
‘*Le penne delle mie ali*’: The Flight of the Poet in Dante’s
Commedia

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Throughout the *Commedia*, the motif of a winged creature ascending upward toward a goal serves as Dante’s principal means of self-presentation on his quest for literary fame.^[1] He associates his guide Virgil as well as other famous writers of epic with the eagle—a royal bird known in the Middle Ages and Renaissance for its ability to soar to great heights. Winged creatures function as Dante the Poet’s signature: they provide him with suitable travel metaphors for his descent into the *Inferno* followed by his ascent up Mount Purgatory toward the beatific vision in Paradise. In the *Inferno* winged creatures that only descend, are relatively static, or use their mouths for perverse rather than salvific ends act as parodic inversions of Dante’s celestial flight and song as a poet. He aligns liars, deceivers, and defrauders with fowl that plummet or with winged monsters that become entrapped so they cannot fly. Lucifer provides the archetype for such prisoners guilty of fraud in the *Inferno*; he falls from grace only to become stuck in ice and has “two mighty wings stretched out, / the size you might expect of this huge bird” (*Inferno* 34.46-47).^[2] Lucifer uses his wings, not to fly, but to keep Cocytus frozen and his mouth, not for sacred poetic delights, but to inflict pain on other defrauders, Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. In this way this infamous monster serves as the polar opposite of the poet on his signature flight to God. In *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* Dante relies on motifs of ascending winged creatures to represent those like himself who write sacred poetry. In these two canticles he also presents himself as a fledgling in a nest under the watchful care of the mother bird Beatrice prior to his mature flight back to his heavenly, poetic origins. Having fulfilled his quest for Christian, literary fame and glory at the end of *Paradiso*, he descends like the winged messenger Hermes to bring the word of the gods to those who read his epic.

In the first canticle of the *Commedia* Dante uses the motif of a winged creature in flight both as a means of self-representation and as a symbol for other poetic authorities as well. In *Inferno* IV, for instance, he praises Virgil or Homer as “the master singer of sublimest verse / who soars above all others like the eagle” (*Inferno* 4. 95-96).^[3] Here he pays homage to his literary forefathers by associating them with soaring eagles at the top of the avian hierarchy, an appropriate symbol for an epic writer wielding the highest poetic authority. While deferring to the authority of his literary predecessors such as Virgil, Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan in *Inferno* IV, Dante also becomes a poetic authority himself; he gains admittance to this elite flock of birds, designating himself as its sixth member—a number symbolic of perfection: “they welcomed me as one of their own group, / so that I numbered sixth among such minds” (*Inferno* 4. 101-102). This Christian poet achieves literary fame, however, not from attempting to soar above his pagan predecessors but by paying tribute to and relying on the guidance of those who have helped to “fledge” his own works.

In *Inferno* V Dante describes lustful sinners in terms of three bird similes that parody and invert the recurring motif of the sacred poet as a winged creature who flies upward toward a goal. In the first simile he compares an unruly mob of the damned, who are driven by the winds of passion “now here, then there, and up and down,” to a flock of starlings that flies in a random, erratic pattern (*Inferno* 5. 43). In contrast to Dante alighting upward to Paradise on the wings of divine eros, the starlings’ impulsive ascending and descending lack a particular end or goal. The flight pattern of these birds, which were noted in the Middle Ages for “their capacity for imitating speech,” depicts the blusterous, mindless nature of lust.^[4] The poet also compares a more regal and dignified number of the lustful to “cranes in flight, chanting their lays, / stretching an endless line in their formation.” (*Inferno* 5. 46-47) Dante indirectly links these birds that are “*cantando lor lai*,” a literary genre made popular by Marie de France, to secular poets. Unlike the mob-like, screeching starlings, the military formation of the cranes in flight illustrates the rigorous, disciplined use of speech associated with the art of poetry.^[5] Dante’s third simile comparing Paolo and Francesca to two doves that “float downward through the air” on “wings” that are “poised and motionless” sets the stage for the entrance of two legendary lovers who were

seduced by a book. (*Inferno* 5. 83-84)^[6] Her subsequent description of love, “*Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende*” (100: “Love, that kindles quick in the gentle heart”) and her repetition of the word “Amor”, in lines 103 and 106, imitates the style of the *stilnovisti* poets that included Guido Guinizelli and perhaps Dante in his youth.^[7] In contrast to Dante the Poet, Francesca uses language intentionally to mislead others. She is guilty of either lying or self-deception when she claims that Paolo first kissed her, reversing the roles of the notorious lovers in *Lancelot du Lac*.^[8] Although Dante the Pilgrim feels pity for Francesca, he matures throughout the *Inferno* by coming to terms with the divine justice of the punishments he witnesses there. Like a dove descending into a flightless prison, Francesca endures a justified fate that is the opposite of the poet’s famous flight to Paradise.

In *Inferno* XVII Dante compares the winged monster Geryon that transports the Pilgrim and Virgil to Lower Hell on his back to a descending falcon, one of a number of avian motifs that provide parodic inversions of Dante’s eventual ascent to God:

As the falcon on the wing for many hours,
 having found no prey, and having seen no signal
 (so that his falconer sighs: “Oh, he falls already”),
 descends, worn out, circling a hundred times
 (instead of swooping down), settling at some distance from
 his master, perched in anger and disdain,
 so Geryon brought us down to the bottom
 at the foot of the jagged cliff, almost against it,
 and once he got our bodies off his back,
 he shot off like a shaft from a bowstring. (*Inferno* 17. 127-36)

Unlike Dante’s upward voyage throughout *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* with the aid of his guides, Virgil, Beatrice, and the Virgin Mary, the hazardous flights of Phaeton and Icarus to whom Dante compares himself during this free fall on Geryon’s back lead to disaster because they disregard their leaders. The Pilgrim compares the fear he experiences on the back of Geryon to that of Phaeton when he “dropped the sun-reins of his father’s chariot / and burned the streak of sky we see today” (*Inferno* 17.107-108). In contrast to Dante the Pilgrim, who clings to Virgil while riding this winged monster, Phaeton falls to his death because he is proud and ignores his father Apollo’s warning against flying alone; this

foolish son believes he is mature enough to act as charioteer of the Sun by himself. The flight of Icarus similarly leads to disaster because this mythical figure also disobeys his paternal guide. After his father Daedalus attaches wings to his body so he can fly, Icarus disregards his advice that he maintain a moderate course over the sea and flies too close to the sun. As a result, he “[felt] his sides unfeathering as the wax began to melt, his father shouting, ‘Wrong, your course is wrong—’” (*Inferno* 17. 110-111). In *Inferno* XXVI, Ulysses also compares his voyage beyond the Pillars of Hercules in defiance of God’s command to the flight of a winged creature: “we made our oars our wings for that mad flight” (*Inferno* 26. 125). Dante the Pilgrim, by contrast, realizes that he cannot continue his divinely-ordained journey without the aid of his male and female leaders. He relies on Virgil as his father-figure and obeys his command that he mount Geryon as “a servant brave before his valorous master” (*Inferno* 17.90).⁹¹ Throughout *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* the Pilgrim similarly depends on the guidance of Beatrice, who “guidò le penne / delle mie ali a così alto volo” (*Paradiso* 25.49-50: “on [his] high flight / had guided every feather of [his] wings”), and then on the Virgin Mary, who empowers the movement of his wings upward toward the beatific vision (*Paradiso* 32.146). His spiritual leaders make his ultimate flight to Paradise successful rather than disastrous, the end result of the ambitious flights of the damned he encounters in the *Inferno*.

In *Inferno* XXII, Dante represents those who commit fraud as winged creatures, like Lucifer, that descend and become entrapped; these winged, infamous creatures function as perverse opposites of the poet on his famous flight upward in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Dante employs the extended simile of a bird fight resulting in physical entrapment to depict the scuffle between Ciampolo, a lawyer guilty of barratry, and two devils, who have hoisted the barrater above the boiling tar with their pitchforks. Prior to this fowl skirmish, Ciampolo drafts a false contract with the devils, Alichino and Calcabrina, in which he promises to summon seven other defrauders from below the pitch for them to torture if they will hide and thereby release him (*Inferno* 22. 100-105). Dante describes Ciampolo as a duck who escapes the gullible devils’ grasp by diving into the tar. Frustrated over losing their prey, the two devils tangle with one another and tumble downward

into the tar themselves. The poet depicts them in terms of a simile of a falcon fighting with a hawk:

...down the sinner dived
 and up the fiend was forced to strain his chest
 like a falcon swooping down on a wild duck:
 the duck dives quickly out of sight, the falcon
 must fly back dejected and defeated.
 In the meantime, Calcabrina, furious,
 also took off, hoping the shade would make it,
 so he could pick a fight with his companion.
 And when he saw the grafter hit the pitch,
 he turned his claws to grapple with his brother,
 and they tangled in mid-air above the ditch;
 but the other was a full-fledged hawk as well
 and used his claws on him, and both of them
 went plunging straight into the boiling pond. (*Inferno* 22.128-141)

The fall of the two devils into the pitch and the subsequent restriction of their ability to move parallels Lucifer's archetypal fall into hell and his entrapment in ice. These two hawk-like devils become "mpaniati" in the tar as if they were ensnared in bird-lime (*Inferno* 22.149). They also become birds baked in a pie when the poet describes them as being "deep-fried within their crusts" (*Inferno* 22.150). This food metaphor anticipates subsequent winged prisoners noted for their cannibalism.

Monstrous birds in the *Inferno* not only prefigure Lucifer by becoming entrapped but also by possessing a degenerate mouth that functions as an oral device for fraud or torture, a parodic inversion of Dante's use of his poetic voice for heavenly goals throughout the *Commedia*. Ugolino, who is guilty of fraudulent treason for engaging in subversive activities against the Ghibellines in Pisa and thereby betraying his country, is yet another example of an infernal bird trapped in a confining space. Dante depicts his prison aptly named the Tower of Hunger where he cannibalized his children as a "mew," which is a cage for falcons and hawks (*Inferno* 33.22).^[10] The poet anticipates cannibalistic figures such as Ugolino, who is gnawing on the brain of Archbishop Ruggeri, followed by teeth-gnashing Lucifer at the nadir of the *Inferno* by comparing the chattering of the sinners' teeth in the icy Ninth Circle to the clapping of a stork's beak:

so these frigid, livid shades were stuck in ice
 up to where a person's shame appears;
 their teeth clicked notes like storks' beaks snapping shut. (*Inferno* 32.34-36)

This image of the stork gains significance in light of Brunetto Latini's observation in his bestiary the *Tresor* that the stork "is a bird without a tongue, 'wherefore they say he does not sing, but claps his beak and makes a great noise'"^[11] and Hugh of St. Victor's claim in his *De Bestiis* that the stork signified "those who with weeping and gnashing of teeth utter with their mouths what they have done ill."^[12] Dante purposely locates the voiceless stork in *Inferno* XXXII to prefigure silent Lucifer, who savagely vents his anger on the three traitors teetering within his mouth. The poet's presentation of infamous Ugolino and Lucifer as winged, yet flightless cannibals provides the ultimate perversion of his own famous flight and song directed upward to God.

Throughout *Purgatorio* Dante undergoes his gradual metamorphosis into a soaring, mature bird that flies with great speed toward its heavenly goal. In *Purgatorio* II he anticipates the time when he, unlike those trapped in the *Inferno*, will be freed from the prison of the body and will need "no oars, no sails, only his wings" to ascend (II, 32). In *Purgatorio* XIX he compares himself to a falcon that upon hearing the call of God, the falconer, prepares for flight: "Like the falcon which looks first to its feet, then turns to the call and stretches forward through the desire for food that draws it there, such I became".^[13] In *Purgatorio* XXIV, Bonagiunta Orbicciana of Lucca, one of the souls of the Gluttonous, further describes the poet as an ascending bird: "I see very clearly how your wings / fly straight behind the dictates of that Love—" (*Purgatorio* 24. 58-59).^[14] In *Purgatorio* XXXI Beatrice playfully scolds Dante for allowing a young girl—presumably herself—to weigh down his wings (*Purgatorio* 31. 58: "*gravar le penne*") and divert him from his celestial quest.

Recalling Dante's comparison of epic poets such as Virgil and Homer to the eagle in *Inferno* IV, he links this winged figure at the top of the avian hierarchy with poets who write sacred lyrics in *Paradiso* XVIII-XX. He describes the dynamic symbol of the eagle in terms of three similes: a domestic falcon eager for flight (*Paradiso* 19.34-36), a stork circling the nest of its young as a symbol of love (*Paradiso* 19.91-93), and a lark

...that soars in spacious skies,
 singing at first, then silent, satisfied,
 rapt by the last sweet notes of its own song,
 so seemed the emblem.... (*Paradiso* 20.73-76)

Together, the eagle, falcon, stork, and lark function as a composite, winged emblem of sacred poets like Dante. In the Middle Ages it was thought that the lark, “like the Psalmist, praises God daily, with a song.”^[15] The poet also establishes an alliance between the eagle and King David, writer of the *Book of Psalms*, who is the prominent soul occupying the focal position within the eye of this celestial bird. In *Paradiso* XX, is description of the eagle’s body in terms of a “*cetra*” (*Paradiso* 20. 22), a lute, and a “*sampogna*” (*Purgatorio* 28. 24, a pipe or flute, further strengthens the connection of this emblem with sacred, lyrical poets such as King David.^[16]

Throughout *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* Dante depicts himself as a fledgling in a nest, a developmental stage that ultimately leads to his mature flight back to his literary as well as heavenly origins. In *Purgatorio* XXV he compares himself to a little stork on the verge of leaving its nest (*Purgatorio* 25. 10-11). The widely recognized cultural association of this nesting bird with pregnancy and the delivery of children is particularly relevant here. In *Purgatorio* XXVIII Beatrice designates Dante as the “*pennuti*” (*Purgatorio* 28. 62), meaning “a full-fledged bird,” in the “*nido*,” or nest of the Earthly Paradise (*Purgatorio* 28. 78). He compares bird song not only to poetry but to art work more generally in the Earthly Paradise by depicting the birds there as “*cantando*” (*Purgatorio* 28. 17), a word derived from the literary term “*canto*,” and as “*operare ogni lor arte*” (15: “practicing their art.”) In *Paradiso* XVIII, Dante compares birds that build nests to poets that construct texts by recounting how God the artist creates birds with the instinct to build:

The One who paints there has no one to guide
 his hand. He guides Himself. It is from Him
 that skill in birds to build their nests is born. (*Paradiso* 18.109-111)

In *Paradiso* XIX Dante presents himself as a stork that looks up with intensity at its mother while in its nest to describe his seeking guidance from Beatrice (*Paradiso* 19. 91-93), and in *Paradiso*

XX, he becomes a fledgling awaiting food in a nine-line simile depicting her as a roosting mother bird (*Paradiso* 20.13-15).

In *Paradiso* Dante transforms his body, mind, and soul into a winged creature in order to experience divine love to which Beatrice leads him. In *Paradiso* X he grows wings himself and advises others who wish to make this heavenly ascent to do the same: “who does not grow the wings to fly up there, / awaits these tidings from the tongueless here” (*Paradiso* 10. 74-75).^[17] In *Paradiso* XV he describes his very desire to reach heaven as winged, “*l’ali al voler mio*” (*Paradiso* 15. 72: “the wings of my desire”) and the human will itself as downy, “*Ma voglia ed argomento ne’ mortali, /... diversamente son pennuti in ali*” (*Paradiso* 15. 79-81: “will and faculty in mortals...are not equally feathered in their wings.”)^[18] In keeping with the conventional depiction of the Neoplatonic lover as a winged figure, Dante adds sensual nuances to his depiction of Beatrice, the mother bird, and of himself as her fledgling in *Paradiso* XXIII.^[19] She peers out from “*l’amate fronde*” (*Paradiso* 23. 1: “the beloved leaves”) and awaits the sun “*con ardente affetto*” (*Paradiso* 23. 8: “with burning love”) while he, watching her, resembles one who is “*disiando*” (*Paradiso* 23. 14), or “moved with desire.”^[20] The sensual dimension of this passage intensifies with his allusion to the legend of Leda and the swan in *Paradiso* XXVII. Dante casts Beatrice as Leda by drawing a parallel between the delight he experiences upon gazing at her face to that of Jupiter in the “*bel nido di Leda*” (*Paradiso* 27. 98):

My mind in love, yearning eternally
to court its lady, now was burning more
than ever to behold the sight of her...
The power which her gaze bestowed on me
snatched me from Leda’s lovely nest, and up
it thrust me into Heaven’s swiftest sphere. (*Paradiso* 27. 88-90 & 97-99)

In *Paradiso* XXXIII, Dante likens the souls in the Celestial Rose to “holy minds created to fly through that height” (*Paradiso* 23. 89-90). In *Paradiso* XXXIII, however, he discovers that the wings that have propelled his ascent to God thus far are insufficient for penetrating into the mystery of the three revolving circles: “but my own wings could not take me so high—” (*Paradiso* 23. 139). Nevertheless, he overcomes his bodily limitations by merging with the divine Bird and intermingling with Truth itself

when he experiences “a great flash of understanding” about the uniting of the human and the Divine in God (*Paradiso* 23. 140-41).

Throughout the *Commedia* Dante presents himself as a winged figure on route to poetic glory and immortality. He thereby fulfills the prophesy of Oderisi of Gubbio, an illuminator of manuscripts, that this Italian poet will be the next bird to nest in the tree of laurel:

So, one Guido takes from the other one
poetic glory; and, already born,
perhaps, is he who'll drive both from fame's nest.
(*Purgatorio* 11. 97-99)

Dante achieves fame as an epic poet in part by returning to the creative nests of prior literary “birds” such as Virgil and Homer for guidance and inspiration. His humbling reliance on the guidance of Virgil, Beatrice, and the Virgin Mary further contributes to his flight on the wings of Pegasus, the emblem of fame, to the heavens. In *Paradiso* XVIII he invokes this flying horse for the inspiration that leads to poetic immortality:

O sacred Muse of Pegasus who gives
glory to men of genius and long life,
as they, through you, give it to realms and towns—
let your light shine on me.... (*Paradiso* 18. 82-85)

After experiencing the beatific vision at the culmination of his epic ascent, this new poet laureate descends once again and thereby assumes the role of Hermes as the winged messenger and mediator between heaven and earth. As the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* illustrate, Dante contributes vitally to the literary tradition of the poet as a winged figure, a motif that reappears in later Renaissance English works by Spenser as well as in Romantic poems by Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth.^[21]

Notes

1. For a discussion of the bird as Spenser’s principal means of self-presentation, see Cheney. Cheney cites several passages from *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* in which Dante, like Spenser, compares

his famous flight to that of a soaring eagle or falcon (Cheney 275). I am grateful to Patrick Cheney, Professor of English at Penn State University, and Mark Musa, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of French and Italian at Indiana University, for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article. Cheney notes our conversation about the artistic significance of the falcon-like Geryon in *Inferno* XVII and argues similarly that he is “a parody of the famous flight” of poets such as Virgil, Dante, and Spenser (Cheney 275).

2. All references to the Italian text of the *Commedia* are from Singleton’s edition, and all translations of Dante are from Musa’s *The Divine Comedy* unless noted otherwise. For the sake of brevity, I cite Dante’s original language only when my argument depends on it.

3. Critics tend to disagree over whether Dante’s simile of the eagle refers to Virgil or Homer. In Mark Musa’s commentary on *Inferno* IV, p. 33, he suggests that “the master singer of sublimest verse” may be Homer “since Dante referred to him in line 87 as ‘leading the three as if he were their master’ and in line 88 as ‘sovereign poet.’” He asserts that this phrase “also makes us think of Virgil” because Dante refers to him in Canto I as “light and honor of the other poets” (Musa 82). Dante’s possible designation of Virgil as the “master singer” also makes sense because the eagle was the symbol of the Roman Empire founded by Virgil’s Aeneas. In *Paradiso* VI Dante associates Virgil with the eagle explicitly when he states that the regal bird followed Virgil’s Aeneas to Rome: “Once Constantine reversed the eagle’s flight, / against the course of Heaven which it pursued / behind that warrior who wed Lavinia” (*Paradiso* 6. 1-3). Singleton argues that the critical debate over whether the eagle in *Inferno* IV refers to an epic poet in particular or to the genre of epic poetry results from the fact that the antecedent of “*che*” in the lines “*quel signor dell’altissimo canto / che sovra li altri com’aquila vola*” (*Inferno* 4. 95-96) could be either “*quel signor*” or “*canto*.” He claims that “the latter seems preferable since ‘altissimo canto’ refers specifically to epic poetry, and not all the poets mentioned wrote epics.” See Singleton, tr. *Inferno*, 2. *Commentary* at 64. Natalino Sapegno identifies “*quel signor*” as Homer in a note that provides a useful summary of the critical

debate generated by the elusive phrase “*quel signor dell’altissimo canto.*” See Sapegno 1: 48.

[4.](#) Ryan 28.

[5.](#) Ryan notes that St. Ambrose in his *Hexameron* argues that cranes frequently exhibit a “military organization” (Ryan 32).

[6.](#) For a discussion of the doves in *Inferno* V and their connection with the idea of “misreading” see Shoaf 44-51.

[7.](#) Freccero 73.

[8.](#) Freccero, “Casella’s Song (*Purg.* 11, 112)”: 118.

[9.](#) Commenting on the comparison Dante draws between himself and Phaeton when describing his descent on Geryon’s back, Kevin Brownlee notes the differences between these two voyagers: “Dante has a guide and Phaeton had none” (Brownlee 137).

[10.](#) “Mew.” sb.2, 1. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

[11.](#) *Tresor* 211-12, as quoted in Holbrook.

[12.](#) *De Bestiis*, I, 42, as quoted in Holbrook at 291.

[13.](#) Sinclair 2: 264.

[14.](#) For a discussion of these key lines see Musa, “Le Ali Di Dante” 367.

[15.](#) Bawcutt 7.

[16.](#) Smith argues that Dante derives his association of the lark with poetry from the Provençal poet Bernart de Ventadorn.

[17.](#) Sinclair 3: 365.

[18.](#) Singleton 3: 169.

[19.](#) For a discussion of the Neoplatonic development of images of winged figures see Hart 136-92.

[20.](#) Sinclair 3: 264.

[21.](#) See not only Cheney, but also Perkins 142.

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