12. Centaurs, Spiders and Saints

Christian Moevs
A vertical link within each set of corresponding cantos in the three canticles may not always be obvious, or not always intentionally willed by the author. The way Dante constructs things is often not meant to be obvious; Dante is difficult, subtle. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to pursue such vertical links, even where they are not evident, for two reasons. The first is that in some cases there certainly is such a vertical correspondence, which Dante clearly means us to reflect upon, and to fail to do so would be a failure in our reading. A few such cases are the canto Ones, the Threes, the Sixes, the Nines, the Twenty-Sevens, the Thirty-Threes. These play on Dante’s beloved three and nine, or mark great parallel transitions in the three canticles, or focus on one theme, and so on. But how do we know how many of these vertical correspondences there are, until we look? The second reason it is worth hunting for vertical links is that even where they may not be consciously constructed, looking for them makes us read the cantos in a new way, bringing new details and themes into relief. That too can lead to discoveries, or enrich our understanding. I think the Twelves fall into this latter category: they are not, as far as I can tell, linked vertically in any conscious way, and yet looking at them as a set has been intriguing, and perhaps fruitful.

Let us refresh the Twelves in our memory, and make some observations about them as we go. In *Inferno* xii, we have recently come through a key transition, passing through the gate of Dis in *Inferno* ix. This transition has immersed us in the realm of malice, or injury, or injustice (*malizia, ingiuria*) (*Inf.*, xi. 22, 23): of love so misdirected that it pursues as a good what is actually evil, the destruction of self and of others. In *Inferno* xi, Virgil and
Dante had paused at the edge of a high cliff, among a last group of heretics — apparently those who thought Christ has only one nature, only the human, and not also the divine — and there, while they accustomed themselves to the stench wafting up from lower Hell beneath the cliff, Virgil had given an account of how Hell is structured. In particular, he had explained that the first circle at the foot of the cliff contains the violent, arranged in three concentric rings. The first or outermost ring holds those who are violent against others, whether in their person or in their possessions; that is, it holds murderers, those who wound others unjustly, pillagers, arsonists, plunderers, spoilers, and the like, in distinct groups (‘omicide e ciascun che mal fiere, / guastatori e predon’, Inf., xi. 37–38). This is brute force; it does not involve an element of fraud or cunning, of the misuse of intellect that will be punished further down in Hell, where the cunning thieves and swindlers and traitors are. It is this first ring of the circle of violence that we will be exploring in Inferno xii. Inferno xii is thus the first of five cantos treating the realm of violence; in the next four, the pilgrim crosses the other two rings, of the violent against themselves (suicides and squanderers), and of the violent against God and nature (blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers). Then at the end of Inferno xvi, the pilgrim will come to the edge of another cliff, beneath which is the realm of fraud.

Inferno xii begins at the very edge of the steep cliff that leads down from the area of the heretics to the circle of violence. At the edge over the chasm lies the Minotaur, half human half bull, conceived from Pasiphaë’s lust. Virgil taunts the Minotaur, reminding him how Theseus had killed him. The Minotaur hops and bites himself in blind rage, making it easy for the travellers to get by him. The Minotaur was guarding a sort of passage down the cliff, formed by a landslide. Virgil explains that the landslide was caused by an earthquake that occurred just before someone came and harrowed Limbo; we understand that he means the earthquake at the Crucifixion. Virgil has his own explanation of the earthquake: he thinks perhaps the universe felt love, and he cites the theory of Empedocles, who maintained that order was caused by forces of discord or hatred, which held the elements separated in a balanced tension; when those forces were overcome by concord or love, the universe collapsed in chaos, in endless cycles. Now Dante and Virgil come to a river of boiling blood, the first ring of the circle of violence, boiling ‘qual che per violenza in altrui noccia’ [those who harm others with violence] (Inf., xii. 48). The poet breaks into an invective against ‘cupidigia’ [greed] (and perhaps against ‘ira folle’
[mad wrath]; the reading is uncertain) as the source of this violence and this boiling. Between the foot of the cliff and the river of blood, Centaurs armed with arrows run in ranks, shooting any sinners who rise above their allotted depth in the blood. A platoon of three of them comes to patrol, Chiron at the centre, flanked by Nessus and Pholus. Chiron is the grave teacher of Achilles and other classical heroes; Nessus is the impetuous figure who tried to make off with Deianira, and was killed by a poisoned arrow of Hercules; Pholus is kindred to Nessus, a wrathful type who was also killed, accidentally, by one of Hercules’ poisoned arrows.

Nessus addresses Virgil and Dante, but Virgil says he will speak only to Chiron. As they come near, Chiron too draws his bow, uncovering his mouth with the arrow’s notch, and observes to his companions that Dante is alive: his feet disturb the rocks. Now at Chiron’s breast, where Chiron’s two natures, of horse and man, conjoin, Virgil asks Chiron for a Centaur to guide them, and to carry Dante across the river on his back. Chiron appoints Nessus as the escort, and Nessus acts as tour guide. He tells Dante and Virgil that the souls sunk to their eyebrows are ‘tiranni / che dier nel sangue e ne l’aver di piglio’ [tyrants who put their hands to blood and to others’ goods] (ll. 104–05). Nessus leads them to another group, sunk to their necks, and points out one soul set apart, Guy de Montfort, who for vengeance murdered his cousin Henry of Cornwall. Next they come upon other souls only immersed to their stomachs, and others only to their feet, all unidentified and nameless. At that shallow point, Nessus and his charges cross the river. Nessus explains that as the circle of the river progresses, it grows deeper again, back towards another group of five tyrants. His assignment accomplished, Nessus abruptly stops talking and re-crosses the river.

In this canto we have a kind of fracture in nature, a harsh cliff, a giant landslide, on which rests a monster of nature, the Minotaur. The Minotaur, who seems to preside over the entire circle of violence, is a composite creature, half bull, half man. He is a product of unbridled and debased human desire, the animal nature of man warring with and triumphing over the rational, manipulating the intellect to its animal ends. In fact, the Minotaur was conceived when Pasiphaë had the ingenious craftsman Daedalus make her a hollow wooden cow so that she could satisfy her lust for a bull. It is Daedalus then who makes the cunning labyrinth, the intellectual maze, that contains the Minotaur, who yet must be fed with human flesh, seven lads and seven lasses each year, until Theseus threads
the maze with Ariadne’s help, and kills the monster. Theseus thus becomes a figure of Christ, a liberator who — following the intellect to its proper end — heals the destructive war between the animal and the rational dimensions of man. (The pilgrim Dante, slipping by the Minotaur here, becomes another Theseus.)

At the centre of the Comedy (Purgatorio xvii) Virgil will explain that everything in creation is moved by love, by the innate thirst of each finite thing to fulfil the potential of its nature, the greatest happiness possible for it. For humans that potential, and therefore that thirst, is infinite: as conscious — that is, rational — creatures, humans can come to know themselves as one with the ground of all finite reality (pure consciousness or intellect itself), thus encompassing and knowing as themselves everything that exists. That is perfect love, the fruition of human desire in perfect understanding and self-knowledge, union with God. Disaster, profound disharmony, and self-destruction come when humans seek to satiate their infinite thirst with finite things. But humans readily incur disaster, by their very nature as conscious animals, animals who can be satiated only by infinity. Hence the apparent divide, the war, between the rational and the animal in the human form. Humans seek to devour the world through the senses, instead of encompassing it by feeding on the divine within themselves.

So it is cupidigia, infinite thirst seeking to feed on the finite, that gives birth to the Minotaur, to violence and injustice. At the centre of the Comedy, and in Inferno xi, Virgil also explains that human desire focused excessively on finite goods is relatively innocent; it is simply incontinence, wanting too much of a good thing, too much stuff, too much food, too much sex. But the failure to know oneself, to understand one’s true nature as a human being, can lead one to see everything and everyone as in competition in the quest to feed on the world, in a kind of zero-sum game. This is malice: it is to seek the destruction of others, that is, to seek evil or harm or injustice, as an end in itself. Hence violence and fraud: the world within the gates of Dis.

So the landslide, the ruina, that the Minotaur guards, and that provides the passage from those who could not recognize the divine nature of Christ to the circle of violence, takes on more significance. The landslide was caused by the earthquake at the Crucifixion, when the universe did indeed feel love, but not because of endless cycles of natural causes, as Virgil conjectures. The ruina is the infernal evidence of the self-sacrifice of Christ: the perfect love that satiates man, won by surrendering all attachment to the
finite, by being willing to sacrifice even one’s own animal form. It is human consciousness shaking itself free from the obsessive attachment to finite things, so that it can discover its own freedom, its potential infinity. It is to know oneself as not only a mortal animal creature, but also as (one with) God. The mystery of Christ, the mystery of man, the mystery and centre of all the meaning of the world, is that those two — the human and the divine, flesh and spirit, the world and its ground — are not two: they are, in a profound sense, one. The manifest world — and the human in particular — is a sacrament, a theophany or self-revelation of the divine, consciousness made visible. This mystery is the revelation of the Incarnation.

So the Minotaur is a parody of the Incarnation, of the true nature of man, an emblem of a massive failure of self-knowledge, the eclipse of spirit by flesh, of the rational by the animal. This is frustration, rage, impotence, a blind, insane hopping around, a useless self-biting (‘quando vide noi, sé stesso morse’ [when he saw us, he bit himself], l. 14), that is killed/overcome by the true self-sacrifice of the pilgrim/Theseus/Christ. Virgil shouts to the Minotaur:

‘Forse
tu credi che qui sia ’l duca d’Atene,
che sù nel mondo la morte ti porse?’ […]
    Qual è quel toro che si slaccia in quella
c’ha ricevuto già ’l colpo mortale,
che gir non sa, ma qua e là saltella… (ll. 16–18, 22–24)

[‘Perhaps you believe that this is the Duke of Athens, who put you to death in the world above?’ Like the bull that frees itself at the moment it receives the mortal blow, that cannot run, but only hop here and there…]

The essence of the Minotaur is pride, to experience oneself as an autonomous, self-subsistent, finite entity, dependent on no one and nothing, for whom everything is other, and must be either devoured or destroyed.

Clearly, there is a political and social consequence to this blindness: it is injustice, strife, and violence, the failure of humans to become one, or in Dante’s terminology, to form empire, a single united political order under the rule of law and divine justice (imperium). The result is even worse when such blind and greedy souls become rulers: they are tyrants, like the first four souls named (Alexander the Great and Dionysius of Syracuse from the ancient world; and Ezzelino da Romano and Obizzo d’Este
from contemporary Italy, ll. 107–12), or plunderers, leaders of ravaging, pillaging armies or bands, like the last five (Attila the Hun, Pyrrhus of Epirus, and Sextus Pompeius, all perhaps plunderers of ancient Rome; and Rinier da Corneto and Rinier Pazzo, highwaymen from modern Tuscany, ll. 133–37). Tyrants oppose empire through self-interest, subjecting law to greed, becoming counterfeit emperors. They negate human freedom, the greatest gift of the divine to man, and they cancel human identity by seeking to impose their own identity as supreme, in effect effacing it in blood. In between the two groups of tyrants and plunderers are the mere murderers, emblematised by Guy de Montfort. De Montfort reduced politics to vendetta, and ‘cleft a human heart, that still drips blood, calling for vengeance, along the Thames’ at Mass (‘in the bosom of God’) at the very moment — the elevation of the Host — when the human, through Christian self-sacrifice, is revealed as divine (‘Colui fesse in grembo a Dio / lo cor che ‘n su Tamisi ancor si cola’, ll. 119–20). All these souls are faceless and do not speak: human identity and consciousness are drowned in blood. Language fails (along with all human community) when the soul of consciousness/spirit/meaning is eclipsed by the body/flesh/form it has assumed. The failure to recognize Christ — the divine in the human, the one manifest as many (as oneself) — leads to the ultimate act of violence, the Crucifixion; the blood of Christ’s unrecognised self-sacrifice is one with an inexhaustible human thirst for blood. Through greed and blindness, these souls drink blood instead of the water of life; their immersion is a parody of baptism.

The Centaurs, who become the central focus of the canto, are an extension of the contrapasso, its completion. They are the only non-devil custodians in all of Hell, assigned only to this ring of the violent against others, and here they hunt humans, as in the world they hunted animals (‘come solien nel mondo andare a caccia’, l. 57). Humans, indeed, have become animals

here. As the early commentator Benvenuto da Imola and others point out, Centaurs, who are human to the navel and horse below that, look like mounted cavalry: they are an image of the mercenary mounted troops that pillaged Italy at the behest of tyrants, hunting men. It is as if the tyrants are being hunted by their own troops. In fact, these Centaurs are a mini military: they run in ranks, they dispatch exploratory platoons, and they have a commander.

The exploratory platoon that comes to investigate Dante (‘de la schiera tre si dipartiro’ [three split off from the company], l. 59) is a mini-Trinity: Chiron flanked by Nessus and Pholus (ll. 67–72). The latter two are your standard Centaurs, born from an attempted rape, Ixion trying to ravish a cloud that looked like Juno. Unruly sorts, they tried to carry off the women at the wedding of Pirithous, until stopped by Hercules. Nessus, who will carry Dante on his back, was trying to carry off Hercules’ consort Deianira when Hercules killed him. But Centaurs are clever: Nessus tricked Deianira into giving Hercules a robe soaked with Nessus’s poisoned blood, thus ‘making of himself his own revenge’ (‘Fé di sé la vendetta elli stesso’, l. 69). Humans consume themselves with their thirst for vengeance, which is a parody of justice, of divine vengeance. Again we have the tension or split between the two natures of man, the rational and the animal, the rational being made to serve the animal, to serve lust and vengeance. Hercules, the killer and subduer of Centaurs (and of all three of these Centaurs in particular), is another Christ figure: he is a healer and redeemer. Poisoned by Nessus, Hercules burns off his flesh to become deified, an image perhaps for the pilgrim’s own transfiguration of matter into spirit through his journey.

Chiron is a little different: he is a son of Saturn, raised by Apollo, and expert in medicine, music, and archery. He is the teacher of heroes such as Achilles (‘il gran Chirón, il qual nodri Achille’, l. 70), and he was killed by the arrows of Hercules, another of his pupils. In fact, the Chiron presented here is thoughtful, grave and wise; he alone notices that Dante is alive, asking his companions, ‘Siete voi accorti / che quel di retro move ciò ch’el tocca?’ [‘Did you notice that the one in back moves what he touches?’] (ll. 80–81), and the other Centaurs are kept in line by him. But Dante emphasizes his double nature: Chiron gazes at his breast where the two natures are conjoined, or rather ‘associated’ (‘consorti’, l. 84), not fused as

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one. This divide is again an image of failed revelation, the failure to know body as the soul made visible, matter as spirit; the failure to recognize consciousness made flesh, the human as divine. Intellect dissociated from oneself, from one’s animal being, is part of the torment of the violent, that both makes violence possible, and punishes it. Here, in effect, the rational dimension of the violent souls is running on the bank of the river alongside them, keeping them immersed in blood. As Dante observes in the Convivio, we must ‘cavalcare’ [ride] our primitive appetites with reason. But it is only the fusion of reason and passion, of our higher and lower natures united as one, that drives the perfection of man, not their separation. One of the ironies of the canto, as Baldassaro points out, is that the bestial Centaurs have become human in order to guard the humans who have become bestial.

While Inferno xii is the first of the five cantos of the circle of violence, Purgatorio xii is the last of three cantos devoted to the terrace of pride, the first terrace of Purgatory proper. Pride is the foundational vice, from which all others, and all sin, flows. As we saw, it is a failure of self-knowledge: it is to conceive oneself only as an autonomous and self-subsistent finite entity, resulting in insatiable desire, cupidigia, instead of knowing oneself as sharing consciousness itself, the reality that spawns and is all things. In the first two cantos of the ledge, Dante has seen a triptych of carved reliefs, depicting examples of humility, with David the singer of God at the centre; then he has met a trio of penitent souls, with an illuminator of texts, Oderisi da Gubbio, at the centre. The theme of the ledge is artistic representation and artistic pride, related to names and naming, to identity.

Purgatorio xii opens with Dante sharing in the penance of pride, bent low by the side of his fellow artist Oderisi, as if they were oxen yoked together. Prompted by Virgil’s Ulyssian exhortation (he mentions the terms ‘varca’ [cross over], ‘ali’ [wings], and ‘remi’ [oars]: ‘Lascia lui e varca; / ché qui è buono con l’ali e coi remi, / quantunque può, ciascun pinger sua barca’ [Leave him and move beyond, for here it is best that each push his boat to the extent he can with wings and oars], ll. 4–5), Dante stands upright and looks at the ground he is walking on. There he sees that the pavement is ‘figurato [figured] like the floor tombs in churches, except with greater

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verisimilitude because of their artifice or artistry (‘sembianza / secondo l’artificio’, ll. 22–23), given that they were made by God. With this artistically self-conscious terzina, Dante introduces the most artistically self-conscious passage of the Comedy: a verbal account of thirteen floor engravings, with exactly one tercet devoted to each (ll. 25–63). Inscribed in the account is an acrostic: the first four tercets each begin with the word Vedea; the next four with O, and the next four with Mostrava; the three lines of the thirteenth tercet begin with those three words in order, as a kind of summation. The initial letters spell VOM, man: the human is inscribed through verbal signs in the verbal representation of these visual images, whose subject is the punishment of human pride. The grouping of thirty-six verses plus three evokes the sestina, one of the most self-conscious of medieval literary forms, as well as the Trinity, whose image man is. The figures described alternate, as in parallel side-by-side columns, between Old Testament and pagan or mythological examples.

The first four examples are Lucifer, Briareus, the giants and Nimrod, heroic challengers of the divine, destroyed. The next four are presumptuous mortals: Niobe, who in maternal pride defied Latona and turned to stone when all her children were killed with arrows; Saul, who defied the prophet Nathan, led Israel to ruin and killed himself; Arachne, who challenged Minerva in weaving and hanged herself before being changed to a spider; and Rehoboam, a haughty king of Israel who fled in fear. The final four are mortals killing and killed through greed: Eriphyle, who betrayed her husband for a divine necklace and was killed by her son Alcmaeon; Sennacherib who besieged Jerusalem and was killed by his sons while at worship; King Cyrus beheaded by Tomyris, who immersed his head in blood and told him to drink it, since he was so thirsty for it; and the Assyrian general Holofernes, who was beheaded by Judith. The thirteenth engraving, summing up the whole acrostic, is proud Troy undone.

This tour de force is followed by the famous lines: ‘Morti li morti e i vivi parean vivi: / non vide mei di me chi vide il vero’ [Dead seemed the dead, and the living living: one who saw the true event did not see better than I] (ll. 67–68), and a bitter apostrophe to us, apostrophe to us as sons of Eve: ‘Or superbite, e via col viso altero, / figliuoli d’Eva’ [Now assert your pride, and stride on with haughty brow, you sons of Eve] (ll. 70–71). An angel then appears, who invites Dante and Virgil to ascend to the next ledge, lamenting that so few answer the invitation. He cancels a P from Dante’s forehead, and Dante climbs a stair in the steep slope, which is compared
to that of San Miniato in Florence, made when the city still had law and justice. A beatitude is sung, ‘Beati pauperes spiritu’ [Blessed are the poor in spirit] (l. 110), and Dante feels much lighter, all the remaining Ps on his forehead having much faded with the conquest of pride. Dante feels with his fingers to see if the P is really gone, and Virgil smiles, as to a child.

There are a few, arguably incidental, links to *Inferno* xii: we have thirteen engravings, while in *Inferno* xii we had ten sinners and three Centaurs; we have a theme of tyrannous kings, of injustice and violence. We have lots of blood, including a head immersed in blood, because it so thirsted for blood. We even have a king killed at worship, like Guy de Montfort’s victim Henry. The sociopolitical consequences of pride are evident here too: failed kings, strife, and the culminating image of Troy, the human city destroyed through pride. Troy becomes an image of Florence, evoked in the simile of San Miniato, a city whose pride is its own corruption. We have a steep slope between ledges. And Dante is yoked like an ox, subduing the animal under the yoke of Christ.

But a deeper key, for our purposes, is the nexus in *Purgatorio* xii among art-representation-language-pride, in relation to the human, to what a human being is. A human being is the art of God: it is the self-manifestation or language of the divine, consciousness or spirit made visible. Humans are language, they are art. But humans can only fully be that if they fulfil their nature: if they know themselves, so that through them the divine becomes conscious of itself in finite form, as in Christ. Then they are *logos*, spirit made body, the Word made flesh, consciousness or being made visible, sensible. But as a conscious being, that visible image itself speaks and says ‘I’, it signs and represents. The Word become image, becomes word. A human being is the perfect nexus or translation between consciousness and form, between word and image, which is why Dante assimilates himself and his poetry to the art of an illuminator. The word or art of someone who is fully human (through whom the divine knows itself and speaks), is revelatory and authoritative, denoting the divine, the truth.

Pride undoes all this: it is a failure to know oneself as a manifestation of the divine, as consciousness or love made visible. This failure of human self-knowledge, not to know one’s own form as the language or art of God, this alienation from the ground of one’s own being, is an eclipse

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9 *Purgatorio* xii opens by pairing the pilgrim with the illuminator Oderisi da Gubbio: ‘Di pari, come buoi che vanno a giogo, / m’andava io con quell’anima carca...’ [Side by side, like oxen under a yoke, I was walking along with that burdened soul...] (ll. 1–2).
of consciousness: it destroys meaning, signification, communication, language, art. It undoes the Incarnation, and dissociates language from form, consciousness from body, the human from the divine, as in the Centaurs. It also destroys community, since it is only in the common consciousness of the one ground of being, recognizing the divine in or as oneself, and thus all possible others as not other than oneself, that humans can be one, that they can fully communicate. (Indeed we saw that pride is intrinsically oriented toward the destruction of others, seen as competitors in a zero sum game; one wants to see others lowered, so one can be superior.) Hence the pride of Nimrod results in multiplicities of tongues, a fracturing of community, alienation and exile. Hence almost every example of the acrostic depicts the destruction of the human form, of the language of God. The examples are all pre-Christian, emphasizing that only the awakening to Christ can undo pride.

The centre of the triptych in Purgatorio x is David, the humble singer of God in words. At the centre of the trio of souls in Purgatorio xi we have Oderisi the illuminator, the counter-image of Dante; in fact at the exact centre of the entire ledge of pride Oderisi evokes Dante, unnamed, as one who may supersede his predecessors Guido Guinizelli and Guido Cavalcanti in the glory of language. Here in Purgatorio xii, at the exact centre of this acrostic, as the seventh of thirteen images, we have the proud weaver of images Arachne, alienated from the divine, competing with it, and belittling it in her textum, her weaving. Dante has poised himself, unnamed, between a humble praiser of God in words (David), and a proud belittler of God in images (Arachne), while assimilating himself to an illuminator (Oderisi), one who translates between word and image. This is the balance of all human life, language, representation: poised between surrender and pride, our own body is either the language of God or its eclipse and disfiguration, and our own language or art is either the truth, the Word made flesh made word, or a false idol that eclipses and disfigures reality, its source. Art and poetry alone address and express the fullness of human nature as the fusion of spirit and body, as Incarnation, which is why they can be an instrument of revelation and purgation.

11 ‘…così ha tolto l’uno a l’altro Guido / la gloria della lingua; e forse è nato / chi l’uno e l’altro caccerà dal nid’ [thus the one Guido has seized renown in language from the other, and perhaps one is born who will kick the one and the other from the nest] (ll. 97–99).
The verbal acrostic representation of images of human pride itself spells the word ‘man’. The acrostic signifies, signs, human pride, as do the images it has translated into words, with Arachne at their centre. Thus, through this language, through these images, we can recognize ourselves, our own eclipse of language, of God’s human image; this recognition is itself an awakening to the divine, a recovery of meaning. In the same way, the fall of Troy (the final image) leads to the birth of Rome, through which justice and revelation will be restored. (In fact acrostics are a scriptural form, from the Psalms, written by David: Dante is assimilating his text to Scripture, and himself to David.) After the acrostic, Dante meets a beautiful angel, in white like the angels at the tomb of the risen Christ,¹² who invites Dante, and us, to fly home.

*Paradiso* xii, like *Purgatorio* xii, is the last of a set of three cantos (*Paradiso* x–xii). We are situated in the Heaven of the Sun (*Paradiso* x–xiv), which is the fourth of the nine moving heavens, and the first to be out of the shadow cast by the earth. The Heaven of the Sun thus marks a key new start, and corresponds in some ways to the ledge of pride, the first in Purgatory proper, after the nine cantos devoted to Ante-Purgatory. In *Paradiso* x a ring of twelve dancing souls forms around Dante and Beatrice. These are wise, illuminated souls, that know themselves as nothing other than pure conscious being, the ground of all reality. Thus their form, their identity, is perfectly transparent to the light: they are a ring of lights, facets or sparks of the divine, as it projects, seeks, and knows itself. Aquinas, one of the lights, introduces the others, who are a mixed lot, including Albert the Great, Peter Lombard, King Solomon, Boethius, Richard of St Victor, and Siger de Brabant, Aquinas’s polemical rationalist adversary. In *Paradiso* xi, Aquinas observes, on the traces of Joachim of Fiore, that God sent two guides to renew Christ’s faltering bride (the Church), one seraphic in ardour (Saint Francis), and the other cherubic in wisdom (Saint Dominic). They worked to a single end; to speak of one is to speak of the other. Aquinas then embarks on a panegyric of Francis, bridegroom of Poverty, that is, of renunciation and humility, and he ends by condemning straying Dominicans.

*Paradiso* xii begins with a new circle of twelve lights forming around the first, like a double rainbow, perfectly corresponding to the first in movement and song, like the voice of Echo (ll. 4–21). One of the lights says that the love that makes him beautiful leads him to speak of the other guide: as warriors who, rallying the struggling army of Christ, fought to the same end, they should be praised together (‘Degno è che, dov’è l’un, l’altro s’induca: / sì

The light is the Franciscan Saint Bonaventure, who (in a chiasmus with the Dominican Aquinas praising Francis in *Paradiso* xi) embarks on a panegyric of Saint Dominic, who was born in the Occident (Calaruega) as Francis was in the Orient (Assisi), accompanied by portentous dreams and names, that pointed to what he was, one who belonged entirely to God, the holy warrior of the Christian faith. Married to Faith at his baptism, elected by Christ to labour in his garden, messenger and intimate servant of Christ (‘messo e famigliar di Cristo’, l. 73), his first love was Christ’s first commandment (‘che l primo amor che ’n lui fu manifesto, / fu al primo consiglio che diè Cristo’, ll. 74–75), to follow poverty and humility (or, as Ghisalberti thinks, to seek first the kingdom of God, and trust that all else will be given, which is, indeed, true faith). St Dominic sought learning not for worldly ends, but for love of the true manna (‘amore de la verace manna’, l. 84), in order to patrol Christ’s vineyard. From the pope he sought no worldly advancement, but only authority to fight for the seed that has flowered in the twenty four lights: the seed of faith or revelation (ll. 81–87). Like a torrent pressed by a rising spring, he unleashed himself upon the brambles of heresy (meaning the Cathars or Albigensians), striking most where there was most resistance (ll. 97–102). That same water then became, in his followers, life-giving irrigation for ‘l’orto cattolico’ [the Catholic garden] (l. 104). Dominic was one wheel of the war chariot with which the Holy Church defended itself; Francis was the other (ll. 106–11). But the Franciscans stray from Francis’s track, weeds in a bad harvest, misled by the rigid polemical Ubertino di Casale and the compromising lax Matthew of Acquasparta (ll. 112–20).

The light then reveals itself as St Bonaventure, who always set aside worldly goals, and he names the other eleven lights of his ring (another chiasmus; the list of names is how Aquinas had started). The lights include early humble Franciscans, the mystic Hugh of St Victor, the prophet Nathan, St Anselm, the encyclopedist Rabanus Maurus and the grammarian Donatus; it culminates in Bonaventure’s mystical adversary Joachim of Fiore, ‘di spirito profetico dotato’ (l. 141), whose spiritual-prophetic vision of history is, arguably, an inspiration for *Paradiso* xi and xii. Then, in *Paradiso* xiii, Aquinas explains why Solomon is the wisest of men: he is so as king. (One could say also that, as judge and author of the *Song of Songs*, Solomon

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fuses the chiasmus between intellect and love, faith and renunciation, laid out in *Paradiso* xi and xii through Francis and Dominic, and enacts it in political-social reality.)¹⁴ In *Paradiso* xiv, Solomon speaks of the resurrection of the body, and the ontological primacy of intellect to love, and of love to luminosity. After this, a third ring of souls, a *sfavillar* of the Holy Spirit, encompasses the first two, in a culmination of the trinitarian imagery that has permeated this heaven.

We have, then, some further incidental links among this set of vertical cantos. As with the Centaurs in *Inferno* xii, there is lots of military imagery in *Paradiso* xii: might the Centaurs be a parody of the straying army of Christ in *Paradiso* xii?¹⁵ Where *Inferno* xii features tyrants and bad military leaders, and *Purgatorio* xii represents bad kings and generals, *Paradiso* xii celebrates a true military leader, St Dominic, in a true battle. We have a catalogue of names in *Paradiso* xii, as in the acrostic in *Purgatorio* xii and in the river of blood of *Inferno* xii. If one adds Dominic, the subject of the panegyric, to the twelve souls introduced here, we have thirteen names, as in the acrostic of *Purgatorio* xii (which is also twelve plus one), and perhaps as in *Inferno* xii (where Chiron is in charge of twelve creatures collectively, whether Centaurs or violent souls). Twelve plus one implies Christ and his disciples, suggesting that Chiron may be a counter-Christ and his brood in *Inferno* xii counter-apostles, Dominic an alter-Christ and the circle of sages in *Paradiso* xii alter-apostles (they flower from the seed he fought for).¹⁶ Twelve is also the number of the tribes of Israel, the community of God’s people, destroyed in the twelve examples of the acrostic of *Purgatorio* xii, and summed up in the thirteenth, the fall of Troy which issues in Rome, Christ and redemption. Strife and violence, represented vividly in *Inferno* xii and *Purgatorio* xii, are also clearly implicit in the battle against heresy evoked in *Paradiso* xii (in fact, of course, the Albigensian Crusade was a massacre). The plays on three and the triptychs of *Purgatorio*’s terrace of pride are echoed in the insistent trinitarian imagery of *Paradiso*’s Heaven of the Sun; as there are three circles of sages in the Heaven of the Sun, there are

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¹⁵ ‘L’essercito di Cristo, che si caro / costò a riarmar, dietro a la ‘nsegna / si movea tardo, sospeccioso e raro…’ [The army of Christ, which cost so dear to re-arm, was moving behind the ensign slowly, suspiciously, and scarce…] (ll. 37–39).

¹⁶ Bonaventure tells Dante that Dominic sought only to Dominic sought only ‘to defend the seeds that bore the twenty-four plants that now surround you’ (‘combatter per lo seme / del qual ti fascian ventiquattro piante’) (ll. 94–96).
three rings in Hell’s circle of violence, and a trinity of Centaurs. Humility, the antithesis of pride on that terrace in Purgatory, is a key undercurrent in the meditation on wisdom in this heaven (pride is the most intellectual vice, and the Sun is a heaven of intellectuals). The torrent/river of Dominic’s preaching of faith in Paradiso xii counters Inferno xii’s river of blood; we have seen that the bodies immersed in blood are a parody of the baptism in faith, evoked in Dominic. The bull/cow of animality of Pasiphaë and the Minotaur in Inferno xii is echoed by the ox-yoke of Christ and humility in Purgatorio xii.

But I think the key to possible deeper vertical correspondences is Dominic as alter-Christus, as one belonging to God, as his name implies (‘quinci si mosse spirito a nomarlo / del possessivo di cui era tutto’ [hence the Spirit moved to name him with the possessive form of Him who wholly possessed him], ll. 68–69), one who fuses in himself the fruition of intellect and love (passion), consciousness and body, the divine and the human, spirit and matter, contemplation and action, word and deed (‘fare’ and ‘dire’, l. 44), all of which are one in a fully realized human being, in a human assimilated to Christ, as shown in the chiasmus between Francis and Dominic, between love and reason. (Giuseppe Ledda observes that at their absolute centre, both the panegyric of Dominic and Paradiso xii itself culminate in the first triple Cristo rhyme of the poem (ll. 71–75); Dominic is ‘venuto a questo’ [come for this], echoing Christ announcing his mission; he is ‘agricola’ [husbandman] of Christ’s ‘orto’ [garden] (ll. 71–72), as Christ himself is the ‘ortolano eterno’ [the eternal Gardener] (Par., xxvi. 65).) In this sense, Dominic is at the other pole from the Centaurs and their violent charges, who together represent the sundering of all of these twin dimensions or attributes — fused in Christ and Dominic — into duality, into a negation of the Incarnation. In Purgatorio xii, we saw how that sundering happens: through pride, through the failure of man to be logos, to translate the Word into human image into word, into revelation. It is the failure to be a finite form through which the divine knows and reveals itself; it is to see oneself not as a sign or signifier, but simply as a material mark.

Francis and Dominic re-reveal Christ, they are sol oriens and sol occidens (Par., xi. 47–54; xii. 46–56), Incarnation and Crucifixion; they image Christ so that the straying bride, the Church, can come back to its groom (Par., xi. 28–36). The chiasmus between them (the Dominican Aquinas praising

Francis, and the Franciscan Bonaventure praising Dominic) and between Paradiso xi and xii (which makes the two panegyrics contiguous) indicates that perfect love (Francis) is perfect understanding (Dominic), and vice versa, and that perfect faith (Dominic) is perfect renunciation of all greed and worldly ambition (Francis), and vice versa. To know the ground of being in oneself, which is understanding, is to recognize all other things as oneself, which is love: it is to see the one in the many, the many in the one. This is the foundation of all harmony and social order, as epitomized in the dancing rings of the Heaven of the Sun; it is the negation of pride, and hence of all violence and strife. The harmony and parallel between the rings is linked to Iris the rainbow, the messenger or bridge between gods and men (‘Come si volgon per tenera nube / due archi paralleli e concolori, / quando Iunone a sua ancella iube [...]’ [As two parallel and con-colored bows arc through a tender cloud, when Juno commands her handmaiden] (Par., xii. 10–13); it is a link fulfilled in the rainbow that sealed the covenant between God and man (Genesis 9.12–17). The rainbow thus becomes an image of Christ, of the union between the divine and the human.

So why all the unsettling military imagery in Paradiso xii, and the indirect evocation of the slaughter of the Albigensians? (Just at Béziers in 1209, the entire population of more than ten thousand people was massacred, including all the children, and those who took refuge in churches.) It is intriguing that the Cathars or Albigensians were dualists, separating body and soul, matter and spirit, the world and God, as opposing forces: again, a negation of the Incarnation, a failure of self-knowledge. But as the Centaurs indicate, the battle of our double nature is already and always engaged: we are animals who are conscious, finite beings satiated only by infinity, in constant tension between, on the one hand, seeking to inflate our finite sense of self by devouring the world through the senses and, on the other, renouncing all greed and pride by feeding on conscious being, the all-encompassing divine reality at our core. Like the Albigensians, we experience that tension as a war between opposing forces of spirit and matter, good and evil. But, in reality, to fight for faith, the seed that flowers in the double ring in the Heaven of the Sun, is not to fight for a set of ideas, but for a deeper human self-knowledge, in which all matter, all finite reality, is revealed as the art or self-expression of the divine, apart from which it has no being at all. That battle can only be led by one who has such self-knowledge. That means one who has married Poverty like Francis, which is to have renounced all greed and ambition. This renunciation is to marry Faith like Dominic, which is to commit to the gamble that all that
exists is but the projection of a reality we can know as ourselves. To live that commitment is to come to understand the true nature of reality, which is to love all things as oneself. It is to have followed both Dominic and Francis, *alter Christi*, in the fruition of intellect and love. The true nature of reality is summed up in the Trinity. The ground of reality (pure consciousness) is not other than its manifestation as finite form (the world), because both consist in love: the power of conscious being to give itself to, experience itself as, finite form. The Trinity is what the rings of souls in the Heaven of the Sun both embody and sing: they are the self-manifestation of the Trinity, through which what is praises and loves itself. This is the fruition of all understanding, of all art, of all revelation. The singing souls are themselves the rainbow they are compared to: the self-revelation of God to man. Joachim of Fiore, the last soul to be named in the rings of souls, and thus in a sense their culmination (*Par.*, xii. 140–41), is ‘di spirito profetico dotato’ [endowed with prophetic spirit] (l. 141): he saw the Trinity in history, saw the spiritual meaning in the letter of Scripture, and announced an age of true human freedom and understanding beyond all institutions and doctrines, whose harbingers were arguably Francis and Dominic. This is the revelation of the *Comedy* itself.

This battle between humility and pride, between renunciation and *cupidigia*, between the divine and the animal in us, that we have traced through the Twelves, is the only battle there is: all others are merely corollaries of it, symptoms of losing this one true war. St Dominic is a torrent of water, pressed by an endless font: that torrent, which is self-knowledge or revelation itself, both destroys delusion, the illusory irrevocable divide between the world and its ground, and waters the garden of Christ, the faith and love that lead to the experience of all things, and God, as not other than oneself. That alone is the end of the war, of all wars.

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*18* The preaching of the Gospel is experienced as a destructive torrent by those who are opposed to it, and as healing water by those who open themselves to it (*Par.*, xii. 99–105); Ledda observes that this echoes Cacciaguida’s description of Dante’s own poem (*Par.*, xvii. 124–32). He further suggests that the idea of fighting for the seed that sprouts as the saved (*Par.*, xii. 95–96) unites the metaphors of ‘campione’ [warrior] and ‘agricola’ [gardener]; the torrent of Dominic’s preaching (l. 99) evokes a biblical image of Christ’s wisdom, of the power of the Spirit. Ledda argues, then, that Dante himself becomes a figure of Dominic when he undergoes his examination on faith in *Paradiso* xxiv; both Dominic and Dante fulfil St Paul’s mission (*Inf.*, ii. 29–30) of fostering faith as the first step of the journey to salvation (Giuseppe Ledda, ‘Osservazioni’, pp. 120–24). Manselli also observes that Dominic is a precursor to Dante himself. Raoul Manselli, ‘Il canto XII del *Paradiso*, in *Nuove Letture Dantesche* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1997), VI, pp. 120–24. In celebrating Dominic, Dante is celebrating himself, the mission of the *Comedy*. 