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Purgatorio 31: Armonizzando in Due

Canto 31 is a serial duet, a call and response that penetrates through the porous threshold between Heaven and Earth. It recapitulates the critical history of the relationship between Dante and Beatrice. It narrates the reclamation of the pilgrim's soul so that he is restored to the right path, the one we learn that he deviated from as a direct consequence of his flawed choices following the death of Beatrice. The poet packs these verses with doublings—of words, of metaphors, of intercantical resonances, and of couples—of two natures in one being and of two beings in one transformative relationship that transcends all barriers.

Almost every tercet in the canto contains a duality of some kind. The *continuing* metaphor of the sword signals that Beatrice's discourse in this canto will switch from «per taglio», its *side*, to «per punto», its sharp *tip*, that is, from the slashes of generalized scoldings she transmitted *indirectly* to Dante through the angels in Canto 30, to the deep puncture wounds of detailed reproaches she inflicts *directly* upon the pilgrim [31.2-3]. Beatrice *begins again*, with a double imperative: «dì, dì» demanding that Dante *join* his spoken confession to her accusations [31.4-6]. In the next tercet, the poet deploys, for the first of many times in the canto, a word and its opposite: “my voice would *move* and then was *spent* before its organs had released it.” [31.8-9]. What you have *now* will not be available *later*: the pilgrim's «memorie triste» of his sins are in that moment still recallable for him for the purposes of the confession, but in the future will be obliterated by the waters of Lethe [31.11]. Confusion and fear are *mixed together* as two emotions in one. In order to *hear* the «sì» coming from Dante's mouth, one needs *eyes* [31.14].

The word «bocca» will return again as «la *seconda* bellezza» of Beatrice at the end of the canto [31.14,138]. The *first* metaphor of arrows employs both «balestro», crossbow, and «asta», spear, as well as both cord and bow [31.16-18]. The use of words such as ‘dischiusa’, ‘dibarba’, and ‘disvele’ make the reader think simultaneously of their antonyms. The word chain of «braccia» followed in the next line by «abbracciommi» and in the next tercet «braccio» creates a link of encircling events in time [31.100,101,105].

Dante’s intentional twinning of words doubles their significance and mirrors the two in one theme of the canto. Other paired nouns include ‘tears and sighs’, ‘ditches and chains’, ‘comforts and advantages’, ‘nature and art’, ‘winds from *our lands* or the *lands of Iarbus*’, and ‘pargoletta’ which pairs with ‘novità’ as well as with ‘augelletto’ in the following tercet [31.59-61]. Stars double as nymphs, love changes to an enemy, “Out of your *grace*, do us this *grace*.” [31.136] the three theological virtues gracefully implore Beatrice. The double imperatives are compelling calls to critical actions: “say, say!” Beatrice orders Dante to confess publicly, “hold me, hold me!” Matelda instructs Dante so that he does not drown in the Lethe, , “turn, turn” the three virtues implore Beatrice to gaze directly upon the cleansed pilgrim. The double subjunctive, «Se tacesi o se negassi ciò che confessi», serves to emphasize the precariousness of Dante’s status in the event that he had failed to follow the requisite rite of oral confession, even though God already knew his sins [31.37].

Key opposites abound. Beatrice admonishes the pilgrim and fires the second arrow metaphor «lo primo strale (arrow) de le cose fallaci» [31.55] She lays bare Dante’s primal sin: he should have *risen up* to follow behind her «Levar suso di retro a me» after her death, and not *weighed his wings down* with false things «gravar le penne in guiso» [31.56-58]. The poet juxtaposes «le presente cose» of brief false pleasures «falso lor *piacer*» with the eternal «sommo

piacer» of Beatrice's resplendent spiritual beauty [31.34-35, 52]. The lovely carnal but mortal limbs which *enclosed* Beatrice's soul in life contrast with the revelation of her timeless unveiled face in the *open* air of the divine forest. The sharp 'barba', the external signifier of the, at least, physically mature man who is ordered to point it upward, resonates with the 'si dibarba' in the metaphor of the unrooted oak, and puns with the hidden barb of the poison in Beatrice's command. Matelda's sudden dunking of Dante «mi *sommerse*» into the river, forcing him to swallow its waters, startles in comparison with the prior proximate image of Matelda walking on water «sen giva *sovresso* l'acqua» [31.101,96]. At the canto's conclusion, the contrasting phrases of light and shadow, «viva luce eterna», the living eternal light, and «il ciel t'adombra», the sky that veils you, demonstrate the poet's success at rendering into poetry the ineffable presence of Beatrice [31.139,144].

The mystery that lingers beyond this canto, now that Dante's sins have been outed, and Beatrice is unveiled (and revealed to be inexpressibly more beautiful than *before*) is that of the griffin, the beast who is one person in two natures. Dante has raised his head to look at Beatrice, who is looking at the griffin, «la doppia fiera», whose double nature Dante again emphasizes [31.122]. In Beatrice's eyes, Dante sees *reflected*, just like the sun within a mirror, the griffin radiating serially first one of his natures and then the other, «*or con altri or con altri* reggimenti», the only repetition of a phrase in the canto [31.121-123]. When Dante looks *directly* at the griffin, as he apostrophises in amazement to the reader, he sees only one creature. Beatrice's powers of perception have expanded to a supernatural level. The poet's are not yet there. He struggles with the translation of the ineffable again at the end of the canto.

The parallels to Canto 5 of the *Inferno* haunt Canto 31 and inspire a re-reading. The love that seized hold of Paolo and Francesca acted quickly through shared glances and a fatal kiss.

Here Dante planted the antecedent «piacer» to the two in Canto 31, where Francesca describes her attraction to the physical beauty of Paolo's body: «mi prese di costui *piacer* sì forte.» [Inf.5.104]. Their mutual lust, «con sì breve uso» in life, led the two of them to one death, a simultaneous one [31.60]. Conjoined forever in Hell, there will no opportunity for change in their static relationship, only a change in their location as they are battered about, here and there, up and down by the «bufera infernale» [Inf.5:31]. The pilgrim, moved to pity by the lovers' fate which he senses could be his own, faints and falls «*caddi*» as if he had met his own death [Inf.5.141-2]. In a deliberate echo to Inferno 5, Dante uses 'caddi' for only the second time in the poem when in Canto 31, Dante, after being stung by the nettle of remorse, «*caddi vinto*», falls overcome once again [31.89]. However, this time, it is a correction of the previous grave error, an active repudiation of the lust and other things that once most lured his love [31.85-87].

Dante's relationship with Beatrice is dynamic, capable of change, of revision, of surprises and of disappointments. It is transcendent but without a predetermined outcome. There is plenty of room for mistakes. The relationship between the two Florentines seems to have been one-sided during their shared historical co-existence, more vivid in Dante's imagination than enacted, and especially tenuous during the 10 years following Beatrice's death. Unlike in the situation of Paolo and Francesca, the deaths of Beatrice and Dante were not, of course, simultaneous. This yawning gap in mortality between the two raises the question of why a living lover should remain faithful to his beloved after her death, as strange a concept in the 13th century as it is today. Dante's great sin of "obliare", forgetting Beatrice, is the earthly obverse to the sanctioned purging of memory in the Lethe. And yet, Dante's grievous misdirection in reaction to the early loss of his beloved forged his character and secured his destiny as the Sommo Poeta. Beatrice's death was not the end of their relationship, but was the catalyst for what became a more profound

and complicated connection with deep salvific implications. The poet necessarily had to follow behind his beloved, «retro di me» as Beatrice says, so that the recalcitrant trailing ‘fedele’ could undertake and universalize his personal journey to salvation [31.57]. They were in the same ‘opera’, but their arias were clearly not in synchrony. Unlike the weeping Paolo who never speaks, Beatrice does not turn out to be a silent partner. After a long period of muteness, she unforgettably uses her voice, sweetly and angelically in Limbo, and then as a finely honed weapon in the Garden of Eden in Purgatorio. She is prompted by Love to descend to Limbo where she asks Virgil to lead Dante out of the dark wood through Hell and to the top of Mount Purgatory where she will then take over as his guide. In Cantos 30 and 31 of Purgatorio she assumes center stage as accuser and confessor among other more symbolic roles. Beatrice displays her intimate knowledge of Dante’s past. She reveals the interventional role she has played over the years in sending dreams and visions to the one she loves, who was not as alone as he thought. Near the end of the canto the long separated pair finally look directly at one other. Their two very distinctive natures share a long anticipated moment of reunion. Dante has perfected his human innocence and Beatrice, long ago, her divine soul. Their relationship has moved out from under the dark shadows of dissonance to the open air of harmony.