

‘Una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna’: Dante’s *Eclogues* and the World Beyond the Text

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This article explores the poetic exchange between Dante and Giovanni del Virgilio with close attention to the Cacciaguیدا cantos. It suggests that the ‘ten buckets of milk’ mentioned at the end of Dante’s first eclogue correspond closely to *Paradiso* xv–xxv and that both these cantos and the eclogues may be understood to form Dante’s response to del Virgilio’s epistle. In answering del Virgilio, Dante sought to underline his own classical credentials while at the same time mounting a defence of vernacular literature. *Paradiso* xxv is read as the climax of Dante’s arguments, in which he rejects del Virgilio’s offer to move to Bologna and asserts his desire to wait to receive the laurel crown in Florence. This article highlights both Dante’s willingness to defend his own poetic practice and the role of external factors in motivating the writing of the *Comedy*. It suggests that by choosing to address troubling external factors within his ‘poema sacro’, Dante was able to respond to them from a more secure position of authority and theological unassailability.

KEYWORDS Dante, Giovanni del Virgilio, eclogue, *Comedy*, vernacular, epistle, poetics, *tenzone*

At some point shortly after 5 February 1319,¹ Giovanni del Virgilio, a professor of rhetoric at the University of Bologna,² wrote a Latin epistle to Dante in which he

¹ Alberto Casadei argues that ‘ricosiderando gli elementi interni ad esterni già abbondantemente noti, non ci allontana mai da un inizio della corrispondenza poetica ascrivibile al 1319 avanzato (comunque dopo il 5 febbraio 1319, ultimo fatto storico sicuramente databile cui si allude nel primo testo delvirgiliano)’. In his footnote he elaborates on this event: ‘Si ricava dal verso “dic Ligurum montes et classes Parthenopeas” (*Egl.*, 1. 29), che tutti i commenti riconducono ai tentativi che, tra il luglio 1318 e il 5 febbraio 1319, Roberto d’Angiò fece, con la sua flotta, per liberare Genova assediata dai Ghibellini.’ See Casadei, ‘Sulla prima diffusione della *Commedia*’, *Italianistica*, 39.1 (2010), 57–66 (p. 63).

² On Giovanni del Virgilio and early humanism, see Giuseppe Billanovich, *Dal Medioevo all’umanesimo: la riscoperta dei classici* (Milan: Edizioni C.U.S.L., 2001); Giuseppe Billanovich, *Petrarca e il Primo Umanesimo*

questioned Dante's decision to write the *Comedy* in the vernacular. Del Virgilio was undoubtedly an admirer of Dante's poem and he had read at least the *Inferno*.³ His argument was that by writing a poem in Latin, Dante would finally gain the recognition that he so clearly deserved. In John Kevin Newman's terms, 'Giovanni's appeal to Dante [was] to move into the mainstream of literature, to seek fame and fortune.'⁴ Indeed, del Virgilio went so far as to suggest that by accepting his invitation, Dante might even be crowned with the poetic laurel, as Albertino Mussato had been in Padua in 1315.⁵

Much to del Virgilio's pleasure, Dante responded, and their exchange was, as Simona Lorenzini puts it, 'un evento letterario di straordinaria importanza'.⁶ In his first eclogue to del Virgilio, Dante makes it clear that the *Comedy* is at present unfinished, but at the end of the poem Tityrus (Dante) promises to send Mopsus (del Virgilio) ten full buckets of milk, in which he will respond in more detail to Mopsus's arguments.⁷ Dante is clearly taking del Virgilio's epistle seriously, and to turn once more to Newman, his 'greatness is revealed by the complexity of his answer to this simple challenge'.⁸ The debate between del Virgilio and Dante addresses some of the most fundamental and fiercely disputed questions within 'early humanism',⁹ and it provides an insight into how Dante both developed and defended the experimental nature of the *Comedy*. Dante's poem undoubtedly transgressed the traditional poetic conventions taught within Italian Universities, and, as such, it challenged the intellectual establishment's attitudes to vernacular literature.¹⁰ At the same time, by

² *Continued*

(Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1996); Giuseppe Billanovich, 'Giovanni del Virgilio, Pietro da Moglio, Francesco da Fiano', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 7 (1964), 279–324. See also Enzo Cecchini's entry in the *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1985), II, 73–74.

³ He refers to *Inferno* IV in his initial epistle (*Ecl.*, I, 17–19).

⁴ John Kevin Newman, *The Classical Epic Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 260.

⁵ Robert Hollander notes that 'Dante could hardly forget that Albertino Mussato had won the laurel at Padova in 1315 for his Latin Senecan tragedy, *Ecerinis*': see Hollander, 'Babytalk in Dante's *Commedia*', in *Studies in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1977), pp. 115–29 (p. 116, n.3). Mussato was to play a further role in the exchange. As Lorenzini reminds us, '[s]timolato dalla corrispondenza con Dante, nel 1327 Giovanni del Virgilio inviava una lunga egloga-epistola ad Albertino Mussato, della cui incoronazione poetica (1315) si rinnova nei versi iniziali il ricordo': see Simona Lorenzini, *La corrispondenza bucolica tra Giovanni Boccaccio e Checco di Meletto Rossi. L'egloga di Giovanni del Virgilio ad Albertino Mussato* (Florence: Olschki, 2011), p. 7.

⁶ Lorenzini, p. 4.

⁷ *Ecl.*, II, 63–64. Quotations are from *Le egloghe*, ed. by Giorgio Brugnoli and Riccardo Scarcia (Milan-Naples: Riccardi, 1980). Translations are my own with reference to P. H. Wicksteed and E. G. Gardner, *Dante and Giovanni del Virgilio: Including a Critical Edition of Dante's 'Ecloghae Latinae' and of the Poetic Remains of Giovanni del Virgilio* (Westminster: Constable, 1902). I am grateful to David Moyes for assistance with my translations.

⁸ Newman, p. 260. Guy Raffa also argues that Dante's eclogues are 'a defense of his own poetic practice' in his 'Dante's Mocking Pastoral Muse', *Dante Studies*, 114 (1996), 271–91.

⁹ Marjorie Curry Woods elaborates upon her use of the term 'early humanism'. She explains that '[m]ost debates center around the continuity of medieval teaching methods in the Renaissance or lack thereof'. For her part, she tends to 'side with those who emphasize the continuity of the pedagogical tradition', and, 'following in Ronald Witt's footsteps', she has 'adopted his term "early humanist"': see Woods, *Classroom Commentaries: Teaching the 'Poetria nova' across Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p. 94, n. 1. This article follows her example.

¹⁰ The *Comedy* was to have a lasting impact on those conventions. For example, one later commentary to the *Poetria nova*, cited by Woods, felt the need to explain that there are 'not one but two kinds of comedy'. It then 'goes on to cite Dante's *Commedia* as an example of the kind of high style that uses rhetorical devices,

considering the complex relation between Dante's eclogues and his 'poema sacro',¹¹ we are better placed to appreciate the extent to which Dante responded in his writing to the pressures and challenges that he encountered in the world beyond his texts.

To date, critical discussions of the exchange have been dominated by two preoccupations: first, deciding whether the eclogues are authentic or not, and second, determining what it was (if anything) that Dante intended to send to del Virgilio. Regarding the first question, Albert Ascoli explains that the 'authenticity of [del Virgilio's] epitaph, of the exchange between Dante and del Virgilio, and of del Virgilio's later epistolary eclogue to Albertino Mussato have all been disputed. Boccaccio's *Zibaldone laurenziano* is the earliest source for all five epistles, and he is the prime suspect for those who think they are forged'.¹² The argument for a Boccaccian forgery was most compellingly asserted by Aldo Rossi in the 1960s.¹³ However, Enzo Cecchini has since refuted Rossi's claims through what he describes as 'un'analisi delle caratteristiche prosodico-metriche dei testi, posti anche in confronto con i carmi latini del Boccaccio'.¹⁴ Cecchini declares 'decisamente l'impossibilità della falsificazione della corrispondenza Giovanni del Virgilio-Dante e dei testi ad essa connessi da parte del Boccaccio', adding speculatively in parenthesis, 'ma se non lui, chi avrebbe prima di lui potuto architettare un falso così ben congegnato?'¹⁵ The first question,

¹⁰ *Continued*

and an altered version of a classical source to support the argument'. Even the fact that Dante 'wrote his exalted *Comedy* in ordinary speech/the vernacular (*vulgariter*)' is worthy of mention. Dante's *novitas* both with respect to his literary experimentation and his writing in the vernacular is clear. Woods writes: 'Dante is the only naming of a work in the vernacular in a commentary on, and almost the only example of a vernacular work copied with, the *Poetria nova* that I have discovered, although there are other Italian manuscripts of the *Poetria nova* that contain Latin works by authors studied more today for their vernacular texts'; quotations in Woods, *Classroom Commentaries*, pp. 158, 160.

¹¹ *Par.*, xxv. 1. All quotations are from *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67).

¹² Ascoli, 'Blinding the Cyclops', in *Petrarch & Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, ed. by Theodore J. Cachey Jr and Zygmunt G. Barański (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. 114–73 (p. 149). Scholars arguing for the authenticity of the exchange include: Ascoli, 'Blinding the Cyclops'; Paola Allegretti 'Dante "Tityrus annosus"', in *Dante the Lyric and Ethical Poet*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Martin L. McLaughlin (London: Legenda, 2010), pp. 138–209; C. Battisti, 'Le egloghe dantesche', *Studi danteschi*, 33 (1955–56), 61–111 (pp. 64–68); Brugnoli and Scarcia, 'Introduzione' to *Le egloghe*, pp. xi–xiv and throughout; Enzo Cecchini, 'Giovanni del Virgilio, Dante, Boccaccio: appunti su un'attribuzione controversa', *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 14 (1971), 27–44; Guido Martellotti 'Dalla tenzone al carne bucolico: Giovanni del Virgilio, Dante, Boccaccio', in *Dante e Boccaccio e altri scrittori dall'Umanesimo al Romanticismo* (Florence: Olschki, 1983), pp. 71–89; Martellotti, 'La riscoperta dello stile bucolico (da Dante al Boccaccio)', in *Dante e Boccaccio e altri scrittori dall'Umanesimo al Romanticismo*, pp. 91–106; Martellotti, 'Le egloghe', in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, 6 vols (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970–76), II, 645; Giorgio Padoan in his reviews of the Aldo Rossi essays listed below, in *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 1 (1963), 517–40; 2 (1964), 475–507; and 5 (1968), 365–68; Lino Pertile, 'Le Egloghe di Dante e l'antro di Polifemo', *Studi danteschi*, 71 (2006), 285–302; Claudia Villa, 'Il problema dello stile umile (e il riso di Dante)', in *Dante the Lyric and Ethical Poet*, pp. 138–52.

¹³ See Aldo Rossi, 'Dante nella prospettiva del Boccaccio', *Studi danteschi*, 37 (1960), 63–139; Rossi, 'Dante, Boccaccio, e la laurea poetica', *Paragone*, n. s.13 (1962), 3–41; Rossi, 'Il carne di Giovanni del Virgilio a Dante', *Studi danteschi*, 40 (1963), 133–269; Rossi, 'Il Boccaccio autore della corrispondenza Dante-Giovanni del Virgilio', *Miscellanea storica della Valdelsa*, 69 (1963), 130–72; Rossi, 'Dossier di un'attribuzione: dieci anni dopo', *Paragone*, n. s. 36 (1968), 61–125.

¹⁴ Cecchini, 'Giovanni del Virgilio, Dante, Boccaccio', p. 27.

¹⁵ Cecchini, 'Giovanni del Virgilio, Dante, Boccaccio', p. 55.

then, as Alberto Casadei has recently observed, has largely been put to rest.¹⁶ A more heated debate continues to rage over what precisely Dante intended to send to del Virgilio, however. As Ascoli notes, the 'decem [...] vascula' have been 'interpreted to mean either ten Latin eclogues (in imitation of Virgil) or ten cantos (not necessarily the first ten) of the *Paradiso*'.¹⁷ Recently, both Casadei and Lorenzini have argued that Dante intended to send more Latin poems rather than cantos from the *Comedy*. Lorenzini argues for 'dieci egloghe o libri di egloghe secondo il modello classico delle *Bucoliche* virgiliane, piuttosto che i dieci canti finali del *Paradiso*, come interpreta parte della critica moderna',¹⁸ while Casadei agrees that the *Paradiso* theory is 'poco credibile'.¹⁹ In making their arguments, both scholars point to classical tradition: for example, Casadei refers to the 'diffimità rispetto al codice bucolico'.²⁰ However, there are also a number of Dante scholars in favour of the *Paradiso* theory,²¹ and given Dante's willingness to experiment, combined with his commitment to the vernacular, it seems more in keeping with his poetic practice that he depart from classical precedent, by referring in a Latin text (his first eclogue) to a vernacular authority (the *Paradiso*). A pertinent Dantean example of such tendencies is found in *Paradiso* xxv, where Dante gives the vernacular priority over Latin, citing Psalm 9. 11 in Italian before then referring to it in Latin.

If it is accepted that Dante intended to send del Virgilio a section from the *Comedy* then we may ask, in line with Ascoli's second parenthesis, the further question as to which cantos in particular Dante had in mind. This article suggests that *Paradiso* xv–xxv are the ones most closely engaged with del Virgilio's arguments, and so were the cantos intended to be sent to him. This proposal is opposed by various scholars, including J. S. Carroll, Lino Pertile, and Claudia Villa, who have all argued that the 'decem [...] vascula' are the final ten cantos of the *Paradiso*.²² This is largely, as Pertile puts it, because of 'il rapporto tra la prima egloga e il canto XXIII del *Paradiso*', which he argues is 'più profondo e significativo'.²³ This article, rather than seeing these cantos as the beginning of Dante's response to del Virgilio, suggests reasons why cantos xxiii–xxv might better be viewed as the conclusion and the climax of Dante's arguments.

¹⁶ Casadei ('Sulla prima diffusione', p. 62) writes: 'Sulla loro autenticità, la polemica sembra per adesso chiusa; personalmente, ritengo che gli aspetti controversi siano stati chiariti in senso positivo, e che quindi i testi siano nella sostanza autentici'.

¹⁷ Ascoli, 'Blinding the Cyclops', p. 168, n. 88.

¹⁸ Lorenzini, p. 5.

¹⁹ Casadei, 'Sulla prima diffusione', p. 65. Also in favour of the Latin eclogue option are Eugenio Chiarini, 'I "decem vascula" della prima ecloga dantesca', in *Dante e Bologna nei tempi di Dante* (Bologna: Commissione dei testi di lingua, 1967), pp. 77–88, and Brugnoli, notes to Dante, *Le egloghe*, II, 58–64, 45–47.

²⁰ Casadei, 'Sulla prima diffusione', p. 65.

²¹ In favour of the *Paradiso* theory are: Ascoli, 'Blinding the Cyclops', p. 168, n. 88; Martellotti, 'Egloghe', in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, II, 645; Wicksteed and Gardner, *Dante and Giovanni del Virgilio*, p. 228; Battisti, 'Le egloghe dantesche'; Giovanni Reggio, *Le egloghe di Dante* (Florence: Olschki, 1969), pp. 21–33; Helen Cooper, *Pastoral: Mediaeval into Renaissance* (Ipswich: Brewer, 1977), p. 34.

²² See J. S. Carroll, *In Patria. An Exposition of Dante's "Paradiso"* (London-New York: Hodder and Stoughton, s. d. [1911]), notes to pp. 395–96; Pertile, 'Le Egloghe di Dante', p. 156; Claudia Villa, 'Il problema dello stile umile'.

²³ Pertile, 'Le Egloghe di Dante', p. 153.

Casadei argues convincingly that *Paradiso*, XVIII. 124–36 refers ‘a un tempo e a un referente storico preciso’, which he identifies as the excommunication of Cangrande della Scala by Pope Giovanni XXII at the beginning of 1318.²⁴ As a result of this reference, Casadei dates the composition of this canto to the second half of 1318.²⁵ There are two points to make here. First, if Dante received del Virgilio’s epistle at some stage around the beginning of 1319 (as Casadei also argues),²⁶ then this time-frame may well correspond with the period when Dante was working on the central cantos of the *Paradiso*. Indeed, it may well be that Dante had already begun writing *Paradiso* xv–xviii when del Virgilio first made contact. Of course, the dating of the composition of the *Paradiso* is fraught with difficulties, but there seems no reason to assume that Dante finished one work before beginning the other. Indeed, the fact that Dante may have been working on both the eclogue and these cantos of the poem may help to explain the fact that *Paradiso* xv–xxv comprises eleven cantos, and so one more than the ‘decem’ promised in the first eclogue.²⁷ Two further points can be made. First, it cannot be argued conclusively that Dante wrote *Paradiso* xv–xxv purely in response to del Virgilio’s criticisms; as we will see, he would have already had in mind many of the arguments made both for and against vernacular literature when composing the *Comedy*. And second, while Dante may well have intended to argue for vernacular poetry in the *Paradiso*, del Virgilio’s arguments provided an additional incentive as well as a number of specific objections to take into consideration.

In *Paradiso* xvii Cacciaguida commissions Dante to make his vision public: ‘tutta tua vision fa manifesta’ (l. 128). This instruction goes hand in hand with Dante’s willingness to defend publicly the poetics of his poem. Of course, Dante had engaged in poetic correspondences before, most famously in his *tenzone* with Forese Donati, and he may well have done so at the very same time that he was writing the *Vita nuova*.²⁸ Indeed, the exchange between Dante and del Virgilio is, as Guido Martellotti argues, ‘fondamentalmente una tenzone’.²⁹ It is an unusual *tenzone* in that it is conducted in Latin, in classical forms rather than in vernacular sonnets, but it is nevertheless, as Claudio Giunta puts it, a ‘poesia a un destinatario’.³⁰ And in Italy, such exchanges entailed a notable degree of openness to the public.³¹ By engaging in

²⁴ Casadei, ‘Questioni di cronologia dantesca: da *Paradiso* xviii a *Purgatorio* xxxiii’, *L’Alighieri*, 38 (2011), 123–41 (p. 124).

²⁵ Casadei, ‘Questioni’, p. 125.

²⁶ See note 1.

²⁷ Billanovich uses the verb ‘intercalare’ on two separate occasions to describe the relationship between the *Paradiso* and the eclogues, writing that Dante ‘aveva intercalato alla stesura dei canti del *Paradiso* il dialogo bucolico con Giovanni del Virgilio’, and elsewhere claiming that ‘[d]’altronde l’anziano Dante aveva intercalato alla stesura di questi canti il dialogo bucolico con Giovanni del Virgilio’; see Billanovich, *Petrarca e il primo Umanesimo*, p. 16; *Dal Medioevo all’umanesimo*, p. 120.

²⁸ Fabian Alfie, *Dante’s Tenzone with Forese Donati: The Reprehension of Vice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 4.

²⁹ Martellotti, ‘Dalla tenzone al carme bucolico’, p. 82.

³⁰ Claudio Giunta, *Due saggi sulla tenzone* (Rome-Padua: Antenore, 2002), p. 122. See also idem, *Versi a un destinatario. Saggi sulla poesia italiana del Medioevo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002) and *Codici. Saggi sulla poesia del Medioevo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005).

³¹ Alfie (*Dante’s Tenzone with Forese Donati*, p. 20) contrasts Provençal *tenson*, in which ‘a certain level of control was maintained’ by virtue of the fact that ‘the initiators of the *tensons* knew the identities of all their respondents’, with the Italian *tenzone*, in which ‘[u]ninvited people could answer, or could answer in a manner unintended, or they could respond to a sonnet which had no overt intentions to initiate a *tenzone*’.

a bucolic *tenzone* with del Virgilio, Dante was at once acknowledging del Virgilio's specific criticisms while at the same time engaging with a wider public.

Del Virgilio's primary complaint in his first epistle is that, in writing in the vernacular, Dante is prostituting the bejeweled riches of his poem to an uncouth public: 'Do not carelessly throw your pearls before swine, nor press upon the Castalian sisters clothes unworthy of them.'³² He is concerned about the appropriateness of Dante's intended audience, arguing that an 'idiotic or illiterate people' will sooner solve the riddle of the Sphinx than comprehend the *Comedy*.³³ In order to emphasize this point, del Virgilio even puts words into Dante's mouth, claiming that Dante will say 'I do not speak to such as these, but rather to those skilled in study', before interjecting rhetorically, 'but in lay or secular verse!'.³⁴ In part del Virgilio is attacking the argument that Dante made around twenty-five years earlier in the *Vita nuova* (1292–95), in which he claimed that 'lo primo che cominciò a dire sì come poeta volgare, si mosse però che volle fare intendere le sue parole a donna, a la quale era malagevole d'intendere li versi latini'.³⁵ For del Virgilio, a work of the *Comedy*'s complexity should not be written in the language of common people and Dante perhaps acknowledges this point of contact with the *Vita nuova* by suggesting towards the end of his first eclogue that his correspondent's complaint is based on the assumption that the words of his comedy sound trite on the chattering lips of women.³⁶

Tityrus is then asked by his interlocutor, Meliboeus (Dino Perini), 'Therefore, what will we do, wishing to win Mopsus to our side',³⁷ to which Tityrus responds by promising to send Mopsus the 'decem [...] vascula'. As we have seen, this allusion implies that Dante's full response to del Virgilio's criticisms will be in the supplementary material rather than in the eclogue itself, for the *Comedy* is a poem, as Cornish writes, which 'requires no translation or commentary',³⁸ or in Ascoli's terms, a poem which 'insists that it can "explain itself"'.³⁹ Consequently, in promising to send the 'decem [...] vascula', Dante defers to the authority of the *Comedy*. And in *Paradiso* xv–xvii we find that Dante's justifications for using the vernacular are both extended and nuanced beyond his earlier discussions of the subject. In *Paradiso* xv. 121–26, Cacciaguیدا states that during his lifetime a child learned both his local vernacular ('l'idioma') and his social and cultural history at his mother's breast. Indeed, the link between a mother's milk and one's native speech recurs throughout Dante's writing, and perhaps lies behind his decision to refer to poetry within the eclogues as 'lacte'.⁴⁰

³² *Ecl.*, I. 21–22: 'Nec margaritas profliga prodigus apris, | nec preme Castalias indigna veste sorores'.

³³ *Ecl.*, I. 9–11: 'gens ydiota'.

³⁴ *Ecl.*, I. 14–15: 'Non loquor his, ymo studio callentibus [...] Carmine sed laico'.

³⁵ VN, xxv. 6. The *Vita nuova* was widely circulated at this time and it is reasonable to assume that del Virgilio had read it before writing to Dante. Quotations are from '*Vita nuova*': *Italian Text with Facing English Translation*, ed. by Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

³⁶ *Ecl.*, II. 53–54.

³⁷ *Ecl.*, II. 56–58: 'Ergo | quid faciemus [...] Mopsium revocare volentes?'.

³⁸ Alison Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 139.

³⁹ Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 226.

⁴⁰ In *Par.*, xxxiii. 106–08, Dante refers to the apophatic limit of his poetic capability in the following terms: 'Omai sarà più corta mia favella, | pur a quell ch'io ricordo, che d'un fante | che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella'.

As such, ‘il tema del nutrimento e del cibo’, suggested by Lino Pertile to be a point of contact between *Paradiso* xxiii and Dante’s first eclogue,⁴¹ can in fact be traced back (at least implicitly) to *Paradiso* xv. In presenting his description of ancient Florence, Cacciaguیدا also criticizes the current state of affairs. Appreciation of the ‘idioma’ has faltered, and as a result Florence has lost touch with its original Roman, and so Trojan, values. In *Paradiso* xvi. 10–12, Dante addresses Cacciaguیدا as ‘voi’, a term of respect ‘che prima a Roma s’offerie’, but which is no longer remembered by their descendants. In these cantos, Dante urges his reader to understand that the vernacular is not the language of the lowest in society but is the means by which society as a whole is both formed and nourished. Or, as he puts in the *Convivio* (i. xii. 26–27), language is ‘congiunto colle più prossime persone, sì come colli parenti e [colli] proprî cittadini e colla propria gente’.⁴²

Dante’s longstanding admiration and support for the vernacular would have troubled many intellectuals of his time, and it clearly worried del Virgilio. Del Virgilio’s distaste for the vernacular can be discerned in his first epistle, in which he stresses that his belief that a wise man flees from the vernacular — ‘clerus vulgaria tempnit’⁴³ — is based on the supremacy of classical precedent:

Praeterea nullus, quos inter es agmine sextus,
nec quem consequeris celo, sermone forensi
descripsit [. . .]⁴⁴

[Besides, not one of those among whom you are a sixth, nor he that you follow to heaven, wrote in the language of the marketplace (or the forum, as opposed to the language of the courts)]

In referring to *Inferno* iv, and in particular the moment that Dante is accepted by Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, and Virgil as the sixth in their elite group (*Inf.*, iv. 102), del Virgilio places the classical tradition at the centre of his dispute with Dante. From Dante’s point of view this argument must have been all too familiar, given that the authority granted to classical precedent by conservative thinkers such as del Virgilio was a cultural barrier that he had been attempting to overcome since at least the *Vita nuova*, in which he claimed that vernacular poets should be afforded the same poetic license as their classical predecessors.⁴⁵

The robustness of Dante’s reiteration of this point in his response to del Virgilio, and so in effect the defence of his own poetic authority, is evident first of all at the level of the form in which he chose to respond to his interlocutor. Zygmunt Barański argues that Dante’s decision to change the metrical form from del Virgilio’s Horatian epistle to an eclogue is a move of ‘considerable novelty’, as well as a clear

⁴¹ Pertile, ‘Le Egloghe di Dante’, p. 153.

⁴² Quotations are from: *Convivio*, ed. by Franca Brambilla Ageno, in *Le opere di Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols (Florence: Le Lettere, 1995).

⁴³ *Ecl.*, i. 15.

⁴⁴ *Ecl.*, i. 17–19.

⁴⁵ VN, xxv.

transgression of poetic etiquette.⁴⁶ Barański goes on to suggest that ‘when Dante selected this metre, his idea was that it should serve as an integral part of his self-defence, thereby bringing together and harmonising the literary-critical associations both of the poems’ content and of their form’.⁴⁷ In essence, Barański argues that Dante’s choice of form was intended to suggest that his decision to write in the vernacular was one based on considerable knowledge of poetics, both classical and vernacular, rather than due to ignorance of either tradition. In resurrecting the eclogue Dante was defending his poetic credentials and demonstrating that he could more than competently write in an often mentioned but rarely used archetypal ‘comic’ form. This decision was to prove of lasting consequence to European literature; in Lorenzini’s terms, ‘Dante apriva la strada alla rinascita di quel genere bucolico che il Medioevo aveva visto scomparire nella sua forma più pura e che invece avrà grande fortuna nell’Umanesimo’.⁴⁸

Dante’s choice of form also presents del Virgilio with a further challenge. As Lorenzini puts it, ‘Dante rispondeva immediatamente non con un’altra epistola, bensì con un’egloga latina, dialogata, di stampo virgiliano’.⁴⁹ In his first epistle to Dante, del Virgilio refers to his own association with Virgil: ‘And I will now take the lead if you think I am worthy, clerk of the Aonides, vocal attendant upon Maro.’⁵⁰ By changing the metrical form of the exchange from an Horatian epistle to a Virgilian eclogue, Dante both challenges del Virgilio’s authority and asserts his own. Indeed, Dante’s assertion of authority is all the clearer if we remember that throughout the eclogues Dante speaks, as Ascoli recognizes, ‘in the first person singular under the name of Tityrus, with whom, according to the tradition deriving from Servius’ commentary, Virgil himself is identified’.⁵¹ Dante’s response to del Virgilio’s criticisms could hardly be stronger. In reviving a Virgilian form and even assuming the voice of the ancient poet, Dante attacks the very basis of del Virgilio’s authority, questioning his expertise and presenting him, to borrow Guy Raffa’s phrase, with an emphatic ‘put-down’.⁵²

The ‘tema del nutrimento e del cibo’ suggested by Pertile also has Virgilian connotations.⁵³ Gary Cestaro argues that ‘Christian theologians posited linguistic simplicity and fluidity over and against hard-lined classical grammar and rhetoric’, before going on to suggest that ‘[a]ppropriate to Christian charity was an open, gentle linguistic pedagogy that took its cue from Scripture, a nurse-tutor who provides

⁴⁶ Zygmunt Barański, ‘Dante Alighieri: Experimentation and (Self-)Exegesis’, in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson, 9 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ii: *The Middle Ages*, 561–82 (p. 561). This change has been noticed by many critics, including, for example, Giuseppe Velli, who writes: ‘Surprisingly enough, Dante answered this letter not — as one would expect from the long established literary canons of which he was, of course, aware — with another epistle in hexameters, but with a Vergilian eclogue. This apparently marginal or utterly irrelevant event determines a dramatically novel “literary” situation’, in Velli, “Tityrus Redivivus”: The Rebirth of Vergilian Pastoral From Dante to Sannazaro (and Tasso)’, in *Forma e parole: studi in memoria di Fredi Chiappelli* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1992), pp. 67–79 (p. 68).

⁴⁷ Barański, ‘Dante Alighieri: Experimentation and (Self-)Exegesis’, p. 561.

⁴⁸ Lorenzini, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Lorenzini, p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Ecl.*, I. 35–36: ‘En ego iam primus, si dignum duxeris esse, | clericus Aonidum, vocalis verna Maronis’.

⁵¹ Ascoli, ‘Blinding the Cyclops’, p. 138.

⁵² Raffa, ‘Dante’s Mocking Pastoral Muse’, p. 272.

⁵³ Pertile, ‘Le Egloghe di Dante’, p. 153.

gradual instruction'.⁵⁴ This contrast has been described in vivid terms by Hollander, who suggests that 'Dante realized that it would have been useless to put the good hard bread of Latin in the mouths of those who still are suckled at the breast'.⁵⁵ The vernacular is associated with mother's milk, while Latin is seen as harder food, for those weaned and thus ready to enter more explicitly male environments. And yet, in *Purgatorio* XXI, Statius refers to the *Aeneid* as 'la qual mamma | fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando' (ll. 97–98), while Dante himself refers to Virgil in *Purgatorio* xxx as his 'mamma':

volsimi a la sinistra col respitto
col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma
quando ha paura [. . .] (*Purg.*, xxx. 43–45)

Virgil's Latin is neither entirely distinct from nor at odds with the vernacular. Cornish elaborates on such complexities, reminding us that in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, the sought-after *vulgare illustre* is the language not of family, females, and infancy, but rather of the *patria*, the fatherland, and the court.⁵⁶ Consequently, the 'vernacular is emphatically female at its origin, imbibed with mother's milk; but the *illustrious* vernacular is praised precisely for its distance from that origin and approximation of a courtly, male idiom'.⁵⁷ In *Purgatorio* xxx, Virgil is both 'mamma' and (six lines later) 'dolcissimo patre' (l. 50), and as such he is both Dante's source of poetic inspiration and his literary guide, or in Hollander's terms, 'father in his role as Dante's *magister*', but '*mamma* in his role as giver of linguistic nutriment'.⁵⁸

In *Paradiso* xv, Dante further elaborates upon his classical credentials by describing in explicitly Virgilian terms the moment when he first encounters his illustrious ancestor Cacciaguida:

Sí pïa l'ombra d'Anchise si porse,
se fede merta nostra maggior Musa,
quando in Eliso del figlio s'accorse. (ll. 25–27)

This meeting is, as Hollander argues, clearly 'modelled in part upon that of Aeneas and Anchises in the Elysian Fields'.⁵⁹ If Cacciaguida is Anchises, then Dante is Aeneas, an individual selected by God to found a new community based on the values of the old. Cacciaguida was knighted by the Roman emperor (ll. 139–41),⁶⁰ and because Dante is, so to speak, a branch off the same tree — 'O fronda mia in che io compiacemmi | pur aspettando, io fui la tua radice' (ll. 88–89) — he can also claim a vocation inherited from Rome. In this canto, Dante claims classical as well as theological justification for his actions by making it clear that any departures from his teacher remain sanctioned within a Virgilian framework.

⁵⁴ Gary Cestaro, *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), p. 137.

⁵⁵ Hollander, p. 116.

⁵⁶ Cornish makes this point with reference to Ascoli: Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy*, p. 146. See Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, p. 308.

⁵⁷ Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy*, p. 146.

⁵⁸ Hollander, p. 125.

⁵⁹ Hollander, p. 125.

⁶⁰ *Par.* xv, 139–41.

The Virgilian allusions in *Paradiso* xv, combined with the exchange between Dante and del Virgilio, may even help to explain one of Dante's apparent inconsistencies. Cornish discusses the significance of Brunetto Latini in *Inferno* xv as a 'model for Florentines who wanted to speak and write in the vernacular, who were politically engaged and interested in the application of classical ethics to modern civic life'.⁶¹ In response to Brunetto's mention of his coming misfortunes, Dante replies:

Ciò che narrate di mio corso scrivo,
a serbolo a chiosar con altro testo
a donna che saprà, s'a lei arrivo. (*Inf.*, xv. 88–90)

Cornish explains that in this tercet, 'Dante suggests that Beatrice (*donna che saprà*) will have the role of *sponitore* (or *sponitrice*) since she will know how to gloss Brunetto's narrative, to tell us what it really means.' However, readers of the *Comedy* are faced with a problem when they reach the *Paradiso*, for it seems, as Cornish continues, that Dante has a 'change of heart': 'in the *Paradiso* Dante has Cacciaguada, not Beatrice, explain in clearest possible terms the facts of his future exile.'⁶² Perhaps this 'change of heart' can be explained by Dante's exchange with del Virgilio. In light of their correspondence, it may be that Dante felt moved to explain the prophecy in an explicitly Virgilian context, to have as a counterpoint to Brunetto an individual in whom he could place both classical and Christian authority. If this were the case, a crusader knight would be the perfect choice.

However, the importance of the balance between the classical and Christian should not be underestimated. Dante was not solely concerned with defending his classical credentials; rather, he had to locate that defence within the context of his theological mission. And, with this in mind, del Virgilio's reference to *Inferno* iv shows a limited understanding of the ways in which Dante deals with the classical canon in the *Comedy*.⁶³ To some extent, as Amilcare Iannucci observes, *Inferno* iv is 'una espressione dell'umanesimo di Dante, o, almeno, del suo spirito preumanistico'.⁶⁴ Yet Iannucci goes on to warn that '[n]oi dobbiamo guardare al di là dell'iperbole della retorica': 'Nel Limbo la metafora è più transcinante. Essi, Virgilio incluso, sono spinti ai margini, nel 'nobile castello' del Limbo. Solo Dante il poeta 'comico' cristiano può occupare il centro. L'ultimo è diventato il primo.'⁶⁵

Michelangelo Picone argues that 'Virgil represents the pivot in Dante's system of *auctores*'.⁶⁶ Dante shows this himself in *Purgatorio* xxii when Statius meets Virgil and acknowledges the conversional power of his predecessor's poetry: 'Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano' (l. 73). For Dante, Virgil was a pagan poet on the cusp of the Christian era and his poetry contains within it the seeds of Christian revelation. And

⁶¹ Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy*, p. 133.

⁶² Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy*, p. 138.

⁶³ *Ecl.*, I. 17–19.

⁶⁴ Amilcare A. Iannucci, 'Dante e la "bella scola" della poesia (*Inferno* 4.64–105)', in *Dante e la "bella scola" della poesia: autorità e sfida poetica*, ed. by Amilcare Iannucci (Ravenna: Longo, 1993), pp. 19–37 (p. 20).

⁶⁵ Iannucci, 'Dante e la "bella scola"', p. 35.

⁶⁶ Michelangelo Picone, 'Dante and the Classics', in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997), pp. 51–73 (p. 66).

yet, earlier in this canto we are also informed by Statius that Virgil was acting like someone ‘che porta il lume dietro, e sé non giova’ (l. 68). While Virgil is a crucial point of reference for Dante, he is not the summit of possible literary achievement, and this is for theological as much as poetic reasons. Throughout the course of the *Comedy* it becomes apparent that, as Steven Botterill explains, Dante must progress from the ‘parola ornata’ of Virgil to the ‘parole sante’ of Bernard of Clairvaux.⁶⁷ As such, Dante is not only guided by Virgil through the first two *cantiche*, and he is not simply sanctioned by Cacciaguida in a Virgilian framework; he must in fact surpass his master and rewrite the classical epic, so that, to use Picone’s phrase, ‘the *Commedia* definitively surpasses the *Aeneid*’.⁶⁸ Evidence of such a progression can be found in Cacciaguida’s opening three words, ‘O sanguis meus’ (*Par.*, xv. 28), for in these words Dante transforms a quotation from Virgil into an echo of the Eucharist,⁶⁹ while at the same time placing ‘Virgilian Latin in rhyming hendecasyllabic tercets’.⁷⁰ Dante must be recognized as *both* Aeneas and Saint Paul, merging and fulfilling the Christian and the classical traditions in his movement from Virgilian ‘tragedia’ (*Inf.*, xx. 113) to a divinely sanctioned ‘tëodia’ (*Par.*, xxv. 73).

In short, Dante defends his relationship with Virgil while at the same time demonstrating a willingness to move beyond his former guide. In the *Paradiso*, Virgil is displaced from his position as Dante’s ‘maestro’ and ‘autore’ (*Inf.*, l. 85). In *Paradiso* xvi, Cacciaguida is identified by Dante as his true father: Dante claims, ‘[v]oi siete il padre mio; | voi mi date a parlar tutta baldezza’ (ll. 16–17). In *Paradiso* xviii–xix, Dante encounters the souls of the just in the shape of an eagle and questions them on the fate of noble pagans, stating, ‘sapete qual è quello | dubbio che m’è digiun cotanto vecchio’ (*Par.*, xix. 32–33). The Eagle outlines a thought experiment in which ‘[u]n uom nasce a la riva | de l’Indo’, and so ‘non è chi ragioni | di Cristo né chi legga né chi scriva’ (ll. 70–72). How can such a ‘good’ man be condemned? Or as the Eagle puts it, ‘ov’è questa giustizia che ‘l condanna? | ov’ è la colpa sua, se ei non crede?’ (ll. 77–78). The Eagle rejects the question entirely, and reminds Dante that the origins of all human goodness are in the divine:

La prima volontà, ch’è da sé buona,
da sé, ch’è sommo ben, mai non si mosse.
Cotanto è giusto quanto a lei consuona:
nullo creato bene a sé la tira,
ma essa, radiando, lui cagiona. (*Par.*, xix. 85–90)

⁶⁷ *Inf.*, ii. 67; *Par.*, xxxii. 3. See Stephen Botterill, ‘Dante and the Authority of Poetic Language’ in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 167–80. Picone emphasizes that Dante embeds an alternative list of *auctores* to those in *Inferno* iv in *Purgatorio* xxii. 97–98, and the fact that this list is based on comedy highlights Dante’s movement from classical antiquity to more appropriately Christian works; see Picone, ‘Dante and the Classics’, pp. 61–62.

⁶⁸ Picone, ‘Dante and the Classics’, p. 66.

⁶⁹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, vi. 836. Robin Kirkpatrick writes: ‘In these Latin phrases Dante brings together allusions to Virgil’s *Aeneid* 6 (especially line 836) with allusions to the familiar language of Saint Paul’s epistles. (The adjective ‘superinfusa’ appears to be constructed on models to be found in Romans 5: 20 and Ephesians 1: 8.)’, in Kirkpatrick, *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradiso*, trans. and ed. by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 395–96.

⁷⁰ Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante’s Italy*, p. 139.

Consequently it would be possible (albeit difficult) for a noble pagan to receive grace, and in the next canto Dante learns of the salvation of Ripheus the Trojan, who is just such a pagan:

[...] di grazia in grazia, Dio li aperse
 l'occhio a la nostra redenzion futura;
 ond' ei credette in quella, e non sofferse
 da indi il puzzo più del paganesmo;
 e riprendiene le genti perverse. (*Par.*, xx. 122–26)

Ripheus is identified in the *Aeneid* as the most just of all the sons of Troy ('iustissimus unus | qui fuit in Teucris et servantissimus aequi'),⁷¹ and 'so great was his passion for justice' that he seems to have been 'given special grace to see into the depths of the ocean of justice evoked in canto 19'.⁷² By including a figure from Virgil's epic poem, Dante underlines the greatness of his teacher while at the same time reminding us of his limitations. Virgil's poem remains a source of inspiration and prophetic truth, but Ripheus's presence in Paradise simultaneously reminds us that Virgil himself has been condemned to Limbo.

Moreover, throughout the *Paradiso* a 'connection' between Dante and the prophet David is gradually developed.⁷³ Teodolinda Barolini observes that David is referred to three times, on each occasion being described as a 'cantor',⁷⁴ and, in her view, the last reference contains a direct recall of Dante's first meeting with Virgil in *Inferno* 1. In this first canto, Dante repeats a fragment of Psalm 51, exclaiming '*Miserere di me*' upon first encountering Virgil (l. 65), and in *Paradiso* xxxii, David is identified as the author of this expression, being described as the 'cantor che per dogli | del fallo disse "*Miserere mei*"' (l. 12). In a sense, then, Dante shows us in the penultimate canto of the *Comedy* that David actually precedes Virgil in *Inferno* 1, while for Barolini, 'by echoing the pilgrim's first words to Vergil', the last reference to David in the *Paradiso* (*Par.*, xxxii. 11–12) 'gives us a sense of the distance Dante has traveled to become the author of the new *tëodia*'.⁷⁵ In Ascoli's opinion this links 'David and Dante further as sinners redeemed to and by a vocation for singing',⁷⁶ and he goes on to connect Barolini's analysis with Cacciaguida:

I would add that this reference, actually part of a periphrasis for the biblical Ruth, identified as the great-great grandmother of the psalmist, reinforces a parallel with Dante as great-great grandson of Cacciaguida. In fact, in this way, it closes an allusive circle that opened with the first use of the key word, 'cantor', in *Paradiso*, namely in canto 18.51, where Cacciaguida is called 'tra i cantor del cielo artista', preparing the reference to David two cantos later. Finally, to my specific purposes, the first use of the word in the poem as a whole, and the only instance outside the *Paradiso*, is Stazio's reference to

⁷¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, II. 426–27.

⁷² Kirkpatrick, *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradiso*, p. 416.

⁷³ Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 276.

⁷⁴ The three occasions are *Par.*, xx. 38–39; *Par.*, xxv. 72; *Par.*, xxxii. 11–12. See Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, p. 276.

⁷⁵ Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, p. 277.

⁷⁶ Ascoli, 'Blinding the Cyclops', p. 164, n. 73.

Virgilio as ‘cantor dei bucolici carmi’ (*Purgatorio* 22.57; noted by Barolini, 276), forging a proleptic link to David as shepherd-poet and, not incidentally, stressing the pastoral associations with this highest, yet humblest, type of song.⁷⁷

Ascoli’s observations strengthen the claim that Dante’s ‘decem [...] vascula’ were intended to be *Paradiso* xv–xxv, because in these cantos Dante draws together his vocation as a poet with Cacciaguida’s divine sanction. Dante incorporates a defence of his poem on both theological and literary grounds by associating himself with the psalmist in vocabulary that first appears in the poem to describe Virgil (‘cantor’), and crucially not Virgil as author of the *Aeneid*, but Virgil as an author of eclogues (‘dei bucolici carmi’).

Paradiso xxiv and xxv can be understood as the culmination of Dante’s response to del Virgilio because it is here that he is examined on the Christian virtues of faith and hope, virtues which he may well have had reason to rely upon throughout his exile. Moreover, as Theresa Federici argues, Dante’s ability to hope is shown to be in part dependent upon his willingness to move once and for all beyond the classical authors encountered in *Inferno* iv:

Paradiso 25 is set in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, where the pilgrim undergoes an examination on the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. Before St James begins to examine Dante on the virtue of hope, special attention is drawn to the exceptional nature of Dante’s hope. Beatrice announces that ‘[l]a Chiesa militante alcun figliuolo / non ha con più speranza’ (52–53) [...] As confirmation of this, Dante responds to St James: ‘Spene’, diss’io, ‘è uno attender certo / de la Gloria futura, il qual produce, grazia divina e precedente merto’ (67–69) [...] The classical authors cannot bring hope to Dante. They do not know God, and they remain in Limbo, ‘senza speme’ (*Inf.* 4. 42).⁷⁸

By emphasising his proximity to David, Dante is able to become ‘God’s *auctor*, whose vernacular language and style can most effectively transmit His Word’, and, for Federici, ‘Dante’s use of the Psalms within the *Commedia* plays an important role in creating this identity.’⁷⁹ Indeed, in *Paradiso* xxv, Dante demonstrates quite emphatically his willingness to prioritize the vernacular over Latin. In this canto, as we have noted, Dante quotes Psalm 9. 11 in Italian, “‘Sperino in te’ [...] “color che sanno il nome tuo”” (ll. 73–74), and just over twenty lines later, as Federici notices, the ‘Latin version of the psalm is sung [...] by the whole of Heaven, congratulating Dante on his answer’: “‘Sperent in te’” di sopr’ a noi s’udi’ (l. 98). Kevin Brownlee argues that ‘[n]ot only does the Italian citation of Psalm 9:11 precede the Latin in Dante’s text, but it also is given in its entirety — in contrast to the abbreviated (even fragmentary) Latin citation of the same verse’. ‘It is as if’, as Brownlee suggests, ‘the Latin were (paradoxically) presented as a “translation” of the Italian’.⁸⁰ For Brownlee, Dante’s

⁷⁷ Ascoli, ‘Blinding the Cyclops’, p. 164, n. 73.

⁷⁸ Theresa Federici, ‘Dante’s Davidic Journey: From Sinner to God’s Scribe’, in *Dante’s ‘Commedia’: Theology as Poetry*, ed. by Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 199–200.

⁷⁹ Federici, ‘Dante’s Davidic Journey’, p. 203.

⁸⁰ Brownlee, ‘Why the Angels Speak Italian: Dante as Vernacular “Poeta” in *Paradiso* 25’, *Poetics Today*, 5.3 (1984), 597–610 (p. 608).

use of the vernacular is 'linked to [his] explicit and definitive self-presentation as *theologus*',⁸¹ but in the light of the above arguments, it can also be understood as part of his rejection of del Virgilio's arguments.

Upon receiving Dante's eclogue, del Virgilio 'develops' the exchange 'within the requirements of the form', responding to Dante with an eclogue of his own.⁸² Nevertheless, it is possible that del Virgilio perceived the challenge regarding his knowledge of Virgil — within the first ten lines of his reply he includes figures derived from Virgil's eclogues (Nisa and Alexis)⁸³ — and perhaps he realised that he had overstepped the mark, for he declines, as Martin McLaughlin notes, to mention further Dante's use of the vernacular.⁸⁴ And yet, it is also likely that Dante's promised section of the *Paradiso* had not arrived by the time del Virgilio replied. He clearly does not understand any better Dante's reasons for writing in the vernacular and he refers to Dante's poems as 'promised', implying that they are yet to arrive: 'I have come to the milking pail: what if I were to send as many full vessels to him as Tityrus himself has promised me?'⁸⁵ Nevertheless, del Virgilio expresses delight that Dante has decided to write in Latin, describing the moment when he heard 'the song that Tityrus was singing beneath the shade of the Adriatic shore' and praising the uniqueness of Dante's eclogue,⁸⁶ which is particularly evident to one familiar with the poetic landscape.⁸⁷ Del Virgilio's praise for Dante's poetic achievements climaxes in his claim that Dante is not only Virgil's heir but rather may be the man himself reincarnated, if Pythagoras' teaching of transmigration of the soul is to be believed.⁸⁸ This praise may seem in accordance with Dante's implicit ambition in the *Comedy* to outstrip Virgil, but del Virgilio actually misinterprets the cause for praise, ignoring the question of vernacular writing and rejoicing in the fact that, as he puts it in his epitaph for Dante, 'At the end he was singing pastoral songs on the Pierian pipes'.⁸⁹

Del Virgilio is, however, closer to the mark in perceiving that praise may be what Dante wants to hear, not least in light of his exile from Florence. In his first epistle to Dante, he identifies fame as the ultimate goal of any poet, asking Dante 'but rather, I beg you, summon utterance that might bring you fame, and with your vatic song be generous to both sides alike' (i.e. to both the learned and ignorant),⁹⁰ before warning that 'if fame brings you joy, you will not be content to be restricted to a narrow confine, nor to be elevated by the judgement of the vulgar people'.⁹¹ In Dante's response Tityrus takes this up, telling his companion Meliboeus that fame is of no importance,⁹² yet this comment immediately precedes a startling expression of

⁸¹ Brownlee, 'Why the Angels Speak Italian', p. 599.

⁸² Velli, 'Tityrus Redivivus', p. 70.

⁸³ *Ecl.*, III. 8.

⁸⁴ Martin McLaughlin, 'Latin and Vernacular from Dante to the Age of Lorenzo (1321–c.1500)', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, II, 612.

⁸⁵ *Ecl.*, III. 94–95: 'Ad mulctrae venit: si tot mandabimus illi | vascula quot nobis promisit Tityrus ipse?'

⁸⁶ *Ecl.*, III. 11: 'litoris Adriaci resonantem Tityron umbra'.

⁸⁷ *Ecl.*, III. 18–21.

⁸⁸ *Ecl.*, III. 34–35.

⁸⁹ 'Pascua Pieriis demum resonabat avenis', in *La corrispondenza poetica di Dante Alighieri e Giovanni del Virgilio*, ed. by Ettore Bolisani and Manara Valgimigli (Florence: Olschki, 1963), p. 78.

⁹⁰ *Ecl.*, I. 23–24: 'at, precor, ore cie que te distinguere possint | carmine vatisono, sorti comunis utrique'.

⁹¹ *Ecl.*, I. 33–34: '[s]i te fama iuvat, parvo te limite septum | non contentus eris, nec vulgo iudice tolli'.

⁹² *Ecl.*, II. 36–37.

anger — ‘indignatio’⁹³ — during which Tityrus laments his exile and states his desire to wait until he returns to Florence in order to receive the laurel wreath.⁹⁴ Del Virgilio has clearly touched a nerve. As we have seen, Dante attempts to explain his present circumstances in the *Paradiso* by placing them within the context of his divinely sanctioned mission and allowing Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* xvii to elucidate Brunetto Latini’s prophecy from *Inferno* xv:

Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
lo scendere e ’l salir per l’altrui scale. (*Par.*, xvii. 58–60)

The pain of exile, as well as the failure of his native city to recognize his achievements, is obvious enough for del Virgilio to offer Dante a new home, surrounded by admirers in Bologna. As Villa suggests, Dante’s rejection of this offer is finally and emphatically expressed at the beginning of *Paradiso* xxv in which he imagines his divinely sanctioned ‘poema sacro’ facilitating his return to Florence as a ‘poeta’, where ‘in sul fonte | del mio battesimo prenderò ’l cappello’ (l. 7–9).⁹⁵ However, rather than seeing this canto as the beginning of Dante’s response to del Virgilio (as both Villa and Pertile do),⁹⁶ it is better understood as the conclusion of Dante’s ‘decem [. . .] vascula’, and so a final rejection of del Virgilio’s offer of sanctuary and worldly fame. Fittingly, just before his examination on hope by St James, Dante decides to persevere with his vernacular masterpiece, a work he felt undoubtedly warranted the laurel wreath, and which he hoped, one day, might overcome ‘la crudeltà che fuor mi serra | del bello ovile ov’io dormi’ agnello’ (*Par.*, xxv. 4–5).

Dante’s rejection of del Virgilio’s solution is a reaffirmation of his Florentine roots and it is coupled in *Paradiso* xxi and xxii with an increased emphasis on the smallness and limitations of the earth from the perspective of heaven. In *Paradiso* xxi, Peter Damian corrects Dante’s desire to understand the mystery of predestination (‘predestinata’: l. 77), pointing out the limits of mortal, intellectual inquiry:

però che sì s’innoltra ne lo abisso
de l’eterno statuto quel che chiedi,
che da ogni creata vista è scisso.
E al mondo mortal, quando tu riedi,
questo rapporta, sì che non presuma
a tanto segno più mover li piedi. (*Par.*, xxi . 94–99)

Dante’s acknowledgement of human intellectual overreaching is a familiar theme by this stage of the *Comedy*, indeed arguably it is Ulysses’s desire to become ‘[...] del mondo esperto | e de li vizi umani e del valore’ (*Inf.*, xxvi. 98–99) at the expense of his familial relationships that leads him to shipwreck. There is perhaps an extra irony (and appropriateness) in the possibility that Dante is writing with del Virgilio, as academic and university professor, partially in mind. By *Paradiso* xxii, Dante is told by Beatrice to look down, ‘e vedi quanto mondo | sotto li piedi già esser ti fei’

⁹³ *Ecl.*, ii. 38.

⁹⁴ *Ecl.*, ii. 42–44.

⁹⁵ See Villa, ‘Il problema dello stile umile’, pp. 148–49.

⁹⁶ See note 3.

(ll. 128–29). Dante does so, and he tells us ‘ch’io sorrisi del suo vil sembiante’ (l. 135). Dante is finally able to set aside earthly matters, to reject del Virgilio’s offer of fame and comfort on earth, to state, ‘consiglio per migliore approbo | che l’ha per meno’ (ll. 136–37).

Giuseppe Mazzotta has claimed that Dante ‘acts on the world by being outside of it’.⁹⁷ Participation in the world remains essential to Dante’s poetic vocation, and, in his first eclogue to del Virgilio, he reprimands his correspondent for ignoring contemporary social, political, and ethical issues. Tityrus mocks Mopsus’s choice of occupation in contrast to those who learn law (‘iura doceri’), and he couples this with a sarcastic description of the world that Mopsus inhabits and the power of his poetry.⁹⁸ Tityrus refers to Mopsus’s home from which he can happily contemplate the works of gods and men,⁹⁹ and ironically reports that Mopsus’s music can calm nature, tame wild lions, and change the course of rivers.¹⁰⁰ This second point is a reference to Orpheus, the poet-civilizer who was said to have tamed the beasts and made the trees and rocks move. Barański claims that throughout his *œuvre*,

Dante deliberately restricted Orpheus’s standing to that of the poet-musician who had acted as a civilising and ethical agent — an interpretation which was derived from the story of the marvellous sway achieved by the Thracian over nature thanks to the wondrous strains of his music.¹⁰¹

By turning to the figure of Orpheus at this moment, Dante suggests that del Virgilio fails to play an active role in the world around him, while at the same time he claims by implication that his own poetry fulfils precisely such a social function: del Virgilio is a failed Orpheus while Dante alone is the new Orpheus, the poet-theologian able to change the world through his writing. And here, once more, Dante merges the classical and the Christian, for as Ascoli reminds us, ‘because of his descent into and return from Hell’, Orpheus was ‘often treated as a *figura Christi* in medieval allegorizations’.¹⁰²

However, as much as the *Comedy* claims a conversational authority to engage with history, there are also suggestions in Dante’s writing that this process is not simply one way. For Barański, the allegorical and the historical collide right from the outset of the poem: ‘Coll’arrivo di Virgilio, non solo figura storica ma, nei panni dell’Adiuvante, anche personaggio della visione d’oltretomba, si può riconoscere il momento nel testo in cui la *fabula* del viaggio allegorico si scontra colla *historia*’.¹⁰³ Ascoli has explored the ways in which Dante responds poetically to political reality,

⁹⁷ Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the ‘Divine Comedy’* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 138.

⁹⁸ *Ecl.*, II. 28–33.

⁹⁹ *Ecl.*, II. 18–19.

¹⁰⁰ *Ecl.*, II. 20–23.

¹⁰¹ Zygmunt G. Barański, ‘Notes on Dante and the Myth of Orpheus’, in *Dante Mito e Poesia*, ed. by Michelangelo Picone and Tatiana Crivelli (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 1997), pp. 133–54 (p. 138).

¹⁰² Albert Russell Ascoli, ‘Dante and Allegory’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. by Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 133. See also John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

¹⁰³ Zygmunt G. Barański, ‘Allegoria, storia e letteratura nella *Commedia*’, in *Dante e le forme dell’allegoresi*, ed. by Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1987), pp. 79–97 (p. 89).

examining in particular Dante's complex relation to Emperor Frederick II. In doing so, he observes the discrepancies between material relating to Frederick in Dante's *Convivio*, and similar arguments from which Frederick seems to be excised in the *Monarchia*.¹⁰⁴ Ascoli claims that these

elements cannot be subjected to the palinode because they are, at base, neither an unmitigated fiction nor a pure concept of Dante's — instead they are *history* — or rather they are the historical significance of Frederick as it has pressed itself upon Dante and expressed itself in his writings.¹⁰⁵

Accordingly, when Nicholas Boyle suggests that the '*Divine Comedy* is neither the representation of a timeless ideal nor a self-contained fiction but a part of the process of history',¹⁰⁶ we should be aware that such participation necessitates a responsiveness on Dante's part. In other words, although Dante's cantos may not have arrived in time to answer del Virgilio's questions, they were written at least partially in response to his criticisms, and this helps us to understand the *Comedy* as a text constantly in dialogue with external factors rather than as the hermetically sealed product of divine inspiration that Dante may at times suggest it to be.

Exile from Florence may have allowed Dante to assume a position beyond petty factionalism but the pressure of precisely such factionalism, whether political or literary, informed the content of his poem. Barański traces Dante's understanding of Orpheus as a poet-civilizer in both the *Convivio* (II. i. 15–26) and *Inferno* IV back to Horace in the *Ars poetica*,¹⁰⁷ and it is appropriate that Dante's carefully controlled presentation of Orpheus, as mediated through Horace, should come to mind when responding to del Virgilio's literary criticism. As Barański explains, Horace was Dante's *magister*, 'his supreme, probably exclusive, authority on all matters relating to literary theory'.¹⁰⁸ We may detect a trace of vulnerability in this turn to Horace, and if we do then it was precisely such vulnerability that Dante sought to compensate for in the Cacciaguida cantos of the *Paradiso*. Claire Honess contends that Cacciaguida's language, in both its stylistic range and plurilingualism, provides 'Dante with an important model for the poem which his ancestor here instructs him to write'.¹⁰⁹ However, Honess's statement can be supplied with an additional nuance: Cacciaguida provides Dante with an important model precisely because Dante uses his ancestor's theological unassailability to justify his poetic experimentation. That such theological security was not available to Dante when writing the eclogues further explains why he intended his full response to del Virgilio's criticisms to be found in the *Paradiso*.

¹⁰⁴ Albert Russell Ascoli, 'Palinode and History in the Oeuvre of Dante', in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 23–50 (pp. 32–33).

¹⁰⁵ Ascoli, 'Palinode', p. 36. Picone ('Dante and the Classics', p. 67) notices a similar tension in the *Comedy* between Dante's poetic model, that is, 'the fiction of Virgil', and 'the historical truth of Lucan, to which Dante turns in order to represent the degraded reality of contemporary politics'.

¹⁰⁶ Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now?: Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 293.

¹⁰⁷ Horace, *Horace on Poetry: The 'Ars poetica'*, ed. by Charles O. Brink (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 69, ll. 391–96. See also Brink's notes on these lines, pp. 386–89.

¹⁰⁸ Barański, 'Notes', p. 143.

¹⁰⁹ Claire Honess, *From Florence to the Heavenly City: The Poetry of Citizenship in Dante* (London: Legenda, 2006), p. 163.

Having attended to the relationship between the eclogues and the *Paradiso* in terms of argumentation, it also seems plausible that there is a point of contact in terms of poetic technique. Here again, the figure of Orpheus is important. As Barański explains,

beginning in the classical era and continuing right through the Middle Ages, the story of Orpheus taming the beasts and causing the rocks and trees to move was not interpreted as a moral allegory but as a poetic and metaphorical rendering of a key moment in the history of civilization.¹¹⁰

In other words, the account of Orpheus taming the beasts in Horace's *Ars poetica* is a sublimation of historical fact into metaphor,¹¹¹ or as Dante puts it immediately before mentioning Orpheus in the *Convivio*, 'una veritate ascosa sotto bella menzogna' (*Con.* II. i. 16–17). For Dante, Orpheus was a historical figure, and the poetic element in the story lies in the reference to the beasts and rocks, not the contribution made by the poet himself.¹¹²

Ascoli reminds us that in choosing to respond to del Virgilio in an eclogue, Dante was turning to a form commonly associated with 'topical, and especially political, allegory'.¹¹³ Early in Dante's second eclogue, Tityrus' companion Alphisiboeus (Fiduccio dei Milotti) identifies the danger to Tityrus' life by asserting that he is amazed that Mopsus finds the land of the Cyclops pleasing.¹¹⁴ The Cyclops is later identified as Polyphemus, the mythical son of Poseidon who features in both Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Alphisiboeus goes on to mention explicitly the bloody stories of both Galatea and Achaemenides in order to emphasize the brutality of the Cyclops.¹¹⁵ Ascoli explains that, within the context of Dante's allegory, Polyphemus has most often, and most convincingly, been identified as Fulcieri da Calboli, 'a fierce persecutor of the Ghibellines and Florentine Whites as *podestà* of Florence in 1303', who 'took over the governorship of Bologna in 1321', that is, during 'the period when the *Eclogue* is supposed to have been composed'.¹¹⁶ In this sense, Honess misreads the eclogues when she suggests that, as with particular images in the *Comedy*, they reflect 'the countryside's detachment from the practical political environment in which Dante had been involved'.¹¹⁷ In Polyphemus, we have a threatening, historical figure transformed into myth through Dante's poetry.

¹¹⁰ Barański, 'Notes', p. 150.

¹¹¹ Horace, *Ars poetica*, ed. by Brink, p. 69, ll. 391–96.

¹¹² Barański argues that by associating Orpheus in *Inferno* IV with Cicero, Linus, and Seneca, 'three figures who had long been seen as great social and moral educators', Dante counted Orpheus not only as a historical figure but as one of 'the first philosophers who were almost poet theologians'. Barański, 'Notes', p. 148.

¹¹³ Ascoli, 'Blinding the Cyclops', p. 166, n. 82.

¹¹⁴ *Ecl.*, IV. 24–27: 'finds [sc. Mopsus] pleasure in the arid rocks of the Cyclops under Etna'.

¹¹⁵ *Ecl.*, IV. 76–83. Galatea appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, XIII. 740–895, while Achaemenides, like Polyphemus, situates the eclogue at a juncture between the Homeric and the Virgilian. We discover in Virgil (*Aeneid*, III. 613–54) that Achaemenides was marooned on Sicily when Odysseus fled Polyphemus, until Aeneas arrived and took him to Italy.

¹¹⁶ Polyphemus has also occasionally been associated with Robert of Sicily (1277–1343), the ruler of Bologna who, as leader of the Guelf party in Italy, had opposed the reign of Emperor Henry VII (c. 1275–1313), and who had also sentenced Dante to death, if he were ever to come into his power. See Ascoli, 'Blinding the Cyclops', p. 170, n. 97. Other scholars engaged with this debate include Reggio, *Le egloghe di Dante*, pp. 35–47, and Raffa, 'Dante's Mocking Pastoral Muse', pp. 272–73.

¹¹⁷ Honess, *From Florence to the Heavenly City*, p. 159.

In *Paradiso* xv one finds a comparable process, although in this case it is the city of Florence that is transformed into poetic fiction.¹¹⁸ In this canto, Cacciaguیدا describes the Florence of his birth, claiming that while ‘dentro da la cerchia antica’, Florence ‘si stava in pace, sobria e pudica’ (ll. 97–99). He goes on to argue that at this time there was no spatial excess within the city:

Non avea case di famiglia vòte;
non v'era giunto ancor Sardanapalo
a mostrar ciò che 'n camera si puote. (*Par.*, xv. 106–08)

Every house had a ‘famiglia’ inside it, and there were no mansions greater than the needs of a household. Moreover, there was also a sense of moral discipline, conveyed by Cacciaguیدا through the reference to the ‘terza e nona’ and elaborated upon in the following tercet:

Non avea catenella, non corona,
non gonne contigiate, non cintura
che fosse a veder più che la persona. (ll. 100–02)

The city (personified as a lady) did not adorn herself excessively; rather she was similar to ‘la donna’ of Bellincion Berti who is described later in the canto as coming from her mirror ‘sanza 'l viso dipinto’ (l. 114). This description is a transformation of the historical past into a poetic utopia through which Dante can suggest particular flaws in contemporary society.

Martellotti associates the bucolic with three key elements: a low style, dialogic form, and use of allegory.¹¹⁹ Consequently, it is not shocking that Dante transforms a historical figure into myth in his eclogues: the nature of the form encouraged precisely such mythical sublimation. Similarly, the presence in *Paradiso* of a utopian description of a past society (used to reprimand the contemporary world) is hardly surprising. Rather, the subtlety of the poetic technique shared by both the *Comedy* and the eclogues is the way in which Dante combines the process of poetic sublimation with a polyphonic, dramatic quality. This brings the *Comedy* much closer to Virgilian pastoral than we might initially expect, although, as we have seen, the description of Virgil in *Purgatorio* xxii as the ‘cantor de’ buccolici carmi’ (l. 57), combined with Dante’s later association in the *Paradiso* of the term ‘cantor’ with both himself and the prophet David, clearly suggest, to use Ascoli’s phrase, the *Comedy*’s ‘pastoral associations’.¹²⁰

In the case of the exchange between Dante and del Virgilio, Lorenzini surmises that the ‘carattere drammatico di questi componimenti bastava a persuadere i loro autori a usare lo stile bucolico’.¹²¹ Martellotti notes that:

¹¹⁸ This process of poetic sublimation is perhaps one way of understanding the relationship between poetry and truth in the *Paradiso* as a whole. Beatrice explains in *Paradiso* iv that what Dante sees is not the truth but instead a demonstration (or representation) of that truth so that he can, as much as possible, understand it (*Par.*, iv. 34–45).

¹¹⁹ Martellotti, ‘La riscoperta dello stile bucolico’, pp. 91–106.

¹²⁰ Ascoli, ‘Blinding the Cyclops’, p. 165, n. 73.

¹²¹ Lorenzini, p. 4.

[d]ue delle tre egloghe, quelle precisamente che la tradizione attribuisce a Dante, si risolvono nella narrazione di un dialogo: un dialogo dunque, che, servendo di risposta al discorso di una persona che sta fuori di esso, si inserisce come una battuta in un soprastante colloquio.¹²²

In Martellotti's view, the low style of bucolic literature is connected to 'la tendenza alla forma dialogica', while '[q]uasi tutte le egloghe di Virgilio sono dialogate'.¹²³ Newman argues that Dante's 'ability to rediscover' Virgil's eclogues is 'surprising', and to an extent involved reading against the critical climate of his day.¹²⁴ While issues of chronology raise complexities here, it may be in precisely this sense that Dante's reading of Virgil inspired the *Comedy*; and one might speculate whether it was not by reading closely Virgil's eclogues that Dante gained or reinforced his interest in polyphonic dialogue: as Paolo de Ventura asserts, 'riportando con precisione le parole degli altri, ci immette [sc. Dante] in un mondo dove alla polifonia delle voci si accompagna innanzitutto la varietà plurilinguistica delle varie favelle'.¹²⁵

Certainly, Dante makes excellent use of such a dialogic tendency in *Paradiso* xv–xvii. De Ventura argues that '[d]a un punto di vista testuale, il trittico di Cacciaguida compendia l'estensione stilistica dell'intero poema'.¹²⁶ By allowing Cacciaguida to articulate his poetic sanction, Dante avails himself of the unassailable, 'eschatological-prophetic' perspective of Paradise.¹²⁷ It is Cacciaguida who articulates Dante's responses to del Virgilio's criticisms, and it is Cacciaguida who praises the virtue of the past, consequently allowing Dante to condemn the present decline in social morality. Moreover, while Martellotti is correct to see the 'forma dialogica' as inherent to bucolic writing, this was a technique that Dante refined throughout the course of the first two *cantiche*. As such, although Dante's emphasis on polyphony may have been in part inspired by Virgil's eclogues, one way in which the writing of the *Comedy* can be seen to influence his correspondence with del Virgilio is in the skill with which he was able to exploit the polyphonic nature of the eclogue form.

This is particularly apparent in Dante's second eclogue. Up until this point he has been able to defend his poetic experimentation by combining a playful tone with an emphasis on his Virgilian credentials. However, when inviting him to Bologna, del Virgilio urges Dante not to be afraid ('et nostros timeas ne') and places him in a difficult position by asking outright, 'Will you not trust yourself to me, who loves you?'.¹²⁸ This is perhaps further evidence of the scholar's lack of worldly wisdom, and the result is that Dante must find a way to assure his admirer that he trusts him, while simultaneously emphasizing the fact that he cannot — and will not — come to Bologna. Dante manages this by relying on Alpheisiboeus to articulate the danger of such a visit: 'O fortunate old man, do not trust false favour, but have pity on the

¹²² Martellotti, 'Dalla tenzone al carme bucolico', p. 82.

¹²³ Martellotti, 'La riscoperta dello stile bucolico', p. 94.

¹²⁴ Newman, p. 260.

¹²⁵ Paolo de Ventura, *Dramma e dialogo nella Commedia di Dante: il linguaggio della mimesi per un resoconto dall'aldilà* (Naples: Liguori, 2007), p. 112.

¹²⁶ De Ventura, p. 127.

¹²⁷ Ascoli, 'Palinode', p. 38.

¹²⁸ *Ecl.*, III, 76: '[n]on ipse michi te fidis amanti?'

Dryads of this place and on your flocks.¹²⁹ While Tityrus merely claims that he would go and see Mopsus, ‘if I were not afraid of you, Polyphemus’,¹³⁰ it is Alpheisboeus who emphasizes the brutality of Polyphemus by referring to the bloody stories of Galatea and Achaemenides.¹³¹

The effect of mentioning these stories is, of course, to emphasize Fulcieri’s brutality through mythic association, but the fact that it is Alpheisboeus who articulates this brutality means that all that is required of Tityrus at the end of the eclogue is to smile in agreement: ‘Tityrus, smiling and in complete agreement, receives in silence the words of the great pupil (or nursling) of the flock.’¹³² Moreover, Dante’s emphasis on polyphony is also a possible explanation for the otherwise strange, final lines of the second eclogue in which it transpires that ‘Iolas’ has been hiding nearby and ‘told it to all of us’.¹³³ In these final moments, Dante suddenly and rather unexpectedly draws our attention to the anonymous narrator (‘nobis’), who is, in turn, relaying the conversation to Mopsus: ‘He made the tale for us, and we, Mopsus, for you.’¹³⁴ Tityrus’s conversation with Alpheisboeus has gone through two intermediary mouths before reaching the ears of Mopsus and as a result could hardly be less confrontational.¹³⁵

Tityrus’s smile at the conclusion of this eclogue may demonstrate Dante’s agreement with Alpheisboeus’s specific arguments regarding a possible visit to Bologna, but it can also be seen to indicate satisfaction on Dante’s part at the conclusion of the exchange as a whole. Across both the *Paradiso* and the eclogues, Dante has managed to answer each of del Virgilio’s criticisms. He has emphatically demonstrated his Virgilian credentials, shown his poetic skill in both languages and also offered a defence of the vernacular. By attending to the relationship between the *Comedy* and the eclogues we are able to appreciate the subtlety of Dante’s poetic techniques while also showing that even in the final months of his life, as he neared the completion of his great work, Dante had lost none of his determination to engage with those ‘miseri lassi’ who are ‘de la mente infermi’ and so put their faith in backwards steps (*Purg.*, x. 121–23). In *Paradiso* xvii, Dante is ordered by Cacciaguida to abandon ‘ogne menzogna’ (l. 127) and to make his vision known to the world (‘tutta tua vision fa manifesta’: l. 128). While he is never quite able to set aside ‘ogne menzogna’, he certainly succeeds in revealing his vision, and the ‘decem [...] vascula’ referred to in the first of his eclogues to Giovanni del Virgilio were intended to support, defend, and nuance that vision.

¹²⁹ *Ecl.*, iv. 55–56: ‘fortunate senex, falso ne crede favori, | et Driadum miserere loci pecorumque tuorum’.

¹³⁰ *Ecl.*, iv. 75: ‘ni te, Polypheme, timerem’.

¹³¹ *Ecl.*, iv. 76–83.

¹³² *Ecl.*, iv. 88–89: ‘Tityrus arridens et tota mente secundus | verba gregis magni tacitus concepit alumni’.

¹³³ *Ecl.*, iv. 96: ‘retulit omnia nobis’.

¹³⁴ *Ecl.*, iv. 97: ‘ille quidem nobis; et nos tibi, Mopse, poymus’.

¹³⁵ Ascoli notes that ‘No completely satisfactory interpretive explanation has yet been offered for the curious way in which the poem ends’, suggesting that ‘[o]ne possible reading is that the final lines were added after Dante’s death so that the sequence could be closed and the poem sent on to del Virgilio’, in Ascoli, ‘Blinding the Cyclops’, p. 169, n. 94.