

## “L'ARDÜA SUA OPRA” (PAR., XXXI, 34): ARCHITECTURAL ASPECTS OF DANTE'S ROME

*The aim of this article is to examine the specifically architectural and structural aspects of Dante's Rome in the *Commedia* which have not received particular attention in the critical literature. Focusing on the Eternal City's monumental and urban features and their placement in the order of the poem at pivotal junctures in each of the three canticles, reveals how the city was for Dante, paradoxically, both central and liminal. While Rome is central to Dante's political ideology, like the poem itself, the city is situated at the threshold between this world and the next. A key meta-architectural literary theme, Rome can serve as a point of departure for investigating the structure and status of the poem itself taken as an artifact fashioned in imitation of the divine architect: “Colui che volse il sesto a lo stremo del mondo, e dentro ad esso distinse tanto occulto e manifesto” (Par., XIX, 40-42).*

### Introduction

The central place of Rome in Dante's map of the world has long been recognized<sup>1</sup>, beginning with the city's first appearance in his *oeuvre* in a key passage of the *Vita nova* that describes pilgrims passing through Florence on their way to Rome to see the Veronica, “the blessed image that Jesus Christ left us as a visible sign of his most beautiful countenance (which my lady [Beatrice] beholds in glory) [...]” (XL, 1)<sup>2</sup>. The thematic role of Rome in the *Commedia*, especially in opposition to that of Florence, has, moreover, recently been the object of renewed commentary emphasizing how Dante's movement from Florence to Rome in the poem reflects the post-exilic evolution of the author's political thought from that of a Florentine Guelph to that of an imperial Ghibelline<sup>3</sup>. The specifically architectural and structural dimensions and resonances of Dante's Rome, however, have not received particular attention<sup>4</sup>. Our aim in this article, therefore, is to briefly illustrate the potential critical value of an architectural lens through which to view the place of Rome in the poem. Focusing on the Eternal City's monumental and urban features and their placement in the order of the poem reveals how the city was for Dante, paradoxically, both central and liminal. While Rome is central to Dante's political ideology, like the poem itself, it is at the threshold between this world and the next. A neuralgic meta-architec-

tural literary theme, Rome can serve as a point of departure for investigating the structure and status of the poem itself taken as an artistic artifact fashioned in imitation of the divine architect: “Colui che volse il sesto a lo stremo del mondo, e dentro ad esso distinse tanto occulto e manifesto” (Par., XIX, 40-42)<sup>5</sup>.

The topic of Dante and architecture is not new<sup>6</sup>. Our focus on Rome attempts a new approach that combines different features of past discussions of this traditional theme with a new perspective on cartography and its role in shaping Dante's poetic treatment of Rome and its architecture. Alongside revolutionary developments in art, architecture and urban planning that characterized the Italian Duecento<sup>7</sup>, advances in cartography reflected a new spatial sensibility that informed Dante's mapping of Rome in the poem. The tradition of maps of Rome, featuring bird's-eye views of stylized walls and selections of principal monuments contained within them that went back to the twelfth century<sup>8</sup>, was evolving during the late Duecento and early Trecento under the influence of modern empirical forms of mapping. In fact, maps of both the Mediterranean basin and of Italy, including local or regional territories had appeared: the *mappaemundi* and maps of Italy and Rome of Pietro Vesconte and Fra Paolino Veneto are contemporary or nearly contemporary to Dante<sup>9</sup>. Dante's writings clearly reflect this new cartographic culture

and express a cartographic impulse, for example, in the tenth chapter of the first book of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, where the exile's appeal for a literary-cultural unification of the peninsula is rooted in the map of Italy<sup>10</sup>; while the *Commedia* transmits the most detailed verbal cartographic representation of the peninsula to come down to us from the period<sup>11</sup>.

The poem, in fact, functions at one level as a map of the world in the tradition of medieval *mappaemundi* with Rome featured as one of its central cosmological and geographical points of reference. It also functions as a map of the eternal city in the tradition of the iconographic representations of Rome in books and maps, including more or less contemporary maps of the city which featured its principal architectural and urban monuments in an iconic fashion. Dante's privileging of Rome on his map of the world reflects his poetic and political ideology and investments. Indeed, Jerusalem was typically located close or at the center of the inhabited world in Medieval *mappaemundi*. Dante's poem, on the other hand, gives special treatment to Rome and a number of its monuments, and combines the perspectives and cartographic idioms of itineraria, or road maps such as the Peutinger Map (fig. 2-3), and *mappaemundi* such as the Ebstorf map (fig. 4) with that of regional/local maps of the city such as the Medieval Map of Rome in the Ambrosiana Library's Manuscript of Solinus



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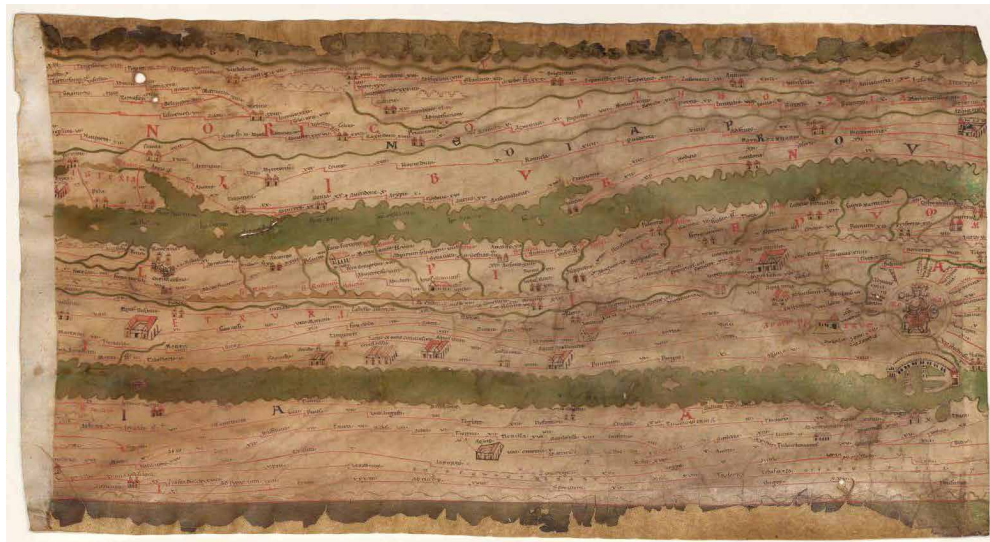
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Fig. 1 Fra Paolino Veneto, *Chronologia Magna*, 1334. Detail of the plan of Rome (Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, Lat. Z 399 [= 1600], f. 98; su concessione del Ministero dei Beni Culturali - Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana).

Fig. 2 Fourth segment of the Peutinger Map (National Austrian Library of Vienna, Cod. 324, segm. 4, with permission of ÖBA/Vienna)



\*The authors would like to thank Zyg Barański and Jacob Blakesley for their valuable and generous comments on earlier versions of this article.

<sup>1</sup> “Roma per Dante è il perno di tutto il sistema dell’universo”; A. BASSERMAN, *Orme di Dante in Italia. Vagabondaggi e ricognizioni*, Bologna 1902, p. 5. Giulio Ferroni’s recent, monumental *L’Italia di Dante. Viaggio nel paese della Commedia* (Roma 2019), takes Rome as its point of departure, “il primo nome di città fatto nella *Commedia*”: ivi, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> D. ALIGHIERI, *Opere*, I (*Vita nuova; le Rime della Vita nuova e altre rime del tempo della Vita nuova*), a cura di D. Pirovano, M. Grimaldi, Roma 2015, p. 277: “Dopo questa tribolazione avvenne, in quello tempo che molta gente va per vedere quella imagine benedetta la quale Geso Cristo lasciò a noi per esemplo de la sua bellissima figura, la quale vede la mia donna gloriosamente, che alquanti peregrini passavano per una via la quale è quasi mezzo de la cittade ove nacque e vivette e morio la gentilissima donna”.

<sup>3</sup> G. MILANI, *Florence and Rome*, in *The Oxford handbook of Dante*, edited by M. Gragnoli, E. Lombardi, F. Southerden, Oxford 2021, pp. 337-352.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the passages dedicated to the ancient Roman monuments in the poem (not limited to those in the city of Rome but extending to the mention of those in the broader Roman world), see V. BRACCO, *Il ricordo dei monumenti di Roma e del mondo romano nella Divina Commedia*, “Studi Romani”, XIII, 1965, 3, pp. 281-295.

<sup>5</sup> See T. E. HART, *Architecture and text: the Florentine baptistry in Dante’s Commedia*, “Res Publica Litterarum: Studies in the Classical Tradition”, IX, 1986, pp. 155-174. Of the four metaphors that Hart finds expressive of “a kind of paradigmatic correspondence between the (geometrical) art of the Creator and the art of the poet,” the first is “the depiction of the universe as the work of the divine Geometer or Architect designing his creation with compass in hand” (p. 160) in *Par.*, XIX, 40-45. This image of God as architect of the universe is Biblical, especially *Proverbs*, VIII, 27-29, which Dante himself translated in the *Convivio*, III, XV, 16: “E però disse Salomone in quello de’ Proverbi in persona della Sapienza: ‘Quando Dio apparecchiava li cieli, io era presente; quando con certa legge e con certo giro vallava li abissi, quando suso fermava [l’etera] e suspendeva le fonti dell’acque, quando circuiva lo suo termine al mare e poneva legge all’acque che non passassero li suoi confini, quando elli appendeva li fondamenti della terra, con lui e io era, disponente tutte le cose, e dilettaami per ciascuno die”, D. ALIGHIERI, *Convivio*, in *Id.*, *Opere*, a cura di M. Santagata, II (*Convivio; Monarchia; Epistole; Egloge*), a cura di G. Fioravanti et al., Milano 2014, pp. 95-805: 510. Geometer, divine architect and poet share in the science of measurement. For the role of the architect in the late medieval period see B. M. ALFIERI, *Architetto*, in *Enciclopedia dell’arte medievale*, II, Roma 1991, accessible online at: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/architetto\\_%28Enciclopedia-dell%27-Arte-Medievale%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/architetto_%28Enciclopedia-dell%27-Arte-Medievale%29/) (last accessed 8/11/2021).

<sup>6</sup> See R. ASSUNTO, *Architettura*, in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, I, Roma 1970, pp. 351-352; J. C. BARNES, “*Ut architectura poesis? The case of Dante’s ‘Candida rosa’*,” “The Italianist”, VI, 1986, pp. 19-33; J. G. DEMARAY, *Dante and the book of the Cosmos*, “Transactions of the American Philosophical Society”, LXXV, 1987, 5, and *Id.*, *Cosmos and epic representation. Dante, Spenser, Milton and the transformation of Renaissance heroic poetry*, Pittsburgh 1991; R. KAY, *Vitruvius and Dante’s ‘Imago Dei’*, “Word & Image. A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry” XXI, 2005, 3, pp. 252-272; then in R. KAY, *Dante’s enigmas. Medieval scholasticism and beyond*, Burlington

(fig. 5), or Fra Paolino Veneto’s map of Rome in the *Chronologia Magna* (fig. 1).

The architectural dimensions and implications of the place of Rome in Dante’s poem are thus both global and local. ‘Architectural’ refers to both the poem’s structures as invented by its *geometra* or *artifex*, and to the architectural features of Rome that the poet maps along the itinerary of the poem. On the one hand, Rome functions as a crucial node within the architectural network of the cosmological poem and the city is featured as destination of the poet-pilgrim-exile Dante’s itinerary to “quella Roma onde Cristo è romano” (*Purg.*, XXXII, 102). On the other hand, the journey is punctuated by Roman architectural monuments and urban sites along the way. This itinerary of the journey to Rome is thus a vital, load-bearing structure within the architecture of the poem<sup>12</sup>.

The itinerary that we propose to chart in this contribution accordingly maps the progression of the pilgrim/poet through the three canticles *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Initially, in the style of the ‘traveler’s tale’, which according to the conventions of travel literature must contain marvels and curiosities<sup>13</sup>, the poet references a marvel of contemporary Roman urban traffic control used to regulate the crowds of Jubilee pilgrims flowing to and from St. Peter’s across the Ponte Sant’Angelo (*Inf.*, XVIII, 28-33). The bridge is the vehicle of a simile used to describe the two-way traffic of the first of ten ditches of the *Inferno*’s eighth circle of fraud, the Malebolge (or “evil-pouches”). In Hell the panderers and the seducers trudge in opposite directions on their circular pathways, or rather, what the poet pointedly describes as “eternal circlings”: “quelle cerchie etterne.” When

the pilgrim and his guide turn to view the seducers coming in the opposite direction at the canticle’s precise midpoint (*Inf.*, XVIII, 70-72), the poet evokes the turning or pivot of the opposite movements of the heavens<sup>14</sup>. The passage thereby links, in a kind of meta-architectural *mise-en-abîme*<sup>15</sup>, the Roman urban architectural feature of the bridge to the architecture of the cosmos to that of the poem. The same meta-architectural literary strategy is employed by Dante in the *Purgatorio* in two key transitions of the second canticle dedicated to ‘passage’, that is, the process of penitential purification of the pilgrim/poet and of the souls of the saved. In *Purgatorio* II, the port of Rome is assigned the unprecedented role within Dante’s poetic cosmology as the place of embarkment of all the saved souls bound for Mt. Purgatory (*Purg.*, II, 100-105). Later, at the threshold of the “porta sacrata” (*Purg.*, IX, 130: “sacred door”), the entrance of Purgatory proper, the poet Dante compares the sound of the door turning on its hinges to the creaking of the swinging door of the Roman treasury on the Capitoline hill forced open by Julius Caesar when he pushed past Quintus Caecilius Metellus, and plundered the coffers of the Roman Republic.

Celestial Rome had been established as the pilgrim and the poem’s ultimate destination in the poem (*Inf.*, I, 124-129), and the overarching trajectory of the journey is punctually recapitulated at the end of the *Purgatorio*: “Qui sarai tu poco tempo silvano; / E sarai meco, senza fine, cive / Di quella Roma onde Cristo è romano” (*Purg.*, XXXII, 100-102), and at the end of the *Paradiso* at the entrance to the empyrean tenth heaven “Io, che al divino dall’umano, / all’eterno dal tempo era venuto, / E di Fiorenza in popol



Fig. 3 Detail of the Peutinger Map representing Rome (National Austrian Library of Vienna, Cod. 324, segm.4, with permission of ÖBA/Vienna).

giusto e sano [...]” (*Par.*, XXXI, 37-39). This arrival at the empyrean is the last great structural transition in the cosmological architecture of the poem. It is represented in terms of an elaborate three-part comparison that involves at each stage the city of Rome as destination, beginning with the comparison of the pilgrim-poet’s wonder upon arrival at the ‘city-rose’ of the empyrean to that of barbarians from the north astounded by the sight of “Roma e l’ardua sua opra,” in other words, the architectural wonders of Rome. The last comparison in the series, as we will see, brings Dante the author full-circle, returning him to the experience of pilgrims contemplating the Veronica at St. Peter’s in Rome as first featured in the *Vita nova*. Here the destination of the pilgrim’s devotion is figured as a culminating encounter which points beyond itself and concludes with the question of representation, that is, whether the Veronica corresponds to the reality of Christ’s effigy which the pilgrim-poet is about to directly encounter in the poem’s final vision: “Signor mio Gesù Cristo, Dio verace. / Or fu sì fatta la sembianza vostra?” (*Par.*, XXXI, 107-108).

### The Traveler’s Tale

Dante’s focus on architectural features of the eternal city, which stand as signposts along the path of the poet’s journey, underscores both the structural function of Rome in the architecture of Dante’s poetic cosmology and the poem’s status as an artifact created by the poet in imitation of the divine *artifex*. Both aspects character-

ize the first appearance of Rome after the proem (*Inf.*, I-II) at the beginning of the eighth circle of fraud, just after the architectonic plan of Malebolge is described: “Luogo è in Inferno, detto Malebolge [...]” (*Inf.*, XVIII, 1-18)<sup>16</sup>. It is thus in the cantos treating the eighth circle of fraud that architecture enters the poem for the first time as a distinctive feature of the poetic treatment. In keeping with the Aristotelian ethical anthropology that informs the order of the sins punished in Dante’s Hell as expounded by the pilgrim’s guide Virgil in *Inf.*, XI<sup>17</sup>, the circles of incontinence and violence presented predominantly natural settings in the cantos of incontinence (V-IX) or hybrid natural settings, after having passed through the walls of the city of Dis in *Inf.*, IX. In fact, the circle of violence (7) features the river Phlegeton of the violent against others (which is channeled by the dykes described in *Inf.*, XV, 1-12), the wood of the suicides, and the desert plain of the sodomites in *Inf.*, XII-XVII. Urban architectural features emerge most prominently as the contexts and vehicles of punishment in the eighth circle, since they are the products of the intellect that distinguishes mankind from plants and animals in the chain of being. Indeed, the intellect constitutes the divine aspect of humanity upon which the analogy between the poet as architect and the divine architect is ultimately based.

The architectural overture of the exordium of *Inf.*, XVIII, 1-18, in fact, describes the circle in which simple fraud is punished in ten concentric circular ditches or pouches as the combi-

2006; E. PANOFSKY, *Gothic architecture and scholasticism*, Latrobe 2005 (first ed. Latrobe 1951); W.A. MCCLUNG, *The Architecture of Paradise. Survivals of Eden and Jerusalem*, Berkeley 1983; *Divina sezione: l’architettura italiana per la Divina Commedia*, catalogo della mostra (Reggia di Caserta, 8-29 marzo 2018), a cura di L. Molinari, C. Ingrosso, Milano 2018; M.A. WATT, *The Cross that Dante bears. Pilgrimage, crusade, and the cruciform church in the “Divine Comedy”*, Gainesville 2005.

<sup>7</sup> See A. MARINA, *Architecture and urban space*, in *Dante in Context*, edited by Z. G. Barański, L. Pertile, Cambridge 2015, pp. 427-447; M. TRACHTENBERG, *Dante and the moment of Florentine art*, in *Art and experience in Trecento Italy*, conference proceedings (New Orleans, 10-12 november 2016), edited by F. Holly, S. Wilkins, Turnhout 2018, pp. 19-27; and ID., *Dominion of the eye. Urbanism art and power in Early Modern Florence*, Cambridge 1997.

<sup>8</sup> A.-M. LEVI, *The medieval map of Rome in the Ambrosiana Library’s manuscript of Solinus*, “Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society”, CXVIII, 1974, pp. 567-594.

<sup>9</sup> See P.D.A. HARVEY, *Local and regional cartography*, in *The history of cartography, I (Cartography in prehistoric, ancient, and medieval Europe and the Mediterranean)*, edited by J.B. Harley, D. Woodward, Chicago 1987, pp. 464-501: 474-478; S. MADDALO, *In figura Romae. Immagini di Roma nel libro medievale*, Roma 1990, pp. 37-40; and L. NUTI, *Ritratti di città: visione e memoria tra Medioevo e Settecento*, Venezia 1996, especially pp. 43-67, and for Paolino Veneto’s map of Rome, pp. 105-112.

<sup>10</sup> T.J. CACHEY, JR., *Il problema della lingua: il “De vulgari eloquentia e l’Inferno”, in Voci sull’Inferno. Una nuova lettura della prima cantica*, a cura di Z.G. Barański, M.A. Terzoli, III, Roma 2021, pp. 455-481.

<sup>11</sup> See T.J. CACHEY, JR., *La “Commedia” come “mappamundi”, “Le forme e la storia”, n.s., IX, 2016, 2, pp. 49-73; ID., “Cosmographic cartography of the Perfect 28s”, in *Vertical readings in Dante’s Commedia*, edited by G. Corbett, H. Webb, III, Cambridge 2017, pp. 111-138; and G. CORAZZA, *Dante cosmographus. Indagini sulla ricezione della geografia reale della “Commedia” nell’esegesi dei primi secoli e nella letteratura geografica trecentesca*, tesi di dottorato, Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia, 2019.*

<sup>12</sup> The use of spatial itineraries, both architectural and cartographic, in support of the composition of literary works, was characteristic of the arts of memory that were extensively cultivated during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. This mnemotechnical aspect of geographical and cartographical metaphors and similes clearly informed Dante’s writings. See M.J. CARRUTHERS, *The book of memory: a study of memory in medieval culture*, Cambridge-New York 2008; EAD., *The craft of thought: meditation, rhetoric, and the making of images, 400-1200*, Cambridge-New York 2000; *The Medieval craft of memory: an anthology of texts and pictures*, edited by M. Carruthers, J. Ziolkowski, Philadelphia 2002; and L. BOLZONI, *Dante o della memoria appassionata*, “Lettere Italiane”, LX, 2008, 2, pp. 169-193.

Fig. 4 Reproduction of the Ebstorf Map (Ebstorf Abbey, Uelzen; the image is published here by kind permission of Abbess Erika Krüger).



<sup>13</sup> E.J. LEED, *The traveler’s tale*, in ID., *The mind of the traveler from Gilgamesh to global tourism*, New York 1991, pp. 103-108. An important genre of Medieval travel literature to Rome, undoubtedly available to Dante, was that of the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*. See *La più antica redazione dei Mirabilia*, in *Codice topografico della città di Roma*, a cura di R. Valentini, G. Zucchetti, III, Roma 1946, pp. 3-66 and Cristina Nardella’s study, edition and Italian translation of the *Marvels of Rome* written between the XII and XIII centuries: C. NARDELLA, *Il fascino di Roma nel Medioevo. Le Meraviglie di Maestro Gregorio*, Roma 1997.

<sup>14</sup> The two opposing movements of the heavens are the daily east to west motion along the equator, and the annual west to east motion of the zodiac along the ecliptic: “Leva dunque, lettore, a l’alte rote / meco la vista, dritto a quella parte / dove l’un moto e l’altro si percuote” (*Par.*, X, 7-9).

<sup>15</sup> For interesting reflections on the history of the notion of mise en abyme and its applicability to Dante’s poem, see C. GINZBURG, *Mise en abyme: a reframing*, in *Tributes to David Freedberg: Image and Insight*, edited by C. Swan, London-Turnhout 2019, pp. 465-480.

<sup>16</sup> “Luogo è in inferno detto Malebolge, / tutto di pietra di color ferrigno, / come la cerchia che dintorno il volge. / Nel dritto mezzo del campo maligno / vaneggia un pozzo assai largo e profondo, / di cui suo loco dicerò l’ordigno. / Quel cinghio che rimane adunque è tondo / tra ’l pozzo e ’l piè de l’alta ripa dura, / e ha distinto in dieci valli il fondo. / Quale, dove per guardia de le mura / più e più fossi cingon li castelli, / la parte dove son rende figura, / tale imagine quivi facean quelli; / e come a tai fortezze da’ lor sogli / a la ripa di fuor son ponticelli, / così da imo de la roccia scogli / movien che ricidien li argini e’ fossi / infino al pozzo che i tronca e raccogli” (*Inf.*, XVIII, 1-18).

<sup>17</sup> For the ethical structure of Dante’s Hell: M. COGAN, *The design in the wax: the structure of the Divine Comedy and its meaning*, London 1999, pp. 1-75.

<sup>18</sup> An architectural line of inquiry which cannot be developed here due to considerations of space, but which would be well worth further investigation, is the extent to which Dante’s experience and knowledge of Roman architectural monuments informs the *Commedia*; for instance, the way that the form of Malebolge and/or the celestial rose (see below) seems to echo a Roman amphitheater, or the evident but strictly implicit inspiration and influence of Trajan’s column on the invention of the terrace of pride, or the possible influence of the San Silvestro chapel frescos of the Basilica of Santi Quattro Coronati.

nation of a medieval fortress and a roman amphitheater<sup>18</sup>. The Malebolge cantos (*Inf.*, XVI-II-XXX) will be strongly characterized by the presence of architectural structures of the contemporary Italian environment, ranging from the Florentine baptistery (*Inf.*, XIX, 13-21) to the arsenal of Venice (*Inf.*, XXI, 7-18), to the towers of Monteriggioni and Bologna (*Inf.*, XXXI, 40-45; and 136-145). Moreover, the ten concentric circles that make up Malebolge represent an infernal parody of the ten heavens of the cosmos, so that from the bird’s eye perspective of the exordium of *Inf.*, XVIII, the Malebolge resembles a map of the heavens. In making up the eighth circle of his Hell, the poet-architect Dante imitates the divine architect in his ordering of the represented space in relation to the space of representation, in other words, the ratio of ditches to cantos, according to elaborate numerological and geometrical criteria<sup>19</sup>.

It is not surprising that an architectural feature of Rome is the first to be evoked in the Malebolge, given the classical symbolic resonance of Rome’s bridges<sup>20</sup>, and Rome’s preeminence among the cities of Italy in the *mappamundi* of the exiled

author. The Castel Sant’Angelo bridge across the Tiber is the vehicle for a simile that describes the back-and-forth movement of the panderers and seducers in opposite directions within the first ditch of the eighth circle:

Come i Roman per l’essercito molto,  
l’anno del giubileo, su per lo ponte  
hanno a passar la gente modo colto,  
che da l’un lato tutti hanno la fronte  
verso ’l castello e vanno a Santo Pietro,  
da l’altra sponda vanno verso ’l monte.  
(*Inf.*, XVIII, 28-33).

The simile is the first of what we have termed the load bearing architectural placements of Rome in the map of the cosmological poem. We have already remarked upon the cosmological architectural aspect of this first simile of Malebolge, which is often overlooked, although it has been the focus of suggestive commentary by James Nohrnberg<sup>21</sup>. According to the critic, the double movement of the sinners on their circular pathway in the first of the ditches of Malebolge encrypts “a mock heavenly milieu”. The architecture of the first ditch of the Malebolge is therefore designed by Dante in imitation of nature, in

Fig. 5 Medieval Map of Rome in the Manuscript of Solinus (Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Roma, C 246 Inf.; photo Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

keeping with *Inf.*, XI, 97-105, according to which nature takes her course from divine Intellect, and “your art, as far as it can, follows her”. Developing further John Freccero’s discovery of the importance of the *Timaeus* for Dante<sup>22</sup>, Nohrnberg takes the double movement of the sinners of the first ditch to allude to “the strophe and antistrophe” of cosmic rotation that informed the traditional Middle Platonic allegory of Plato’s creation myth (*Timaeus*, 36), which divided stellar (east to west, rational) and planetary (west to east, irrational) rotation, taking the cosmic motions of the same and the different to be at the foundations of creation. Nohrnberg considers them to represent the hypostases or underlying reality that the two files of sinners in the first ditch of Malebolge embody: “seducer and pander correspond to the love and contemplation – the ardent seraphim and contemplative cherubim – that communicate the first motion from the Primum Mobile and the fixed stars (‘the same’) to the planetary spheres (‘the different’)”<sup>23</sup>.

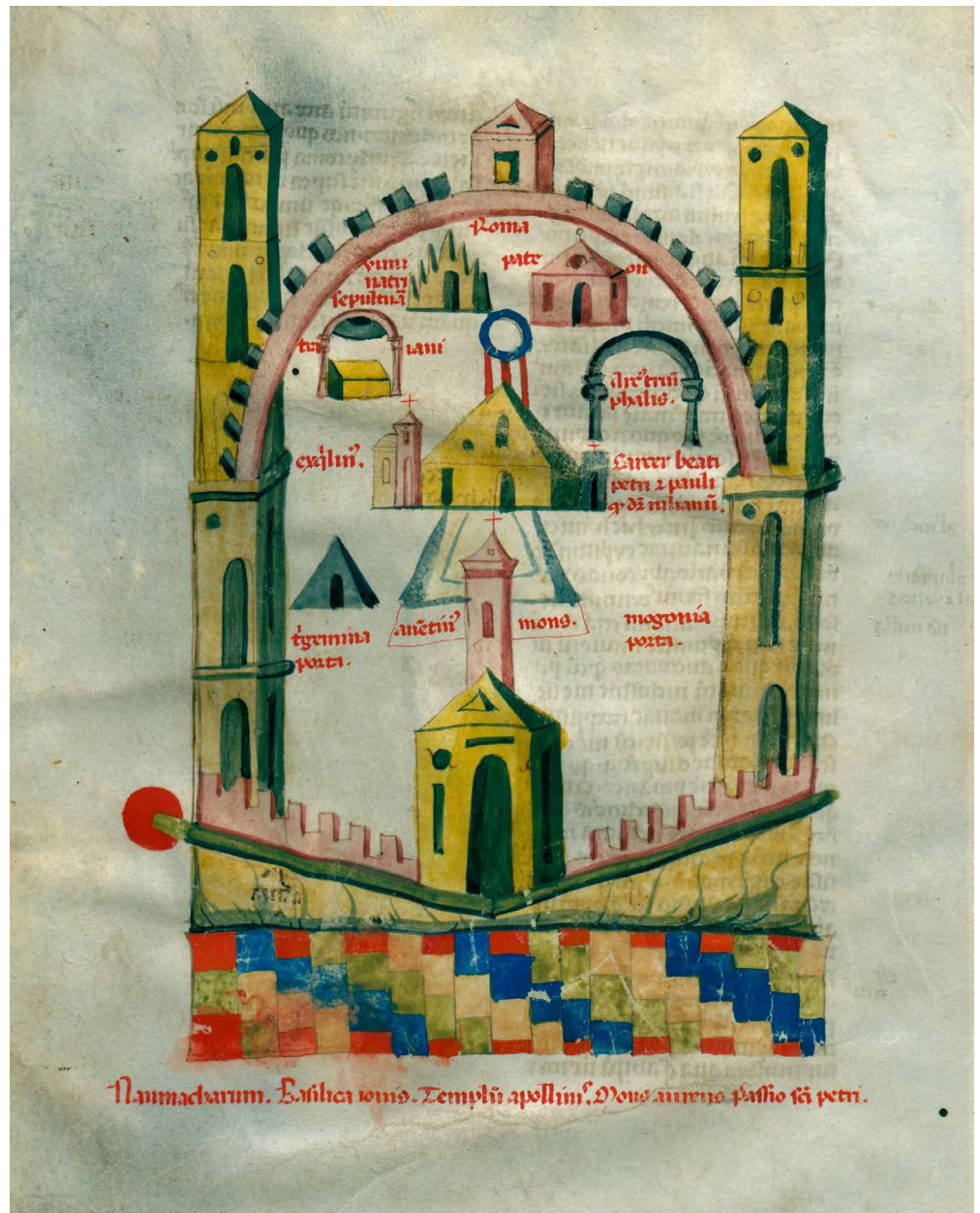
Be that as it may, Nohrnberg’s hypotheses are relevant for their architectural implications from our perspective. It is, in fact, likely by design, extrapolating from the studied architectural proportions of the poem uncovered by T.E. Hart, that the middle verse of the *Inferno* marks Dante and Virgil’s turn to view the sinners in the first *bolgia* coming toward them in the opposite direction<sup>24</sup>. There are 4720 verses in the *Inferno*. The midpoint occurs at verse 2360: *Inf.*, XVIII, 66, which is the transition from the first ditch of the panderers to that of the seducers who proceed in the opposite direction now facing Dante and Virgil:

Così parlando il percosse un demonio  
de la sua scuriada, e disse: “Via,  
ruffian! qui non son femmine da conio.  
(*Inf.*, XVIII, 66)

I’ mi raggiunsi con la scorta mia;  
poscia con pochi passi divenimmo  
là ‘v’ uno scoglio de la ripa uscia.

Assai leggermente quel salimmo;  
e vòlta a destra su per la sua scheggia,  
da quelle cerchie etterne ci partimmo.  
(*Inf.*, XVIII, 64-72)

From this perspective, the architectural motif of the bridge regulating two-way traffic in Rome can be said to correspond to the movement of the poem as an architectural artifact in its own right, in imitation of nature, which takes her course from the divine Intellect. Indeed, while the design of the eighth Circle and its elaborate architecture appears to mirror in a parodic, infernal fashion the map of the cosmos, it nevertheless represents an artistic expression of divine power and justice as mediated by the poet in the poem, so as to express a positive value in the overall ideological structure of the poem.



<sup>19</sup> For example, in the structure of the Malebolge cantos, Dante uses the golden ratio to measure the distribution of ditches and cantos, see T. J. CACHEY, JR., *Cartografie Dantesche: Mappando Malebolge*, “Critica del Testo: Dante oggi”, XIV, 2011, 2, pp. 229-260.

<sup>20</sup> See T. HARRISON, *The Great Bridge-Building of God*, in ID., *Ofbridges: a poetic and philosophical account*, Chicago, 2021, pp. 13-41.

<sup>21</sup> J. NOHRNBERG, *The Love that Moves the Sun and Other Stars in Dante’s Hell*, in *Sparks and seeds: medieval literature and its aftermath. Essays in honor of John Freccero*, edited by D.E. Steward, A. Cornish, Turnhout 2000, pp. 87-118; but see, also by J. NOHRNBERG, *The Descent of Geryon: The Moral System of Inferno XVI-XXXI*, “Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society”, CIV, 1996, pp. 129-187, and *Introduction to Malebolge*, in *Lectura Dantis: Inferno: A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*, edited by A. Mandelbaum, A. Oldcom, C. Ross, Berkeley 1998, pp. 238-261.

<sup>22</sup> J. FRECCERO, *Dante’s Pilgrim in a Gyre*, “Publications of the Modern Language Association of America”, LXXVI, 1961, 3, pp. 168-181; and ID., *Paradiso X: The Dance of the Stars*, “Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society”, LXXXVI, 1968, pp. 85-111.

<sup>23</sup> NOHRNBERG, *The Love that moves...* cit., pp. 95-96.

<sup>24</sup> T.E. HART, *The Cristo-Rhymes and polyvalence as a principle of structure in Dante’s Commedia*, “Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society”, CV, 1987, pp. 1-42.

The simile of the Castel Sant’Angelo bridge at the start of the Malebolge cantos mid-way through the poem’s first canticle is thus central both structurally and thematically to the architecture of the poem. Critics have noted the implicit but unmistakable connection that the simile establishes between the journey of the poem and the Jubilee pilgrimage of the year 1300, the first in the history of the church as promulgated by Dante’s nemesis Boniface VIII. The simile polemically juxtaposes in real-time the crowds of pilgrims crossing the bridge with the poet’s counter-pilgrimage recounted in the poem that departed from the “selva oscura” midway in the journey of the poet’s life in the same Jubilee year of 1300. In other words, while the Jubilee pilgrims were still flowing back and forth across the Sant’Angelo bridge the pilgrim Dante was crossing the bridge over the panders and seducers in Malebolge. The ‘signature’, eye-witness nature of the simile has led some modern commentators, starting with Scartazzini and Vandelli<sup>25</sup>, to suppose that Dante was in Rome for the Jubilee. Instead, bearing in mind the fictional dating of Dante’s journey to the Otherworld, in referencing Rome in the Jubilee year, the poet would seem here to be primarily concerned with drawing attention to the fact that he was otherwise occupied at the time with his own competing pilgrimage to that Rome “onde Cristo è romano” (*Purg.*, XXXII, 102). In any case, the ‘traveler’s tale’ casts an ironic, not to say, jaundiced eye on the popular and secular dimensions of Boniface’s Jubilee pilgrimage by reducing it to a question of traffic flow. Indeed, the neutral and detached observational perspective of the traveler to Rome describing “l’essercito” passing in opposite directions on the bridge in a regimented manner is decidedly secular. It is noteworthy, given the historical-religious context, for a total lack of religious reference or connotation.

In addition, in recalling a ‘marvel’ of contemporary Roman administrative planning, the po-

et pointedly maps three sites associated with political power in the city. The area mapped by the simile, including the Castel Sant’Angelo bridge and the Basilica of St Peter features as representative of medieval Rome in the very succinct plan of Rome detailed in the Ebstorf *mappamundi* mentioned above. Dante’s urbanistic and architectonic references (the bridge, the castle, the mount, the implicit ‘basilica’ referred to by the toponym “Santo Pietro”) have indeed a toponymic function focusing a geopolitical map of contemporary Rome which will be the target of Dante’s harsh critique in the next canto and the following ditch of Malebolge containing the papal simonists. The first, the “castello”, the castle, is Castel Sant’Angelo, which during Dante’s time was the property of the Orsini family, as was the “monte”, Monte Giordano, the stronghold of Giordano Orsini, created cardinal by his brother Pope Nicholas III. The political and polemical implications of mapping the Rome controlled by the Orsini family are amplified in *Inf.*, XIX, 19 which is dominated by the figures of three simoniac popes, beginning with the late Pope Nicholas III (Giovanni Gaetano Orsini, 1277-1280), who identifies Dante’s nemesis Boniface VIII (1294-1303), still living at the time of the fictional journey, as destined for the third bolgia, along with Boniface’s successor Clement V (1305-1314), who was to move the papacy to Avignon in 1309<sup>26</sup>. In the background of Ponte Sant’Angelo, the third site of the simile, and the destination of the pilgrims, is Santo Pietro, St Peter’s Basilica which was the fulcrum of Boniface’s Jubilee.

Yet another purely secular architectural ‘marvel’ highlighted by the traveler to Rome was the “pina” of St. Peter’s<sup>27</sup>, located at that time directly in front of the basilica itself. It is featured in the canto of the Giants as we emerge from the Malebolge cantos in *Inf.*, XXXI, to describe the gigantic proportions of Nimrod:

<sup>25</sup> G.A. SCARTAZZINI and G. VANDELLI (1929) (*Inf.*, XVIII, 28-30); C.S. SINGLETON (1970-75) (*Inf.*, XVIII, 28-30): “It is thought that Dante was in Rome during that year and himself witnessed the remarkable organization here described”. Commentaries cited from the Dartmouth Dante Project at <https://dante.dartmouth.edu/> (last accessed on 8/11/2021)

<sup>26</sup> Castel Sant’Angelo, originally the mausoleum of Emperor Hadrian, was successively owned by different families in the course of the Middle Ages. Owned by the Crescenzi family between the X and XI centuries, it was known as *Castellum* or *Castrum Crescentii* (Cristancia castellum is the denomination in the Ebstorf *mappamundi*). It later became the stronghold of the Pierleoni family, and eventually, at some point in the XIII century, it passed to the Orsini.

<sup>27</sup> A. LANCI, *Pina*, in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, Roma 1970, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pina\\_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pina_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/) (last accessed on 8/11/2021)). The “pina di San Pietro” is a celebrated pinecone made of bronze that was originally placed on the mausoleum of Hadrian according to some sources or atop the Pantheon according to others. It was moved to the atrium of the basilica of St. Peter’s by Pope Simmaco (498-514) where it remained until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when it was moved to the Belvedere palace and subsequently to the courtyard of the Pigna where it is found today.

La faccia sua mi pareo lunga e grossa  
come la pina di San Pietro a Roma,  
e a sua proporzione eran l’altre ossa;  
(*Inf.*, XXXI, 58-60)

The comparison serves as a fitting architectural epilogue to Dante’s infernal treatment of Rome. It reflects the secular perspective of the traveler on the marvels of the city. It also alludes to the meta-architectural aspect of the poet’s authorial role since the simile describes the gigantic size of Nimrod, the reputed builder of the Tower of Babel (*Genesis* X, 8-10 and XI). In fact, architectural details regarding the dimensions not only of the giants but also of Hell itself in cantos XXIX (*Inf.*, XXIX, 7-9), XXX (*Inf.*, XXX, 85-87) and XXXI of the *Inferno*, including here the estimated length of Nimrod’s face, which Galileo would later use to calculate the giant’s height<sup>28</sup>, were utilized by 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance architects, humanists and scientists, beginning with Antonio Manetti (1423-1497), to determine the “Site, Form and Measurements of the *Inferno* of Dante”<sup>29</sup>. More important for us than their role in the Renaissance reception of Dante’s poem, however, is the contemporary critical perspective on the meta-literary significance of such measurements that has highlighted the way that Dante the poet subtly utilizes them to inoculate himself from the charge of being the Nimrod of his own poem<sup>30</sup>.

### Passage

As we have seen, the Roman architectural simile of the bridge at the beginning of Malebolge is structural in the sense that it connects and mediates important architectural and thematic aspects of the poem. Two structurally key passages of the *Purgatorio* feature Rome in a fundamentally different yet still meta-architectural manner. The port of Rome in *Purg.*, II figures as the harbor where all the saved souls board the boat on their journey to the mountain of Purgatory,

and the simile of the creaking gate of entry to Purgatory proper in *Purg.*, IX, is compared to the creaking door to the Roman treasury located at the foot of the Campidoglio raided by Caesar. Both relate to the process of otherworldly salvation, while the bridge of *Inf.*, XVIII was simply an image. Both are thematically tied to and reinforce Dante’s Roman-centric ideology. They communicate his conception of Rome as a liminal space at the border between this world and the next, at two structural junctures of the poem marking the passage of the souls to the second realm and salvation. The two passages are keystones in the poem’s overall structure:

Ond’io, ch’era ora a la marina vòlto  
dove l’acqua di Tevere s’insala,  
benignamente fu’ da lui raccolto.  
A quella foce ha elli or dritta l’ala,  
però che sempre quivi si ricoglie  
qual verso Acheronte non si cala.  
(*Purg.*, II, 100-105).

E quando fuor ne’ cardini distorti  
li spigoli di quella regge sacra,  
che di metallo son sonanti e forti,  
non ruggiò sì, né si mostrò sì acra  
Tarpèa, come tolto le fu il buono  
Metello, per che poi rimase macra.  
(*Purg.*, IX, 133-138).

The fact that Dante makes the port of Rome the point of departure for the passage to Purgatory is perhaps one of if not the most under-appreciated features of Dante’s invention of the Otherworld. There is no theological, philosophical or literary source or precedent for making the port of Rome the point of embarkation of all the saved souls of Christendom<sup>31</sup>. Dante’s invention here has the immediate result of reinforcing and validating the representation of Purgatory as a physical place in the geography of earth (and the second realm in the architecture of the Otherworld described in the poem)<sup>32</sup>. The remarkable nature of this innovation has been perhaps obscured by

<sup>28</sup> G. GALILEI, *Due lezioni all’Accademia fiorentina circa la figura, sito e grandezza dell’Inferno di Dante*, a cura di R. Pratesi, Livorno 2011.

<sup>29</sup> G. BENIVIENI, *Dialogo di Antonio Manetti, cittadino fiorentino, circa al sito, forma & misura dello Inferno di Dante, poeta eccellentissimo*, Firenze 1506.

<sup>30</sup> J. KLEINER, *Mismapping the Underworld: Daring and Error in Dante’s ‘Comedy’*, Stanford 1994.

<sup>31</sup> A possible iconographic parallel with Dante’s ship was a large mosaic by Giotto that adorned the atrium of St Peter’s Basilica, representing Peter and the other Apostles in a *navicella*, a vessel tossed by the storm and saved by Christ waiting for it on the shore, according to the Gospel of Matthew 14, 22-33. In the left part of the mosaic the harbor and lighthouse of Rome were represented. The mosaic, which is lost and whose iconography survives in a drawing by the painter Spinello Aretino (end of XIV-beginning of the XV century), was a gift of cardinal Stefaneschi, Boniface VIII’s nephew and it has been interpreted as an allegory for the Church agitated by political conflicts and saved by the fisherman Peter and his successors, in particular Boniface, promoter of the first Jubilee calling the faithful to Rome. On Giotto’s mosaic: H.L. KESSLER, J. ZACHARIAS, *Rome 1300. On the path of the pilgrim*, New Haven and London 2000, pp. 217-218; and J.A. HEPPNER MORAN CRUZ, *Dante, Purgatorio 2 and the Jubilee of Boniface VIII*, in “Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society”, CXXII, 2004, pp. 1-26: 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> The idea that Purgatory was a physical place did not correspond to the notion of Purgatory as it had been recently defined by the doctrine of the general profession of faith elaborated in the second Council of Lyon in 1274. The notion of Purgatory as a physical place was mainly rooted in popular culture and the literature of visions that most commonly placed it underground. Theological and doctrinal definitions of Purgatory instead oscillate between the idea of Purgatory as a state of the soul and of it as a real place. See J. LE COFF, *The birth of Purgatory*, Chicago 1984.



the elaborate cosmological mapping program of *Purg.*, II, and of the Antepurgatory in general. Here, the poem to which “heaven and earth [and the poet] have set their hand” mixes celestial and terrestrial sites in an elaborate concoction that combines fictional and real places.

Rome and the port of Rome are situated in a cosmological and metaphysical context. Dante remains true to his privileging Rome within the cosmos as he had in the commentary on the second canzone of the *Convivio* (III, v, 9-12) *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona*, and on verse 19: “Non vede il sol, che tutto ’l mondo gira”, which describes the course of the sun around the earth. In that passage of the *Convivio* Rome figures as the geographical point of reference on earth for the measurement of the circumference of the planet which is based on the Arabic astronomer Alfraganus and his classic *Liber aggregationis*. Alfraganus, of course, never mentions Rome. Instead, Rome is for Dante a prime geographic meridian by which to measure the movements of the sun<sup>33</sup>. In the *Commedia*, on the other hand, Dante conceives of Rome not just as a central node of the material cosmos, but also as a portal to the metaphysical realm beyond it.

The mention of the river Tiber recalls the Rome evoked in *Inf.*, XVIII. Indeed, the presence of the river there was implicitly suggested by the bridge crossing it, as in the Ebstorf map, connecting St Peter’s Basilica and the Vatican to the Monte Giordano, which evokes the secularized (fraudulent) and touristy circuit of the pilgrimage industry. Here in *Purg.*, II, on the other hand, the mouth of the river where the Tiber mixes its waters with those of the Tyrrhenian Sea (“dove l’acqua di Tevero s’insala”, *Purg.*, II, 101), is the port where the souls of the saved gather waiting for the angel to embark them on his boat, directed to the mountain of Purgatory and ultimately, salvation. All commentators who consider the appearance of the Tiber and the port of Rome

in *Purg.*, II, agree in interpreting it as a symbol not only for the city as a whole, but specifically also for the Church as the only institution that can grant salvation. While in *Inf.*, XVIII a secularized and temporal Church was evoked, here in *Purg.*, II the focus is on the city of Rome as the seat of the pope as the vicar of Christ, the *loco santo* “the sacred precinct where successors of great Peter have their throne” (*Inf.*, II, 23-24). In contrast to the indistinct and impersonal flux of pilgrims on the bridge of *Inf.*, XVIII, *Purg.*, II, dramatizes the singer Casella’s journey of salvation<sup>34</sup>. His soul has finally arrived at the shore of Purgatory, and Dante expresses surprise at the length of time that Casella has taken to reach the shore since his death. The singer explains how his soul was delayed by the angel until a new law allowed for the souls to choose their own time to embark. Commentators agree that Dante implies here that the souls waiting to pass to Purgatory benefit from the plenary indulgence granted by Pope Boniface VIII with the promulgation of the first Jubilee in the year 1300. The episode reflects Dante’s faith in the institution of the Church and his recognition of the Jubilee dispensation without regard to the person of Boniface VIII.

The simile of the creaking hinges on the door of Purgatory proper which swings open for Dante and his guide is among the most intriguing in the poem, and it has been the subject of recent commentary<sup>35</sup>. For our purposes, the simile serves to put the Campidoglio hill on the map of the poem, almost in the iconographic manner of the Ambrosiana or Fra Paolino maps of Rome in counterpoint to the placement of the Aventino, the scene of Cacus’s crimes and his demise in *Inf.*, XXV, 25-33<sup>36</sup>. The simile, and its intertext with Lucan’s *Pharsalia* (III, 153-155; 167-168), connect the narrative architecture with a nodal point on the map of the city rich in ideological significance. As before, the emphasis is on

<sup>33</sup> Rome serves a similar geodetic tracking function in *Purg.*, XVIII, 79-81, where it is taken as the vantage point from which to observe the path taken by the sun when it sets in the southwest in late November between Sardegna and Corsica: “quelle strade / che ’l sole infiamma allor che quel da Roma / tra’ Sardi e’ Corsi il vede quando cade”.

<sup>34</sup> It is suggestive that the song that Casella begins to sing in *Purg.*, II, *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*, is the same which Dante commented upon in the *Convivio* in which he developed the extensive astronomical gloss which took Rome as a central point of reference.

<sup>35</sup> G. LEDDA, *Il mondo classico nei canti dell’Antipurgatorio* (Dante, Purgatorio I-IX), “Chroniques italiennes”, s. web, 39 2020, 2, pp. 215-245; *Passages seuils, sauts: du dernier cercle de l’Enfer à la première terrasse du Purgatoire* (*Inf.* XXXII-*Purg.* XII), édition M. Gragnolati, Ph. Guérin, <http://www.univ-paris3.fr/chroniques-italiennes-recherche-par-numero-page-1-441707.kjsp?RH=1488359347838> (consulted on 10 october 2021).

<sup>36</sup> In fact, the Ambrosiana map includes a vignette portraying a triangle without indentations and mostly painted in a gray-green color, which bears the inscription “trigemina porta,” a reference to the well-known gate located at the base of the Aventine hill to which Solinus refers when relating how Hercules, after punishing Cacus, consecrated a votive altar to Jupiter on this particular spot: “Qui Cacus habitavit locum, cui Salinae nomen est; ubi Trigemina nunc porta” (*Sol.*, I, 8), LEVI, *The medieval map of Rome...* cit., p. 584.

the city of Rome as a liminal space, this time between Antepurgatory and Purgatory proper. Appropriately enough, in so far as Purgatory is part of this terrestrial world within the context of historical time and space, the simile is the occasion for some fine tuning or adjustment in Dante’s Roman ideology, that is to say, his theory of empire and its relation to sacred history. Indeed, Giuseppe Ledda is no doubt correct in his interpretation of Dante’s referencing of Republican heroes (and a philo-Republican poet such as Lucan). Both here with Metello at the end of Antepurgatory and at the beginning with Cato, the poet intended to nuance his position vis-à-vis the legacy of Rome. Dante’s imperial ideology might have been misinterpreted by contemporaries and later readers as aggressively Ghibelline in the earthly political sense of being in favor of the empire and the emperor of his day, when in reality, as here in the Purgatory, the poet was also clearly interested in proclaiming the virtues of the Romans and their heroes in the defense of liberty, both political and spiritual.

The *Purgatorio* is, in fact, where Dante develops his interpretation of Rome in terms of its political and spiritual legacy. The three key passages in the *Purgatorio* that speak of Rome without evoking any particular architectural motif emphasize nevertheless and reinforce the central importance of the Eternal City to the poem’s ideology and its structure. In the last of the references at the end of the canticle in *Purg.*, XXXII, which takes place in the sacred “wood” of the earthly Paradise, Beatrice points again to Rome as the final destination of the poet: “Qui sarai tu poco tempo silvano; e sarai meco senza fine cive di quella Roma onde Cristo è romano” (*Purg.*, XXXII, 100-102). Beatrice here refers to Rome as the empyrean, the same Eternal City evoked longingly by Virgil in the poem’s proem (*Inf.*, I, 21-29), while looking forward to the poet’s arrival in the empyrean at the end of the poem in

*Par.*, XXXI, when the poet will arrive at the city of Rome as the “Eternal City” in which Christ is a Roman. The other two references to Rome are central in their own right. The first occurs in the context of Dante’s famous invective on the state of contemporary Italy in *Purg.*, VI, “Ahi, serva Italia,” which takes up the second half of the canto (vv. 76-151):

Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello,  
nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta,  
non donna di provincie, ma bordello!  
(*Purg.*, VI, 76-78).

The cartographic dimension of the invective is often overlooked. It starts out as if Dante were looking down on a map of the peninsula in composing his review of its sorry political condition:

Cerca, misera, intorno da le prode  
le tue marine, e poi ti guarda in seno,  
s’alcuna parte in te di pace gode.  
(*Purg.*, VI, 85-87).

Just as Rome is centrally located within Dante’s map of the cosmos and the inhabited world, so it is central to his map of Italy in *Purg.*, VI. Midway through the poet’s polemic is a portrait of “widowed Rome,” an iconographic motif alluding to the contemporary decampment of the papacy to Avignon and the start of its Babylonian captivity, which Dante is among the first to register as he was composing the second canticle:

Vieni a veder la tua Roma che piagne  
vedova e sola, e dì e notte chiama:  
“Cesare mio, perché non m’accompagne?”  
(*Purg.*, VI, 112-114).

The contemporary political travails of Rome make their first appearance in the poem here. Dante’s diagnosis of the causes of the political and spiritual crisis of Italy is likewise centered in Rome, in the *Purgatorio*’s central cantos (XIV-XVIII), and in particular in Marco Lombardo’s discussion of free will in *Purg.*, XVI. The

start of Marco Lombardo’s discourse, 25 tercets before Virgil’s on love, in fact marked the beginning of the ideological and architectural center of the *Commedia*, and it includes Dante’s fullest statement of his theory of the proper relation between church and empire, outside his political treatise, the *Monarchia*<sup>37</sup>:

Soleva Roma, che ’l buon mondo feo,  
due soli aver, che l’una e l’altra strada  
facean vedere, e del mondo e di Deo.  
(*Purg.*, XVI, 106-108).

Dante’s diagnosis of the causes of contemporary political and spiritual crisis in the confusion of roles and in particular his vehement critique of the contemporary papacy that had in his view usurped the political prerogative of the empire, underpins and runs through the entire poem (cf. *Inf.*, XIX; *Inf.*, XXVII). It will return even in the late cantos of the *Paradiso* (cf. *Par.*, XXVII, 1-66; *Par.*, XXX, 139-148), when Dante will distinguish between the Rome of the corrupt contemporary popes he has condemned to the circles of fraud, and the ideal Rome which counts Christ among its citizens.

### Arrival

Rome is figured in the *Paradiso* under the heading of arrival in both its ideological and architectural aspects. The central and at the same time liminal function of the city of Rome as destination is reiterated in the architecture of the poem at the entrance to the empyrean in a series of three similes in *Par.*, XXXI, each of which focuses on a different phase of the journey to Rome. The arrival at the empyrean is first figured in terms of the arrival at Rome of barbarians from the north who are stupefied by the city’s “ardüa opra,” its architectural magnificence (vv. 31-40); then as the arrival of the pilgrim at the “tempio” or church within the city that she had vowed to visit (vv. 43-48); and finally, in terms of

the pilgrim’s contemplation of the Veronica, the true likeness of the Christ (vv. 103-111). The sequence of similes is exceptional, even unique in the poem, for the way in which it charts forward movement, articulating in three stages the progressive unfolding of the pilgrim’s experience in the empyrean, and the way it “almost seems to constitute a subordinate narrative, discrete from (though parallel to) the main plot of the other-world adventure”<sup>38</sup>. The prominence of the series of similes is an index of the meta-architectural literary significance of the rhetorical figure of the simile itself as a means of attempting, and failing to represent, the unrepresentable. The simile is a rhetorical figure that acknowledges by definition a measure of incongruity and inadequacy, which is another reason why Dante makes three attempts here. As with Rome, the destination of repeated approaches and arrivals by pilgrims, the repeated approximations of the sequence of similes expresses the ineffability of the destination. The sequence of the arrival in Rome similes are a signature, defining rhetorical feature of the cantos of the empyrean. As a sequence, they provide a key transition and pivot, almost as a springboard toward the poem’s final vision which, in its last phase, foreshadowed by the Veronica simile, will envision the incarnation and humanity of Christ<sup>39</sup>, which ultimately proves to be the final destination of the pilgrim’s journey<sup>40</sup>.

The architectonic role of the journey to Rome achieves its culminating expression at the entrance to the empyrean, having been prepared during the course of the poem<sup>41</sup>. Dante never speaks of pilgrimage in hell, except as we have seen, indirectly and in a parodic and polemical manner in the Castel Sant’Angelo bridge simile of *Inf.*, XVIII. In fact, the word pilgrimage only enters the poem in the *Purgatorio* (*Purg.*, II, 61-63: E Virgilio rispuose: “Voi credete / forse che siamo esperti d’esto loco; / ma noi siam peregrin

<sup>37</sup> C.S. SINGLETON, *The poet’s number at the center*, “Modern Language Notes”, LXXX, 1965, 1, pp. 1-10.

<sup>38</sup> R. LANSING, *Patterns of Meaning: Similes in Series*, in ID., *From image to idea: a study of the simile in Dante’s ‘Commedia’*, Ravenna 1977, pp. 124-166: 136-140.

<sup>39</sup> G. LEDDA, *L’ineffabilità della ‘visio Dei’ e lo scacco del geometra’*, in ID., *La guerra della lingua. Ineffabilità, retorica e narrativa nella ‘Commedia’ di Dante*, Ravenna 2002, pp. 299-319.

<sup>40</sup> “O luce eterna che sola in te sidi, / sola t’intendi, e da te intelletta / e intendente te ami e arridi! / Quella circolazion che sì concetta / pareva in te come lume riflesso, / da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta, / dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso, / mi parve pinta de la nostra effige: / per che ’l mio viso in lei tutto era messo. / Qual è ’l geometra che tutto s’affige / per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova, / pensando, quel principio ond’elli indige, / tal era io a quella vista nova: / veder voleva come si convenne / l’imago al cerchio e come vi s’indova” (*Par.*, XXXIII, 136-138).

<sup>41</sup> B. BASILE, *Il viaggio come archetipo. Note sul tema della ‘peregrinatio’ in Dante*, “Lecture Classensi”, XV, 1986, pp. 9-26.

come voi siete”; and cf. *Purg.*, VIII, 4-6; *Purg.*, XXIII, 16-18). Now, as the poem is about to end, the nature of the journey of the poem as a poetic alternative to the Jubilee pilgrimage of Boniface VIII taking place during the same year 1300 explicitly emerges<sup>42</sup>. Dante the poet appropriates the Lateran, St. Peter’s, and the Veronica and relocates them as vehicles of a sequence of similes to express arrival in “quella Roma onde Cristo è romano” (*Purg.*, XXXII, 102). He explicitly references the Lateran in the first simile of the series which describes the pilgrim’s wonderment, or rather his stupor<sup>43</sup>, at the encounter with what has been described as the “colosseo floreale” of the empyrean. In fact, the poet characterizes it as both a city (*Par.*, XXX, 130: “Vedi nostra città quant’ella gira”) and a rose (*Par.*, XXXI, 1: “In forma dunque di candida rosa...”) <sup>44</sup>. Dante’s figuration of the empyrean combines the celestial rose with a single architectural element of the city, the heavenly amphitheater or stadium, which is “his way to bring the empire into the Empyrean. Implicitly refuting Augustine’s equation of Rome with the *civitas diaboli*, Dante makes it nothing less than the city of God”<sup>45</sup>. The arrival from the human to the divine, from time to eternity, is therefore figured in the first simile of the series autobiographically from the Florentine exile’s perspective, that is, of the poet for whom the journey of the poem represented ultimately a return home from exile, and thus a journey from iniquitous Florence to the just community of celestial Rome: “e di Fiorenza in popol giusto e sano” (*Par.*, XXXI, 39)<sup>46</sup>:

Se i barbari, venendo da tal plaga  
che ciascun giorno d’Elice si cuopra,  
rotante col suo figlio ond’ ella è vaga,  
veggendo Roma e l’ardüa sua opra,  
stupefaciensi, quando Laterano  
a le cose mortali andò di sopra;  
ïo, che al divino da l’umano,  
a l’eterno dal tempo era venuto,

e di Fiorenza in popol giusto e sano,  
di che stupor dovea esser compiuto!  
Certo tra esso e ’l gaudio mi faceva  
libito non udire e starmi muto.  
(*Par.*, XXXI, 31-42).

The barbarians arrive from the north. The elaborate periphrasis used to describe their place of origin, including the complex allusion to the Ovidian myth of the transformation of the nymph Helice (Elice) or Callisto and her son Arcas or Boötes into two constellations (*Metamorphoses*, II, 401-507), represents a valedictorian expression of the poet’s cosmo-cartographic poetics. It reflects the effort that the poet expends in his arduous rhetorical exertions to represent the unrepresentable. The global reference to barbarians located in the northernmost climate above the 55<sup>th</sup> parallel, where the Big and Little Dipper (or Great and Lesser Bear) are always visible, can be said to complement and frame the Mediterranean and Italian context of the final simile in the series, which compares Dante to a pilgrim “perhaps from Croatia” (v. 103: “colui [...] forse di Croazia”) come to see “our Veronica...” (v. 104: “la Veronica nostra”). The circling constellations in the heavens which are moved by the love of a mythical mother for a son foreshadow not only the encounter with Mary in the next cantos but also “l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle” (*Par.*, XXXIII, 145) at the poem’s end. In other words, the poet Dante maps in the similes the cosmos and the terrestrial globe as the frame for his autobiographical journey as exile/pilgrim from Florence to Rome.

This first simile compares the pilgrim’s wonder before the “colosseo floreale” of the divine architect to that of barbarians encountering for the first time the marvelous architectural edifice of Rome, “l’ardüa sua opra” (v. 34)<sup>47</sup>, which is thus implicitly compared to both the architecture of the poem and that of the divine maker who with his compass had struck the circle that marked

<sup>42</sup> R. JACOFF, *Lectura Dantis: Paradiso XXXI*, “Quaderns d’Italia”, XVI, 2011, pp. 103-114.

<sup>43</sup> See Dante’s definition of “stupore” or “wonder” in the *Convivio*, IV, XXV, 5, behind which lies a canonical passage from the second chapter of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (982b, 11-28) which traces the origins of both thought and myth to wonder. See P. BOYDE, *Wonder and knowledge*, in *Id.*, *Dante philomythes and philosopher: man in the cosmos*, Cambridge 2009 (first ed. Cambridge 1981), pp. 43-56; and P. BOTTANI, *Dante e la meraviglia*, “Rivista di Studi Danteschi”, XX, 1, 2020, pp. 51-72.

<sup>44</sup> P.S. HAWKINS, “Are you here?": *surprise in the Commedia*, in *Sparks and seeds: medieval literature and its aftermath. Essays in honor of John Freccero*, edited by D.E. Steward, A. Comish, Turnhout 2000, pp. 175-198: 182.

<sup>45</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>46</sup> A further testament to the inspiration of the journey to Rome and the traveler’s experience of Rome’s architectural magnificence on the poet’s imagination is a key passage of the speech pronounced by Cacciaguada, the ancestor of the exiled poet, against the decadence and corruption of contemporary Florence in which Florence and Rome are compared metonymically in terms of competing birds-eye views of their respective urban complexes in *Par.*, XV, 109-111: “Non era vinto ancora Montemalo / dal vostro Uccellatoio, che, com’è vinto / nel montar sù, così sarà nel calo”. In other words, at the time of Cacciaguada’s idealized evocation of ancient Florence, the architectural and urban splendor of Rome as viewed by the traveler arriving from the north from the hill of Montemario had not yet been surpassed by the prospect of Florence’s architectural development as viewed by the traveler from the height of Uccellatoio, a hill about ten km north of Florence from which the city first appeared to travelers from Bologna who had crossed the Apennines. But if Florence’s rise was swifter than Rome’s, so it will be swifter in its political and moral decline.

<sup>47</sup> *Par.*, XIX, 40-45, and note 5 above.

<sup>48</sup> The only other occurrence of “arduo” in the poem is in the previous canto, *Par.*, XXX, 36. There the poet admits to his failure to adequately treat the beauty of Beatrice and confesses to have to desist in his poetic effort, having reached the limit of his capacities, cf. *Par.*, XXX, 31-36: “ma or convien che mio seguir desista / più dietro a sua bellezza, poetando, / come a l’ultimo suo ciascuno artista. / Cotal qual io la lascio a maggior bando / che quel de la mia tuba, che deduce / l’ardüa sua matera terminando”. The occurrences in close proximity are the earliest recorded in the Italian vernacular. They express nearly at a spontaneous or unconscious level the profound link in the poet’s mind between the exalted architecture of Rome and the arduousness of the poet’s “opra”.

<sup>49</sup> D. ALIGHIERI, *Paradiso*, (trans. by S. Lombardo), edited by A. Cornish, Indianapolis-Cambridge 2017, p. 537.

<sup>50</sup> S. MARCHESI, *Classical culture*, in *The Cambridge companion to Dante’s ‘Commedia’*, edited by Z. Baranski, S. Gilson, Cambridge 2018, pp. 127-139: “In sum, what we term today the ‘classical past’ was for Dante not a matter of archaeology but of actual and present relevance” (p. 129).

<sup>51</sup> An earlier key example of pagan/Christian continuity focused by an architectural monument occurs in Justinian’s account of the flight of the eagle of empire in *Par.*, VI. There secular and sacred history of Rome is sealed by a classical architectural feature that Dante found in his sources (most probably Orosius), who had linked the third closing of the doors of the Temple of Janus by Octavian as marking the world-wide peace that was the necessary premise according to God’s divine plan for the birth of Christ: “Con costui [Octavian] corse in fino al lito rubro; / Con costui puose il mondo in tanta pace / Che fu serrato a Iano il suo delubro” (*Par.*, VI, 79-81). The classical pagan temple of Janus is thereby Christianized as an architectural motive presaging the arrival of the savior of the world.

<sup>52</sup> See note 43 above. Cf. *Purg.*, XV, 10-12; *Purg.*, XXXI, 127-129; *Par.*, XXII, 1.

<sup>53</sup> J. SCOTT, *Lectura Dantis Turicensis*, III (*Paradiso*), a cura di G. Güntert, M. Picone, Firenze 2002, pp. 473-489: “Possiamo ora guardare la serie delle tre immagini che illustrano il concetto del pellegrinaggio compiuto da Dante verso quella Roma onde Cristo è romano (*Purg.*, XXXII, 102). Nella prima (quella dei barbari colpiti dallo stupore) troviamo una panoramica dell’urbe quando Laterano / a le cose mortali andò di sopra; in seguito, nei vv. 43-44, il campo visivo si restringe alla chiesa che è il punto d’arrivo del pellegrinaggio; poi, con un’ulteriore zumata, il poeta concentra tutto lo sguardo su un unico particolare, il santo sudario, *la Veronica nostra*. Quest’ultima immagine sottolinea l’intensità dell’amore di Dio espressa da tutta la figura del santo: la sua *vivace carità*” (p. 487).

the limit of the world of space-time, and set the stars circling in the heavens<sup>48</sup>. The astronomical and mythic references that the architect of the poem uses to describe the northern climes from which the barbarians arrive are paradoxical in so far as the references to space and time in the simile underscore their inadequacy for describing Dante’s transcendence of the world of space and time. The arrival in Rome that has been prepared along the entire length of the journey has therefore a double aspect. On the one hand, Dante maintains Rome as the destination of the journey but his rhetorical treatment of it, for instance, in this initial simile, is disillusioned, not to say deconstructionist. For example, the Lateran is viewed from the perspective of “the time of its former glory, when it ‘surpassed all mortal things’, according to the gloss of Alison Cornish, who notes that the time of the Lateran’s former glory is not specified: “It could indicate imperial or papal Rome”<sup>49</sup>. In fact, Dante’s perspective on Rome’s monuments transcends any simple dichotomy between pagan and Christian and instead views the city and its history and monuments in terms of continuity<sup>50</sup>, as part of a greater whole of providentially determined sacred history<sup>51</sup>. In any event, the implication is that the Lateran’s glory was over and done. (In fact, at the time of Dante’s writing, the Lateran had been abandoned by the pope who had transferred the curia to Avignon.) At the same time that Dante seeks to represent his arrival at eternal Rome he points to the earthly time-bound city by way of contrast.

The complexity of the vehicle of the initial simile leads the reader to overlook the fact that its tenor is to express the fact of the pilgrim’s amazement which caused him to hear nothing and to be mute (vv. 41-42: “Certo tra esso e ’l gaudio mi faceva / libito non udire e starmi muto”). Stupor or wonder in Dante is almost always the prelude and stimulus to the poet’s renewal of the quest for

knowledge, including by undertaking to poetically reestablish his equilibrium by attempting to put into words the object of his amazement<sup>52</sup>. The next simile in the series accordingly focusses on the pilgrim who, having arrived at the temple of his vow, surveys it in a focused and detailed manner just as Dante the pilgrim examines “la forma general di paradiso” (v. 52) in the tercets that follow the simile:

E quasi peregrin che si ricrea  
nel tempio del suo voto riguardando,  
e spera già ridir com’ ello stea,  
su per la viva luce passeggiando,  
menava ò li occhi per li gradi,  
mo sù, mo giù e mo recirculando.  
(*Par.*, XXXI, 43-48).

John Scott has analyzed the ‘zoom-effect’ of the series of three approaches, and how each phase reflects a different aspect of Dante the poet-pilgrim’s engagement with his theme<sup>53</sup>. The emphasis in this second panel is on the poet-pilgrim’s desire to bring back home and to retain his experience of Paradise in order to recount it upon his return to the world of the living.

But at this point the reader learns that the pilgrim’s initial stupefaction expressed by the first simile has caused him, at the level of the diegesis, to ignore the fact that Beatrice has been replaced by a new guide, “un sene” (v. 59), who is initially unidentified. The pilgrim only becomes aware of the substitution five tercets later (vv. 55-60: “E volgeami con voglia riaccesa / Per domandar la mia donna di cose / Di che la mente mia era sospesa. / Uno intendeva e altro mi rispose: Credea veder Beatrice e vidi un sene / Vestito con le genti gloriose”), following his inspection of “La forma general di paradiso” (v. 52). This is the first in a series of unexpected and uncanny transitions in the cantos of the empyrean that lead up to the poem’s final vision, what Katherine Powlesland has termed “dislocations of focal view”, dislocations which create gaps

“into which the reader is invited to unconsciously ‘insert’ herself in a mode of imaginative participation”<sup>54</sup>. Powlesland’s research parallels recent work by Helena Phillips-Robins, which has explored the participatory role of liturgical song and practice in the poem in general and in *Par.*, XXXI-XXXII in particular. From this perspective, the sequence of pilgrimage to Rome similes in their progressivity also have a quasi-liturgical function of facilitating the reader’s participation<sup>55</sup>. In fact, the pilgrimage as ritual travel is a privileged site of liturgy<sup>56</sup>. The final simile in the series enacts another of these uncanny transitions when the “lively charity” (vv. 109-110: “vivace carità”) of St. Bernard suddenly and unexpectedly replaces the Veronica as the object of the poet-pilgrim’s contemplation:

Qual è colui che forse di Croazia  
viene a veder la Veronica nostra,  
che per l’antica fame non sen sazia,  
ma dice nel pensier, fin che si mostra:  
“Signor mio Iesù Cristo, Dio verace,  
or fu sì fatta la sembianza vostra?”;  
tal era io mirando la vivace  
carità di colui che ‘n questo mondo,  
contemplando, gustò di quella pace.  
(*Par.*, XXXI, 103-111).

The final stage of the poet’s arrival is, in fact, described in terms of the direct encounter with the veil of Veronica, an encounter which is shadowed with doubts about whether the image corresponds to the true likeness of Christ. The arrival at the empyrean is thus figured as an arrival of the barbarians at the gates, as the arrival of the pilgrim at the church that she had vowed to visit, and finally, as the pilgrim’s devotion in the presence of the Veronica, the true likeness of the Christ. The destination of the pilgrimage of the poem is, however, like the destination of pilgrimage in general, as originally mapped by Dante in the *Vita nova*, whether that pilgrimage is directed toward the empty tomb of Christ, or to the

tomb of St. James at the end of the earth (*Finisterre*) or to the *sudarium* of the Veronica in St Peter’s in Rome<sup>57</sup>. The function of the destination of pilgrimage is in every case, inevitably, to point to a realm and a reality beyond this world of space-time and its forms. Michelangelo Picone emphasized this point long ago in a seminal study of the role of pilgrimage as a foundational cultural model for the medieval period and for Dante: “There is, however, one point that bears emphasizing: the culminating moment of the visit to holy sites is the visit to the tomb of Christ. But, paradoxically, the tomb is empty: the purpose of the pilgrimage is in fact to see beyond the empty tomb”<sup>58</sup>. The same can be said of the architecture of the poem and of Dante’s poetry itself taken as attempts to represent the divine. Ultimately, even in the representation of the final vision of the pilgrim, as has recently been emphasized, the poet calls attention to its status as representation, as *essempulum* or simulacrum that can only point beyond itself toward the poet Dante’s actual experience of the *deificatio*<sup>59</sup>. This is, finally, the key conceptual analogy that connects the figure of Rome as a central and liminal place in the poem’s architecture and defines its meta-architectural literary character. Rome as a destination of pilgrimage, Rome as the destination of Dante’s pilgrimage, is ultimately a point of arrival in the poem that must be transcended. It can only point to the experience of the divinity that lies beyond it.

<sup>54</sup> K. POWLESLAND, *Invitations to Participate: Bernard’s Sign, “Le Tre Corone”*, IV, 2017, pp. 97-115: 110. Powlesland’s focus is on the “interaction manqué” of “the final dramatised interaction between characters in the *Commedia*, Bernard’s signal to Dante to look upwards in *Par.*, XXXIII”; *Par.*, XXXIII, 49-54: “Bernardo m’acennava, e sorridea, / perch’io guardassi suso; ma io era / già per me stesso tal qual che ei voleva: / che la mia vista, venendo sincera / e più e più intrava per lo raggio / de l’alta luce che da sé è vera”.

<sup>55</sup> H. PHILLIPS-ROBINS, *Liturgical Song and Practice in Dante’s “Commedia”*, Notre Dame 2021, especially pp. 137-163.

<sup>56</sup> J.F. ROMANO, *Liturgy and Pilgrimage*, in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*, edited by L.J. Taylor et al., Leiden-Boston 2010: [http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nd.edu/10.1163/2213-2139\\_emp\\_SIM\\_00367](http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nd.edu/10.1163/2213-2139_emp_SIM_00367) (consulted on 15 august 2021). First published online: 2012: “It has further been suggested that pilgrimage as a whole was a kind of large-scale liturgy, which would make pilgrimage something of a subcategory of liturgy”.

<sup>57</sup> D. ALIGHIERI, *Vita nova*, XL, 7.

<sup>58</sup> M. PICONE, *Peregrinus Amoris: La Metafora Finale*, in ID. *‘Vita Nuova’ e tradizione romanza*, Padova 1979, pp. 129-192: 145: “C’è però un punto che dobbiamo qui accentuare: momento culminante del soggiorno nei luoghi santi è la visita alla tomba di Cristo. Ma, paradossalmente, si tratta di una tomba vuota: scopo del pellegrinaggio è infatti quello di cercare di vedere oltre di essa”.

<sup>59</sup> Z.G. BARANSKI, *‘Affectivity’ and theology: the representation of beatitude in Dante’s Paradiso*, in *Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio: literature, doctrine, reality*, Cambridge 2020, pp. 163-208: “As Dante frequently reiterated, whatever formal solution is adopted to deal with the ineffability of the transcendent, it is by definition inadequate. It is simply a way of speaking ‘darkly’ (1 Corinthians 13:12), whereby one engages not with the divine but with the ways in which the divine has been treated. When reduced to human capabilities, the problem of talking about God becomes one of representation and culture, both of which, unlike the divine, are accessible to us. Consequently, in examining beatitude in the *Commedia*, as well as the entire metaphysical system of the poem, it is important to recognize that we are dealing not with the divine but with the representation of the divine”.