

SINGING FOR DANTE IN 'PURGATORIO' 30-31

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This essay investigates types of sociality enacted through song, as depicted in Dante's Earthly Paradise. The first section of the essay argues that the singing of Psalm 30 (*In te, Domine, speravi*) in *Purgatorio* 30 is a way of enacting a particular mode of compassion. In the second section of the essay I argue that Dante's depiction of Psalm 30—together with his depiction of the antiphon sung in *Purgatorio* 31, the *Asperges me*—invites a devotional response from the reader. The sociality of prayer can involve not only the characters, but also the readers of the *Commedia*. I investigate the liturgical context in which Dante and medieval readers would have known and lived the *Asperges me*. I argue that here, at the end of the narrative of his penitential journey, Dante, with this antiphon, invites the reader to her own performance of penance.

Keywords: Dante, *Commedia*, Purgatorio, Song, Liturgy, Reader

In *Purgatorio* 30, a host of angels intercede for Dante by singing verses from Psalm 30. The angels' singing prompts a physical and spiritual transformation in the pilgrim, turning him from an isolated figure who could not produce words, tears, or sighs, to one who weeps with true contrition. The transformative power of this psalmody lies, at least in part, in the ways in which it brings singers and listener into relation; it is when the pilgrim perceives the angels' compassion that he is finally able to pour forth tears of penitence:

ma poi che 'ntesi ne le dolci tempre
lor compartire a me, par che se detto
avesser: 'Donna, perché sì lo stembre?',
lo gel che m'era intorno al cor ristretto,
spirito e acqua fessi, e con angoscia
de la bocca e de li occhi uscì del petto. (*Purg.* 30.94-9)¹

¹ Citations from the *Commedia* are taken from Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994).

These lines leave open the possibility that the angels' psalm singing is not only an expression of *compartire*, but also a means of effecting that *compartire*. We could read "ne le dolci tempore" as "through their sweet harmonies," the song as a manifestation of the angels' *compartire*. But we could also understand the verse more literally as "in their sweet harmonies," the song as containing their compassion, their singing itself a means of *compartire*.

Elsewhere in the *Commedia*, *compartire* signifies "to distribute" or "to alternate;" it is only in *Purgatorio* 30 that it has the sense "to participate or share in." The alternative manuscript reading is "compatire," a verb that also foregrounds the co-experience of the angels. In its root meaning *compatire* signifies a co-suffering, a *con-patire*. The term is used only once in the *Commedia* and its noun, *compassione*, is equally rare.² Whether we read *compatire* or *compartire*, Dante's unusual word choice draws attention to the importance of this moment and to the sung fellow suffering of the angels.

This essay investigates the angels' psalm singing as a means of co-suffering and co-worship. The singing of the angels in *Purgatorio* 30 is part of a wider discourse in the *Commedia* on intercession and is among Dante's most sustained reflections on the types of sociality that can be enacted through intercessory prayer. In the second part of the essay, I argue that Dante's depiction of Psalm 30—together with his depiction of the antiphon sung in *Purgatorio* 31, the *Asperges me*—invites a devotional response from the reader. The sociality of prayer can involve not only the characters, but also the readers of the *Commedia*. I investigate the liturgical context in which Dante and medieval readers would have known and lived the *Asperges me*. I argue that here, at the end of the narrative of his penitential journey, Dante, with this antiphon, invites the reader to her own performance of penance.

In *Purgatorio* 30 the pilgrim experiences, in the most immediate fashion, the power of intercessory prayer. Offering and receiving suffrages are key in *Purgatorio*, both for the individual

² Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, Giuseppe Vandelli and earlier editors take "compatire." For an overview of these alternative readings, see *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, 3 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1991–94), 2: 903–904; and *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Petrocchi, 3, 524–525. *Compartire*, meaning "to distribute" or "to alternate:" *Inf.* 19.12; *Purg.* 23.6; *Purg.* 25.126; *Par.* 2.76; and *Par.* 27.16; see Andrea Mariani, "compartire," in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, dir. Umberto Bosco, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 6 vols. (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970–78), 2, 123–124. *Compassione* occurs only in *Purg.* 13.54.

soul's spiritual progress and for drawing the faithful into deeper communion. The souls ask, repeatedly and with great urgency, for the intercession of the living—from Manfred's articulation of the purgatorial *divieto*, “ché qui per quei di là molto s'avanza” (*Purg.* 3.145) to Guido Guinizelli beseeching the pilgrim to remember him when he reaches heaven (*Purg.* 26.127–32). The shades relate how they have been helped by such intercession (Forese, for example, “liberato” by the prayers of his wife, Nella, *Purg.* 23.85–90) or oppressed by its absence (Buonconte, weighed down because his loved ones have forgotten him, *Purg.* 5.88–90). And they in turn offer prayers for those remaining on earth (the ending of the *Padre nostro* of the proud, *Purg.* 11.19–24). Readers of the *Commedia* are invited to pray for those in Purgatory, by the poet in *Purgatorio* 11.31–6 and, indirectly, by the characters who appeal for the help of those on earth. The pilgrim's journey itself stems from a sequence of intercessory prayers—those of Mary, Lucia, and Beatrice.

Dante draws on established doctrines and practices of suffrage and on the concept of the living and the dead being members of one Church or communion of the saints. The bonds of charity that bind together the living and the departed were held to be a key reason that suffrages worked, and suffrages, in turn, fostered those bonds of love.³ Dante also, as Matthew Treherne has observed, moves beyond these doctrines.⁴ According to Thomas Aquinas, though the living should pray for the dead who are in Purgatory, those purgatorial souls are unable to return the favour:

Now those in Purgatory do not pray for us, on the contrary we pray for them. [. . .] Those who are in Purgatory though they are above us on account of their impeccability, yet they are below us as to the pains

³ On medieval traditions of suffrage (prayer, masses, alms, fasting) for the departed and the bonds of charity that enable suffrages to work and that suffrages in turn foster, see Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London: Scholar Press, 1984), esp. 11–12, 41–42, 45–46, 249, 263–264, 274–277, 293–294, 323–324. On intercession in *Purgatorio*, see Erminia Ardissino, “‘Pregar pur ch'altri prieghi’ (*Purg.* VI 26): Richieste di suffragio nel *Purgatorio*,” in *Pregiera e liturgia nella Commedia: Atti del Convegno internazionale di Studi, Ravenna, 12 novembre 2011*, ed. Giuseppe Ledda (Ravenna: Centro dantesco dei Frati minori conventuali, 2013), 45–66; and Francesco Santi, “Il sorriso di Beatrice: Dante e la preghiera di intercessione,” in *Pregiera e liturgia nella Commedia*, 31–43.

⁴ Matthew Treherne, “Liturgical Personhood: Creation, Penitence, and Praise in the *Commedia*,” in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, ed. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 132.

which they suffer: and in this respect they are not in a condition to pray, but rather in a condition that requires us to pray for them.⁵

Those in purgatory can no longer sin and in this respect are superior to those on earth, but, on the other hand, their suffering is far greater than that which the living might experience, and for this reason they are the object and not the subject of intercessory prayer. Albert the Great also provides a brief reflection on whether those in purgatory pray for the living and concludes that they probably do not.⁶ In *Purgatorio*, however, they do. By not only having the living pray for those in Purgatory but also those in Purgatory pray for the living, Dante gives even greater reach and significance to the community that stretches from this world to the next. Intercession in *Purgatorio* forges bonds between the living and the dead, as purgatorial souls, those on earth, and readers of the *Commedia* join in offering prayers for each other. The living and the dead, those within and those outside the poem, are brought together into one community, forming, to use Heather Webb's phrase, a "transmortal network."⁷ The singing of the angels in *Purgatorio* 30 belongs to this wider discourse on the sociality of intercessory prayer.

In *Purgatorio* 30, the angels' psalm is part of an extended exchange between Beatrice, Dante, the angels, and God. Beatrice first addresses the pilgrim:

Dante, perché Virgilio se ne vada,
non pianger anco, non piangere ancora;
che pianger ti conven per altra spada.

⁵ *Summa theologiae*, 2a2ae, q 83, a 11; 2a2ae, q 83, a 11, ad 3. Cited from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici. Opera Omnia. Iussu Leonis XIII, vols. 4–12, (Rome: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1882): "Sed illi qui sunt in purgatorio non orant pro nobis, sed magis nos pro eis. [. . .] illi qui sunt in purgatorio, etsi sint superiores nobis propter impeccabilitatem, sunt tamen inferiores quantum ad poenas quas patiuntur. Et secundum hoc non sunt in statu orandi, sed magis ut oretur pro eis." Translation from *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd ed. (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1920), available at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa> [accessed December 10, 2016].

⁶ Albertus Magnus, *Scripta in quattuor libros Sententiarum*, IV, d. 45, a. 4, in *Opera omnia ex editione lugdunensi religiose castigate*, ed. Auguste Borgnet, 38 vols. (Paris: Vivès, 1890–99), 30 (1894), 612. Albert and Aquinas are concerned only with intercessory prayer; Dante's purgatorial souls engage in many types of prayer, intercessory and otherwise.

⁷ Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 50.

[. . .]

Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice.

Come degnasti d'accedere al monte?

non sapei tu che qui è l'uom felice? (*Purg.* 30.55-7, 73-5)

Beatrice turns to Dante with a pointedly direct address, apostrophizing him by name and concluding her speech with a grammatically unnecessary “tu.” Her accusation is immediately followed by a first-person response and then by an extended reflection from Dante-poet:

Ella sì tacque; e li angeli cantaro
di sùbito “*In te, Domine, speravi*,”
ma oltre “*pedes meos*” non passaro.
Sì come neve tra le vive travi
per lo dosso d'Italia sì congela,
soffiata e stretta da li venti schiavi,
poi, liquefatta, in sé stessa trapela,
pur che la terra che perde ombra spiri,
sì che par foco fonder la candela;
così fui senza lagrime e sospiri
anzi 'l cantar di quei che notan sempre
dietro a le note de li eterni giri;
ma poi che 'ntesi ne le dolci tempre
lor compartire a me, par che se detto
avesser: ‘Donna, perché sì lo stembre?,’
lo gel che m'era intorno al cor ristretto,
spirito e acqua fessi, e con angoscia
de la bocca e de li occhi uscì del petto. (*Purg.* 30.82-99)

The first-person quality of the angels' song is foregrounded by the emphatically placed “*speravi*” and the concluding “*meos*” (83-4). The angels sing to God and indirectly to Beatrice on Dante's behalf. But their song is also partly directed to the pilgrim, who experiences the sweet harmonies as intensely personal: “a me” (95). The “*dolci tempre*” convey the angels' compassion for Dante in all his individuality, moving from “lor” to “me,” the two pronouns framing the hemistich.

The angels' psalm conveys an entreaty that could be articulated in the question “Donna, perché sì lo stembre?” Dante draws attention to the fact that the angels could have replied, still on his behalf, with this very different mode of address. Rather than the psalm text sung to God and to Beatrice, this response is a non-

biblical line, spoken to a single addressee. It refers, furthermore, to Dante in the third person—“lo stembre” instead of “speravi.” In this mode of address, angels and pilgrim are sharply separated, divided into the respective roles of speakers and object about which to be spoken.⁸ That the angels—though conveying the sentiment expressed by the “Donna, perché sì lo stembre?” question—actually sing in the first person and to multiple addressees, suggests there is a more complex relationship between singer and listener, singer and sung for, at work.

Before the angels sing, the pilgrim is bowed down with shame and remorse, painfully weakened by Beatrice’s reproaches. He is locked within himself, his heart—which should be a generative source of warmth and communication with the outside world—sealed off by a ring of ice.⁹ He is unable to relate and respond properly to others and he cannot offer the tearful *scotto di pentimento* required for true contrition. His own resources are insufficient; all that is left for him is to turn to God, but he does not seem able to do so. And it is at this point that the angels begin their song, the opening part of Psalm 30, a prayer of supplication, hope and trust:

2 In te, Domine, speravi; non confundar in aeternum; in iustitia tua libera me.

3 Inclina ad me aurem tuam; accelera ut eruas me. Esto mihi in Deum protectorem, et in domum refugii, ut salvum me facias.

4 Quoniam fortitudo mea et refugium meum es tu; et propter nomen tuum deduces me et enutries me.

5 Educes me de laqueo hoc quem absconderunt mihi, quoniam tu es protector meus.

6 In manus tuas commendo spiritum meum; redemisti me, Domine Deus veritatis.

7 Odisti observantes vanitates supervacue; ego autem in Domino speravi.

8 Exsultabo, et laetabor in misericordia tua, quoniam respexisti humilitatem meam; salvasti de necessitatibus animam meam.

9 Nec conclusisti me in manibus inimici; statuisti in loco spatioso pedes meos.

⁸ The alternative manuscript reading of line 95 has “più che” rather than “par che.” On these readings, see *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Chiavacci Leonardi, 2: 903–904. The reading “più che” foregrounds even further the difference between the first-person psalm and the third-person referencing of “lo stembre.”

⁹ On medieval conceptions of the heart as a generative organ, see Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 96–142.

[2 In thee, O Lord, have I hoped, let me never be confounded: deliver me in thy justice.
3 Bow down thy ear to me: make haste to deliver me. Be thou unto me a God, a protector, and a house of refuge, to save me.
4 For thou art my strength and my refuge; and for thy name's sake thou wilt lead me, and nourish me.
5 Thou wilt bring me out of this snare, which they have hidden for me: for thou art my protector.
6 Into thy hands I commend my spirit: thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, the God of truth.
7 Thou hast hated them that regard vanities, to no purpose. But I have hoped in the Lord:
8 I will be glad and rejoice in thy mercy. For thou hast regarded my humility, thou hast saved my soul out of distresses.
9 And thou hast not shut me up in the hands of the enemy: thou hast set my feet in a spacious place.]¹⁰

The singing voices cry out in petition, trusting not in their own merit but in God: “in iustitia tua” (2) and “propter nomen tuum” (4).¹¹

As Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio note, the psalm serves as a justification of the pilgrim's past actions (his ascent of the holy hill of Mount Purgatory) and as a call to look upon those actions with mercy.¹² Robert Hollander writes that the angels answer Beatrice's question—“Come degnasti d'accedere al monte?” (*Purg.* 30.74)—by calling to mind Dante's past and still abiding hope; they “celebrate only hope rewarded.”¹³ Their song, in these readings, is a means of looking backwards and of affirming the hope that justifies a sinner in his attempt to journey toward God. In its

¹⁰ Citations from the Bible are taken from the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, Clementine Version, and translations from the Douay/Rheims Version, both available at <http://www.drbo.org> [accessed December 8, 2016].

¹¹ On the interweaving of petition and trust in this psalm, see, e.g., Walter Brueggemann and W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 154–9. In his commentary on the psalm, Augustine stresses trusting in God rather than one's own merits: *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, ed. Eligius Dekkers and Jean Fraipont (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), 194–196, 197 (In psalmum 30, enarratio 2, sermo 1. 6, 9).

¹² Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio, gloss on *Purg.* 30.83–4: “gli angeli tentano di giustificare l'ascesa al monte di Dante dinanzi agli occhi di Beatrice [. . .] [con] un salmo, che è un ardente canto di speranza e di certezza nella misericordia divina.” Commentaries on the *Commedia* are cited according to the *Dartmouth Dante Project* database: <http://dante.dartmouth.edu/> [accessed December 8, 2016].

¹³ Robert Hollander, “Dante's Use of the Fiftieth Psalm (A Note on *Purg.* XXX, 84),” *Dante Studies* 91 (1973): 148.

affirmations of past and continuing hope (most prominent in the opening verse written into the *canto*, but also in verse 7), the psalm is indeed a response to Beatrice's bitter questioning and a plea to look on the pilgrim's ascent with mercy.

Yet the psalm does not only look to the past and justify Dante's earlier actions; it also constitutes a renewed turning, in trust and surrender, to God. The singers reaffirm their faith in God's deliverance ("Educes me de laqueo," 5) and their conviction in the strength of his love ("Exsultabo, et laetabor in misericordia tua," 8). Crucially, they yield themselves to God: "In manus tuas commendo spiritum meum" (6). In one of the most powerful expressions of self-surrender in the Psalms, an expression so complete it was spoken by Christ from the Cross, the singers turn to God and entrust themselves wholly to him. It is a performative utterance; by singing, they give themselves to God.¹⁴

The angels do not only pray for Dante in the sense of asking God (and Beatrice) to consider his abiding hope and to be merciful to him, but they also pray the sort of prayer that he, in his weakened, isolated state, needs to pray. They sing out in supplication and trust, in a yielding of self to God, that Dante needs, though is yet unable to effect. They participate in his condition ("lor compa[r]tire a me"), not in that they share his guilt, but in that they offer a prayer of the sort that those in this state of crippling remorse need to make.

The singing of Psalm 30 is prompted by a particular situation and a particular person, but Dante also situates it in the context of the angels' unending song:

così fui senza lagrime e sospiri
anzi 'l cantar di quei che notan sempre
dietro a le note de li eterni giri;
ma poi che 'ntesi ne le dolci tempre
lor compartire a me. (*Purg.* 30.91–5)

The angels sing sempiternally, always patterning their notes on the notes of the wheeling heavens. The "note de li eterni giri," as many commentators have suggested, may be a reference to the

¹⁴ On the performative nature of many of the psalms, see Annie Sutherland, "Performing the Penitential Psalms in the Middle Ages," in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. Manuele Gagnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 15–37.

music of the spheres, the Pythagorean–Platonic concept of mathematical and sounding cosmic harmony, well known throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period.¹⁵ Or, as other critics have observed, the “note” followed by the angels could be understood as written notes; the angels observe divine providence inscribed across the circling heavens—described metaphorically as the notes written across a page of music—and sing in concord with it.¹⁶

In both interpretations, the angels’ singing is a way of directing themselves toward God.¹⁷ The phrase “notan sempre / dietro a le note” (*Purg.* 30.92–3) suggests a giving of attention to the notes, as the angels continually ensure that their song is in perfect accord with God’s *note*, whether the sounding notes of the planets directed by God (“l’armonia che temperi e discerni,” [*Par.* 1.78]) or the notes of divine will written out across the heavens. There is, of course, no danger that the angels will sing out of tune, but song and the attention it requires are a dynamic means of being centred on God, a directing of the self that is eternally renewed as each note is aligned with the notes of the heavens. Singing is thus part of the angels’ very mode of being. If the angels’ every note is aligned with the notes of the heavens, then it follows that their psalm in *Purgatorio* 30 is likewise patterned on the divine *note*, as the linking of “l canter” (which refers to the psalm) and “notan sempre” in line 92 might also suggest. As well as being intercession for Dante, the psalm becomes part of the angels’ sempiternal sung attention to God. Or to put it another way, the angels’ sempiternal sung attention to God involves singing for others; it involves singing for particular human beings, it involves singing for Dante.¹⁸

In *Paradiso* 32 Bernard commands Dante to pray his, Bernard’s, prayer with him, even though Dante remains silent:

¹⁵ Benvenuto da Imola was the first to advance this interpretation (gloss on *Purg.* 30.85–99). The majority of commentators collected in the *Dartmouth Dante Project* database who discuss these lines refer them to the harmony of the spheres. On the harmony of the spheres in Dante, see, recently, Francesco Ciabattini, *Dante’s Journey to Polyphony* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 193–216.

¹⁶ Francesco da Buti was the first to suggest this interpretation (gloss on *Purg.* 30.85–99).

¹⁷ The same nexus of concepts—the circling heavens, the harmony of the spheres, musical *tempre/temperare*—reappears at the opening of *Paradiso*, where the music of the heavens is associated with the desire to be directed toward God (*Par.* 1.76–8).

¹⁸ More generally, on angels in *Purgatorio* as ministers assisting the souls on their journey to God, see Susanna Barsella, *In the Light of the Angels: Angelology and Cosmology in Dante’s Divina Commedia* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2010), 133–43. Barsella argues that the angels who recite the Beatitudes help the souls acquire knowledge of the seven gifts of the Spirit.

‘Veramente, *ne* forse tu t’arretti
movendo l’ali tue, credendo oltrarti,
orando grazia conven che s’impetri
grazia da quella che puote aiutarti;
e tu mi seguirai con l’affezione,
sì che dal dicer mio lo cor non parti’.
E cominciò questa santa orazione: (*Par.* 32.145–51)

Dante is to follow Bernard’s prayer “con l’affezione;” he is to express and seek, silently, what Bernard will express and seek with his voiced appeal. Bernard’s uttered prayer will guide Dante’s inner prayer. One voices the words, the other follows those words inwardly, but both are praying. In the *santa orazione* that follows, Dante is the object of the prayer:

E io, che mai per mio veder non arsi
più ch’i’ fo per lo *suo*, tutti miei prieghi
ti porgo, e priego che non sieno scarsi,
perché tu ogne nube *li* dislegghi
di *sua* mortalità co’ prieghi tuoi,
sì che ’l sommo piacer *li* si dispieghi.
Ancor ti priego, regina, che puoi
ciò che tu vuoi, che conservi sani,
dopo tanto veder, li affetti *suoi*. (*Par.* 32.28–36, my emphasis)

But Dante is also a subject of the prayer, in that his heart is one with Bernard’s speech: “sì che dal dicer mio lo cor non parti.” We realize at the end that not only are Dante and Bernard the subjects of the prayer, but everyone in Heaven:

Vinca tua guardia i movimenti umani:
vedi Beatrice con quanti beati
per li miei prieghi ti chiudon le mani! (*Par.* 32.37–9)

Beatrice and all the blessed are praying Bernard’s prayer along with him. It is only Bernard who is praying aloud, but he is not the only praying subject. Rather, he, Dante, Beatrice, and every soul in heaven are offering this prayer.

In *Purgatorio* 30 the angels pray for Dante not with a detached, third-person reference, “Why, *donna*, cause him discord such as this?” or “He hoped in the Lord, be merciful unto him,”¹⁹

¹⁹ “Why, *donna*, cause him discord such as this?” is Robin Kirkpatrick’s translation of *Purg.* 30.96: *The Divine Comedy*, trans. and ed. Robin Kirkpatrick, 3 vols.

but an intimate “In thee, O Lord, have *I* hoped . . . Into thy hands I commend my spirit.”²⁰ The angels sing for Dante in such a way that he, by listening and identifying with the first-person voice of their song, can participate in its supplication and self-offering. In the terms of *Paradiso* 32, they give Dante the opportunity to pray “con l’affezione,” to follow their song in such a way that his heart might be one with their prayer. By interceding for Dante and by doing so in the first person, with the sort of prayer that he ought to offer, the angels give Dante the opportunity to be both the object and the subject of the psalm. Praying for Dante becomes a way of praying *with* Dante, as both the singing angels and the silent pilgrim turn toward God.

In the *Padre nostro* of *Purgatorio* 11 the souls intercede for others and do so in the first person:

Nostra virtù che di legger s’adona,
non spermentar con l’antico avversaro,
ma libera da lui che sì la sprona.
Quest’ ultima preghiera, signor caro,
già non si fa per noi, ché non bisogna,
ma per color che dietro a noi restaro. (*Purg.* 11.19–24)

The souls pray in the collective first person, *noi*, even in the part of the prayer that is recited for those on earth. The shades are, however, careful to make a distinction between themselves and those for whom they pray, a distinction that is articulated in the balanced phrases—“non si fa per noi” and “ma per color”—and in the spatial distance foregrounded between “us” and “them:” “color che dietro a noi restaro.” In this articulation of the sociality of intercessory prayer, the living and the dead are bound together in one communion of faith, in that each person offers prayers for her fellows and in turn becomes the object of their prayers. While the prayerful sociality of *Purgatorio* 11 is based on reciprocal intercessions offered by a carefully delineated *noi* and *loro*, in *Purgatorio* 30 it is the shared nature of first-person prayer that allows those in this life and those beyond it to enter into communion. At the end of *Purgatorio*, Dante presents a form of shared attention to God in which the angels’ sempiternal singing becomes intercession for the pilgrim and, in the psalm’s first-person offering of self to God, becomes a way for the pilgrim to follow, “con l’affezione,” the words that he is not able to sing for himself.

(London: Penguin, 2006–2007). “He hoped in the Lord, be merciful unto him,” is a paraphrase of Psalm 30, with the first-person verb replaced with a third-person verb.

²⁰ Psalm 30.

The pilgrim responds to the *compartire* of the angels' psalm by opening himself and allowing himself to be opened, in contrition, to God (*Purg.* 30.85–99). He pours forth anguished tears that Beatrice later describes as an intrinsic part of repentance:

Alto fatto di Dio sarebbe rotto,
se Letè si passasse e tal vivanda
fosse gustata senza alcuno scotto
di pentimento che lagrime spanda. (*Purg.* 30.142–5)

A true *scotto di pentimento* requires contrite tears. The pilgrim's *lagrime* are the beginning of the drama of penitence that will be played out across these cantos and through which he will be reconciled to God, cleansed and prepared to ascend to heaven.²¹

The pilgrim weeps in response to the psalm and the poet invites us, too, to respond to the psalm. Throughout *Purgatorio*—from the *In exitu Israël de Aegypto* in *Purgatorio* 2 to the *Deus, venerunt gentes* in *Purgatorio* 33—Dante portrays the prayers of the souls and, when they occur, the angels and the blessed, by quoting a few words of the song directly and indicating, with a range of techniques, how much of the rest of the song is sung. In *Purgatorio* 2, for example, Dante transcribes the opening words of the souls' song and tells us that they sing these words “con quanto di quel salmo è poscia scripto” (*Purg.* 2.46–8). Or in *Purgatorio* 16, with the singing of the *Agnus Dei*, Dante cites the first words of each phrase of the song, thereby indicating that the intervening words are prayed too (*Purg.* 16.19–21). Many more examples could be given. In each case, the reader is left with the task of calling to mind—or perhaps in the case of twenty-first-century readers, looking up—the “missing” words. In *Purgatorio* 30, Dante cites the opening and closing words of the psalm, creating yet another variation on his practice of transcribing the souls' and angels' songs only in part and indicating to us how much of the rest of the song is performed:

²¹ On the role of tears in the sacrament of penance in the Middle Ages, see Piroška Nagy, *Le don des larmes au Moyen Âge: Un instrument spirituelle en quête d'institution (V^e–XIII^e siècle)* (Paris: Michel, 2000). On Dante's tears and the melting snow simile, see Francesco Mazzoni, “Un incontro di Dante con l'esegesi biblica (A proposito di *Purg.* XXX, 85–99),” in *Dante e la Bibbia: atti del convegno internazionale promosso da 'Biblia,' Firenze, 26–27–28 settembre 1986*, ed. Giovanni Barblan (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1988), 207–212; and Kevin Brownlee, “Dante and Narcissus (*Purg.* XXX, 76–99),” *Dante Studies* 96 (1978): 201–206.

Ella si tacque; e li angeli cantaro
di sùbito, “*In te, Domine, speravi*”;
ma oltre “*pedes meos*” non passaro. (*Purg.* 30.82–4)

Pedes meos are the concluding words of the ninth verse of the psalm: “Nec conclusisti me in manibus inimici; statuisti in loco spatio *pedes meos*.”²² John Freccero writes that the *pedes meos* verse points both to Dante’s progress (throughout *Inferno* and for most of *Purgatorio* he was not in such a liberating, spacious place) and to the journey he still has to make (he is planted but cannot yet advance through Eden).²³ Hollander argues that Dante draws even more attention to the verse that follows *pedes meos* than to the *pedes meos* verse itself. The phrase ‘oltre [. . .] non passaro’ designates *pedes meos* as a stopping place, but also points to the unuttered words that lie beyond. Hollander argues that the next verse, which begins “Miserere mei, Domine,” reminds pilgrim and reader of the penitence to be completed.²⁴

Yet the words that lie “oltre” could do more than merely remind us of the penitence that is still to come; they could offer us the chance to join the penitential drama. I have argued elsewhere that when Dante, on each terrace of *Purgatorio*, gives his partial transcriptions of the souls’ songs, he is not only inviting the reader to call to mind and interpret the “missing” words of the songs, but is also inviting the reader to pray them.²⁵ In the remainder of this essay I shall suggest that in *Purgatorio* 30–31, at the end of the pilgrim’s penitential journey, Dante’s depictions of song create a space for the reader’s own performance of penance.

In *Purgatorio* 30, by encouraging us to ask which words lie “oltre,” which words follow *pedes meos*, Dante all but obliges us to continue reciting the psalm, and so we find ourselves saying or singing “Miserere mei, Domine.” We find ourselves, that is, uttering our own cry for mercy. In full the verse that follows *pedes meos*

²² *Psalm* 30.9: “And thou hast not shut me up in the hands of the enemy: thou hast set my feet in a spacious place.”

²³ John Freccero, “Adam’s Stand, *Purg.* XXX, 82–84,” *Romance Notes* 2 (1961): 115–118.

²⁴ Hollander, “Dante’s Use of the Fiftieth Psalm,” 147–148.

²⁵ Helena Phillips-Robins, “Liturgical Song in Dante’s *Commedia*” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2016), 78–89. I develop this argument significantly (as well as the arguments in the present article) in my book, *Liturgical Song and Practice in Dante’s Commedia*, currently in preparation.

runs: “Miserere mei, Domine, quoniam tribulor; conturbatus est in ira oculus meus, anima mea, et venter meus.”²⁶ The psalmist cries out in supplication to God, but though the verse begins *Miserere mei*, it is not primarily a penitential verse. There is no explicit mention of sin or expression of penitence, but rather a cry for help in time of trouble and a plea for deliverance from suffering and distress.²⁷ In the context of *Purgatorio* 30 we could hear it as a preparatory *Miserere*, an initial occasion for the reader to turn, through prayer, to God.

This *Miserere*, not sung by the angels or written into the text of the poem, but potentially recalled and performed by the reader, is matched in the following *canto* by a second, now fully penitential *Miserere*. Once the pilgrim reaches the end of his penitence, once he has confessed and undergone the racking pain of repentance, he is immersed in the river Lethe. During this cleansing he hears singing voices:

Poi, quando il cor virtù di fuor rendemmi,
la donna ch’io avea trovata sola
sopra me vidi, e dicea: ‘Tiemmi, tiemmi!’.
Tratto m’avea nel fiume infin la gola,
e tirandosi me dietro sen giva
sovresso l’acqua lieve come scola.
Quando fui presso a la beata riva,
‘*Asperges me*’ sì dolcemente udissi,
che nol so rimembrar, non ch’io lo scriva.
La bella donna ne le braccia aprissi;
abbracciommi la testa e mi sommerse
ove convenne ch’io l’acqua inghiottissi.
Indi mi tolse, e bagnato m’offerse
dentro a la danza de le quattro belle;
e ciascuna del braccio mi coperse. (*Purg.* 31.91–105)

‘*Asperges me*’ are the opening words of the ninth verse of Psalm 50: ‘*Asperges me hyssopo, et mundabor; lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor*’ [‘Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow’]. Many commentators situate this scene in a liturgical context by citing a gloss from the *Ottimo commento*:

²⁶ *Psalm* 30.10: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am afflicted: my eye is troubled with wrath, my soul, and my belly.”

²⁷ Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 158.

Questo testo è chiaro, ma tuttavia sappi, che questo *Asperges* [. . .] si dice quando per lo prete si gitta l'acqua benedetta sopra il confesso peccatore, il quale elli assolve [. . .]. Lo quale l'autore bagnato in Lete introduce, per mostrare ch'egli è lavato di tutti suoi peccati.²⁸

In the Latin liturgy the *Asperges* was sung as the priest sprinkled the penitent with holy water (recalling his baptism) and absolved him from his sins, and so is particularly consonant to Dante's immersion and purification in the Lethe.²⁹

It is, however, worth examining the Aspersation liturgy in more detail. During the preparation ceremonies before Sunday Mass the priest would bless the salt and water and then sprinkle the altar and the congregation, to the accompaniment of the *Asperges* and other prayers.³⁰ The rite might include or be followed by a procession. For our purposes, the crucial point is that the *Asperges* verse was never sung alone. It was, rather, an antiphon and was followed by the opening verse or verses of Psalm 50, then the *Gloria patri*, and then the *Asperges* verse again. The *Asperges* antiphon, with its accompanying verse or verses from the *Miserere* was sung every Sunday of the year, with the exception only of the Sundays in Eastertide, when the *Asperges* was replaced by the paschal antiphon *Vidi aquam* and the first verse of Psalm 117.³¹

Two ordinal books—texts that give minutely detailed instructions on how to perform the Mass and Office throughout the year—survive from the cathedral of Santa Reparata in Florence. The first of these ordinals, the *Ritus in ecclesia servandi* (compiled between 1173–1205 and used throughout the thirteenth century),

²⁸ *L'Ottimo commento*, gloss on *Purg.* 31.97–9.

²⁹ On the baptismal resonances of Dante's immersion in the Lethe, see Dunstan J. Tucker, "In exitu Israel de Aegypto: The *Divine Comedy* in the Light of the Easter Liturgy," *American Benedictine Review* 11 (1960): 59–61.

³⁰ Francesco da Buti notes in his commentary (gloss on *Purg.* 31.91–102) that the *Asperges* "si canta la domenica mattina."

³¹ On the *Asperges* antiphon and the preparation ceremonies for Sunday Mass, see Andrew Hughes, *Medieval Manuscripts for Mass and Office: A Guide to their Organization and Terminology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 34, 82–3; Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, trans. Francis A. Brunner 2 vols., rev. ed. (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 2012), 1, 271–272; and William Durand, *Rationale divinarum officiorum*, eds. Anselme Davril and Timothy M. Thibodeau, *Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis*, vols. 140, 140A, 140B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995–2000), book 4, 4. 1–10 (vol. 140, 263–266).

prescribes how the Aspersio was to be carried out at Santa Reparata:

During the sprinkling of the holy water, which the priest does every Sunday of the year, let the *Asperges me domine* be sung with the first three verses of the psalm *Miserere mei deus* and with the *Gloria patri, Sicut erat in principio* and then let the *Asperges me* antiphon be repeated.³²

The number of verses from Psalm 50 that were sung in between the two *Asperges me* verses varied from region to region, but the fundamental antiphon-verse-antiphon structure remained the same.³³

Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo, et mundabor: lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor.

Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam; et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum, dele iniquitatem meam.

Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.

Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo, et mundabor: lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor.

[Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, O Lord, and I shall be cleansed; Thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy. And according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my iniquity.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

³² “In aspersione aque, quam facit sacerdos diebus dominicis per totum annum, cantetur *Asperges me domine* cum primis tribus versibus psalmi *Miserere mei deus* et cum *Gloria patri, Sicut erat in principio* et repetatur ant[iphona] *Asperges me*.” *Ritus in ecclesia servandi* (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS. 3005), edition in Franklin Toker, *On Holy Ground: Liturgy, Architecture and Urbanism in the Cathedral and the Streets of Medieval Florence* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 157–264 (lines 1501–5, 199); translation mine. On the *Ritus* and other late medieval ordinals as important and as yet untapped sources in Dante Studies, and for bibliography, see Helena Phillips-Robins, “‘Cantavan tutti insieme ad una voce’: Singing and Community in the *Commedia*,” *Italian Studies* 71, no. 1 (2016): 7–9.

³³ According to Hughes, *Medieval Manuscripts*, 34, it was standard to sing just the opening verse of Psalm 50.

Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, O Lord, and I shall be cleansed;
Thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow.]³⁴

The words *Asperges me* did not stand alone, but rather formed a unit with the opening verse of Psalm 50.

The resonances—the purification of a penitent from sin by immersion in, or sprinkling with, holy water, as the words *Asperges me* are sung—that link the *Purgatorio* 31 scene with the Asperion liturgy (a ceremony familiar to medieval readers, if less so to modern scholars) strongly suggest that it is the chant used in the Asperion liturgy, rather than the isolated ninth verse of Psalm 50, that we are to call to mind. That is, we are to call to mind the rest of the *Asperges me* verse and the following *Miserere mei* verse.

In the Sunday Mass the *Asperges me*, like every other element of the liturgy, was supposed to help bring humans into closer relationship with God. The texts sung in the liturgy (as well as the sights, smells, sounds, actions and gestures of the liturgy) existed in order to become lived experience, and, ideally, lived experience of encounter with God. In referencing the *Asperges me*, then, Dante is not referencing only a text or a set of words, but rather the lived experience of praying those words. That is, Dante is referencing the lived experience of using those words as a way of giving one's attention to God. Dante gives the reader the opportunity to bring to mind the remaining words of the *Asperges me* and also to bring to mind—and then to reproduce—her lived experience of that song as prayer. By citing only in part the song that the pilgrim hears, Dante invites the reader to supply the remaining words and, if she chooses, to pray them. He creates a space for the reader to pray the opening of the most important penitential text of the Middle Ages: “*Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam; et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum, dele iniquitatem meam.*”³⁵

³⁴ Cited from the *Liber Usualis*, ed. the Benedictines of Solesmes, new ed. (Montana: St. Bonaventure, 1997), 11. Translation from *Mass and Vespers with Gregorian Chant for Sundays and Holy Days*, ed. the Benedictines of Solesmes (Tournai: Desclée, 1957), 25. The *Liber Usualis* gives only the first half of the *Miserere* verse; I have included the whole verse.

³⁵ On Psalm 50 and the other Penitential Psalms in the Middle Ages, see Michael S. Driscoll, “The Seven Penitential Psalms: Their Designation and Usages from the Middle Ages Onwards,” *Ecclesia orans* 17 (2000): 153–201.

The pilgrim cannot ascend to heaven until he is accused (*Purg.* 30.55–81, 100–45; *Purg.* 31.1–12, 43–69), is pierced with contrition, repents and confesses (*Purg.* 30.97–9; *Purg.* 31.13–21, 31–42, 85–90), and is then washed and purified, first in the Lethe (*Purg.* 31.91–105) and then in the Eunoe (*Purg.* 33.127–41). It is only after all this that he is “remade and renewed” and ready to enter *Paradiso*:

Io ritornai da la santissima onda
rifatto sì come piante novelle
rinovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salire a le stelle. (*Purg.* 33.142–5)

It seems appropriate that the reader should also be invited to seek mercy before embarking on *Paradiso*.

If she prays the words *Miserere mei*, the reader joins a voice that has particular prominence in the *Commedia*. The first words uttered in the narrative are “*Miserere di me*,” as the lost Dante breaks the silence of the dark wood (*Inf.* 1.65).³⁶ At the close of the poem, David, now triumphant in Heaven, is evoked as the one who cried *Miserere*: the “cantor che per doglia / del fallo disse ‘*Miserere mei*’” (*Par.* 32.11–12). The words *Miserere mei* are also the first words the pilgrim hears the purgatorial souls sing on land, as he listens to the late repentants singing together as a community waiting to enter Purgatory proper: “E ’ntanto per la costa di traverso / venivan genti innanzi a noi un poco, / cantando ‘*Miserere*’ a verso a verso” (*Purg.* 5.22–4).

There are two *Misereres* that frame Dante’s penitential progress through the Earthly Paradise. Neither is written into the text of the poem but are both, instead, left to the reader. After the initial, preparatory *Miserere*, with its plea for help in times of suffering, comes the fully penitential *Miserere* prompted by the angels’ *Asperges me*. The “I” that says *Miserere mei* in the *Commedia* is shared in by many individuals—Dante, David, the purgatorial souls. And we too have the chance to participate in that “I.” The *Misereres* of *Purgatorio* 30–31 not only give the reader an opportunity to perform her own penance, but to do so in company with others,

³⁶ On the *Inferno* 1 “*Miserere di me*” as a prayer that leads the pilgrim toward self-knowledge, see Giuseppe Mazzotta, “The Book of Questions: Prayer and Poetry,” *Dante Studies* 129 (2011): 34–36.

to turn to God, and to perform her repentance as one of the many who have sung penance through the words *Miserere mei*.