

Article

“And Lo, As Luke Sets Down for Us”: Dante’s Re-Imagining of the Emmaus Story in *Purgatorio* XXIX–XXXIII

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Abstract: This essay will suggest that Dante’s journey through the earthly paradise in the *Purgatorio* is a figural representation of the journey of Cleopas and the unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus in *Luke* 24. By making several references to the *Gospel of Luke*, Dante seems to be setting the stage for the reader to understand his own pilgrimage through the Garden of Eden as a retelling of the Emmaus story in the context of the Church Triumphant. Indeed, reading *Luke* 24 alongside Cantos XXIX–XXXI of the *Purgatorio* helps students to unpack the complex images of Dante’s experience in light of the themes present in the Emmaus story. For example, the concealment of Beatrice’s face and the gradual unveiling of her beauty mirrors Christ’s gradual revelation of his nature to Cleopas and the unnamed disciple. Cleopas and his companion also walk away from the promise of God revealed in Christ by leaving Jerusalem, just as Dante “took himself” from Beatrice and “set his steps upon an untrue way” (XXX 125, 130). In developing these and other parallels as well as elaborating on their significance for the latter cantos of the *Purgatorio*, this essay will attempt to establish a pedagogical approach to Books XXIX–XXX that draws on students’ recollections of the familiar Gospel text of Emmaus, which Dante clearly intends (among others) as a resource for appreciating his vision of an essential passage in Christian life.

Keywords: Dante; Beatrice; *Purgatorio*; *Gospel of Luke*; Emmaus; *figura*; Christ; Eric Auerbach; pedagogy

1. Introduction

Students in a Great Books Colloquium often find the latter books of the *Purgatorio* to be difficult on a number of levels. This is expected as Dante’s experience in the earthly paradise is described in complex and layered imagery, which is meant to depict the path of his soul from its triumph over the will to the higher challenges of faith meeting understanding. However, beginning in Canto XXI, Dante the poet provides a window through which the reader can interpret the pilgrim’s journey in the third and final part of the *cantica*. The story of Emmaus is presented as a simile for the appearance of Statius to Dante and Virgil in Canto XXI. The poet writes:

And lo, as Luke sets down for us that Christ,
Just risen from the cave that was his sepulcher,
Revealed himself to two He walked with on the road
There appeared a shade, coming up behind us.¹ (XXI 7–9)

¹ All citations from the *Purgatorio* are taken from the translation by Robert and Jean Hollander. See (Alighieri 2003).

This reference to Emmaus in *Luke* 24 is followed by two other references to his Gospel and his person in Canto XXIX. In lines 85–87, during the procession of the Church Triumphant, the elders sing a phrase from the Magnificat in *Luke* 1:28: “Blessed are you/ among the daughters of Adam/ and blessed is your loveliness forever!” (XXIX 85–87). In lines 136–38, Luke is the only one of the four evangelists to be highlighted in his guise as a physician and author of the *Acts of the Apostles* in this case.

In the following sections, I will present a figurative interpretation of *Purgatorio* XXIX–XXXI, suggesting that the pilgrim Dante’s experience in the garden of Eden is meant to be read in light of Luke’s description of Cleopas and the unnamed apostle encountering Jesus. Jesus himself was veiled in the guise of a stranger who is only gradually but nevertheless fully revealed in a stunning moment of recognition that is similar to that of the *figura Christi* of Beatrice. Indeed, reading *Luke* 24 alongside Cantos XXIX–XXXI of the *Purgatorio* can aid students in unpacking a number of the complex images of Dante’s experience while simultaneously engaging them in a significant form of European medieval interpretation. In suggesting a figurative approach to Cantos XXIX–XXXI, I am following Eric Auerbach, who argues that Dante’s “figural system” in the *Commedia* was firmly rooted in the medieval allegorical tradition. In Auerbach’s view, the figural interpretation “combines two events, causally and chronologically remote from each other, by attributing to them a meaning common to both” (Auerbach 2014b, p. 116).

2. Beatrice as *Figura Christi*

The setting of both the appearance of Jesus and that of Beatrice are attended by a series of images that serve to map one story onto the other. Cleopas and the unnamed disciple who accompanies him on the road to Emmaus together form a *figura* of the figure of Dante the pilgrim who has “cast aside all hope of going forward” according to Beatrice in a similar way to the apostles (XXXI 26–27). Cleopas and his companion have left Jerusalem, disappointed and disillusioned, and have abandoned “the way” on the very day that the promise of Jesus’ entire life was being fulfilled (the day of the resurrection). As a *figura Christi* from whom Dante has likewise strayed, Beatrice arrives on the scene following a grave loss as Dante had informed her that “Virgil had departed . . . leaving us bereft” (XXX 49). In turning away from Jerusalem following the death and burial of Christ, the two disciples walk away from the promise of God revealed in Christ. They tell the stranger: “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Lk 24:2 New Revised Standard Version Catholic edition). Dante likewise “took himself” from Beatrice and “set his steps upon an untrue way” (XXX 125, 130). In her chastisement of Dante, Beatrice even refers to her own burial, telling Dante “just how my buried flesh should have directed you to quite a different place” (XXXI 47–48).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the two texts is the veiling of the Christ figure. Jesus draws near to the two disciples and walks with them but he is a stranger to them as “their eyes were prevented from recognizing him” (Lk 24:16). If Beatrice is indeed a *figura Christi*, the poet’s repeated use of the word veil in addition to the images of Dante’s restricted sight and “the hidden force that came from her” (XXX 38) suggest that being veiled is an important aspect of the Christological aura that surrounds her. Dante describes his first glimpse of Beatrice as being similar to watching the obscure face of the sun rising in “tempering mist.” She appears within a “cloud of blossoms,” wearing “a veil of white” and Dante tells us, “I could not see her with my eyes” (XXX 25–37). In *Luke* 24, both disciples are prevented from seeing the true nature of Christ until they have been properly chided by the veiled Christ, who declares, “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Lk 24:25–27).

In chastising Dante for failing to realize that his desire for her should have led him to Christ, Beatrice turns “the point of her words” (XXXI 2) on him just as Jesus rebuked Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. Finding him weeping after the departure of Virgil, Beatrice

remarks, “there is another sword to make you weep” (XXX 57). In alternating passages in *Purgatorio* XXX, she both accuses Dante of betraying his potential and interprets her earlier role in his life:

He sank so low that every instrument
 For his salvation now fell short—
 Except to see souls in perdition.
 And so I visited the threshold of the dead
 And, weeping, offered up my prayers
 To the one who has conducted him thus far. (XXX 136–41)

Beatrice’s pointed and lengthy chastisement of Dante provides a gloss to Christ’s rebuke of Cleopas and his companion, who are called “slow of heart to believe.” What, we may ask, is signified by the juxtaposition of slowness of heart with belief in Christ as the Son of God? Although Luke’s text is brief, it does suggest that belief requires more than a trembling sense of awe in someone’s presence, i.e., more than simply feeling, as Dante does upon first seeing the veiled Beatrice, “the overwhelming power of that ancient love” (XXX 39).

The slowness of heart of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is a *figura* of the torpidity of Dante the pilgrim and indeed all Christian pilgrims, who fail to understand that the recognition of their true good is an affair of the heart. True recognition (*epignosko*) of the person of Christ occurs in the context of the disciple’s recollection of their love for Christ. “Were not our hearts burning within us when he was . . . opening the scriptures to us” (Lk 24:32), they recall and it is this burning of heart that leads them to offer hospitality to the stranger. As the veiled Christ walks “ahead as if he were going on” (Lk 24:28), the two apostles ask him to stay with them because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over. Given the fact that Jesus is depicted at the table far more in Luke’s Gospel than any other part of the bible, (eight times, including the Last Supper), it makes sense that the disciples would recognize the stranger as the resurrected Christ in the very moment “he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them” (Lk 24:30). Luke writes, “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him (*epignosan*)” (Lk 24:31).

3. The Horizon of *Epignosko*

Although the two texts clearly point to one another, they also point to something beyond. As Auerbach notes:

In figural understanding, . . . meaning must at all times be sought vertically, from above and events are understood individually, not as part of an unbroken sequence, but as torn apart from one another and always waiting for a third thing that has been promised but has not yet come to pass. (Auerbach 2014a, p. 100)

The lengthy delay in the unveiling of Beatrice signifies both the slowness of heart of Dante and the promise inherent in Luke’s notion of *epignosko* or deep and penetrating recognition of the person of Christ. In the *Purgatorio*, this authentic recognition occurs when the griffin, who symbolizes Christ in its two natures, shines forth in the eyes of Beatrice and is seen by Dante in a mirror. However, this unveiling is more than a recognition of Beatrice as the revelation of Christ as it simultaneously opens out onto a third plane, namely a further horizon. In gazing at the nature of God incarnate, Dante is both satiated and left yearning for more. The poet describes the moment in this manner:

While my soul, filled with wonder and with joy
 Tasted the food that, satisfying in itself,
 Yet for itself creates a greater craving. (XXXI 127–29)

Focusing on a figurative interpretation, the pilgrim's craving suggests that even the revelation of Christ in Beatrice is a provisional event, namely a *figura* of the eternal reality that, while always already fulfilled perfectly in God, is a matter of hope and anticipation for us. The concealment of Beatrice's face and the gradual unveiling of her beauty points to Christ's gradual revelation of his nature to Cleopas and the unnamed disciple and vice versa.

The fact that Dante's recognition of Christ in Beatrice takes place within a procession of the Church Triumphant, which Hollander tells us "exists as an ideal out of time and can only be gathered once history is done" (XXXII, n.109–60, p. 734), is also significant. Such placement provides evidence that the two texts constitute what Auerbach would call "a historically real prophecy or *figura*, of a part of a divine reality that will occur in the future and that will at that point be perfected in all its immediacy" (Auerbach 2014a, p. 110). While the ideal of the Church Triumphant has already been fulfilled in God through God's providence, it exists beyond time and as an historical event, it is veiled and obscure and will remain so until we see Christ face to face. Dante underscores the timeless ideal of the Church Triumphant by noting its ascent into the Empyrean in *Purgatorio* XXXII after the first pageant (89–90). This divinely ordered pageant is juxtaposed with a second pageant, which amounts to an allegory of what we might term "the Church Devastated" in historical times. This corrupt pageant ends with a "disheveled harlot," namely the Church, "casting provocative glances this way and that" (XXXII 150) while being dragged away by a giant, Phillip the IV of France, whom Dante viewed as being responsible for moving the papacy from Rome to Avignon. In the final image of the *Purgatorio*, the penitent Dante is cleansed in the river of Lethe and his power to access good memories is restored in the waters of Eunoe. These events of the pilgrim's own journey are again placed within the context of a promised eternal reality as Dante states that he has been "made pure and prepared to rise up to the stars" (XXXIII 145), thereby reminding his readers of the divine order in which all souls and events inhabit the place assigned to them.

There is one final way in which the story of Emmaus prefigures the final canto of the *Purgatorio*. Toward the end of *Luke* 24, the narrator says of Jesus:

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (Lk 24:29)

Once again, *Luke* prefigures the *Purgatorio*. The message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins is embodied in the experience of Dante as there is no doubt of his repentance:

The nettle of remorse so stung me then
That whatever else had lured me most to loving
Had now become for me more hateful. (XXXI 82–84)

The ritual of bathing in the river Lethe, which erases his memory of sin—or at least most of it as Beatrice has pierced him with the arrow of remorse—mimics the forgiveness of sins that Jesus preached, thereby returning Dante to a state of innocence. After this, Matilda immerses him in the river Eunoe in order to revive his power to recall good memories. In a similar manner to Jesus asking the disciples to proclaim forgiveness and the repentance of sins to which they have been witnesses, Beatrice, as a *figura Christi*, commissions Dante to mark her words: "set these words down for those/who live the life that is a race to death" (XXXIII 53–54).

Sensing that a petrified Dante is "confounded" by her words, Beatrice softens her command, telling Dante that if nothing else has been made clear, he has "seen the moral sense of the justice of God" (XXXIII 71):

I wish that, if not written, then sketched out
 You carry what I've said inside you, just as
 A pilgrim brings his staff back wreathed with pain. (XXXIII 76–78)

What does it mean to bear witness to Christ's message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins? The doubling that has marked the encounter between the two texts merges into divine mystery in the final words of both texts, opening into the promised but not yet eternal reality. Ultimately, Dante finds this in Beatrice's message as her "longed-for words/soar up so far beyond my sight/the more it strives the more it cannot reach them" (XXXIII 82–84). Once again, this suggests that Dante's experience has been mediated to the *Purgatorio* from within the horizon of *Luke 24*. Similar to Jesus in the final passages of *Luke*, Dante the poet withdraws before this final figuring of God's divine order and is revealed as the mysterious witness to God's mercy that has enfolded him throughout the *Commedia*. It is notable that he undertakes this withdrawal in his role as poet, writing, "since all the sheets/readied for this second canticle are full, /The curb of art lets me proceed no further" (XXXIII 139–41). However, as a pilgrim, he comes away remade, "as are new plants/ renewed with new-sprung leaves" (XXXIII 143–44). This promise of renewal also marks the end of *Luke's Gospel* as well as Jesus not only withdraws from the disciples but is "carried up into heaven" just as Dante will be carried up by his Christ figure, Beatrice.

4. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I have suggested in this present essay that Dante clearly intends *Luke 24* as one resource (among many others) for appreciating his vision of an essential passage in Christian life. In developing the above parallels and elaborating on their significance for the latter cantos of the *Purgatorio*, this pedagogical approach to Books XXIX–XXXIII draws on individual students' recollection of the familiar Gospel text detailing the journey to Emmaus. In addition, it brings them into the Medieval European world of interpretation. This becomes a dance of figuring and prefiguring that gives meaning to the text of *Purgatorio* while simultaneously preserving that mystery of slowness of heart giving way to conversion, repentance and forgiveness, which forms the soul of the entire poem. In coming to appreciate how Dante incorporates a range of Gospel *figuras*, narrative patterns and eternally present yet historically receding theological horizons, students of the *Purgatorio* may just be encouraged to ask what Dante's narrative process—layered as it may be—could mean for their own recognition of Christ.

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