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„Eyes Down" (The *Purgatorio*'s Canto XII)[*]

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In terms of its narrative, this Canto is tightly connected to the previous three Cantos, which describe the entry of the poet and his leader into the genuine purgatory, along with their experiences in the first circle. We cannot even locate a genuine dividing line between Cantos XI and XII (from the perspective of the narrative, at least); the borderline appears instead within the new Canto, since the episode of the previous Canto is yet to be completed. The poet is still accompanied by Oderisi di Gubbio, the miniature-painter punished for his pride, with his back bent almost to the ground because of the weight around his neck. Only Virgil's customary urging prompts the poet to move on. Dante is also forced to assume a slouched posture, a *bow* in a physical, intellectual and moral sense (the two walked "[s]ide by side, like oxen that go yoked" 1.)– this bow becoming the Canto's chief motif.

Of course, Oderisi has been silent, having ended his speech about the poet's imminent exile with a prophecy. In the *Purgatorio,* this is the second prophecy – following the one spoken by Corrado Malaspina (VII. 133–9.) – which, like its predecessor, appears in a prominent spot: at the very end of a Canto. This is precisely the reason why the episode describing the encounter with Oderisi extends into the next Canto, thus making for distinct borderlines required within the *intellectual*, *moral*, and *narrative* structure. Just like in other

[*] In quoting passages from the Divine Comedy I follow Singleton's translation.

cases, the text calls for different divisions in terms of narrative, doctrine, semantic units and motifs. As a result, the text's relationship to the structure of the poem as a whole also varies with the standpoint of examination.

After the travelers part with Oderisi, they do not encounter further penitents on the way to the stairs leading to the next circle. Sources of their edification are images on the marble pavement at the edge of the cliff wall. Something similar already appeared in Canto X, in which travelers who have just passed through the gate of the purgatory are greeted by sculptures along the cliff, live caryatids, which, in the meditation, serve as positive examples of souls rewarded for their virtue (humility). Thus the journey through the first circle of the purgatory divides into the following sections: entry into the purgatory (IX. 73–145.), "the images of humilities" on the cliff wall (X. 1–139.), encounters with souls repenting for their pride, Oderisi among them (XI. 1 – XII. 9.), images on the marble pavement (XII. 10–76.). In accordance with the purgatory's laws of purification, the latter two sections serve as counterpoints to the positive examples, displaying instances of pride punished.

The narrative structure of Canto XII itself can be defined as follows: the travelers farewell to Oderisi (1–9.), description of the images on the marble pavement (10–78.), the arrival of the angel who erases the first P from Dante's forehead (79–136). Based on all this, we can say, using Croce's words, that Canto XII of the *Purgatorio* has a "structural" nature, unlike that of several Cantos within *The Divine Comedy* that create powerful dramatic effects through encounters with penitent, repentant or saved souls. The "structural nature" of this Canto (and by this I do not mean to contrast "poetry" with "non-poetry") consists in its being the first Canto of the *Purgatorio* in which a full cycle of repentance is completed, illuminating the general rule of repentance, absolution, and moving to the next circle (the punishment in accordance with contrapasso is supplemented by meditation over the punished crime and the

opposite virtue relative to the crime, providing either three examples of each or three types of the examples illustrating them).

Dante keeps up with Oderisi (bending low next to the figure bent under his weight) until Virgil calls on him – rather than suggesting that time is short, however, this time, he explains that in the purgatory everyone has to move forward out of his own strength (with his own sail and oar), urging "his bark along with all his might" (6.). That is to say, everyone has to repent for his own crimes, although – as it becomes apparent on a number of occasions – the amount of time spent in the fire of the purgatory also depends on how eager those alive are praying for the penitents. Virgil's mention of the "sail" and "oar" in his warning bring the text closer to one of the overarching semantic dimensions, dominated by images of the sea, ship, and sailing (*Inferno,* II. 106–108., *Inferno*, XXVI. 91–142., *Paradiso* II. 1–16., etc.). The significance of this goes beyond the poet's fondness for using a metaphor already introduced. The connotation of danger is always present in the sea and sailing, and this danger is not absent in the purgatory either, even though here we are sailing on calmer seas: ("To course over better waters the little bark of my genius now hoists her sails, […]" *Purgatorio*, I. 1–2.).

Upon his leader's urging, Dante parts with Oderisi and presses on, straightening his back. But we should note that he straightens up in a physical sense only!

> "I raised my body erect again
> as one should walk, though my thoughts
> remained bowed down and shrunken.
> (*Purgatorio*, XII. 8–9.)

It is easy to recognize the metaphoric meaning of this elaboration filled with moral and psychological implications. But on a narrative plane, we should consider the literal meaning

of the quoted lines: Dante is still bowed in thought, just like the souls repenting in the first circle. After all, he, too, is guilty, he, too, has to rid himself of pride. The weight on him presses down on his soul just like the rock forcing Oderisi into a bow; he finds it difficult to walk, just like Oderisi did. This is affirmed by the physical relief he experiences when the angel erases the first P from his forehead: his feet will "not feel fatigue, but it will be a delight to them to be urged upwards" (120.).

Before the angel arrives, Dante has to examine the didactic images under his feet. We have arrived at a section (13–75.) in which the poet directly formulates his aesthetic conception, along with his overall view of visual arts and the nature of visual images in general. But let us first stay on the narrative plane, on which the episode builds up as follows: Virgil calls his protégé's attention to the images under his feet (16–18.), this is followed by a detailed description of the physical placement of the images (16–24.), a description of the images themselves (25–63.), and their aesthetic and moral evaluation (64–72.).

At the beginning of the episode, the chief motif of the Canto resurfaces. To examine the images, Dante has to look down on the ground again, urged by Virgil ("solace your way by seeing the bed beneath your feet." (14–15.)) – he has to cast his eyes down again, since this is how he can take a look at the images on the marble pavement. He lifts his head only once he is done looking at all the images and Virgil urges him to rise ("Lift up your head, there is now no more time for going thus absorbed" 77–78.). as the angel approaches. Thus those roaming the first circle of the purgatory are forced into a bow not just because of the physical and spiritual weight on them, but also because of the placement of the images. The situation is characteristic of Dante's irony: the images, which can be viewed only with eyes cast down, assuming the posture of humility, portray famous instances of pride punished.

Dante employs an often-used tool of his by taking as starting point observable features of his environment, rather than *inventing* the situation. Moreover, he gives a detailed

description – with the kind of elaborate simile of his stretching across several triplets to which we have grown accustomed from him – of the slice of reality that inspired his imagination.

> As in order that there be memory of them,
>
> the stones in the church floor over the buried dead
>
> bear figured what they were before;
>
> […]
>
> so I saw sculptured there,
>
> but of better semblance in respect of skill,
>
> all that for pathway juts out from the mountain.
>
> (*Purgatorio*, XII. 16–24.)

Dante displays thirteen pictures, devoting a tercet to each. The images are divided into three series, based on the three distinct categories of pride (the one punished illustrated the crime by three types of examples), each of which consists of four cases. The thirteenth tercet should be read as a summary of the previous tercets. Each series displays in turn biblical and mythological heroes who were already punished in their lifetime.

The heroes in the first group (Lucifer, Briareus, the giants, and Nimrod) had been driven by their haughty pride to revolt against god (or the gods) and are punished by the deity; those in the second group (Niobe, Saul, Arachne, and Rehoboam) are punished by their own conscience; while the members of the third group (Alchmaeon/Eriphyle, Sennacherib, Cyrus, Holofernes) are punished by one of their enemies or victims. The thirteenth example summarizing the preceding twelve is about Troy, whose punishment came from a combined effort on behalf of god, itself and humans.

The unity of the examples in each group is reinforced by external, formal marks: the triplets of the first series start with the letter “V” (= “U”), while the triplets of the second and third series start with “O” and “M” respectively. The initial letters of the lines in the thirteenth tercet repeat the same formula. It is easy to notice the acrostic (“VOM” = “UOM”, that is, “uomo”, men) obviously suggesting that “man” is the root of sin. The sequence of examples reads the word OMO as it is written across the human face:

> The sockets of their eyes seemed rings without gems:
>
> he who reads *OMO* in the face of man
>
> would there surely have recognized the *M*.
>
> (*Purgatorio*, XXIII. 31–33.)

The themes of the images clearly reflect considerations about how morally instructive the depicted stories are. But some of the themes are additionally interesting because they play a role in establishing the poem’s overall architectonics. For example, the figures of Lucifer, Briareus or Nimrod – in accordance with the symmetries among individual parts of *The Divine Comedy* – recall the last Cantos of the *Inferno.* In hell, Dante had already encountered “face to face,” or at least saw these sinners depicted here with their characteristic gestures. Their figures thus appear to us from a double angle: on the dimension of verbal and visual portrayal.

The image in the purgatory depicts the moment of Lucifer’s downfall:

> I saw, on the one side,
>
> him who was created nobler than any other creature
>
> fall as lightning from heaven.

(*Purgatorio*, XII. 25–27.)

The image of Lucifer falling down as lightning ("vedea colui […] giú dal cielo folgoregiando scender") recalls, among other things, the words of Christ: "Videbam Satanam sicut fulgur da caelo cadentem" (Luke, X, 18). In the corresponding place in the *Inferno*, the lightning-simile is missing, but there is reference to it in the description of the downfall of Lucifer, embedded in a longer story, in part with the same wording ("giú dal cielo"): "on this side he fell down from Heaven" ("Da questa parte cadde giú dal cielo" – *Inferno*, XXXIV. 121.).

Briareus and Nimrod are first mentioned in Canto XXXI of the *Inferno*. As for the former, one of the giants revolting against Zeus, Dante *would have liked to see him* (*Inferno*, XXXI. 98–99.), but Virgil showed him Antaeus instead. Now, to make up for the missed opportunity, we see an image of the fearful giant, depicted in his death. The poet discussed Nimrod in the *Inferno* at greater length (*Inferno*, XXXI. 46–81.). The giant whose chief sin was to bring about the confusion of tongues in Babel ("this is Nimrod through whose ill thought one sole language is not used in the world" - *Inferno*, XXXI. 77–78.) is characterized there as a "stupid soul" (*Inferno*, XXXI. 70.), whose punishment – as an interesting example of the principle of contrapasso ("linguistic contrapasso") – is to lose his ability to speak and therefore to think. The figure of Nimrod bears an important allegorical meaning with respect to the poem as a whole, expressing the opposition of language and being deprived of language, the relationship between his crime and his punishment, and the degradation of human into beast. It is precisely this – the relation of crime, punishment, linguistic deprivation, beastly confusion – that the image in the purgatory succinctly summarizes:

I saw Nimrod at the foot of his great labor, as if bewildered;

and there looking on were the people

who were proud with him in Shinar.

(*Purgatorio*, XII. 34–37.)

Being "bewildered" is the state that Dante is in, while roaming in the dark forest –the first tercet of the entire poem tells about this. It is well to note that in characterizing Nimrod, the poet uses the term *smarrito* ("Vedea Nembrót […] quasi smarrito") – the same word by which he speaks of his own straying ("ché la diritta via era smarrita" *Inferno*, I. 3.). If the shipwreck of Odysseus, the poet's alterego expresses the fate that would have been Dante's if it were not for Beatrice's intervention, then the figure of Nimrod gives a warning: signaling the danger of becoming brutish, which could befall the conceited, sinful humankind.

Immediately after Dante has viewed the images, the angel arrives (which many readers think is the most beautiful angel in *The Divine Comedy*: the "fair creature" dressed in white, with a face that "seems the tremulous morning star" (88–90.). The angel's narrative function is to absolve the poet of his pride, his greatest sin, by erasing the first P and making it possible for him to continue his journey. But first he meditates over the examples, drawing some moral lessons from what he had seen:

[…] "Come: the steps are at hand here,

and henceforth the climb is easy.

To this bidding there are very few that come:

O race of men, born to fly upward,

why do you fall so at a breath of wind?"

(*Purgatorio*, XII. 94–97.)

Actually, we should note that it is unclear whether the above warning should be attributed to the angel or the narrator. But let us assume that it is the angel speaking; after all – as others have pointed out – coming from Dante, this would seem like a somewhat redundant repetition of the moral admonition in Canto X ("O proud Christians, wretched and weary" etc. X. 121–129.).

Immediately after the angel has erased the P from Dante's forehead, the road leading to the next circle becomes more placid, and the choir's song rises ("Spiritu pauperes beati"), completing (as always, at the end of each circle) the passage of repentance and praising the happiness opposite the absolved crime (this time, spiritual humbleness). At this point, Dante shifts his tone, describing the tamed landscape through another lengthy simile:

As on the right hand, for climbing the hill
where stands the church above Rubaconte
that dominates the well-guided city
the bold scarp of the ascent is broken by the stairs
which were made in a time
when the record and the stave were safe,
so the bank that falls there very steeply from the other circle
is made easier, but the high rock
presses close on this side and on that.

(*Purgatorio*, XII. 100–108.)

As on countless other occasions, we find a splendid example of poetic realism in one of the two compared terms of a precisely structured simile, encompassing a wide segment of natural, political and historical reality. Emblems of the old, happy times free of corruption are

listed: Florence, the "well-guided" city, the church above the Rubaconte bridge, the San Miniato, the record and the stave (il quaderno e la doga). (There is no need to add that Dante is referring to specific events and individuals.)

The closing section of the Canto provides a similarly chiseled thought which gives a vivid description of the poet's gesture that made Virgil smile:

> Then did I like those who go with something
>
> on their head unknown to them,
>
> save that the signs of others make them suspect,
>
> so that the hand lends its aid to make sure,
>
> and searches and finds, fulfilling
>
> the office which sight cannot accomplish;
>
> and with the spread fingers of my right hand
>
> I found only six of the letters
>
> that he of the keys had traced on my temples:
>
> (*Purgatorio*, XII. 127–135.)

The description of this gesture is another fine example of Dante's poetic realism always taking over, even when his voice perhaps sounds tired and overly moralizing.

Two factors determine the moral significance of this Canto, along with its place in the moral structure of the poem as a whole: on the one hand, of course, the Canto is about the most severe crime and the punishments for it, and significantly, this crime is the one that the protagonist takes upon himself. Two places explicitly bear witness to these. The references to the penitence of the proud are quite clear in the subsequent Canto:

Far greater is the fear that holds my soul in suspense,
of the torment below, so that already the load
down there is heavy upon me.

(*Purgatorio*, XIII. 136–138.)

But Dante's words in the previous Canto are no less clear:

[…] "Your true words fill my heart
with good humility and abate in me a great swelling

(*Purgatorio*, XI. 118–119.)

This is Dante's reply to Oderisi's speech chastising human pride, employing the biblical metaphor of swelling for naming it (Esther, XVI, 12). Actually, the severe accusations that Beatrice will level on him when they meet (*Purgatorio*, XXX., XXXI.) are explained by the fact that "Dante's sin" is precisely the one that calls for the most severe punishment according to the moral order of hell and the purgatory, the sin whose absolution through heavenly help requires the most sincere remorse. Due to his pride, Dante chose the wrong path upon leaving Beatrice after she died.

Meanwhile, pride is a characteristic sin committed by artists. In the first circle of the purgatory depicted by three consecutive Cantos (X., XI., XII.) Dante encounters only three souls that once lived (XI.) and has a real conversation with only two of them. Of the two, Odirisi is without a doubt the main character. He embodies *artistic* vanity, and contemplates at length the relationship between Cimabue and Giotto on the one hand, and Guido Guinizelli and Guido Cavalcanti on the other (XI. 91–99.) as well as the ephemeral nature of earthly fame in this connection (XI. 91–108.). It is no accident that the great artists of the era come up

in the context of a general discussion about fame, although the relevant passages can also be read as giving an independent summary of the history of art and literature, or as a critical study.

Beyond this, significance should obviously be attributed to the fact that the art theme – with a strong presence throughout the purgatory – dominates in each of the three Cantos devoted to pride. This should not imply that Dante's negative moral judgment about artists should be extended to *art* as well. After all, the poet – in the spirit of the principle that "your art is as it were grandchild of God" - *Inferno*, XI. 105.) – distinguishes between the fallible, vain, sinful artists and eternal art, whose final cause is god. The problem of art can occupy center stage in the Cantos admonishing the first of the major sins precisely because the relationship between art and pride is exactly opposite of the relationship between individual artists and vanity. While the Oderisi-episode displays artistic vanity as a typical instance of pride, the drawings on the cliff wall and the marble pavement illustrate the high moral function that Dante ascribes to art.

Dante describes non-existent works of art, or rather, "creates" them through verbal means. The works described constitute instances of "art within art", at the level of virtuoso examples of fiction like the description of Achilles' shield, or Adrian Lewerkühn's symphony. The visual effect created by Dante's poetry bears witness to his extraordinary power of evocation. Naturally, his accomplishment would be unimaginable without the Italian sculpture of his time: the bases for his descriptions were stone-carved biblical scenes on church gates, church pulpits and altars, among them, as many suspect, perhaps a sculpture by Nicola Pisano depicting damned souls who, while turning towards god, are being pushed into an abyss by devils.

While attempting to preserve the unique features of visual language, Dante cannot but use narration as his descriptive method. He displays the statues and pictures to us by telling

the story either through a detailed description (in the case of the statues carved in the cliff) or condensed into a single, characteristic, dramatic scene (in the case of drawings on the marble pavement). This clearly reflects his conception of visual art as, in a sense, narrative art. After all, along with his contemporaries, he learned this from the pictures of didactic scenes that served the edification of churchgoers. Telling evidence of such a narrative, "historic" conception of image-based depiction is the verb "storiare", used in case of the carving about Trajan and the widow: "There storied [*storiata*] was the high glory of the Roman prince" (Quiv' era storiata l'alta gloria del roman principato" X. 73–74.). But there is more. Dante may well have been aware of the intrinsic linguistic nature of the images; this is supported by the fact that he called the carving of Trajan "visible speech" ("visibile parlare" X. 95.), much to the joy of contemporary semiotics. This view is by no means inconsistent with the suggestion in other commentaries according to which the "visible speech" terminology refers to the idea that the relief is a wonder from god: created by god, it does not just seize the moment (as images created by humans inevitably do) but displays the successive moments of the dialog between the emperor and the widow.

God is a realist according to the lesson of the artwork in the purgatory. We see maximally faithful depictions of reality as the aesthetic ideal suggested by the live caryatids and each of the images on the ground. In terms of this criterion, god surpasses earthly artists: upon seeing his creations "[…] not only Polycletus but Nature herself would there be put to shame" (X. 32–33.).

The mimetic nature of art is perfectly realized in the context of fine arts, for the visual tools of depicting nature can recreate the impressions of the other senses as well (at least in the case of god's perfect creations): the relief depicting a chorus really seems to be singing; the smoke from the incense is real for the eye, if not for the nose (X. 58–63.). In the ideal

case, artistic representation is no longer just imitation, secondary to reality, but an indiscernible likeness of it:

> What master was he of brush or of pencil
>
> who drew the forms and lineaments which there
>
> would make every subtle genius wonder?
>
> Dead the dead and the living seemed alive.
>
> He who saw the reality of all I trod upon,
>
> while I went bent down, saw nor better than I!
>
> (*Purgatorio*, XII. 64–69.)

It is well to note that the just-described aesthetic ideal goes beyond the problem of judging the nature of artwork, constituting a part of the thoughts that serve as basis for the entire poem. The poet describes Beatrice's beauty in exactly those terms ("nature and art", "natura o arte") that he had previously used to characterize his aesthetic conception: "Never did nature or art present to you beauty so great as the fair members in which I was enclosed […]" (*Purgatorio*, XXXI. 49–51.).

The statues and drawings in the purgatory serve as examples in two ways. Their *referents*, at the level of the stories they recall, are examples that help purify the soul. At the level of *self-reference* (regarded as self-referring *signs* or *texts*) they are examples that justify a conception according to which the purpose of an artwork is to teach, to display the truth. The examples thus belong to the sequence that includes *The Divine Comedy*, which realizes the task Beatrice has set: "[…] for profit of the world that lives ill, hold your eyes now on the chariot, and what you see, mind that you write it when you have returned yonder" (*Purgatorio,* XXXII. 104–105.).