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ABSTRACT: The cantos devoted to the Terrestrial Paradise in Dante's *Comedy* are crucial in the process of self-representation of the poet's prophetic identity. To establish such a prophetic authority, he explicitly alludes to many scriptural prophets and visionaries. Starting from a reading of Chapter 7 of *The Undivine 'Comedy'*, the article reflects on the ways in which such 'theological' claims and allusions could be interpreted in a 'detheologized' approach to Dante's poem.

KEYWORDS: David; St. Paul; the Bible; prophecy

Prophetic Models and Structures in an Undivine *Comedy*

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Barolini's *The Undivine Comedy* devotes chapter 7, 'Nonfalse Errors and the True Dreams of the Evangelist', to the final cantos of Dante's *Purgatorio* (specifically cantos 29, 32, and 33), whose importance to Dante's self-representation as poet-prophet is well known and occurs through a wealth of references to biblical prophets, apostles, evangelists, and visionaries.¹ Over the past fifteen years or so, I myself have been studying the perspective that this self-representation has cast over the poem as a whole.² Nowadays, such a perspective seems dangerous as it exposes scholars to the risk of being criticized as naïve catholic readers. Indeed, many colleagues, both in Italy and abroad, consider any study on the relationship between Dante and late-medieval religious culture to be a useless — if not harmful — reactionary repetition of old-fashioned

1 Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Dethologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 143–64 and 313–24, hereafter *UDC*. Subsequent references given in parentheses in the main text.

2 See for instance Giuseppe Ledda, 'Modelli biblici nella *Commedia*: Dante e san Paolo', in *La Bibbia di Dante. Esperienza mistica, profezia e teologia biblica in Dante*, ed. by Giuseppe Ledda (Ravenna: Centro Dantesco dei Frati Minori Conventuali, 2011), pp. 179–216; Ledda, 'La danza e il canto dell'"umile salmista": David nella *Commedia* di Dante', in *Les Figures de David à la Renaissance*, ed. by Elise Boillet, Sonia Cavicchioli, and Paul-Alexis Mellet (Geneva: Droz, 2015), pp. 225–46; Ledda, *La Bibbia di Dante* (Turin: EMI, 2015).

ideas, of no interest for twenty-first-century Dante readers. I shall add that such a criticism is often rooted in a banal and (in my opinion) misleading reading of Barolini's *Undivine Comedy*.³

To further discuss this point, I shall begin with another book by Teodolinda Barolini: *Dante's Poets*, the first of her books which I read on the recommendation of my maestro (Ezio Raimondi).⁴ My first reading of this book dates back to the 1990s, and at the time I perceived it as a brilliant development of the seminal insight offered by Gianfranco Contini's 'Dante come personaggio-poeta'.⁵ However, I soon realized that while Contini's essay develops within the boundaries of Dante's dialogue with medieval lyric traditions in the vernacular, Barolini's book expands the field by considering Dante's response to late-medieval poetry in the vernacular alongside his dialogue with classic epic poetry in Latin. Additionally, in *Dante's Poets* Barolini manages to develop this topic while paying constant attention to the religious dimension of Dante's poem in order to demonstrate that Dante eclipses Virgil and the Latin poets thanks to the theological superiority of his poem, which grants him the capability to express a truth denied to its classical forerunners.

What I believe is even more important in this project, however, is Barolini's (not yet fully developed) attempt to apply this perspective not only to pagan authors, but also to biblical texts. In fact, this latter insight allows Barolini to suggest that Dante took up biblical authors like David as models, according to which he manages to define a more precise idea of a poetics whose features lie at the crossroad of its divinely inspired contents and the humbleness of its author: in other words, the idea of the sacred poet. By assuming David as his model, Dante eventually moves beyond the models offered by the Latin poetic

3 For a survey of this attitude in the context of Italian Dante scholarship, see Giuseppe Ledda, 'Cultura religiosa: ricordi autobiografici di un lettore novecentesco di studi su Dante', in *Now Feed Yourself: Anglo-American and Italian Scholarship on Dante*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański, Theodore J. Cachey Jr., and Anna Pegoretti (Oxford: Legenda, 2024), pp. 201–27.

4 Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the 'Comedy'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), hereafter *DP*. Subsequent references given in parentheses in the main text.

5 Gianfranco Contini, 'Dante come personaggio-poeta della *Commedia*', in Contini, *Un'idea di Dante. Saggi danteschi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), pp. 33–62.

tradition (especially Virgil). My work as a *dantista* has been greatly influenced by my experience as student at the University of Bologna, where I attended Ezio Raimondi's classes. During his course on Italian literature, Raimondi quoted extensively from Barolini's *Dante's Poets* in order to develop a more comprehensive theory of Dante's figural appropriation of both biblical and classical models, with the aforementioned case of David as a starting point.⁶

In this regard, the most important chapter of Barolini's *Dante's Poets* is the last, entitled 'Dante: "ritornerò poeta"', where she traces the passage of 'the poetic mantle' from Vergil (i.e. a non-Christian poet) to Statius, and finally to Dante himself, 'the poet whose Christian faith is a *sine qua non* of his poetics' (*DP*, p. 269). Dante is able to surpass his poetic predecessors thanks to his assumption of the biblical model of David, 'l'umile salmista' ('humble psalmist'; *Purg.* 10.65):⁷ 'as David's humility makes him more glorious, so the *comedia's* lowly standing makes it more sublime' (*DP*, p. 276). Not by chance, as Barolini explains, 'all of the *Paradiso's* three references to David [...] seem designed to contribute to the identification of the inspired biblical poet with the inspired Italian poet' (*DP*, p. 277): like David, Dante is the author of a new 'tèodia' (i.e. his 'poema sacro' or 'sacred poem'; *Par.* 25.1, 73). It is thus fair to conclude (in Barolini's own words) that 'to go beyond a great model — to get past Vergil — Dante requires a humble model, on whose example he can forge his own humbly superior poetics' (*DP*, p. 278).

In the last chapter of *Dante's Poets*, Barolini focuses on another biblical author: John the Evangelist, evoked by Cacciaguیدا in his prophetic investiture: 'the emphasis on making truth manifest anticipates the description of the Gospel of John as "l'alto preconio che grida

6 For Ezio Raimondi's use of *Dante's Poets* during his classes at the University of Bologna, see Ezio Raimondi, *Intertestualità e storia letteraria. Da Dante a Montale* (Bologna: CUSL, 1991), pp. 410–11; and Giuseppe Ledda, 'Osservazioni sul contributo di Ezio Raimondi agli studi danteschi: bilanci e prospettive', in *Ezio Raimondi lettore inquieto*, ed. by Andrea Battistini (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016), pp. 117–23.

7 Quotations from the *Commedia* are taken from Dante Alighieri: *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, Società Dantesca Italiana, Edizione Nazionale, 2nd rev. edn, 4 vols (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994). English translations come from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum, 3 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980–82).

l'arcano di qui là giù sovra ogni altro bando” (*DP*, p. 283).⁸ This said, Barolini adds a remark that anticipates a crucial theme of *The Undivine Comedy*: ‘If Dante’s poem is a vision, it is the same kind of vision afforded Saint John in the Apocalypse, the vision of one who is in a waking sleep, like the old man who personifies the Apocalypse in the allegorical procession and who comes forward “dormendo, con la faccia arguta”’ (*DP*, pp. 284–85).⁹ Following this line of reasoning, in a footnote Barolini discusses a hugely relevant passage from *Purgatorio* 29 (the description of the four animals), in which the mention of Saint John plays a key role in shaping Dante’s poetic authority: ‘Dante openly aligns himself with John earlier in this canto, where he cuts short the description of the four animals surrounding the chariot with the injunction to read Ezekiel; however, on the question of the number of their wings, “Giovanni è meco e da lui si diparte” (“John is with me, and departs from him,” i.e. Ezekiel (*Purg.* 29.105)). Thus the poet is one of the prophets, who — although they may differ on details — share knowledge of the truth’ (*DP*, p. 285 note 105).

This said, we shall now move to *The Undivine Comedy*. I took my first step into the field of Dante studies in the 1990s, aiming to bring together the legacy of Contini’s scholarship and various rhetorical, structuralist, narratological, and broadly formalistic approaches. Although atheist and culturally secular, I soon realized the need to investigate more seriously the religious dimension of Dante’s *Commedia*. This meant adopting a non-conformist approach in the context of Italian scholarship on Dante, as Italian scholars have regularly denied or marginalized this particular feature of Dante’s poetry. While a superficial reading of Barolini’s *Undivine Comedy* might lead us to consider the proposal to detheologize Dante as something like a negation of the religious dimension of Dante’s poem, as I understand it, detheologizing does not mean denying the importance of religious culture or the relationship with the scriptural tradition for a better understanding of Dante’s poetry. On the contrary, it takes seriously the illusion of theological truth construed by Dante, thanks to a study of the literary

8 Here Barolini references *Paradiso* 26.44–45: ‘which more than any other proclamation | cries out to earth the mystery of Heaven.’

9 The quote references *Purgatorio* 29.144: ‘his features keen, advanced, as if in sleep.’

and poetic strategies he uses in order to create this illusion. Conceived as such, Barolini's proposal to detheologize Dante reveals itself as perfectly consistent with the aim to study the ways in which Dante adapts and responds to a wealth of religious tradition and models. One could be even more precise by saying that such a perspective is necessary in order to detheologize Dante. Barolini's proposal thus is perfectly consistent with an approach to Dante's poem based on the study of religious cultural influences in his works, including textual and intertextual analysis, the examination of biblical and religious models present in the text, an exploration of the poem's relationship with the languages, doctrines and practices of medieval religious culture, and so on and so forth.

Not by chance, the biblical authors discussed in the last pages of *Dante's Poets* (David and John: the two models upon which Dante builds his own identity as author of a sacred poem capable of overcoming the classical model offered by Virgil) become an initial point of reference in the first pages of *The Undivine Comedy*. Here, Barolini evokes these two biblical models in relation to the *theologus-poeta* dichotomy — that is, the critical tendency that 'keeps resolutely apart' (*UDC*, p. 8) Dante's poetry and Dante's theology. However, as Barolini explains, 'the two coincide — in a poet who models himself on David, the "humble psalmist" [...], who like David composes a *tëodia* and speaks as *scriba Dei* [...], with what he considers a theologically-vested authority at least equal to that of the author of the Apocalypse' (*UDC*, p. 8).

Barolini's insights on David as a model for Dante have been developed by various scholars (I have written something myself on this topic), and recent scholarship has further demonstrated the fundamental importance of the author of the Psalms as a model for Dante's self-representation as the poet of the *Commedia*.¹⁰ However, after this

10 See for instance Theresa Federici, 'Dante's Davidic Journey. From Sinner to God's Scribe', in *Dante's 'Commedia': Theology as Poetry*, ed. by Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), pp. 180–209; Ledda, 'La danza e il canto'; Marco Veglia, 'Una controfigura biblica', in Veglia, *Dante leggero. Dal priorato alla 'Commedia'* (Rome: Carocci, 2017), pp. 111–47; Nicolò Maldina, "'Per poenitentiam factum prophetam". Filigrane davidiche nel prologo della *Commedia*', in *Poesia e profezia nell'opera di Dante*, ed. by Giuseppe Ledda (Ravenna: Centro Dantesco dei Frati Minori Conventuali, 2019), pp. 163–78.

seminal reference in its first chapter, *The Undivine Comedy* devotes no great space to David. Nonetheless, while chapters 6–7 mention David (albeit not as a model for Dante self-representation),¹¹ the volume's final reference to David deals precisely with this point. Commenting on a famous passage from *Paradiso* 23, Barolini proposes a clever connection between the jumping of the 'sacrato poema' and David's humble dancing: 'the sacred poem must jump, just as the mountains bizarrely skip, and as David — the divinely inspired cantor of those mountains — shames his wife by humbly dancing and leaping before the sacred ark' (*UDC*, p. 227).¹²

The first chapter of *The Undivine Comedy* repeatedly alludes to two additional models for Dante's prophetic identity: St. John and St. Paul. Barolini underscores that 'we have not dealt with the implications of Dante's claims to be a second St. Paul, a second St. John' (*UDC*, p. 20). Then she explains that her book 'is an attempt to analyze the textual metaphysics that makes the *Commedia's* truth claims credible and to show how the illusion is constructed, forged, made — by a man who is, precisely, after all, "only" a *fabbro*, a maker, ... a poet' (*UDC*, p. 20). This idea aligns precisely with my own work on Dante's use of biblical models (such as David, Paul, John and other biblical prophets) and on his use of hagiographical models in the *Commedia* (Boethius, Saint Francis, Saint Dominic, Peter Damianus, Benedict). Thanks to these models, Dante creates a sort of auto-hagiography with his *Commedia*.¹³

Focusing on chapter 7 of Barolini's *Undivine Comedy*, I would like to discuss how, over the last three decades, scholars have developed a critical perspective that aims at analysing the ways in which Dante builds his own authority, both as a poet and as a sacred author, i.e. as a poet inspired by God, but a poet nonetheless, or (to put it more precisely) a poet who, once in paradise, becomes the sacred poet of a sacred poem. To study Dante's relationships with religious culture

11 See *UDC*, pp. 123, 125, 129, 164.

12 Here the passage specifically references *Paradiso* 23.61–63, *Purgatorio* 10.55–69, and Psalms 113.4: 'montes exultaverunt ut arietes, | et colles sicut agni ovium'.

13 See note 2 of the current essay and, for a synthesis of my studies on this subject along with further bibliographical references, see Giuseppe Ledda, 'Poesia e agiografia nella *Commedia*', in *Dante poeta cristiano e la cultura religiosa medievale. In ricordo di Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi*, ed. by Giuseppe Ledda (Ravenna: Centro Dantesco dei Frati Minori Conventuali, 2018), pp. 215–58.

from a formalistic perspective, one must analyse the literary, rhetorical, narratological, and intertextual structures and strategies that Dante utilizes in order to construct the prophetic and theological authority of his text. Among these structures and strategies, truth-claims play a particularly special role, as Barolini masterfully notes, along with (and this is what I shall add to her own thoughts) the biblical intertextuality and references to characters as models for both Dante-character's visionary experience and for the literary mission that Dante-poet accomplishes in writing the poem.¹⁴

Barolini refers to Paul, mentioned in *Inferno* 2 as a model and guarantor of Dante's 'prophetic status' (*UDC*, p. 57): this biblical figure is mentioned repeatedly in chapter 7, as we shall see. John will also play a crucial role in chapter 7, but he is referenced in chapter 4 in its treatment of *Inferno* 19, a canto in which 'The Apocalypse is Dante's preferred source' (*UDC*, p. 78). Here 'the pilgrim specifically cites St. John as his authority when he accuses the popes in language taken directly from the Apocalypse: "Di voi pastor s'accorse il Vangelista"' (*UDC*, p. 78). At the end of this canto, Virgil listens with pleasure to the pilgrim's true words: 'lo suon de le parole vere espresse' (*Inf.* 19.123), and Barolini explains that the poet's words are true 'because what he recounts was revealed to him, as the contents of the Book of Revelations were revealed to St. John'; thus in this canto 'our poet's identity as a true prophet has been validated' (*UDC*, p. 79). Around the time of *The Undivine Comedy's* publication, Rachel Jacoff, Mirko Tavoni, and Zygmunt Barański had further enriched the prophetic genealogy of *Inferno* 19 with the model of Jeremiah.¹⁵ These scholars have argued that Dante's reference to the breaking of the 'battezzatoio' ('basin for baptizing'; l. 18) aims to confer the pilgrim, who has not yet received any prophetic investiture, the authority of a biblical prophet by activating the model of Jeremiah, whom the Lord ordered to break

14 For this distinction and for its relevance within the field, see Giuseppe Ledda, 'Dante Alighieri, Dante-poet, Dante-character', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Simon Gilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 28–42.

15 See Rachel Jacoff, 'Dante, Geremia e la problematica profetica', in *Dante e la Bibbia*, ed. by Giovanni Barblan (Florence: Olschki, 1988), pp. 113–23; Mirko Tavoni, 'Effrazione battesimale tra i simoniaci (*Inf* XIX 13–21)', *Rivista di letteratura italiana*, 10 (1992), pp. 457–523; Zygmunt G. Barański, *Dante e i segni* (Naples: Liguori, 2000), pp. 147–72.

an amphora in front of the people as a sign of the prophetic authority God had conferred to him.

As noted, Barolini studies how Dante's prophetism contributes to the poem's theological credibility, as is especially the case in chapter 7 of *The Undivine Comedy*, devoted to the last cantos of *Purgatorio*. As usual, the author pays great attention to the themes of truth and to the poet's truth-claims. The chapter opens by recalling a very important yet neglected topic in Dante studies: the broad medieval visionary tradition that includes a great number of texts narrating journeys to the otherworld. As Jacques Le Goff, quoted by Barolini, explains: 'these journeys were considered "real" by the men of the Middle Age, even if they depicted them as "dreams" (somnia)'.¹⁶ As Barolini comments, Dante likewise 'believed that his journey was, in some essential sense, real' (*UDC*, p. 143).

As mentioned previously, here I shall focus on the problem of prophetic authority rather than the problem of truth. In this regard, it is crucial to remember that a fundamental feature of this visionary tradition is the presence of prophetic investitures. Barolini investigated this feature in an essay that dates back to 1993, later published as a chapter in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (2006) with the title 'Why Did Dante Write the *Commedia*? Dante and the Visionary Tradition'.¹⁷ As Barolini explains here, in the first prophetic investitures of *Purgatorio* 32 and 33, 'Beatrice echoes many visionary texts, which commonly contain an obligation of *denuntiatio*'.¹⁸ It is true that protagonists of medieval visionary texts regularly receive from their guide the order to show, reveal, make public (in some cases even by preaching at mass) everything they saw and heard during their journey through the afterlife. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that the prophetic model, characterized by the order to disclose to men what

16 Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 177. Quoted in *UDC*, p. 143.

17 Teodolinda Barolini, 'Why Did Dante Write the *Commedia*? Dante and the Visionary Tradition', in Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 125–31 and 399 (originally published in *Dante Studies*, 111 (1993), pp. 1–8).

18 Barolini, *Dante and the Origins*, p. 125.

has been revealed to the visionary, is common to all texts belonging to the visionary tradition.

Taking up this model, Dante goes even further by inserting into the *Commedia* more prophetic investitures than his visionary predecessors. He refers directly back to biblical models in order to establish his authority as prophet and poet of the afterlife. Not by chance, Dante always shapes his own prophetic investitures in such a way that they are particularly faithful to the biblical model, starting from Beatrice's pronouncement in the Earthly Paradise. In fact, the very first prophetic investiture of the poem is a direct translation of the investiture of John at the beginning of the Apocalypse: 'Quod vides, scribe in libro' ('What you see, write in a book'), translated by Beatrice as 'quel che vedi, [...] fa che tu scrivi' ('transcribe what you have seen'; *Purg.* 32.104–05). While the order to reveal what has been shown during an otherworldly journey is present in nearly all medieval texts about the afterlife, Dante shapes his own prophetic investitures upon the biblical model, neglecting other visionary precursors.¹⁹

Moreover, Dante places the model offered by Saint Paul at the very centre of his own prophetic identity as a traveller through the afterlife and a narrator of this experience. In fact, in the words spoken by St. James in *Paradiso* 25, 'si che, veduto il ver di questa corte, | la spene, che là giù bene innamora, | in te e in altrui di ciò conforte' ('so that, when you have seen this court in truth, | hope – which, below, spurs love of the true good — | in you and others may be comforted'; *Par.* 25.43–45), resounds the echo of the Pauline model evoked in the Second canto of the *Inferno*: here Dante says that Paul was transported into Heaven 'per recarne conforto a quella fede | ch'è principio alla via di salvazione' ('to bring us back assurance of that faith | with which the way to our salvation starts'; *Inf.* 2.29–30). Dante's prophetic mission is redefined as similar to that of Saint Paul: they are both allowed to see Paradise so as to comfort, to strengthen in men the hope of the 'gloria futura' ('future glory'; *Par.* 25.68). Not by chance, in the very same canto, David is also evoked as a model for Dante's prophetic identity.²⁰

19 See Giuseppe Ledda, 'Dante e la tradizione delle visioni medievali', *Lettere Classensi*, 37 (2008), pp. 119–42.

20 In addition to the works already mentioned, see Giuseppe Ledda, 'L'esilio, la speranza, la poesia: modelli biblici e strutture autobiografiche nel canto 25 del *Paradiso*', *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, 90 (2015), pp. 257–77.

As for the model of St. John, in chapter 7 of *The Undivine Comedy*, Barolini explicitly states that ‘Dante considered himself [...] a new St. John’ (*UDC*, p. 144). In considering Barolini’s discussion of the visionary status of Dante’s experience (which, in her thorough argumentation, she conceives as a ‘waking sleep’), I shall limit myself to underscoring only one particular aspect. One of the strongest objections to the visionary interpretation of Dante’s experience is that the allusions to sleep that appear at the beginning and end of the poem (*Inf.* 1.10–12, *Par.* 32.139–41) are weak and vague, while on the contrary, when Dante means to present an experience as visionary or oneiric he does so by clearly constructing a specific frame: he refers explicitly to the acts of falling asleep and waking up with clear verbal expressions for the epistemic modality of such experiences, such as ‘in sogno di parea veder’ (‘in dream I seemed to see’; *Purg.* 9.19) or ‘mi parve in una visione estatica [...] esser tratto, e vedere’ (‘I seemed, suddenly, to be caught up in an ecstatic vision and to see’; *Purg.* 15.85–87).²¹

Regarding the weakness and vagueness of the poet’s liminal allusions to sleep, Barolini wisely observes: ‘I take their elusive presence as part of Dante’s Pauline strategy, stemming from his need to veil in mystery the ultimate mode of an experience that he himself — like St. Paul — was unable to explain [...]’ (*UDC*, p. 144).²² Moreover, Barolini links the Pauline model with Dante’s ambiguous discussion of the corporeal status of his otherworldly experience (a problem equally apparent in the medieval visionary tradition) when noting this corporality in the first canto of *Paradiso*: ‘In maintaining an ambiguity that characterizes otherworld journeys of all periods, Dante is deliberately following his avowed and greatest model, St. Paul, whose ambiguity regarding the corporeality of his raptus’ (*UDC*, p. 148) Dante imitates. Thus, Dante chooses Paul as a model for those experiences in which vision and voyage do not conflict: ‘In choosing Paul as a model, Dante chooses a precursor that “went” as well as “saw”; further, he chooses a precursor who left his mode of going notoriously unexplained’ (*UDC*, p. 148).²³

21 See also *Purg.* 17.10–15, 21–25, 34, and 43; *Purg.* 19.10; *Purg.* 27.97–98.

22 Here Barolini refers to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12.2–4.

23 Here the reference is to 2 Corinthians 2.12–13: ‘sive in corpore nescio, sive extra corpus nescio, Deus scit’, echoed by Dante in *Par.* 1.73–75: ‘S’i’ era sol di me quel che creasti |

However, the model upon which Barolini bases her consideration of Dante's experience as a 'waking sleep' is instead St. John and his 'venir dormendo con la faccia arguta' (see *UDC*, p. 145), even while quoting a passage by Michele Barbi to remind us that St. Augustine also presented St. Paul as one who 'quasi dormiens vigilaret': 'Bernard's cryptic verse, "perché 'l tempo fugge che t'assonna" is thus to be understood with the help of Augustine on Paul: Dante is as though awake while sleeping, [...] just like St. John, the author of the Apocalypse' (*UDC*, p. 146).²⁴

An extremely interesting passage is that in which Dante presents the four animals symbolizing the four Gospels (*Purg.* 29.94–105).²⁵ In this passage, as Barolini observes, Dante 'tells us, in unmistakable and emphatic terms, that his representational act is to be considered on a par with those of biblical prophets': 'The passage presents a visionary genealogy: Dante moves from Ovidian Argus, to an Old testament prophet, to a prophet of the new dispensation, the author of the text that will appear at canto's end in visionary posture, as the *senex* who approaches "dormendo con la faccia arguta" (*UDC*, pp. 155–56).²⁶ I want to stress a point generally unnoticed by Dante scholars:

novellamente, amor che 'l ciel governi, | tu 'l sai, che col tuo lume mi levasti' ('Whether I only was the part of me | that You created last, You — governing | the heavens — know: it was Your light that raised me').

24 Here the reference is to *Par.* 32.139 ('But time, which brings you to sleep, takes flight [...]').

25 'vennero appresso lor quattro animali, | coronati ciascun di verde fronda. | Ognuno era pennuto di sei ali; | le penne piene d'occhi e li occhi d'Argo, | se fosser vivi sarebber cotali. | A descriver lor forme più non spargo | rime, lettor; ch'altra spesa mi strigne, | tanto ch'a questa non posso esser largo; | ma leggi Ezechiel, che li dipigne | come li vide da la fredda parte | venir con vento e con nube e con igne; | e quali i troverai ne le sue carte, | tali eran quivi, salvo ch'a le penne | Giovanni è meco e da lui si diparte' ('four animals came on; | and each of them had green leaves as his crown; | each had six wings as plumage, and those plumes | were full of eyes; they would be very like | the eyes of Argus, were his eyes alive. | Reader, I am not squandering more rhymes | in order to describe their forms; since I | must spend elsewhere, I can't be lavish here; | but read Ezekiel, for he has drawn | those animals approaching from the north; | with wings and cloud and fire, he painted them. | And just as you will find them in his pages, | such were they here, except that John's with me | as to their wings; with him, John disagrees'; *Purg.* 29.92–105).

26 For a more recent and extensive treatment of this passage by Barolini, see also Teodolinda Barolini, 'Arachne, Argus, and St. John', in Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 158–71 and 406–11.

the animals which Dante sees differ not only from the ones seen by Ezechiel (because they have six wings and not four), but also from the animals seen by John (because they have the same number of wings, but different aspects). Only Dante saw the animals in that specific form, and his authority comes both from his vision and from his prophetic models. Nonetheless, Dante clearly underscores his status not only as a prophet but also as a poet (i.e. someone who ‘sparge rime’) so as to emphasize the poetic nature of his text.²⁷

John is evoked three times in the final cantos of *Purgatorio*, and he holds great importance as the main source of the *tableaux vivants* which the pilgrim views in the garden of Eden.²⁸ However, John’s importance as a model for Dante, underscored by Barolini with special reference to the modality of the visionary experience and to its contents, must be considered with regard to the role of Saint John as a model for Dante’s own prophetic investiture as well: as already noted, the first of many investitures he receives in the poem is perfectly modelled upon the first given to John in the Book of Revelations (1.10): ‘quod vides scribe in libro’, ‘quel che vedi fa [...] che tu scrivi’ (‘transcribe what you have seen’; *Purg.* 32.104–105).²⁹ Thus Barolini concludes: ‘The pilgrimage of Dante’s *mente peregrina* is a pilgrimage in the footsteps of St. Paul, of St. John: the pilgrimage of a prophetic voyeur bent on recounting in pellucid verse the nonfalse errors of his divine imaginings’ (*UDC*, p. 165).

27 For the biblical references, see Ezekiel 1.1–12, and Apocalypse 4.1–8. For my reading of Dante’s passage, see Giuseppe Ledda, *La guerra della lingua. Ineffabilità, retorica e narrativa nella ‘Commedia’ di Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 2002), pp. 131–35. See also Lucia Battaglia Ricci, ‘Scrittura sacra e “sacrato poema”’, in *Dante e la Bibbia*, ed. by Giovanni Barblan (Florence: Olschki, 1988), pp. 113–23. On the intertwining of prophetic and poetics claims in these cantos, see Zygmunt G. Barański, ‘Lettura e interpretazione del canto xxxiii’, in *Voci sul ‘Purgatorio’ di Dante. Una nuova lettura della seconda cantica*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Maria Antonietta Terzoli (Rome: Carocci, 2024), pp. 885–924; Pietro Ruggeri, ‘Poesia e profezia nei canti del Paradiso terrestre’, *L’Alighieri*, 65 (2025), pp. 53–75.

28 See for instance Sergio Cristaldi, ‘Un ipotesto biblico: l’Apocalisse’, *Letture Classensi*, 37 (2008), pp. 83–117.

29 There will be other models too, such as Jeremiah for the last investiture in St. Peter’s words: ‘apri la bocca e non asconder quel ch’io non ascondo’ (‘speak plainly there, and do not hide that which I do not hide’; *Par.* 27.65–66), imitating ‘Levate signum, praedicate et nolite celare’ (Jeremiah 50.2).

Chapter 9 of *The Undivine Comedy*, devoted to the Heaven of Sun, is central to the topics I am discussing here. Barolini, among many other things, emphasizes once again the prophetic dimension that Dante claims: 'Dante's stress on prophecy in this heaven is related to the heaven's concern with narrative, his own narrative, for to write a text defined as true [...] is to write a prophetic text' (*UDC*, p. 214).

However, I shall conclude my paper here on the coattails of this suggestion, hoping to have shown that we can detheologize Dante through a discussion about theology, mystics, and religious culture, along with biblical, visionary, and prophetic models. Or, to put it in better terms: not only can we do so — we must.

Giuseppe Ledda, 'Prophetic Models and Structures in an Undivine Comedy', in *A World of Possibilities: The Legacy of The Undivine Comedy*, ed. by Kristina M. Olson, Cultural Inquiry, 37 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2025), pp. 209–21 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-37_10>

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