UNHOLY AND UNHOLY VIOLENCE IN DANTE'S *COMEDY*: AN INTRODUCTION

In this year, 2021, commemorations of the 700th anniversary of Dante's death in Ravenna have taken many forms; among them, we have witnessed a vast array of conferences, symposia, individual lectures, panel discussions, exhibits, and numerous publications. Because of the ongoing pandemic, these events have, for the most part, taken place virtually, which, on a positive note, has enabled the discussion of Dante and his works to engage a much wider audience world-wide. This time of crisis has brought with it the demonstration of Dante's truly global reach, engaging and encouraging audiences to read, study, and appreciate Dante for his timeless art and message. As guest editors of this volume of *Annali d'italianistica*, we are grateful to our contributors who are sharing their scholarship. We are also grateful to you, our readers, who we believe will benefit from the rich assortment of essays presented in these pages.

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This 39th monographic volume focuses on the connections between Christ's violent sacrifice—the *sine qua non* for Everyman's salvation—and the poetic rendering of his journey from Hell to Purgatory and Paradise. Climaxing in the shedding of His blood and death on the cross, Christ's sacrifice is preceded by His last words that express a wide gamut of human sentiments. What are the last words of Christ, the Logos, the Verbum, the Word? They are words of consolation and warning to the weeping daughters of Jerusalem and all those accompanying Him to Calvary (Luke 23.27-31); of love, care, and trust toward Mary and John (John 19.25-27); of suffering and a request of water, essential to life ("'I thirst,'" John 19.28); of forgiveness (Luke 23.33-34; 23.43); of personal fear ("'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" Matthew 27.46; Mark 15.34-35; Luke 23.35-38); of hope and trust in the Father (Luke 23.46); of acceptance of his death (John 19.28-29).

Christ's sacrifice is also preceded by His silence in front of the hateful tauntings by many people (Matthew 27.39-44; Mark 15.29-32; Luke 23.35) and by one of the two robbers crucified beside Him (23.39). His final loud cry (Matthew 27.50; Mark 15.37-38; Luke 23.46; John 19.30) signals the death of his mortal body and is followed by the silence accompanying Him in the tomb until the moment of His resurrection. The *Commedia*'s three canticas contain all such verbal expressions: by way of parody in *Inferno*, of purification in *Purgatorio*, and of glory in *Paradiso.*

Two textual elements strategically placed at the beginning and end of the first cantica foreground and emblematize the pervasive presence of violence and blood

sacrifices in Dante's *Inferno*: Christ's triumphant descent into Hell to plunder it (the so-called Harrowing of Hell) after his death on the cross, which is succinctly described by Virgil; and the description of Lucifer—involved in an eternal act of violence—as the mock Verbum, mock Logos, and mock Trinity in *Inferno* 34. Inhabited by those who refused Christ in life and still reject Him and His violent death on the cross, the Dantean Hell is structured poetically in antithesis to Christ's holy sacrifice. The visible elements through which Christ's Redemption is made available to believers (that is, the holy sacraments)—primarily, water, fire, food, and the spoken word—are turned upside down and become the souls' eternal torments precisely because of their refusal of Christ. In addition, the souls shout, curse, insult, or remain silent while they are tormented in countless ways or they shed blood against their will and to no avail, in a continuous parodic and futile sacrifice.

While the justice brought about by Christ's Redemption is visible in a horrific manner throughout Hell, the souls in Purgatory patiently and lovingly suffer while atoning in order to ascend to Paradise, modeling themselves on the holy victim on the cross—with a major difference. Insofar as these souls have accepted Christ's sacrifice on earth, they need not shed any blood in Purgatory, even though each one of them, upon entering Purgatory, is marked by the angelic doorman with a sword and some of their purifications could have been described with the shedding of blood. Hell's damned souls' continuous yelling and cursing, or obstinate and forced silence, are replaced in Purgatory by the souls' acceptance of their purifying experiences and their inner and outward prayers and songs, which Dante the Pilgrim joins in diverse ways as he ascends from terrace to terrace and finally meets Beatrice.

The Pilgrim's ascent to Paradise from the top of Mount Purgatory, as well as each subsequent ascent to a higher heaven, is made possible through Beatrice's looking upwards and the Pilgrim's fixing his eyes on her, while both are immersed in silence, likely modeling their experience after Christ's silent ascension to heaven in front of the disciples (Acts 1.9-11). Dante the Poet cannot describe the Pilgrim's ascent in any other way but through a poetry emphasizing some form of metaphoric violence: he is rapt, taken up, transported rapidly to a higher heaven just as Beatrice looks upward and both are outwardly silent. Furthermore, Dante the Poet employs the language of violence until the very end of the Pilgrim's journey. At the conclusion of *Paradiso* 33, the Pilgrim focuses on the Trinity ("tre giri / di tre colori e d'una sussistenza," *Par.* 33.116-17) as he seeks to understand how it is possible for man ("la nostra effige") to be in the second circle ("pinta," *Par.* 33.131). At this juncture, his mind is struck by lightning: "percossa / da un fulgore" (*Par.* 33.140-41). Readers, too, are struck by the revelation that the language of violence has accompanied Dante the poet until the end of the poem. Equally, or even more striking, is that the same two words present in the Pilgrim's ultimate vision of the Triune God through Christ—the past participle *percosso* (struck) and the noun *fulgore* (lightning)—are the same employed by Capaneus

in describing his death by a bolt of lightning hurled down against him by Jove: "Se Giove stanchi 'l suo fabbro da cui / crucciato prese la *folgore* aguta / onde l'ultimo dí *percosso* fui [...]" (*Inf.* 14.52-54; our emph).

Just as violence disappears in heaven, so too (with the vision of God) does the human word, as the external and visible sign needed for human communication on earth. The name of Dante is never pronounced in Hell. Beatrice proclaims it once on the top of Mount Purgatory to mark the Pilgrim's recognition of his sinfulness. Throughout the heavenly journey, Dante is known to all the saints through their reading in the "great volume" of God (*Par.* 15.50). Thus, not only is his name known to all the blessed; it is also loved by them. Dante's name, therefore, becomes synonymous with the Augustinian definition of *verbum*: namely, "cum amore notitia" ("knowledge with love," *De Trinitate* 9.10.15). This knowledge with love renders the proclamation of Dante's name totally unnecessary and anticipates the dissolution of all words as external, visible, audible signs. In God and through the *Verbum*, Dante is able to understand the divinity as fully as a creature can; by the same token, he is also able to understand himself through a mental, inward, silent illumination. In the poem's last moment, the divinity communicates with Dante, not through names and words as they are usually understood (consisting of a rational element and an externally perceptible sign) but rather through an inner illumination. Dante's and the text's silence at the end of the *Commedia* (contrary to what takes place at its beginning) proposes a totality, which the medieval author believes to be possible only through the divinity.

What precedes is the call for papers circulated about two years ago. Most of the essays analyze—from various perspectives—some of the ideas expressed above to such an extent that all of them, as a whole, have formed a coherent volume reflecting on unholy and holy violence in a frightening reminder of the trials and tribulations, mostly caused by humans, coursing through humankind's history here on earth and in the Dantean afterlife. In fact, for Dante, the afterlife is the direct consequence of human existence on earth, as far as humans are concerned, and, as far as the angels, of the dramatic and tragic rebellion of some of them against God and their fall into a frightening *locus*: for Dante a physical place at the center of the universe the farthest removed from God.

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In the volume's first essay—"L'invenzione del luogo dell'Inferno dantesco—**Paolo Cherchi** demonstrates that the location of Hell before Dante was far from certain. Consequently, just as Dante has been attributed the creation of Purgatory, he can also be credited with the location of Hell, which in the *Comedy* is situated underground just under Jerusalem, in a funnel-like cavity reaching the center of the earth, the nethermost point of the universe: the location of Lucifer. Analyzing many statements from the Fathers of the Church to Dante's contemporary writers, Cherchi illustrates how Dante was the first author to assign a location—physical,

ethical, theological all at once—to the realm of Lucifer, his minions, and the condemned human souls.

In his essay, **Ronald L. Martinez** focuses, not on the glorification of the Empire, which takes place primarily in *Paradise*, but rather on "The Suffering Empire and the Suffering Christ in Dante's *Inferno.*" Christ is suffering because the inhabitants of Hell have refused Him. Consequently, the Empire too is suffering because refusing Christ is tantamount to refusing the Empire, in which Dante placed his hope for justice and peace on earth. Among the many themes Martinez elucidates, the murder (alluded to briefly by the Centaur Nessus in *Inferno* 12) of Henry of Almayne, the innocent son of the emperor-elect Richard of Cornwall, is most striking in that it was perpetrated during the most sacred moment of the celebration of the Eucharist, the bloodless reenactment of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Next, **Federico Canaccini**'s essay—"La condanna degli Uberti"—can be viewed as the historical demonstration, not only of the suffering Empire and Christ, as argued by Martinez, but also of the very imperfect nature of all human societies and communities bent on the supremacy of a group over another group, on revenge, on violence. On the basis of historical sources, Canaccini shows that the very prominent Uberti family, once a Ghibelline leader, became the symbol of the factions and fractions dividing the Italian peninsula and faced the destiny of the defeated: persecuted with the heaviest measures, they were exiled, accused of heresy, and annihilated.

Justice and injustice are thus paramount in the volume's investigations. In her essay titled "La pena del sacco come stilema della sopraffazione," **Claudia Di Fonzo** focuses on divine and human justice, primarily in Dante, but also in Cino da Pistoia, Boccaccio, and some contemporary artistic performances. In ancient times, the guilty person condemned to this barbaric penalty was sewn up in a leather sack together with several animals—such as a dog, snake, monkey, a chicken, or rooster—and thrown into water. While adopting the *contrapasso*, or appropriate retribution for one's transgressions as the basis for the torments of Hell and purifications in Purgatory, Dante rejects, therefore, all forms of extreme punishment such as the penalty of the sack.

As the *locus* furthermost remote from God, Dante's Hell is the primary manifestation of angelic *hubris* and human transgressions. Within this all-comprehensive, perverse context, **Jelena Todorović**'s thesis—"Avarice Is the Most Dangerous Sin: 'la maladetta lupa' in Dante's *Commedia*"—examines the ubiquity of avarice. She argues that, in Dante's ethical world, avarice, more so than any other sin, not only affects humans as individuals but it extends its nefarious effects into the sinner's family and community, causing destruction at the collective level as well. She points out that Dante paints the picture of the corrosive and divisive nature of avarice from the opening canto of the *Comedy* to the bottom of Hell with many references to the same vice throughout *Purgatory* and *Paradise* up to canto 30. Because of the multitudes of people affected by this

vice and the wide array of transgressive acts it generates, avarice and all related vices destroy human society. Whereas avarice, one of the so-called capital sins, is not the deadliest one—*hubris* is Satan's and Adam and Eve's sin—Dante nevertheless views it as the most dangerous and pervasive transgression.

Thus, violence—indeed, unholy violence—stands out as a most fruitful approach to the proper understanding of the *Comedy*, as several other essays evince.

A most troublesome form of violence that may be called sacrilegious is the focus of **Leyla M. G. Livraghi**'s essay, which focuses on an epic hero and a contemporary, vulgar thief from Pistoia: "Vanni Fucci e Capaneo: metamorfosi dell'eroe sacrilego dall'epos classico alla *Commedia*." Through an insightful analysis based on poetic rewriting, the Dantean Capaneus (*Inf.* 14) and Vanni Fucci (*Inf.* 24-25) are transformed, most strikingly, into two violent individuals challenging the divinity: Capaneus, lies supine on the ground while attacking verbally the deity; and Vanni Fucci, vulgarly and blasphemously, addresses God with vulgar words and gesture. In both narratives, the author points out the many faces of unholy violence.

While humans should always condemn all forms of violence against other humans, we wonder about the violence of God against His own Son, which Beatrice explains and recognizes as mysterious (*Par.* 7). Narratives of violent interventions of God against humans are countless in the Old Testament. Such is the case of the violent death of the biblical Uzzah, the focus of the next essay.

Dabney G. Park concentrates on this form of violence in "'I Am Not Uzzah': Dante Speaks Truth to Power." Uzzah the Israelite is killed by God for trying to support the Ark of the Covenant on the verge of falling. During the Middle Ages, various theologians and canon lawyers interpreted this event as a warning to lay persons against criticizing the clergy. Dante refers to the biblical story briefly in *Purgatorio* 10 and more extensively in *Epistola* 11, addressed to the Italian cardinals. In the epistle, Dante positions himself as a humble person who must speak truth to power. He clearly distinguishes himself from Uzzah's transgression by saying that he is not concerned with the Ark (the church), but with the oxen (the cardinals), who are leading the church on the wrong path. Dante's criticism of the conduct of the clergy is forceful, even without reaching the tone evident in several passages of the *Comedy*, including *Paradise.*

The following essays deal with silence, words, and polysemy.

In "Un silenzio che turba più delle parole: Geri del Bello e la contraffazione della giustizia divina (*Inf.* 29.1-36)," **Filippo Fabbricatore** argues that Dante the Poet does not allow the Pilgrim to meet his violent relative so as not to open the door to issues related to family revenge but also—and arguably most importantly—to voice his condemnation of this brutal use of force at the basis of so many human interactions. Further developing his thesis, the author argues also that the sowers of discord (among whom is Geri del Bello), who are eternally mutilated by a devil, and then parodically healed to be dismembered over and over

again, points perversely to Christ's sacrifice, whose purpose was to heal humankind's spiritual wounds once and forever.

In "'Se non…' (*Inf.* 9.9) and 'i vostri mali…' (*Inf.* 23.109): Interpretative Issues of Infernal *Aposiopesis*," **J. C. Wiles** illustrates the several instances of Virgil's and the Pilgrim's self-imposed verbal interruptions. In the first *cantica* —Wiles argues—silence is always disruptive. In fact, it bespeaks not only a disunity between self, the human word, and the world but also, crucially, between self and the Word, which lies at the basis of rationality, unity, and love—all of them, it can be argued, are restored and made available to all humans through Christ's violent death on the cross.

In "Le note di questa comedìa": Music and Metapoesis in *Inferno* 16," **Lachlan Hughes** focuses on a famous declaration by Dante the Poet, who, in announcing the arrival of the monster Geryon, addresses the reader using an oath to emphasize his narrative: "per le note / di questa comedìa." Hughes reconstructs the semantic breadth which the term "nota" held for Dante and his early readers. The author proposes reasons for the term's neglect in critical discussions of *Inferno* 16 and elsewhere, pointing out what is gained by reintroducing the musical resonances of the term to Dante's text. Ultimately, Hughes emphasizes that many terms are highly polysemic in Dante and that reading, writing, singing, and listening are all imbricated with the single term "nota."

In "Rapture and Visionary Violence in Dante's *Purgatorio* 9," **Aistė Kiltinavičiūtė** argues that Dante's dream in *Purgatorio* 9 is indebted to the depiction of rapture in Virgil's and Ovid's stories of Ganymede, but also, and most importantly, outdoes them by registering the inwardness and sensory reactions of the seer. In rewriting his classical models, Dante implicitly invokes Saint Paul as an authority on rapture, allowing the poet to valorize the vulnerability of the visionary person's cognitive uncertainty when confronted with mystical experiences. Finally, the article outlines the implications of rapture represented in *Purgatorio* 9 for the *Commedia* as a whole in that it anticipates the many raptures, albeit of a different nature, which the Pilgrim will experience while ascending from heaven to heaven as he fixes his eyes in those of Beatrice.

With her essay—"'*Regnum celorum* vïolenza pate' (*Par.* 20.94). Il tessuto biblico del cielo di Giove"—**Erminia Ardissino** goes beyond scrutinizing the canto's many biblical quotations and allusions, analyzing the relationships between divine will and human will, holy sacrifice and violence—all closely involved in humankind's salvation history.

The three following essays further expand this issue's central points.

In "Dante in the Margins of Hannah Arendt," **Rosalia Peluso** starts from a quotation of Dante's *Monarchia* which opens the chapter on *Action* of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* to pursue several issues: Why does Arendt choose this exergue, and why does she open the discussion of the "political activity par excellence"—active life—with a reference to an author who arguably asserts the primacy of the speculative over the practical? Peluso informs us that, *via* Étienne

Gilson, Arendt presents Dante as the poet-philosopher who, while reaffirming contemplative life through the Pilgrim's ascent to God, gave active life an unusual dignity in medieval thought. For Peluso, furthermore, Arendt derives from Dante's *oeuvre* some fundamental characteristics of action, namely, the intensification of the agent's being and its revelatory function. In concluding her insightful study, Peluso suggests that what caught Arendt's attention is Dante's emphasis on action itself. Thus, insofar as every existing being tends towards its own being and derives satisfaction from it, Dante holds that the human being who "does" is somehow intensified and enlarged, as it is exposed to a revelation.

Further expanding Dante's influence even in the postmodern, the next essay takes us to literature in its perennial attempt to interpret human existence. In "Olga's Journey to Hell and Back: Echoes of Dante's *Commedia* in Elena Ferrante's *I giorni dell'abbandono*," **Stefania Porcelli** analyzes this 21st-century novel as a journey through hell, purgatory, and whatever kind of paradise, or happiness, one can possibly achieve here on earth. One must bear in mind, in fact, that in postmodernity—which Christian thinkers may be willing to indicate as post-Christianity—the afterlife, and thus the Dantean belief in paradise, is oftentimes excluded. For Porcelli, the female protagonist Olga moves from the dependency and hesitancy of her role as wife and mother to a position that Ferrante herself calls *sorveglianza*, i.e., vigilance: a gendered term entailing a *sorveglianza* made of the desire to be awake and aware. Porcelli's analysis of the imagery and language of the novel highlights Dante's influence on Ferrante primarily through his *Inferno*. The scholar ponders also the question of atonement and salvation, contrasting a medieval poet's belief in the afterlife with a contemporary writer who excludes the beyond.

As the celebrations of the seventh centenary of Dante's death have demonstrated, Dante constitutes not only a presence but also a challenge even nowadays.

The author of next essay, **Olimpia Pelosi**, in "Traduzioni vernacolari della *Commedia* tra secondo e terzo millennio," provides a panaromic view of a fascinating cultural, linguistic, and literary phenomenon: rewritings and translations, primarily of the *Comedy*, not into a foreign language but into one of the many Italian dialects. Pelosi analyzes the many studies of several dialectologists, from Caro Salvioni at the beginning of the twentieth century, to Alfredo Stussi, Francesco Di Gregorio, Francesco Granatiero, and Gian Luigi Ferraris (2020). While reading Pelosi's very informative analysis, one can certainly ask what prompts so many Italian poets to render Dante into their own dialect, oftentimes a language in its own right. One can easily understand the many purposes of poets translating Dante into a foreign language; thus, one can imagine that every day someone, somewhere in the world, is translating Dante into English or some other language. Do Italians translate Dante into a regional dialect to counter Dante's attempt to propose the so-called *volgare illustre*, a noble Italian language capable of setting aside all other idioms existing throughout the

Italian peninsula? Arguably, the goal of non-Italian poets translating Dante into their own language, and the goal of Italians rendering it into their regional idioms, may in fact coincide: to do homage to Dante, to challenge themselves with one of the world's greatest poets, and to proclaim the dignity and beauty of every language.

Concluding the volume, **Dino S. Cervigni**'s "Holy and Unholy Violence in Dante: From Hell to Purgatory and Paradise" links his analysis with the topic of *Annali d'italianistica*'s 35th issue (2017)—*Violence Resistance Tolerance Sacrifice*—and further expands this volume's themes, which (as stated above) were announced two years ago, and seeks to bring to a sharper focus all the studies of this issue.

We are aware that violence lies at the core of all human endeavors, as ancient and medieval writers have stated. According to the Bible—arguably Dante's foremost inspiration for his poetry—humankind's history begins with the rebellion of Satan and Adam and Eve, and will end with the destruction of the world at the end of time. Between these two moments lies the possibility for humans to overcome and obliterate violence by accepting Christ's sacrifice. Cervigni writes that Dante's hell bears out a world gone awry and humans' refusal of Christ's sacrifice. Dante the Pilgrim experiences the consequences of transgression, he then atones, and purifies himself. He finally ascends to God, rising from heaven to heaven as he looks in the eyes of Beatrice. When he arrives in the heaven of the martyrs, he offers himself as a "holocaust": a wholly spiritual self-sacrifice. The language of violence—now totally transformed—accompanies him up to the vision of the Trinity. Using the same terms employed to describe Capaneus' defeat by Jove, as well as Christ being pierced by the soldier's lance, Dante the Pilgrim is metaphorically struck ("percosso") by a bolt of lightning.

In Dante's imagination and belief, one of the three realms, Purgatory, will become once again deserted at the end of time. The vanquished Satan's mock kingdom, however, will forever exist in a perennial opposition to the kingdom of God. Is Hell's eternal existence a form of violent and cruel manifestation of God's justice or defeat? Some ancient and modern philosophers and theologians wondered, and still wonder, how it is possible for an infinitely merciful God to co-exist with Hell and its inhabitants, who, while being subjected eternally to punitive violence, would nevertheless refuse Him. Also, how can one explain the many biblical statements about the renewal of everything, such as "Behold, I make all things new" (Revelation 25.1)? Appearing once only in the New Testament (Acts 3.19-21), the term apocatastasis expresses the belief or theory of ultimate reconciliation, renewal, restoration. In Antiquity, Origen of Alexandria (ca. 184-ca. 253) pondered this troublesome issue and, according to some scholars, believed in the possibility of universal salvation and reconciliation.[1] In modern times, the Italian philosopher and theologian Vito Mancuso argues on

[1] For these issues see Ramelli; Grafton; Mancuso.

behalf of ultimate restoration.[2]

But such issues do not concern the volume's authors, who pay homage to Dante in the seventh centenary of his death. While by and large starting from multiple perspectives, their contributions tend toward a common focus. Thus, in the *Comedy*, Dante the Pilgrim gradually leaves behind unholy violence, witnesses the souls' atonement and he himself atones, and finally he offers himself to God as a holocaust in order to see the divinity. The Poet describes metaphorically the Pilgrim's beatific vision as a bolt of lightning. At the same time, the Pilgrim moves from a frightened silence at the beginning of his journey to an illumined silence at the moment of his beatific vision which he achieves through Christ's Redemption.

It is the hope of the contributors, the guest editors, and all the editors of the journal that these critical directives may encourage scholars to further pursue these approaches to Dante studies.

Dino S. Cervigni
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[2] A former catholic priest, Mancuso develops a cogent argumentation on behalf of apokatastasis and provides many references in the footnotes.