
Metaphors of Nutrition in *Inferno I*: Dante's *Veltro* and the Philosophical Appetite

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ABSTRACT

In the first instance of dramatic action in Dante's *Comedy*, the protagonist is forced by the sudden appearance, in rapid succession, of three wild beasts to abandon his ascent of the sunny hill that offered a haven from the terrors of the dark wood. It is a sequence whose allegorical significance continues to elude the poem's commentators. And woven into this allegory of the three beasts and the prophecy of the hound that is the wolf's nemesis are several metaphors of eating which, it seems fair to assume, are an integral component of the episode's encrypted meaning. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the appetites of the lion, the wolf, and the salvific figure of the "veltro" to be seen as related in some coherent pattern. This essay, however, will seek to show that these patterns of meaning are far more complex and more revealing of Dante's purposes in writing the *Comedy* than has generally been thought.

KEYWORDS avarice, Dante's *Inferno*, metaphors of nutrition, narrative

In the first canto of Dante's *Comedy*, as the protagonist is making his way from the darkness of the wood towards the summit of the sunny hill that promises some form of salvation, he is forced to abandon his ascent by the sudden appearance, in rapid succession, of three wild beasts. The threat posed to the pilgrim's spiritual resolve by the first of these, the *lonza* ("leopard" or "lynx"), is overcome, but the lion and the wolf that come in its wake are not so easily shaken off.

This one [the lion] seemed to advance towards me
with head held high and a ravenous hunger,
so that the air seemed to tremble.

And a wolf, which every desire
seemed to carry in its leanness,
and had already caused many to live in misery.¹ (*Inferno* I.46-51)

Both the lion and the wolf are characterized in terms of uncontrollable appetites, but it is on the second of these two beasts that I shall focus as I explore how, both in this first canto of the *Inferno* and throughout Dante's oeuvre, notions of appetite, expressed through metaphors of nutrition, are crucial to an understanding of the poet's philosophical purposes in writing the *Comedy*. At the heart of my argument is a set of supposedly eccentric readings of the infamous *veltro* riddle, the oldest of which dates back to the sixteenth century. The upshot of these interpretations, I will suggest, is that the *veltro* must be a symbol for the poem itself. If Dante's commentators have misread the riddle, it was in part because they saw in it an expression of the poet's contempt for material greed, for *cupiditas*. However, despite their misapprehensions, the early commentators' intuition that the *veltro* symbolized an answer to the dangers of *cupiditas* was not in itself mistaken. For, I shall argue at last, to see the poem itself as the nemesis of the wolf is simply to recognize how closely aligned the opening of the poem is with Dante's discussion in the *Convivio*, his unfinished philosophical treatise, of the difference between the avaricious and rational appetites.

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¹ The English translations from the *Comedy* are my own and follow the syntax of the Italian as closely as possible.

The wolf is generally interpreted as an embodiment of the sin of avarice. It may well also contain some more specific historical reference, and some commentators have seen an allusion to a pope.² But whether or not Dante had a particular individual in his sights, it is undoubtedly in the image of the *lupa* that we first encounter the theme of cupidity in the *Comedy*, which as we shall see had already featured prominently among the concerns of the *Convivio*. This much seems obvious from the explanation soon to be proffered by Virgil, where he warns that the wolf

is by nature so malicious and evil,
that it can never sate its appetites,
and after the meal is hungrier than before. (*Inferno* I.97-99)

Dante's analysis of why the *lupa* is the cause of such misery, though typically compressed, could hardly be clearer. It is in the lines that follow that the difficulties arise.

Many are the creatures it couples with,
And still more will there be, until the boarhound
Comes that will make it die in agony.

This one will be fed by neither earth nor pewter,
But by wisdom, love, and virtue,
And its birth will be between felt and felt.

(Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia,
e più saranno ancora, infin che 'l veltro
verrà, che la farà morir con doglia.

Questi non ciberà terra né peltro,
ma sapienza, amore e virtute,
e sua nazion sarà tra feltro e feltro.)³ (*Inferno* I.97-105)

² This interpretation features frequently from the nineteenth century, beginning with the commentary of Gabriele Rossetti (1826-27). In his edition of 1867, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow notes that the she-wolf signifies "Avarice; and politically the Court of Rome, or temporal power of the Popes." See also the commentaries of Nicolò Tommaseo (1837), Raffaello Andreoli (1856), Gregorio di Siena (1867), Hermann Oelsner (1899), John S. Carroll (1904), Manfredi Porena (1946-48), and Giuseppe Giacalone (1968), all of which can be consulted on the website of the Dartmouth Dante Project (<https://dante.dartmouth.edu/>).

³ All quotations from the *Comedy* in the original Italian are from Petrocchi's edition.

The fact that the translation of the passage cited above is my own is of little consequence except in the case of the final *terzina*, where the rendering of line 103 in particular is idiosyncratic. In the first instance, this is because I have taken the word “peltro” literally, adopting the interpretation found in the 1570 commentary of Ludovico Castelvetro, where he observes that the “vessels commonly used to serve food . . . are made either of terracotta or pewter, and the same is true when feeding dogs. . . .” In the standard reading of the line, which has gone mostly unchallenged since the Trecento, Dante’s “ciberà,” the third-person future tense of the verb “cibare,” is taken to mean “eat” or “feed on.” However, in every other occurrence of “cibare” used in this sense by Dante, the construction employed is “cibarsi di,” literally “to feed oneself with,” and “cibare” is always used with the preposition “di.”⁴ This is because “cibare” actually means “to feed” in the sense of “to administer food to,” and the commentary tradition recognized that this creates a problem for the standard reading. In response, it has been pointed out, for instance, that “cibare” used non-reflexively to mean “eat” can be found in Jacopone da Todi,⁵ who died in 1306, although doubt has been cast on the attribution of at least one of the poems in question (Ageno; Mancini). One nineteenth-century commentator asserted that “cibare” meaning “to eat” is a dialectal usage still found in modern Tuscan.⁶ But let us assume for the moment, as Castelvetro did, that Dante is employing this verb according to the grammatical conventions.

Almost every other edition of the *Comedy* follows in the footsteps of the Trecento commentators, exemplified by Jacopo della Lana, who identified in the *veltro* a figure “who will love wisdom, love and virtue rather than temporal possessions of dominion over territory or money.”⁷ My reasons for preferring Castelvetro’s reading are discussed at length in a forthcoming article, but they have to do in part with the fact that there is historically very little that might justify the insistence we find in the commentary tradition that “pewter” is synonymous with money.⁸

⁴ See, for example: *Inferno* VIII.106-07: “e lo spirito lasso / conforta e ciba di speranza buona” (“and comfort and nourish your tired spirit with good hope”); *Paradiso* X.25: “Messo t’ho innanzi: omai per te ti ciba” (“I have placed it before you, now feed yourself”); or *Paradiso* XXIV.1-2: “O sodalizio eletto a la gran cena / del Benedetto Agnello, il qual vi ciba . . .” (“O fellowship of those chosen to sit at the great table of the blessed Lamb, who feeds you . . .”).

⁵ See Iacopone 305: *Sopr’onne lingua Amore*, line 345: “Tu cibi Veretate” (“You are nourished by truth”).

⁶ See Tommaseo’s commentary. All commentaries to the *Comedy* cited without page references are taken from the Dartmouth Dante Project (<https://dante.dartmouth.edu/>).

⁷ See Scarabelli’s commentary. For an example of this interpretation in a modern commentary, see the Bosco and Reggio edition: “The metaphor in this passage, however, is clear enough: territorial possessions are represented by the land (‘terra’) and riches by pewter (an alloy of lead and tin, which here evidently signifies ‘money’).”

⁸ This point was authoritatively made by Crivelli. See Ruzicka.

In this sense at least, there can be little doubt that the reading advanced by Castelvetro is more plausible. His subsequent deduction that the *veltro* must be a “signore”—a lord nourished by “spiritual food”—is, however, more problematic. Rather, as I will argue in greater depth elsewhere, Castelvetro’s gloss to line 103 should, I think, be combined with a more recent, though similarly historicist, approach to line 105, which sees an allusion to the craft of papermaking in Virgil’s declaration that the *veltro* “will be born between felt and felt.”⁹ This results in a riddle which tells us that the *veltro* is not a real boarhound, fed by bowls of terracotta or pewter, but a boarhound made of paper, and so very probably a symbol for the poem itself. This might seem rebarbatively strange, but this impression is mitigated considerably when we recall that the bestowal of animacy on inanimate domestic objects is a mainstay of the traditional genre of the riddle.¹⁰

In the traditional reading, the riddle is all about a contrast between the insatiable appetite of the wolf and the *veltro* who will covet “neither land nor wealth.” Plainly, if the Trecento commentators were so confident in their intuition that “terra” and “peltro” must stand for possession of territory and material riches, it was because of the moral logic they saw in the antagonism between the *lupa* and the *veltro*. Their eminently reasonable assumption that the *veltro* represents some personage or agency which is as resistant to the lure of gold as those wedded to the wolf are seduced by it seems warranted not least by the fact that the problem of cupidity is one of the most enduring and important moral concerns in Dante’s writing.¹¹ It is, as Beatrice will lament in *Paradiso* XXVII, the sin in which all of humanity finds itself drowning.

“Oh cupidity, in which mortals have sunk
So deep, that none have the power
To drag their gaze out of your waves!” (*Paradiso* XXVII.121-23)

⁹ Among recent rediscoveries of this possibility, see Baldan; Rattazzi Papka; and Reynolds 119-20.

¹⁰ See, again, Ruzicka. On this feature of riddles, see, for example, Warner: “The riddles in the medieval Exeter Book give voice to commonplace things and everyday natural phenomena—eggs and snow and stars and millstones and quill pens. Like the magic tablecloth that always spreads out a meal in a fairytale, or the dancing teapots and teacups and candelabra in a Disney cartoon, the subjects of riddles have a life of their own.” Warner here is reviewing Cook, who notes, significantly, on her first page that “Literary studies of riddles are few and far between” (xi). Undoubtedly, this is one of the reasons why Dante scholars have never considered that it might be profitable to view the *veltro* *terzina* in the context of the riddle genre. More significant still is the fact that the riddle tradition is predominantly popular and oral, and thus falls beyond the perimeters of the “high” literary culture with which Dante scholarship has always been concerned. On this attitude, see the crucial comments in Barolini 48.

¹¹ Recent work on the theme of avarice in Dante includes Armour (see especially 14-21); Black; Hoffmann; Klettke; O’Ferrall; Pertile, “L’avarizia”; and Scott, “Avarice in Dante.”

That we might expect an expression of the antagonism between two radically opposed kinds of appetite to feature in the poem's prologue is also suggested by the way just such a contrast unfolds through the imagery and metaphors of nutrition spanning the *Commedia*. Dante's depiction of Hell reflects the conventions of a medieval iconography that envisioned the damned as bodies in the process of being eaten rather than nourished.¹² Christianity imagined the Devil as "the devouring maw of the earth" (Neumann).¹³ And so, too, in the *Inferno*, we encounter expressions that draw on this conception of Hell as a "toothed gullet": for example, the "foce" of *Inferno* XIII, line 96 and XXIII, line 129, from the Latin "fauces" (jaws); the "prima valle / . . . e color che 'n sé assanna" ("the first valley / . . . and those in its jaws") (XVIII.98-99); Vanni Fucci's descent into "questa gola fera" ("this fierce gullet") (XXIV.123); and Cocytus as the "fondo che divora / Lucifero con Guida" ("the pit which devours Lucifer and Judas") (XXXI.142-43).¹⁴ The repeated references in the circles of fraud to digestion, excretion, and diseases thought to result from malfunction of the digestive tract suggest an association between the lower regions of Hell and the human belly (Durling, "Io son venuto" 117-19; "Deceit and Digestion" 65).¹⁵ In the *Inferno*, Dante employs digestion and mastication as a "basic image for evil and its punishment" (Bynum, *Resurrection* 299, 308). There is mastication but no nutrition, however, because in Hell there can be no development. In its lowermost reaches, Dante's Hell is not a place of fire but a frozen realm, where the damned are locked in ice.

In the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, however, human beings participate once again in the natural processes of growth and change.¹⁶ As the Virgin Mary takes

¹² Bynum points out that the ancient association of the grave and the underworld beyond with a fear of being devoured was common to both Jewish and Roman cultures (*Resurrection* 53). On this ancient motif in Dante's *Inferno*, see also Ledda, "Cibi d'inferno" and "Il fiero pasto," especially p. 149 and p. 154.

¹³ Camille includes a photograph of part of an entrance to a twelfth-century church which exemplifies the traditional iconographical motif of Hell as "a great gaping maw" (48, 57). See also Pouchelle, who notes how intense fears of being devoured in the *Golden Legend* are a reflection of the common conception of the "mouth of hell" (303).

¹⁴ The phrases cited are noted by De Rooy (68-69) in a discussion of cannibalism in the *Inferno*.

¹⁵ These ideas are reiterated in Durling and Martinez's edition of the *Comedy* (552, 576). Also of interest here is the way in which, in his dramatic production of the first canticle, Sanguineti employed a stage in the shape of a human figure designed to reflect the text's evocation of "the closed space of the body" (12-13).

¹⁶ Bynum views Dante's vision of heaven as an example of the way in which late thirteenth-century writers overcame the fear of natural processes that had characterized resurrection imagery in the previous century (*Resurrection* 320-21). She argues that the *Comedy* reflects the enthusiasm of philosophers like Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Giles of Rome for biological processes such as procreation and nutrition. This view corresponds closely to that of Boyde where he assembles numerous passages from the *Paradiso* to demonstrate Dante's inclination to embrace "the goodness of all the processes in the natural order" (265-69, 291).

leave of the souls gathered in the heaven of Fixed Stars, the flames which encase the blessed stretch up towards her like infants reaching out for the maternal breast (*Paradiso* XXIII.121-26). In a similar vein, the pilgrim's eyes "drink" in the River of Light with the urgent thirst of a child waking late for its feed (*Paradiso* XXX.82-87). One of the scriptural sources of such language is acknowledged in the reference to the tale of the Samaritan woman narrated in John 4.7-26, and the notion of a "sete natural" ("natural thirst") quenched only by the waters of divine grace (*Purgatorio* XXI.1-3).¹⁷ On this theme, Lino Pertile writes that "in keeping with Biblical and mystical tradition the desire for the absent God can only be conceived and expressed in terms of the most instinctive and physical human experiences."¹⁸ As Caroline Bynum notes, "almost all medieval mystics sometimes speak of 'tasting God' and the verb itself is a kind of bridge between the physical act of eating the host and the inner experience of resting in the sweetness ("fruitio") of mystical union." She quotes the twelfth-century William of St Thierry (d. 1148): "gustare, hoc est intelligere."¹⁹ The nutritional imagery of the *Paradiso* is an expression of the desire of the rational soul for knowledge of its origin in God.²⁰ The denizens of Hell, however, are in a state in which it is no longer possible to be nourished by an increase in understanding of God and the world that lies beyond the self. Like the *lupa*, the damned soul hungers for that which cannot nourish it, so is itself devoured.

It would indeed seem natural, then, for the relationship between the wolf and the *veltro* to reflect the representation in the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso* of the contrasting ways in which the human soul strives, and sometimes fails, to nourish itself. But now that we have abandoned the traditional reading of line 103 as an allusion to the hound's refusal of territory and gold, does this mean we have to conclude that the *veltro* is no longer the antithesis of the *lupa* that we once thought it was? Yet Virgil is quite explicit in prophesying that the hound will destroy the wolf. In what way, then, might it be equipped to accomplish this? In what follows, I will argue that the enigmatic hound, if it is a symbol for the poem, should still be understood predominantly as a force that resists the ravenous

¹⁷ See the catalogue of alimentary metaphors in Naumann, as well as Durling, "Deceit and Digestion" 61-63, for the analogy of "digesting" truth as food in St Paul and Seneca, whose Epistle 84, it is argued, is the source for passages such as *Paradiso* X.22-25.

¹⁸ Pertile, "*Paradiso*" 156.

¹⁹ Bynum, *Holy Feast* 151. Ellmann suggests that the analogy between digestion and cognition is so "integral to Western thought" that it has become "ingrained into our very language" in phrases such as "food for thought" or "voracious reading" (29). See also Lakoff and Johnson 46-47 for a brief list of metaphors in which "ideas are food"; and 211-13 for a discussion of an "objectivist" analysis of the metaphor of "digesting an idea."

²⁰ See *Convivio* IV.xii.14.

greed of the wolf. And to grasp why this is so, we need to turn to the *Convivio*. That Dante's philosophical treatise should be the place to look for an exposition of his understanding of human appetites is suggested not least by the work's title, usually translated into English as "Banquet." As Robin Kirkpatrick observes, Dante "sustains this initial metaphor throughout the work, arguing in a variety of ways that the true 'food' for the human mind to feed upon is wisdom, knowledge and rectitude" (Kirkpatrick 103).²¹

In Book IV of the *Convivio*, in the course of an argument that seeks to show that nobility cannot be equated with the possession of wealth, Dante examines the origins of the avaricious appetite. We fall prey to avarice, he argues, because riches hold out the false promise of being able to satisfy our every desire. Dante is thinking perhaps of gold coins, and specifically of the Florin he would much later condemn as the "cursed flower" ("il maladetto fiore") in the *Paradiso* (XI.130), when he warns of how the "false traitors always promise that, once amassed to some particular amount, they will completely satisfy whoever amasses them" (IV.xii.4).²² Yet rather than quenching every thirst ("ogni sete"), they in fact provoke the burning thirst of a fever (IV.xii.5). In what follows, Dante undertakes to explain how the desire for knowledge differs from the desire for riches. It might be argued, he begins, that in the acquisition of both, the desire of the acquirer continues to increase (IV.xii.11).²³ However, in the acquisition of knowledge, desire is not assuaged in the same way as in the accumulation of wealth. And here Dante offers at first an extended comparison of a human life as a pilgrimage on which a route must be found between two cities (IV.xii.18-19).

In reality, we lose our way on this path by going in the wrong direction, just as we do on earthly roads. For, just as from one city to another there is necessarily a best and most direct route, and another that leads only farther away from it (namely the one which goes in the opposite direction), as well as many others, among which some move away and some move toward, so in human life there are a number of roads, among which one is the truest and another the most false, and some less false or less true. And just as we see that

²¹ See also Kirkpatrick 100-05 for an indispensable analysis of how, for Dante, *cupiditas* "represents a perversion of the rational appetite," and a discussion of how the chapters of the *Convivio* we shall now consider are vital to a proper understanding of Dante's philosophical and moral concerns in the *Comedy*.

²² The *Convivio* is cited in the original from the "National Edition" edited by Ageno. English translations are, on the whole, taken from the Frisardi edition.

²³ "Some specious caviler of the truth might say that, if riches are imperfect and therefore base because, in acquiring them, desire for them increases, knowledge must be imperfect and base, since in acquiring it, desire for it always increases; as when Seneca says: 'If I had one foot in the grave, I would still wish to learn.'"

the way which leads straight to the city both satisfies desire and provides rest after much effort, and the one which leads in the opposite direction never satisfies and cannot ever provide rest, so it happens in life: the good wayfarer reaches his destination and rests; the one who has gone astray never arrives, while his straining mind always gazes on ahead with ravenous eyes.

The “good wayfarer” (“buon camminatore”) recognizes which path will lead most directly to his destination, and on reaching the goal will achieve his desire and find the repose of fulfillment. Conversely, the “one who goes astray” will fail to attain his goal and so forever stumble on down the wrong road, staring longingly into the distance “with ravenous eyes” (“con occhi gulosi”).

This passage is somewhat perplexing as it is not until the next chapter that we discover what constitutes the straight path. As Dante admits, the analogy of the “good wayfarer” only “clears the way for an answer” (IV.xii.20). What distinguishes the true path from all the others is in fact a particular kind of appetite, an appetite which is philosophical rather than avaricious. The desire for knowledge, Dante continues, is not a desire always for the same thing, but for a succession of different things. If a philosopher desires to understand a particular natural phenomenon, once that phenomenon has been grasped, attention then turns to the next object of study. Hence, “the desire for knowledge is not always one but is many—when one is completed, another comes along—so that, properly speaking, its expansion is not growth but a progression . . .” (IV.xiii.1). The desire for riches, on the other hand, is always a desire for one and the same thing (“sempre pur uno”). It is an appetite that results neither in succession nor the attainment of any goal (“si che nulla successione quivi si vede, e per nullo termine”). The difference for Dante between the acquisition of knowledge and the amassing of coins is that—and he opts here to use the German “mark” (“marche”)—in the case of the latter, desiring a hundred marks is not, as John Frisardi puts it, “qualitatively” different from desiring a thousand. It is always a desire for one and the same thing. Those hundred coins are simply a fraction of the larger sum, in the same way that a segment of a straight line describes the same vector of movement as the whole line. To be able to point to the cause of some natural phenomenon, however, is qualitatively different from understanding the nature of that causal agent (IV.xiii.3-4).²⁴

²⁴ “And if an opponent were to argue that just as desiring to know the principles of natural things is one desire, and desiring to know what they are is another, likewise desiring a hundred marks is one desire and desiring a thousand marks another, my answer is that this is not true: for a hundred is part of a thousand and is related to it like a line segment to an entire line, the length of which is traversed in a single motion, and in

The twists and turns of Dante's visual imagination in these two chapters of *Convivio* IV leave us with the proposition that what we might have thought of as the single straight line of the path of life is in fact composed of an infinite variety of lines oriented in different directions. Yet there is no contradiction. The principal metaphor of the "good wayfarer" retains its rhetorical efficacy. It is also, moreover, an autobiographical motive that has a crucial relevance to our reading of *Inferno* I. The image returns us to the passage early in the *Convivio* in which Dante laments his condition as an itinerant mendicant, traveling the roads of Italy (I.iii.4). More strikingly, though, the metaphor of the "path" ("cammino") that is "the most direct route" (leads "dirittissimo") to the desired city is also clearly an anticipation of the opening lines of the *Comedy*, where the protagonist, as he travels on the "path of our life" ("cammin di nostra vita"), finds that he has lost the "straight path" ("diritta via"). The "good wayfarer" sequence is almost cartographic, working through the imaginary topography of a landscape unfolding between and around two cities. But Dante's interest in Chapter XIII in vectors and lines, might encourage us to see the "diritta via" metaphor too as geometrical. Read against the *Convivio* passage, the ravening hunger of the wolf turns out to have a spatial aspect. The *lupa* has no path. Its purpose is simply to block and then reverse the steady advance of the ascending pilgrim. But there is no geometry underpinning its motion as there is in the case of the pilgrim, whose hunger for a vision of God propels him to climb step by step towards the summit of the hill, to search for a path.

One consequence of arguing that the *veltro* is the *Comedy* itself is that it brings into sharper focus the question of how we are to read line 104. If the *veltro* is some figure like Cangrande della Scala, the line becomes mere encomium with no real significance insofar as we care little about the precise nature of the wisdom, love, and virtue Dante has in mind. Conversely, the "poema-veltro" solution to the riddle imparts far more traction to the line, encouraging us to reflect more deeply on the "wisdom, love, and virtue."²⁵ We might now, for example, be able to make better use of the observation that Dante's three nouns correspond to the three

which there is no progression and motion is not perfected or completed in any part. But in knowing the principles of natural things, and knowing the *what* of each of them, one is not a part of the other, but they are interrelated like discrete lines, the lengths of which are not traversed in a single motion; rather, when the motion of one is perfected or completed, the motion of the other follows." I have not amended the translation here of "principii" as "principles." The word is also translated thus in two other modern translations. Ryan gives "the principles of physical objects" (155) and Lansing "the principles of natural things" (186), while Wicksteed has "the elements of natural things" (292). I wonder, however, if what Dante means here is rather the more concrete notion of the "origins" or "causes" of phenomena in nature.

²⁵ This label for the hypothesis appears in the title of Bulferetti's essay, which argues that line 105 is an allusion to papermaking.

Persons of the Trinity.²⁶ For Virgil here is surely announcing that God will have a hand in the creation of the poem, prophesying the birth of “the sacred poem to which both heaven and earth have set hand” (“l poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra”) (*Paradiso* XXV.1-2). It must also, of course, be Dante himself as the author of the *Comedy* who will be nourished by wisdom, love, and virtue. The protagonist will have much to absorb from the many individuals he will encounter on the journey, and it is only after that process of intellectual and emotional growth that he will become the poet who writes the *Comedy*. Virgil is telling the protagonist-poet what his pilgrimage will entail, that it will nourish him with these things and that this will subsequently enable him to write the *Comedy*, much as being fed by philosophical texts, the “bread of angels” (“lo pane delli angeli”), in his formative years led him to write the *Convivio* (I.i.7).

At what we might call the metanarrative level, however, if it is Virgil who is uttering the prophecy, it is in part because what is being foretold here is the composition of a narrative, a poem inspired by the Roman poet’s own epic poem *The Aeneid*. The nourishment of Dante the poet by his reading of Latin literature and philosophical texts, along with his love of the vernacular, has already equipped him with what he needs to be the poet of the *Comedy*.²⁷ Within the narrative, the Virgil character is already feeding his poet-disciple with wisdom, as the historical author had done with his poetry. And one of the things he is perhaps eager for the apprentice to understand is that the journey he must now embark upon is one which will come to a “destination” (“termine”). It has a defined end, which is, of course, no less true of the poem, and this for Dante is the value of narrative as a philosophical form. It promises the satisfaction of a process brought to completion, as the desire to amass wealth cannot. In this sense, the force that will eventually triumph over the wolf is indeed the poem itself, through which the reader will learn to cultivate a philosophical appetite. What Dante is doing in the *veltro* riddle is anticipating the novelty of a poem which will offer philosophical sustenance through a narrative, a form which entails a process of constant renewal. Each canto is a discovery of a new experience, an unfolding of new topography and *dramatis personae* that we have not encountered before. Each episode presents the mind with discrete truths, and once these have been grasped, the reader moves on to new themes and images. We follow the lines of the text, which across the span of the poem as a whole constitute the single line

²⁶ See, for example, the Sapegno edition of the *Comedy* (14).

²⁷ On Dante’s love of the vernacular, see *Convivio* I.xii, in which Dante celebrates the “goodness” (“bontade”) of the vernacular and uses the example of the ability of a “veltro” to run to illustrate what he means by a “bontade” which is “proper to a thing.” See also Cestaro 49-76.

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of a continuous narrative. Yet they are also lines of thought, corresponding to the “discrete lines” (“diverse linee”) of the multiple objects of philosophical study (*Convivio* IV.xiii.4). In its embodiment of the poem which will become a vehicle through which to develop the philosophical appetite, the *veltro* becomes an expression of true nobility as Dante had defined it in the treatise.

The time has now come to confess that my meditation here on Dante’s use of metaphor and on the salutary effect that he ascribed to the pursuit of philosophy has skirted around one particular issue that has long loomed large in the minds of Dantists, at least in the modern era. Indeed, it is a question which might perhaps have been addressed at a much earlier stage. Any argument that sets out to map continuities between the *Convivio* and the *Commedia* will have to square at some point with the commonly encountered opinion that the poem represents a repudiation of Dante’s thought in the treatise. For there is a widely held, though also on occasion vigorously contested, view that the relationship between the two works is characterized by a radical *discontinuity*, and that this has to do with an ideological shift in the value Dante attaches to philosophy. Although too complex and extensive to be adequately explored here, this question is germane not only because it is crucial to any attempt to understand the role that Dante accords to philosophy in human lives but also because, in several studies, the discussion has pivoted on his repeated use of an alimentary metaphor, the Biblical topos of the “bread of angels” (“pane delli angeli”).

In the *Convivio*, this expression occurs in the opening paragraphs, where Dante employs the image of a banquet to unfold his purposes to the reader. Beginning, in the wake of Aristotle, with the assertion that all human beings desire knowledge, he laments that only a select few are privileged to sit at the table of the philosophers.²⁸ The vast majority of humanity are excluded from such learning, for reasons which are both “internal and external,” this latter including the demands of “civic and domestic concerns” (“la cura familiare o civile”) and the misfortune of being born in the wrong place (I.i.1-5).

Clearly then, as anyone who reflects upon it can see, few individuals are left over who can achieve the habit desired by all, and nearly numberless are those who are hindered and live forever hungry for this food. O blessed are those few who sit at the meal where the bread of angels is eaten! (*Convivio* I.i.6-7)

²⁸ Ploom notes that the “sapere” in the statement at the beginning of the *Convivio* (“tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere” [all human beings by nature desire to know]) “has a connotation of taste (“sapor”) and smell” (113-14).

Dante's own access to what he here calls "scienza" is also far from untrammelled. Yet, though circumstances have denied him a seat at the banquet of the wise, he is at least in a position to be able to gather some of the crumbs that fall to the floor, and it is from this scattering of material that he will compose his treatise, for the benefit of all those less fortunate than himself. These metaphors in the treatise's prologue can be traced back to quite a number of passages from both the Old and New Testaments, and it is wholly typical of Dante's synthesizing and syncretic tendencies that he should illustrate a train of thought launched in an Aristotelian mode with language drawn from Scripture.²⁹

Both the expression "bread of angels" and the image of scraps falling from the banqueting table recur in the *Paradiso*. In Canto II, Dante addresses those few qualified by their desire to know God, the readers in other words capable of following him as he recounts his journey towards the final vision.

You few who have raised your faces
Since youth for a taste of the bread of angels, on which
We live here, though the hunger is never sated (*Paradiso* II.10-12)

Then, in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, Beatrice intercedes on Dante's behalf in the following speech to the assembled saints:

O fellowship of those chosen to sit at the great feast
of the blessed Lamb, who feeds you
such that your desire is always satisfied,

if by God's grace this man might have some foretaste
of that which falls from your table
before the time prescribed by death

consider his great thirst
and bedew his tongue a little: you drink
forever from that fount from which his thoughts come. (*Paradiso* XXIV.1-9)

One consequence of the parallels that can clearly be drawn between these passages in the *Paradiso* and the opening of the *Convivio* is to see the later vision of the celestial banquet as superseding the conception of philosophical nourishment

²⁹ See, for example, Exodus 16.2-36; Psalms 77.23-24; Wisdom 16.20; Matthew 13.13-21, 15.22-28; Mark 6.30-44; Luke 9.10-17, 16.21; John 6.1-15, 59.

set out in the treatise. For Nicolò Maldina, the crucial distinction between Dante's two uses of the image of the "bread of angels" is that, while in the *Convivio* it is a question of an appetite for knowledge that can be fully assuaged by the study of philosophy, in the *Commedia* the hunger is one which can only be sated by the direct experience of the revealed divinity that awaits in the afterlife (Maldina 154-55). Similarly, Mirko Tavoni has recently shown how Dante's use of the "bread of angels" image in the *Paradiso* returns the expression to its traditional theological context as an allusion to the beatific vision of God, which alone can sate the human being's innate spiritual hunger. And Tavoni, too, like Maldina, observes how this distinction in the way the Scriptural topos is used suggests that it functions in the *Paradiso* as a palinode, retrospectively denying the validity of Dante's celebration in the treatise of the human being's autonomous capacity to attain a state of self-realization through the exercise of reason alone.³⁰ The retheologized vision in the *Paradiso* of the human hunger for "pane delli angeli" is thus one further confirmation of an ideological retraction that many commentators have seen in two well-known episodes in the *Commedia* in which the Dante-character is reprimanded, it has seemed, for some over-zealous attachment to philosophical study. Ultimately, though, Tavoni accepts the view of an earlier generation of scholars who argued that Dante saw no contradiction between philosophy and theology.³¹ If Dante employs the "bread of angels" image in the *Convivio*, it is because it serves to "sacralize" the secular activity of the philosopher and so bestow some kind of coherence on his own identity as an intellectual, an identity which, given that the *Convivio* was unpublished, was personal rather than public (Tavoni 60-61).

At the same time, of course, Dante was always acutely aware of his role as a public intellectual, and it seems appropriate to conclude this essay with what is one of the most memorable, and typically uncompromising, expressions of his sense of the duties incumbent on him in that role. In the Heaven of Mars, the Dante-character encounters his ancestor Cacciaguida, who urges him to see his poem through to completion because of the beneficial effects it will have on his society.

³⁰ For earlier treatments of this topic, see Ransom and O'Brien. For a recent, excellent study of the liturgical context, see also Fioravanti.

³¹ Tavoni refers to Étienne Gilson and Bruno Nardi (59), but see also the important later essay by Scott, "Unfinished *Convivio*," who argues lucidly for the presence in Dante's thought, as in other Christian thinkers, of the "fundamental premise that the truths of religion and philosophy were ultimately compatible" (44). On the crucial importance, in the context of such debates, of not losing sight of Dante's syncretism, see also the two indispensable chapters by Zyg Barański in *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, especially I: 39-43 (on the relation between human reason and divine wisdom); II: 253-65 (on Beatrice's "quella scuola" rebuke in *Purgatorio* XXXIII); and II: 292-98 (on the autonomy of human reason).

Then he replied: “A conscience stained
by shame at one’s own or other’s acts
will feel indeed the sting of your words.

But nonetheless, omitting all falsehood,
Set out your vision whole,
And let them scratch the part that itches.

For if your voice is bitter
At the first taste, vital nourishment
Will it provide, once digested.” (*Paradiso* XVII.124-32)

**Metaphors
of Nutrition
in *Inferno* I**

The most important implication of Virgil’s prophecy of the “veltro,” as we saw, may be the notion that the poem we are about to read is being offered to us as food for the soul. Dante’s aim in the *Commedia* is to nourish his readers, setting them on the path to heaven, but it is a task which, as Cacciaguیدا makes abundantly clear, involves setting us straight here in the earthly life, too.

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**Metaphors
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