

Bread for the People : Dante's Didactic Aims in the *Convivio* and the *Commedia*

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The aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which Dante conceived his authorial role as that of an educator. My point of departure will be the explicit claims that the poet makes to this effect in the *Convivio*. This will then lead to a brief consideration of how the didactic aims of the aborted earlier work are carried through into the *Commedia* and, more specifically, of how the visual qualities of the poem render it such an effective didactic vehicle for the kind of philosophical knowledge which Dante seeks to impart.

Dante's unfinished philosophical treatise opens with the Aristotelian assumption that all human beings are inclined by nature to thirst for knowledge, and that it is in the acquisition of 'scienza' that human perfection lies. Dante then considers the various factors that thwart the human desire to learn, including not only the bodily and psychological defects within each individual, but also external obstacles such as the pressures of family and society, and the misfortune of living at too great a distance from any centre of learning or 'gente studiosa' ('people engaged in studying').

Although the connection is not made explicitly, it is this last disadvantage, that of the lack of access to libraries or teachers, for which Dante aims to compensate by writing the *Convivio*. The notion of compassion is repeated several times, and if so much 'misericordia' wells up in Dante for those deprived of a philosophical education, it is because he himself was once so disadvantaged, one of the 'innumerevoli [...] affamati' ('countless starving'). But having overcome the restrictions of his circumstances, he now finds himself in a unique, intermediary position between the 'alta mensa' of 'coloro che sanno' ('high table of the learned') and the society of those who 'in bestiale pastura' are starved on a diet which is the intellectual equivalent of acorns and grass. With striking modesty, Dante depicts himself as one who has been blessed with the good fortune of being able to gather some of the crumbs that have fallen from the philosophers' table; and it is his recollection of where he has come from ('non me dimenticando' ['not forgetting myself']) that inspires him to pass on to others the learning he has received by inviting them to 'un generale convivio' — a banquet for all.¹

Manifestamente adunque puõ vedere chi bene considera, che pochi rimangono quelli che a l'abito [sc. di scienza] da tutti desiderato possano pervenire, e innumerevoli quasi sono li 'mpediti che di questo cibo sempre vivono affamati. Oh beati quelli pochi che seggono

¹ The gloss supplied by Piero Cudini for this phrase is 'un pranzo per tutti' (i.e. 'a meal for all'). See Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. by Piero Cudini (Milan: Garzanti, 1980), p.8, note 28.

a quella mensa dove lo pane de li angeli si manuca! Ma però che ciascuno uomo a ciascuno uomo naturalmente è amico, e ciascuno amico si duole del difetto di colui ch'elli ama, coloro che a così alta mensa sono cibati non senza misericordia sono inver di quelli che in bestiale pastura veggiono erba e ghiande sen gire mangiando. E acciò che misericordia è madre di beneficio, sempre liberalmente coloro che sanno porgono de la loro buona ricchezza a li veri poveri, e sono quasi fonte vivo, de la cui acqua si refrigera la naturale sete che di sopra è nominata. E io adunque, che non seggio a la beata mensa, ma, fuggito de la pastura del vulgo, a' piedi di coloro che seggiono ricolgo di quello che da loro cade, e conosco la misera vita di quelli che dietro m'ho lasciati, per la dolcezza ch'io sento in quello che a poco a poco ricolgo, misericordievolmente mosso, non me dimenticando, per li miseri alcuna cosa ho riservata, la quale a li occhi loro, già è più tempo, ho dimostrato e in ciò li ho fatti maggiormente vogliosi. Per che ora volendo loro apparecchiare, intendo fare un generale convivio di ciò ch'i' ho loro mostrato, e di quello pane ch'è mestiere a così fatta vivanda, senza lo quale da loro non potrebbe esser mangiata. (*Convivio*, I, i, 6-11)

(Anyone, then, who considers the matter will see quite clearly that only very few are able to acquire the knowledge that so many desire, and that the numbers of those who are prevented from studying and constantly starved of such nourishment are almost beyond measure. Oh, the happy few who sit at the table where the bread of angels is served! But since every man is naturally inclined to befriend his fellows, and every friend is pained by the deprivations suffered by those he loves, those who dine at so high a table are not lacking in compassion towards those fed like beasts whom they see going about eating grass and acorns. And because compassion is the mother of beneficence, those who are learned always give generously of their riches to the truly poor, and are like a living fount in whose waters that natural thirst spoken of above is quenched. I myself do not sit at the blessed table, but, having fled the pastures of the masses, at the feet of those seated there gather what falls to the floor, and know the miserable existence of those I have left behind. And so, because of the sweetness that I taste in that which I have gathered little by little, stirred by compassion and a remembrance of my previous life, for the unfortunate I have made a store of certain things which I have already for some time revealed to them and for which I have excited in them a strong desire. Because I now wish to prepare a table at which they might eat, I propose to hold a public banquet of all that I have shown them with that bread which is the necessary compliment of such a dish and without which it could not be eaten.)

The 'pane' ('bread') which Dante so compassionately offered to his fellow Italians was the prose commentary through which he hoped to elucidate for his readers the philosophical doctrine contained in his lyric poetry.

The *Convivio*, then, was conceived as a didactic project, and in principle at least, there

was nothing eccentric in this. For the society of the *comunes* of north-central Italy at the beginning of the fourteenth century was one in which there was a growing demand among the literate middle-classes for precisely the kind of intellectual nourishment of which Dante speaks. From the late thirteenth century new schools, often employing notaries as teachers, began to be established to supplement the cathedral and parish schools which had proved inadequate to the needs of the urban professional classes. To learn how to read and write in the vernacular had become a necessity for the emerging bourgeoisie.² Accompanying the development of this pragmatic, professional literacy came a desire for the acquisition of a more general culture, and hence also a demand for literary works in the vernacular.³ The reading public for such literature was, on the whole, quite different from that for books in the official language of Latin. There was some overlap in those members of the clergy and legal professionals who owned and read books in Italian. But otherwise the consumers of vernacular literature were monolingual 'merchants, artisans, shopkeepers, artists, accountants, shop or banking employees, as well as some workers and some women'.⁴

Because so few manuscripts from the first decades after Dante's death have survived, the picture that we possess of the poem's earliest readership will probably always remain incomplete. From the evidence that does exist for the subsequent period, however, it is clear that the *Commedia* was read across a very broad social range. Bolognese readers were more likely to be associated with the University, while in Venice the poem was popular among the aristocracy. In Florence, however, Dante was read most avidly by the educated middle classes. The demand from Florentine merchants especially gave rise between 1340 and 1360 to the commercial production of manuscripts on quite a large scale.⁵ There are also examples of readers of lower social status, artisans such as

² Franco Cardini, 'Alfabetismo e livelli di cultura nell'età comunale', *Quaderni storici*, 13 (1978), 488-522 (pp.500-503). Henri-Jean Martin, *The History and Power of Writing*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.190, notes that Villani gives statistics for the numbers of schoolchildren in Florence in 1338.

³ Armando Petrucci, *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy : Studies in the History of Written Culture*, ed. and trans. by Charles M. Radding (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1995), p.222 (originally published as 'Le biblioteche antiche', in *Letteratura italiana*, ed. by Alberto Asor Rosa, 9 vols (Turin : Einaudi, 1982-), II : Produzione e consumo (1983), 528-554), considers it 'probable that the beginning of a process of non professional acculturation using books and affecting substantial quantities of lay urban dwellers can be located between the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth [...]'. M. B. Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers : Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts* (London and Rio Grande, OH : Hambledon Press, 1991), pp.275-97, discusses the emergence of the 'general reader' in medieval England, where from the end of the twelfth century the increase in the use of written documents in commerce, administration and law leads to a literacy among the middle class which is at first pragmatic and then extends beyond the 'immediate professional horizon' (pp.278-80 ; 297). This chapter, 'The Literacy of the Laity', was originally published in *Literature and Western Civilization : The Medieval World*, ed. by D. Daiches and A. K. Thorlby (London : Aldus, 1973), pp.555-76.

⁴ Petrucci, *Writers and Readers*, p.140. This chapter was originally published as 'Lire au moyen âge', in *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome*, 96, no.2 (1984), 603-616.

⁵ Gianfranco Folena, 'La tradizione delle opere di Dante Alighieri', in *Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi danteschi, 20-27 aprile 1965*, a cura della Società dantesca italiana e dell'Associazione internazionale per gli studi di lingua e letteratura italiana ; e, sotto il patrocinio dei Comuni di Firenze, Verona e Ravenna, 2 vols (Firenze : Sansoni, 1965-66), I, 1-78 (pp.3 and 54).

jewellers and weavers, and even poultry traders, which leads later to a humanist polemic against the Dante of the woolweavers, dyers and innkeepers.⁶

Tuscan merchants sought not only to acquire books, but also to cultivate the art of writing. From the second half of the thirteenth century a considerable number of commercial houses conducted business abroad, which entailed a notable quantity of correspondence. Merchants also evolved the practice of keeping meticulous records of their transactions. Their notebooks and correspondence alike not only display a concern with recording events beyond the immediate world of commerce, but also a remarkable striving for clarity and elegance of expression.⁷ Armando Sapori concludes his chapter entitled 'La cultura del mercante medievale italiano' by reproducing a letter written in 1260 by Sieneese merchants 'in un magnifico volgare, cinque anni prima che nascesse Dante' ('a magnificent vernacular, five years before Dante was born').⁸

Thus far, research into the culture of the urban bourgeoisie during the comunal era has focused predominantly on Tuscany, and Florence in particular. It may be possible to demonstrate that there was a similar desire for cultural enrichment in other regions. But one study at least suggests that the Tuscan merchant was indeed exceptional. Legal documents detailing transactions involving books in thirteenth century Genoa seem to show that the only books possessed by the merchant class of that city were those directly relevant to their professional activities.⁹

In Tuscany then, and possibly elsewhere in Italy, the cultural aspirations of the urban middle classes can be seen in the proliferation of vernacular translations of scientific texts and of literature which is didactic or morally edifying in character. Dante's adoption of the vernacular in the *Convivio* can be compared to other literary projects of civic education such as those of Martino da Canal or Brunetto Latini, who sought similarly to compensate their fellow citizens for their inability to read Latin.¹⁰ Boccaccio is right to suggest that the *Commedia* was written in the vernacular so that it might be

⁶ Marcella Roddewig, *Dante Alighieri, Die göttliche Komödie: vergleichende Bestandsaufnahme der Commedia-Handschriften* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1984), pp. lvii and lxxxiii-lxxxiv. A broader perspective is supplied by Martin, *The History and Power of Writing*, p.166, where he comments that even by the end of the fifteenth century, the 'world of writing' represented only '[...] one thin layer of society — some few hundred thousand clerics, merchants, notaries, scribes, and "writers". All around them were tens of millions of men and women who continued to live and to think in the traditional mode'.

⁷ Armando Sapori, *Studi di storia economica: secoli XIII. -XIV. -XV.*, 2 vols, 3rd edn (Florence: Sansoni, 1955; repr. 1982), I, 53-93 (pp.55-58). Sapori writes: '[...] non pochi libri di contabilità e libri di ricordi personali superstiti, notevoli per bellezza ed efficacia di eloquio, o per acutezza di spirito di osservazione, e per ricchezza di dati, meritarono la luce per le stampe, o come testi di lingua, o come fonti storiche' (p.58). Literary figures from mercantile backgrounds include the *novellieri* Boccaccio and Franco Sacchetti, and the *cronisti* Dino Compagni (d. 1324) and Giovanni Villani, a member of the Peruzzi company from 1300 to 1308 (p.59). See also Christian Bec, *Les Marchands écrivains: Affaires et humanisme à Florence, 1375-1434* (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1967).

⁸ Sapori, *Studi di storia economica*, I, 88-93.

⁹ Giovanna Petti Balbi, 'Il libro nella società genovese del sec. XIII', *La Bibliofilia*, 80 (1978), 1-45 (p.25). Petrucci, *Writers and Readers*, p.223, predicts that investigation of the books owned by merchants and artisans in Italian regions other than Tuscany might give a picture that was 'at least partially different'. Martin, *The History and Power of Writing*, p.195, on the other hand, refers to a study by Henri Bresc of book ownership in Sicily as evidence that 'Florence was by no means exceptional'.

¹⁰ Cardini, 'Alfabetismo e livelli di cultura', pp.503-505.

of greater benefit to Florentines and Italians in general, and in order to give 'delight and understanding' to the uneducated, but exaggerates somewhat where he laments that the uneducated had 'in the past [...] been ignored by everyone else'.¹¹

Where Dante deals explicitly with the relative merits of Latin and the vernacular in the philosophical treatise, he acknowledges the superiority of the former: 'però che lo volgare seguita uso, e lo latino arte: onde concedesi esser più bello, più virtuoso e più nobile' ('because the vernacular is shaped by usage and Latin by art: from which it follows that [Latin] is more beautiful, virtuous and noble') (*Convivio* I, v, 14). Latin, however, is no longer understood by 'principi, baroni, cavalieri e molt'altra nobile gente' ('princes, barons, knights and many other noble people') (I, ix, 5). More than simply explaining why Dante chooses not to write in Latin, this statement also implies that it must now be the vernacular which becomes the natural language of the court. And so, as in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, the *volgare* is elevated to a position of nobility. Previously only works in Latin had received the kind of critical attention that Dante directs here towards his own *canzoni*. It is not merely the fact that his lyric poetry is revealed to have contained scientific themes, but also the scholastic apparatus of the extended commentary that bestows upon the vernacular the dignity and intellectual authority of Latin.¹²

At various points throughout the *Commedia*, Dante addresses his reader, showing that he never loses the extraordinarily clear sense which he had in the *Convivio* of there being an audience who might benefit from his writing. By the time he came to write the *Paradiso*, his sense of the intellectual demands that the poem would make on the reader seems to have led him to expect that many would fall by the wayside.

O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,
tornate a riveder li vostri liti:
non vi mettete in pelago, che forse,
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.

(*Paradiso* II, 1-6)¹³

¹¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Life of Dante (Trattatello in laude di Dante)*, trans. by Vincenzo Zin Bollettino, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series B, 40 (New York: Garland, 1990), pp.55-52.

¹² See A. J. Minnis, 'The Author's Two Bodies? Authority and Fallibility in Late-Medieval Textual Theory', in *Of the Making of Books: Medieval Manuscripts, their Scribes and Readers: Essays Presented to M. B. Parkes*, ed. by Pamela R. Robinson and Rivkah Zim (Aldershot: Scolar, 1997), pp.259-79 (pp.260-261). This essay reiterates an argument which appeared in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100 - c. 1375*, ed. by A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

¹³ References to the *Commedia* follow the standard critical text: *La 'Commedia' secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966-67).

(‘O, you in the little boat, / eager to listen and following / in the wake of my ship which singing makes its crossing, / return to the shore: / do not set out upon the sea, for perhaps, / losing sight of me, you might lose your way’)

Despite this warning, however, it remains reasonable to suppose that the *Commedia* was conceived as being as accessible to the general reading public as the *Convivio* was intended to be. This, at any rate, is the implication in the earthly Paradise when Beatrice entrusts Dante with conveying the prophecy he has heard to all mortals.

Tu nota ; e sì come da me son porte,
così queste parole segna a’ vivi
del viver ch’è un correre a la morte.

(*Purgatorio* XXXIII, 52-54)

(‘Note this down ; and as these words are uttered by me, / so convey them in writing to the living / for whom life is a race towards death.’)

The didactic nature of the *Commedia* emerges most clearly in those passages where Dante exhorts his reader to study the poem and ponder its significance, and where he holds out the promise of the ‘fruit’ — the mental nourishment — that will reward this intellectual effort.¹⁴ More than merely translating knowledge like an encyclopaedist, Dante seeks to teach his reader how to think. The vernacular becomes a vehicle for complex thought, assuming the scholastic function previously fulfilled by Latin alone. In this sense too, the *Commedia* is a natural extension of the *Convivio*.

One of the most memorable of Dante’s addresses to his reader occurs in *Paradiso* X, where he imagines the *lettore* bent pensively over his desk, labouring to grasp the significance of the poem.

Or ti riman, lettore, sovra ‘l tuo banco,
dietro pensando a ciò che si preliba,
s’esser vuoi lieto assai prima che stanco.
Messo t’ho innanzi : omai per te ti ciba ;
ché a sé torce tutta la mia cura
quella materia ond’io son fatto scriba.

(*Paradiso* X, 22-27)

¹⁴ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), p.326, gives the following references: *Inferno* XX, 19-20; XXII, 118; XXIV, 23; *Purgatorio* XXIII, 136; *Paradiso* V, 109; X, 7, 22-25; XXII, 26.

(‘Now remain, reader, at your desk, / thinking over what is only a foretaste [of the meal which will follow], / if you wish to be happy before you become tired. / I have put the meal before you : now serve yourself ; / for my attention is wholly directed to / that subject of which I have become the scribe.’)

This is an admonition against cursory reading. The poet warns us that we would do well to digest the preface before rushing into the main arguments. The notion of philosophy as food which nourishes the reader, of the poem as a meal, is clearly a continuation of the same metaphor that Dante had employed to define his purposes in the *Convivio*. What is new here, however, is the admission that parts of the *Paradiso* will tax the reader's intellectual stamina. Comprehension has to be earned and Dante clearly envisages his reader labouring at the text perhaps for many hours at one sitting.

Along with this caveat, however, there remains a sense of the poet's commitment to do his utmost to facilitate the reader's struggle to understand. In the opening eighteen lines of *Paradiso* XIII the reader is exhorted to work through several stages to construct a mental image of the two concentric circles of lights formed by the souls of the Christian philosophers in the heaven of the Sun. The arduous nature of these six *terzine* lies in their grammatical complexity. In order to understand the ‘aver fatto’ which introduces the fifth tercet one has to retain in the mind each separate element of the compound subject, the fifteen bright stars, the seven stars of Ursa Major and the two from Ursa Minor, as they succeed one another over the first segment of the twenty-four verse sentence with which the canto begins. We are not unprepared for the difficulty of this, however, as Dante gives from the outset a specific instruction to ‘ritegna l'image, mentre ch'io dico, come ferma rupe’ (‘keep this image in mind, while I speak, like a firm rock’) (2-3). The image of the ‘firm rock’ conveys precisely the quality of steady concentration which Dante requires of his reader. But what most interests us here is that the noun ‘image’ and the thrice-repeated imperative ‘imagini’ emphasize that the reader's work is one of assembling a visual picture. The goal is to comprehend what the pilgrim saw : ‘quel ch' i’ or vidi’ (‘that which I then saw’) (2). To a large extent, to read the poem is to respond constantly to the poet's entreaty to visualize. But it is also in his use of visual images that Dante is most effective in making complex philosophical ideas easy to grasp for the lay reader.

One of the most powerful examples of the poet's use of visual imagery as a didactic tool occurs in *Purgatorio* XXV, where the shade of the Latin poet Statius delivers a lengthy and philosophically sophisticated lecture on human generation. This disquisition arises in response to the Dante character's perplexity at the emaciation of the gluttons (*Purgatorio* XXV, 20-1), though the question has been begged already by the failed embraces (*Purgatorio* II, 76-87 ; XXI, 130-6) and the pilgrim's stunned realization in Canto III that the bodies of the penitent souls cast no shadow (19-30). Underlying such questions

as how the 'ombre vane' ('empty shades') might be transparent and intangible, yet susceptible to the effects of heat, cold and hunger (*Purgatorio* III, 28-42; XVIII, 49-60), is the Aristotelian conception of the soul as the 'substantial form' of the human body, a 'form' incapable of assuming an existence independent of the body. Virgil asserts in *Purgatorio* XVIII, 49-50, that the soul is both distinct from and yet conjoined with the matter of the body. Statius develops this notion, beginning with an account of fetal development which turns on the conviction that the human soul comes into being as a unity of nutritive, sensitive and intellectual powers (*Purgatorio* XXV, 73-75).¹⁵ This reiterates Virgil's earlier dismissal of the Platonic view that there are three distinct souls (*Purgatorio* IV, 1-12).¹⁶ But it also functions more explicitly as a condemnation of the teachings of Averroes (*Purgatorio* XXV, 62-66), who had assumed that because the act of cognition appeared to have no need of a bodily organ that the *intellectus possibilis* was both separable from soul and shared in common rather than unique to each individual.

The chief purpose of the first segment of Statius's speech is to expose the error of Averroistic and Platonic theses which threaten a unitary, hylomorphic vision of the human person. This in turn furnishes Dante with a philosophical basis upon which to broach the question of the *ombra*. For although, in the formation of the shadow body, the functioning of the sensitive component is temporarily 'muted' (82), the soul remains a unified whole: 'ne porta seco e l'umano e l divino' ('it carries with it both the human and the divine parts') (81). The soul does not merely reside in the body, but entirely appropriates its functions before birth and retains them after death. It is never sundered from its generated, sensitive component: 'the *anima separata* is not a true *substantia separata*, as in the case of an angel', but remains 'most emphatically the form of a body'.¹⁷

The crucial notion employed by Statius is that the divinely created intellectual soul 'absorbs' the generated sensitive soul into itself ('tira in sua sustanzia') (73-74). In the *Convivio* Dante had declared this process to be one which it was indeed miraculous that

¹⁵ In his treatment of this theme, Bruno Nardi, *Studi di filosofia medievale* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1960), pp.9-68, refutes Busnelli's view that lines 73-75 are 'di pretta ispirazione tomistica', and, focusing on the notion of a passage from potency to act, points rather to St Albert as Dante's source. Stephen Bemrose, "'Come d'animal divegna fante": The Animation of the Human Embryo in Dante', in *The Human Embryo: Aristotle and the Arabic and European Traditions*, ed. by G. R. Dunstan (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1990), pp.123-35, however, argues that the most distinctive feature of Statius's discourse, that the rational soul 'absorbs' the sensitive soul, is not to be found in Albert, who in any case contradicts himself by embracing several different embryo-psychological theories. Bemrose concludes that Dante's position has closer parallels amongst thirteenth century English philosophers such as Bacon, Kilwardy or Peckham.

¹⁶ For Dante's use of the Aristotelian concept of 'subsumption' and for references to both Aristotelian and Thomist dismissals of the Platonic notion of a tri-partite soul, see Patrick Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.129; 334, note 59; and 377, note 32, who also points out that Virgil's support in Canto IV for the theory of a unified soul is closely in line with Aquinas's teaching.

¹⁷ Boyde, *Dante Philomythes*, p.280. Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, Lectures on the History of Religions, n. s. 15 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.257, note 113, argues that Aquinas's sense of the soul as 'both the form of body and a subsisting immortal spirit [...] a form that has and bestows substantiality' is not a 'fully Aristotelian conception of form because, to Aristotle, form cannot subsist without matter'.

the human mind could grasp at all (IV, xxi, 6). Bruno Nardi stresses the clarity of Dante's imagery, and the felicitous way in which he describes this process of assimilation by drawing on the language employed in medieval physiological treatises concerned with the body's absorption of nutrition.¹⁸ This recognition of the probable source of the phrase 'tira in sua sustanzia' suggests that for some of Dante's contemporaries the efficacy of his language would have lain in the transposition of a familiar bodily function onto an event which was miraculous and entirely imperceptible. But even for those unaware of the origins of Dante's terminology the subsequent image of the 'calor del sol [...] / giunto a l'omor che de la vite cola' ('the heat of the sun [...] / conjoined with the juice that flows from the vine') (77-78) expresses the fusion of the material and the intellectual no less effectively. Although intangible, the heat of the sun possesses an undeniable reality, at least for an Italian, who would equally require no persuading that without this ingredient the grape would not be what it is. Similarly self-evident is the fact that the sunshine that ripens the fruit can never be extracted from it. Organic matter and solar energy become an indivisible unity, even when converted into wine. Both in the *Convivio*, and here in the *Purgatorio* in the refutation of Averroes, this doctrine had presented a marvellous difficulty to human understanding. But here Aristotle's philosophy is articulated through language which appeals directly to the senses and indirectly to the traditional symbolism of God as the sun, and also more obliquely to the miracle of the Eucharist.¹⁹

What Nardi's appreciation of the poet's intellectual accomplishment highlights is how acutely it mattered to Dante that this doctrine, which 'par forte ad intendere' ('seems difficult to comprehend') (*Convivio* IV, xxi, 6), should be made clear and rendered accessible to the non-specialist lay-reader. In his study of Franciscan preaching David D'Avray defines a historical moment in which positive philosophical conceptions of the body found a broad audience in the flourishing cultural life of thirteenth century Florence. As Dante was to do some years later, Servasanto da Faenza, teaching at Santa Croce, stressed the intrinsic goodness of human generation. Within what D'Avray describes as a 'mass communication' of ideas, the Franciscans sought to develop an intellectual style which would appeal to their listeners.²⁰ In Statius's speech in *Purgatorio* XXV Dante is plainly the inheritor of their mission.²¹

¹⁸ See *Dante e la cultura medievale : nuovi saggi di filosofia dantesca* (Bari : Laterza, 1942), pp.205-207, where Nardi argues that this notion, while common to much medical writing, is particularly characteristic of St Albert in his commentary to the *De Anima*.

¹⁹ Nardi, *Cultura medievale*, p.203, disagrees with Busnelli's identification of the 'tira in sua sustanzia' with a passage in Aquinas's *Summa contra Gentiles* on the assumption of human nature by the Word in the Incarnation. Nardi argues that while St Thomas's phraseology is 'lessicograficamente consimile' the context is entirely different to that in Statius's speech.

²⁰ David D'Avray, 'Some Franciscan Ideas about the Body', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 84 (1991), 343-63 (pp.353-63).

²¹ See Simon A. Gilson, 'Dante's Meteorological Optics : Refraction, Reflection, and the Rainbow', *Italian Studies*, 52 (1997), 51-62 (pp.54-56), for an analysis of how in *Purgatorio* XXV Dante clarifies his thought for the reader by combining illustrations drawn from Aristotelian philosophy (i.e. the rainbow simile applied to the generation of the *ombra* at lines 88-96) with 'limpid visual images'.

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