

## NOTES

### ‘SCEMARE’, OR APPROACHING “VIRGILLESSNESS”<sup>1</sup>

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Any examination of the phenomenon of absence in the *Commedia* must account for a crucial linguistic issue: though they are amply attested in the *Commedia*’s sources, the words *assenza*, *assente*, and their derivatives are themselves conspicuously absent from the poem’s lexicon. Absence experiences are expressed in the poem partly through imagery and circumlocution, but also through a constellation of individual words which invoke experiences of absence without naming absence as such. One particularly suggestive word operating within this language of omission is the verb *scemare*. With a focus on *Purgatorio* 30, in this paper, I discuss the importance of *scemare* to Dante’s lexicon of exclusion, and the ways in which it shapes our experience and understanding of absence in the *Commedia* more broadly.

Keywords: Absence, Affect, Presence, *Scemare*, Virgil.

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If a discussion of absence in the *Commedia*, a poem so richly populated with characters, and so driven by interpersonal encounter and exchange, is not to be doomed from the start, it has to account for crucial linguistic issue. Though they are attested elsewhere in Dante’s work, the words *assenza*, *assente*, and their derivatives are themselves conspicuously absent from the poem’s lexicon. Like the word *empireo*, which disappears after the second canto of *Inferno* to be replaced by periphrases of increasing ambition and effulgence, the concept of absence is articulated only

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<sup>1</sup> This article began as a contribution to the panel “Dante Spaces/Spaces for Dante,” which formed part of the *Centenary Celebration of New Voices in UK and Irish Dante Studies*, held in Cambridge and Oxford in November 2021. I am grateful to the organizers, participants, and especially my fellow panelists, Edward Allnutt, Alessia Carrai, Nicolò Crisafi, and Tommaso Priviero, as well as to our chair, Catherine Keen, for the generosity of their ideas and discussion both before and after the event.

indirectly.<sup>2</sup> This is achieved partly through imagery and circumlocution, but also through a constellation of individual words which invoke experiences of absence without naming absence as such.

A particularly suggestive word operating within Dante's lexicon of exclusion and omission is the verb *scemare*. Seeing only sparing use elsewhere in his work, it appears with relative frequency in the *Commedia*.<sup>3</sup> Where it appears as a verb, commentators have generally glossed *scemare* as roughly equivalent to "diminuire."<sup>4</sup> Where it appears in its adjectival form, "scemə," it has been read as synonymous with "manchevole" or, more commonly, "privə."<sup>5</sup> It seems to me, however, that "privə" does not fully convey the sense of "scemə" as Dante uses it. "Privə" also appears in the *Commedia*, and in each instance it serves a markedly different function to "scemə." Where *privare* and its derivatives occur, they signal a complete loss or deprivation: the devil from whose grip Bonconte da Montefeltro is saved by an angel cries "O tu del ciel, perchè mi privi?" (*Purg.* 5.105); Dante is able to ascend to Paradise only when he is completely "privo / d'impedimento" (*Par.* 1.139-140). While *privare* communicates a state of total lack, the deprivation implied by *scemare* is rather more nuanced. In each case, it denotes a reduction of one kind or another, though, crucially, not to zero. Thus, as Dante and Virgil take their leave of the pagan poets in Limbo, Dante writes that "La sesta compagnia in due si scema" (*Inf.* 4.148): the "bella scola" is diminished, but does not disappear entirely (*Inf.* 4.94). This first instance of its use is indicative of how Dante will go on to use *scemare* to express nuances that *privare* cannot convey. For where *privare* suggests a binary distinction between presence and absence, "having" or "not having," *scemare* allows for gradations to be expressed between the ostensibly polarized concepts.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Christian Moevs, "The Empyrean," in *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15-35, 23.

<sup>3</sup> cf. *Rime* 46.23; 50a.8.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Benvenuto da Imola, commentary on *Inferno* 4.148-149, as found on Dartmouth Dante Lab, <http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu>; Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, note to *Inferno* 4.148 in Dante, *Divina Commedia*, vol. 1, ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milan: Mondadori, 1991-1997), 129.

<sup>5</sup> I have adopted schwa here as a means of conveying gender neutrality in base forms of Italian adjectives. I am grateful to Dario Galassini for our discussion of this. For glosses of "scemə" as "privə," see Chiavacci Leonardi, note on *Purg.* 12.9, 354; Giorgio Inglese, note to *Purgatorio* 30.49 in Dante Alighieri, *Commedia*, vol. 2, ed. Giorgio Inglese (Rome: Carocci editore, 2007-2016), 361. For a gloss as "manchevole" see Chiavacci Leonardi, note to *Purg.* 17.85, 505.

A cross-*cantica* tally of *scemare*'s occurrences reveals that it is a distinctly purgatorial word, appearing a dozen times in the second *cantica*, compared to *Inferno*'s three, and *Paradiso*'s six. Perhaps this should not surprise us. *Purgatorio* is, after all, a space for the cultivation of paradisiacal lightness, and the lessening of spiritual heaviness.<sup>6</sup> As the souls work through this process of spiritual lightening, however, it should not escape our notice that things are constantly visibly diminishing and disappearing in *Purgatorio*. Despite its investment in return and reunion, we as readers are particularly subject in *Purgatorio* to what Daniel Heller-Roazen, in his recent book *Absentees, on Various Missing Persons*, calls "forms of diminution": processes by which people, places, and things have their presence lessened.<sup>7</sup> *Scemare* plays a key role in the articulation of these processes. In an early instance of its use in *Purgatorio*, Dante describes "lo scemo de la luna" (*Purg.* 10.14), connecting *scemare* to the distinctly purgatorial image of the moon fading and returning each day on the mountain. *Scemare* also appears in Virgil's account of the purgative process of the second realm: "L'amor del bene, scemo / del suo dover, quiritta si ristora" (*Purg.* 17.85-87). Indeed, the mountain itself appears "scemo / a guisa che i vallon li sceman quici" as the poets arrive in the Valley of the Princes (*Purg.* 7.65-66). In each case, *scemare* denotes a reduction of presence, be it geological, astronomical, personal, or spiritual, and this feeds into a wider juxtaposition between absence and presence in *Purgatorio* as a whole.

Dante and the reader are increasingly exposed to such lessening as the *cantica* gradually moves towards its culminating drama of personal absence and presence in the Earthly Paradise. I use the word "personal" here to refer to the presence/absence of characters as an alternative to the more widespread notion of "physical absence/presence," since such terms can hold only the most limited currency in the case of the *Commedia*, populated as it is almost exclusively by "ombre vane" (*Purg.* 2.79).<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Dante's ease of movement in *Purgatorio* 12.10-12: "Io m'era mosso, e seguia volentieri / del mio maestro i passi, e amendue / già mostravam com'eravam leggeri."

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Absentees: On Various Missing Persons* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2021), 83.

<sup>8</sup> On the implications of otherworldly "vanità," see Manuele Gragnolati, (In-)Corporeality, Language, Performance in Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia*, in *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, eds. Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati, and Jürgen Trabant (London: Routledge, 2010), 211-222, 212-214. My notion of "personal absence" is indebted to Heather Webb's discussion of "personal presence" in *Dante's Persons, an Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). See esp. pp. 34-37.

presence/absence of his dead souls' aerial bodies is in fact the very first issue that Dante confronts when he first interacts with a dead soul in the *selva oscura*:

Quando vidi costui nel gran diserto,  
 "Miserere di me," gridai a lui,  
 "qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!"  
 Rispuosemi: "Non omo, omo già fui,  
 e li parenti miei furon lombardi,  
 mantoani per patria ambedui" (*Inf.* 1.64-69)

Dante cannot be sure if he is calling to a "true" human being, or a shadow, and this uncertainty proves crucial to the way in which the dialectic of absence and presence is articulated throughout the *Commedia*. Even in the poem's first encounter, then, Dante consciously blurs the boundaries between presence and absence, introducing a focal tension around the tangibility of the souls in the afterlife. Otherworldly presence, as Manuele Gragnolati has persuasively argued, depends on factors other than physicality: our experience of the souls of the afterlife, each with their own "corpo fittizio" (*Purg.* 26.12), cannot be understood with any consistency in physical terms.<sup>9</sup> This poem-wide metaphysical issue complicates the *Commedia's* relationship with absence long before any direct reference is made to any character conspicuously "missing" from the poem's narrative, and Dante's frequent re-problematizing of the issue requires that we read beyond any simple polarity between physical and non-physical. Indeed, I would suggest that his work at large lays out notions of presence and absence which transcend any simple binary distinctions. It is a dynamic dialectic upon which the narrative fabric of the *Commedia* fundamentally depends, and this is especially true of *Purgatorio* 30, which marks the moment of Virgil's personal departure from the poem. On finally sensing Beatrice's presence, Dante turns to the left:

per dicere a Virgilio: 'Men che dramma  
 di sangue m'è rimaso che non tremi:  
 conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma.'  
 Ma Virgilio n'avea lasciati scemi  
 di sé, Virgilio dolcissimo patre,  
 Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi;

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<sup>9</sup> See Manuele Gragnolati, "'Forse non pur per loro, ma per le mamme'. La nostalgia del Paradiso e gli abbracci della *Commedia*," in *Amor che move, Linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2013), 91-110; Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2005), 53-86.

né quantunque perdeo l'antica matre,  
valse a le guance nette di rugiada  
che, lagrimando, non tornasser atre (*Purg.* 30.46-54)

Now, a great deal has already been written about this passage as a farewell, as a lament, as an elegy, to say nothing of its own Virgilian undertones.<sup>10</sup> Less attention has been given, however, to how Dante and his readers are made to “see” Virgil’s absence here, and this is where scholarship from various fields, not least theatre and film studies, may shed some important light.<sup>11</sup> This is a moment, after all, which borders on the filmic: Dante’s perspective is oriented towards a space in the Earthly Paradise which turns out to be empty. As the film theorist Justin Remes has observed, “absence can only be understood in contrast to *what might have been present*,” and it is this frustrated expectation that makes Dante’s

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<sup>10</sup> The literature on these elements of the passage is vast. See, for example, Piero Boitani, “Brooks, Melting Snow, River of Light,” in *Vertical Readings in Dante’s Comedy*, Vol. 3, eds. George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 155-171; John Freccero, “Virgil, Sweet Father: A Paradigm of Poetic Influence,” in *Dante Among the Moderns*, ed. Stuart Y. McDougal (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 3-10; Freccero, “Manfred’s Wounds and the Poetics of the *Purgatorio*,” in *Dante, The Poetics of Conversion* (London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 195-208; Peter S. Hawkins, “Dido, Beatrice, and the Signs of Ancient Love,” in *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante’s ‘Commedia’*, eds. Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 113-130; Robert Hollander, “Tragedia nella *Commedia*,” in *Il Virgilio dantesco: tragedia ella ‘Commedia’*, trans. Anna Maria Castellani (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1983), 117-154; Lloyd H. Howard, *Virgil the Blind Guide: Marking the Way Through the Divine Comedy* (London: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010), 70-112; Rachel Jacoff, “Intertextualities in Arcadia: *Purgatorio* 30.49-51,” in *The Poetry of Allusion*, 131-144; Jacoff, “Canto XXX: At the Summit of Purgatory,” in *Lectura Dantis: Purgatorio*, eds. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 341-352; Giuseppe Ledda, “Sulla presenza di Virgilio nel *Paradiso*,” in *Dante e la tradizione classica, Atti del Convegno in ricordo di Saverio Bellomo (Pisa, Scuola Normale Superiore, 10-11 aprile 2019)*, ed. Stefano Carrai (Ravenna: Longo Editore 2021), 117-143, 127; Vittorio Montemaggi, “Pride and Prayer,” in *Reading Dante’s Commedia as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 159-238, 217-219; Jennifer Rushworth, “Proust’s *Recherche*, Derridean ‘demi-deuil’, and Mimetic Mourning,” in *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 91-125, 107-108; Rushworth, “Conversion, Palinody, Threnody,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, eds. Manuele Graganolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2021), 529-545, 538.

<sup>11</sup> On this concept, see Anna Farennikova, “Seeing Absence,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 166.3 (December, 2013): 429-454.

experience of Virgil's absence so acute.<sup>12</sup> The readers' expectations are doubly undercut by the syntactic arrangement of the passage itself: the words "per dicere a Virgilio" introduce Dante's speech as if it were a full, spoken utterance, but then we learn that it is only what Dante *would have said had Virgil been there*: we "hear" Dante's words, only to be told that we did not actually hear them. That emphatic, line-initial, "adversative *ma*" is the first indicator that what we have just "heard" was never really said.<sup>13</sup> It is an unrealized utterance which constitutes an important example of the poem's "alternate plotlines" recently richly discussed by Nicolò Crisafi: moments in which the poem gestures towards alternative, contingent versions of itself which run contrary to the teleological pull of what Crisafi calls the poem's "master narrative".<sup>14</sup> This particular contingent moment is uniquely destabilizing, for even as it foreshadows the *Commedia*'s long-anticipated scene of reunion, it introduces what Robert Hollander has called the "momento virgiliano più palpabilmente tragico dell'intero poema."<sup>15</sup> On the verge of the poem's supreme moment of comedy, that is to say, we reach an affective nadir which strikes all the more keenly as our anticipation of presence and of language is met instead with silence and personal absence.<sup>16</sup>

The result is that we, along with Dante, experience a spatial and linguistic void: an empty space which brings to mind Muriel Spark's poem "Elementary," in which a "cat subsiding down a

<sup>12</sup> Justin Remes, *Absence in Cinema: The Art of Showing Nothing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 26. Emphasis in original.

<sup>13</sup> Freccero, "Manfred's Wounds," 208. This "ma" constitutes a major example of what poet-critic Jerry Harp calls a "mid-course turn." See "The Mid-Course Turn," in *Structure and Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns*, ed. Michael Theune (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative: 2007), 147-166. Carl Dennis goes so far as to suggest that such turns can denote shifts in genre as well as narrative direction: a consideration which corroborates Hollander's sense of Virgilian tragedy in Eden. See Carl Dennis, *Poetry as Persuasion* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Nicolò Crisafi, "The Master Narrative and its Paradoxes," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, eds. Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2021), 513-528; *Dante's Masterplot and Alternative Narratives in the Commedia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), esp. pp.83-115. On the *Commedia*'s "equal commitment to design and contingency," see John David Rhodes, "Dante on Screen" in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2021), 619-633, 620-621.

<sup>15</sup> Hollander, "Tragedia nella *Commedia*," 131.

<sup>16</sup> The notion of absence and its relation to generic instability is one of the key arguments introduced in Robert Martin Adams, *Nil: Episodes in the Literary Conquest of Void During the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966). See especially pp.89-106.

basement / Leaves a catlessness behind it.”<sup>17</sup> This notion of subsidence provides a productive way to frame our thinking around the word *scemare* in relation to absence: it implies that a being may cease to be visible in a given environment, while traces of that being are left behind in the environment, and can be “seen” despite the absence of the being itself. Further, it bespeaks not a sudden disappearance, but rather a kind of literary slow-fade.<sup>18</sup> Just so, the purgatorial instances of *scemare* gradually draw their readers into sensations of moonlessness, mountainlessness and, finally, Virgilessness. It is made clear to Dante at the very outset of his journey that Virgil will, at some point, leave him: “anima fia a ciò più di me degna: / con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire” (*Inf.* 1.122-123), and Dante himself will reiterate this fact as late as *Purgatorio* 23 during his conversation with Forese Donati: “Tanto dice di farmi sua compagna / che io sarò là dove fia Beatrice; / quivi convien che senza lui rimagna. / Virgilio è questi che così mi dice” (*Purg.* 23.127-130).<sup>19</sup> The textual space which Virgil occupies as a personal presence is strictly delineated even from the outset of the poem: his absence is forecast as soon as he arrives.

Virgil’s subsidence into personal absence, then, is hidden in plain sight throughout the narrative space between his arrival and his departure: over the course of sixty-four cantos, Virgil undergoes a process of diminution in which the future “ti lascerò” becomes the pluperfect “n’avea lasciati scemi.” The shift from the singular pronoun *tu* to the plural *noi* is also particularly significant. Lloyd H. Howard has noted that the *noi* of the line “Virgilio n’avea lasciati scemi di sè” includes Statius as well as Dante, but in reality the pronoun is more inclusive than this.<sup>20</sup> It is a *noi* which also encompasses the reader who, more so than Statius, has borne witness to the growth and diminution of Virgil’s presence over the course of the poem: the reader is utterly implicit in the plural adjective *scemi*. We have been made to interact with and, in some measure, participate in the purgative *pene* of the mountain, and here, as the poem gathers in its lexicon of exclusion, we are drawn into this drama of absence and loss, even as the poem re-presences

<sup>17</sup> Muriel Spark, “Elementary,” in *Going up to Sotheby’s and Other Poems* (London: Granada, 1982), 17.

<sup>18</sup> John Freccero remarks on the “fading” of Virgil in *Purgatorio* 30 in “Manfred’s Wounds,” 208. Similarly, Peter Hawkins calls the dense Virgilian allusions of *Purgatorio* 30 a “literary fadeout that enacts on a linguistic level Virgil’s exit from the narrative.” See Peter S. Hawkins, “For the Record: Rewriting Virgil in the *Commedia*,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 3.1 (2003): 75-97, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Howard juxtaposes *Inferno* 1 and *Purgatorio* 23 in *Virgil the Blind Guide*, 118.

<sup>20</sup> Howard, *Virgil the Blind Guide*, 134.

Beatrice who will guide Dante through *Paradiso*.<sup>21</sup> This sense of diminishment is strengthened still further by the fact that *scemare*'s appearance in Canto 30 occurs in a context in which the language of absence proliferates: *lasciare* recurs, having been applied to Virgil's departure in the *selva oscura*, and *salute*, *perdeo*, and *non tornare* all operate alongside *scemare* to convey the enormity of Virgil's absence.

Further, given the dynamic interplay of absence and presence in *Purgatorio* 30 as a whole, it hardly seems incidental that the canto also contains one of only three uses of the word *presenza* in the *Commedia*.<sup>22</sup>

E lo spirito mio, che già cotanto  
tempo era stato ch'a la sua presenza  
non era di stupor, tremando, affranto,  
sanza de li occhi aver più conoscenza,  
per occulta virtù che da lei mosse,  
d'antico amor sentì la gran potenza (*Purg.* 30.34-36)

As well as strengthening the juxtaposition of presence and absence in the canto, this sense of Beatrice's *presenza* casts significant light on Dante's notion of the dynamism of the two concepts. This is something which Dante also explores in the *Convivio*, the only text of his in which the word *assenza* appears. Accounting for our variable experience of the constant brightness of a star, Dante writes: "Transmutasi questo mezzo di molta luce in poca luce, sì come alla presenza del sole e alla sua assenza" (*Conv.* 3.9.12). Now, it is possible to interpret this astronomical explanation in terms of a simple dichotomy: things, in this case the light of the sun, can be present, or they can be absent. I think the notion of a transition from *molta luce* to *poca luce*, however, demands that we approach the terms rather differently. It points not towards a simple binary between absence and presence, but rather a continuum on which place is never fixed. There are, that is to say, gradations of absence and presence, and *Purgatorio* 30, perhaps more than any other canto in the *Commedia*, dramatizes Dante's sense of this continuum between personal presence and absence. Beatrice's return to presence is, after all, gradual: it is sensed before it is witnessed. Her face is initially occluded "sotto verde manto" (v.32),

<sup>21</sup> On readerly participation in *Purgatorio*, see Gervase Rosser, "Visual Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2021), 188-207, 195-198; Heather Webb, "Postures of Penitence in Dante's *Purgatorio*," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 131 (2013): 219-236; Webb, *Dante's Persons*, 83-122.

<sup>22</sup> The others are *Paradiso* 11.101 and *Paradiso* 27.24.



and though this veil nominally conceals her, its conspicuous color, along with that of her robe, “di fiamma viva” (v.33) serve to convey her presence through allusion to her appearance in *Vita nuova* (*Vn.* 2.3). Her voice is then heard at length before she finally and triumphantly announces herself: “Guardaci ben! Ben sem, ben sem Beatrice” (v.73). The poem’s re-presencing of Beatrice, then, occurs through a gradual process of allusion, followed by speech, followed by self-declaration. She “fades in” just as Virgil “fades out.” Teodolinda Barolini has explored *Paradiso* in terms of its “paradoxes of più e meno,” and here in the Earthly Paradise, Dante stages an anticipatory drama of *più e meno* in which Beatrice’s return is set against, and is in some measure contingent on, Virgil’s diminution.<sup>23</sup> It is a drama, moreover, which enacts St John’s sense of the need to diminish in the presence of Christ: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John, 3:30, *NIV*).<sup>24</sup> This relationship between Christ and John the Baptist in relation to Beatrice is a dynamic Dante also explores in *Vita nuova*: the sonnet “Io mi sentì svegliar dentro a lo core” accentuates Dante’s artistic and affective breaking from cavalcantian poetics in ways which are revisited in this culminating moment of poetic transcendence in *Purgatorio* (*Vn.* 24.7-9).<sup>25</sup> It is significant also that this is the moment in *Vita nuova* at which Beatrice-as-Christ comes to fully displace the hitherto dominating presence of the personified Amor: “Amor mi disse: ‘Quella, è Primavera, / e quella ha’nome Amor, sì mi somiglia’” (13-14).<sup>26</sup> It is not only Giovanna-as-Baptist, then, whose presence is made to diminish in this sonnet: here all sense of Amor’s personal presence is utterly subsumed by Beatrice, as Virgil’s is in *Purgatorio*. As Dante explains in the subsequent prose in the *libello*:

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<sup>23</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, “Problems in Paradise: the Mimesis of Time and the Paradox of Più e Meno,” in *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 166-193. On the dynamic of “più e meno” in *Paradiso*, see also Dorothy L. Sayers, “Dante the Maker,” in *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement: On Dante and Other Writers* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006 [1963]), 21-44, esp. p.31.

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Thomas Graff for pointing me towards John, 3:30 in relation to *Purgatorio* 30.

<sup>25</sup> cf. Manuele Gagnolati, “(In-)Corporeality, Language, Performance in Dante’s *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia*,” in *Dante’s Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, eds. Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gagnolati, and Jürgen Trabant (London: Routledge, 2010), 211-222, 218.

<sup>26</sup> On the connection between Beatrice, Giovanna, Christ, and John the Baptist, see Freccero, “Virgil, Sweet Father,” 9; Gagnolati, “Identità d’autore,” 29-32; Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 67-68.

Potrebbe qui dubitare persona degna da dichiararle onne dubitazione, e dubitare potrebbe di ciò, che io dico d'Amore come se fosse una cosa per sé, e non solamente sustanzia intelligente, ma sì come fosse sustanzia corporeale: la quale cosa, secondo la veritate, è falsa; ché Amore non è per sé sì come sustanzia, ma è uno accidente in sustanzia ( *Vn.* 25.1).

Here, then, the purported substantiality of Amor is revealed to have been illusory, despite the fact that, up until this moment of revelation, Dante has cultivated for him such a strong personal presence that he is able to move, speak, and even laugh ( *Vn.* 25.2). It is a radical form of diminution which, much like Virgil's departure in *Purgatorio* 30, serves the important function of "presencing" Beatrice as the affective object of focus. The various forms of diminution at work at this juncture in *Vita nuova* constitute an important precursor to the drama of departure and return in the Earthly Paradise. As Howard has observed, as the journey up the mountain approaches its terminus, "there is ever less place for a pre-Christian like Virgil."<sup>27</sup> His pagan presence must decrease so that Beatrice's salvific presence can increase.

The biblical model of gradual decrease can, in fact, be productively applied to Virgil's trajectory towards personal absence in *Purgatorio* as a whole. Widening our focus to consider the purgatorial narrative more broadly, it becomes clear that Dante draws out the drama of Virgil's decreasing presence across the second *cantica*, with Canto 30 serving as an end-point for the gradual process of personal subsidence.<sup>28</sup> Thus, there is no haptic contact between Dante and Virgil after *Purgatorio* 16.<sup>29</sup> Shortly thereafter, Virgil ceases to be "lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore" (*Inf.*, 1.85) and becomes one of two "miei poeti" (*Purg.* 28.146), and his final words to Dante, "Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno" (*Purg.* 27.139) occur three cantos before Dante becomes aware of his absence.<sup>30</sup> Virgil's personal presence in the poem, then, is in itself a *scemare*: his agency diminishes and, eventually, so does our sense of him as a figure present in the narrative. Giuseppe Ledda has recently noted that Virgil's narrative trajectory in *Purgatorio* is

<sup>27</sup> Lloyd H. Howard, *Virgil the Blind Guide*, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Barolini summarizes Virgil's trajectory of decreasing agency through the apt image of an hourglass: "When Vergil arrives, an hourglass is set, and the grains of sand fall one by one until, in *Purgatorio* XXX, the glass is empty." See "Epic Resolution" in *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 188-286, 202.

<sup>29</sup> cf. *Purg.* 16.9: "mi s'accostò e l'omero m'offerse." See "Centro del cammin," 118-119.

<sup>30</sup> cf. Barolini, "Epic Resolution," 267.

one in which “si avvia a diventare più un compagno di viaggio che una guida,” and this altered dynamic is plainly visible when Dante’s and Virgil’s eyes meet for the last time in *Purgatorio* 29.55-57: “Io mi rivolsi d’ammirazion pieno / al buon Virgilio, ed esso mi rispuose / con vista carca di stupor non meno.”<sup>31</sup> This is a very different Virgil to the “maestro cortese” of the first *cantica* (*Inf.* 3.121), who was able to successfully navigate the infernal landscape, and to be the (literal) vehicle of Dante’s conversion at the bottom of Hell.<sup>32</sup> This is a Virgil whose pagan wisdom can hold no further currency and who, true to his final spoken lines, can offer neither word nor gesture, but only a look of blank surprise.

Nor should the fact that Dante physically turns towards Virgil in these deeply affecting moments be lost on us. As has been widely noted, Dante’s staging of absence in *Purgatorio* 30 is undergirded by Virgil’s own narrative concerning absence in the fourth *Georgic*, and particularly by Orpheus’ lament at the loss of Eurydice after he turns back towards her in the underworld.<sup>33</sup> While commentators have tended to focus on Orpheus’ language at this moment in Virgil’s poem, widening our intertextual lens to include the event of Eurydice’s disappearance may cast a more direct light on the process of Virgil’s disappearance. At the moment of Orpheus’ turning, we are told, Eurydice “ex oculis subito, ceu fumus in auras / commixtus tenuis, fugit diversa, neque illum / prensantem nequiquam umbras et multa volentem / dicere praeterea vidit” (*Georgics*, 4.499-502).<sup>34</sup> The pathos of these lines lies in the fact that Eurydice is not simply present one moment and gone the next: she leaves traces of smoke and shadow which gradually dissipate. Virgil’s subsidence from Dante’s poem is just such another process of dissipation, but one which spans an entire *cantica*, and which takes on a multitude of forms. As Dante turns to Virgil, in Orphic fashion, in order to cite Virgil’s own *Aeneid* to him, we find that Virgil, like Eurydice, has subsided, leaving an affective empty space behind him. That this void is witnessed in

<sup>31</sup> Ledda, “Sulla presenza di Virgilio nel *Paradiso*,” 123.

<sup>32</sup> cf. John Freccero, “Infernal Inversion and Christian Conversion: *Inferno* XXXIV” in *The Poetics of Conversion*, 180-185.

<sup>33</sup> See note 11. On intertextuality between *Purgatorio* 30 and the *Georgics* in particular, see Freccero, “Virgil, Sweet Father,” 7; Hawkins, “Dido, Beatrice, and the Signs of Ancient Love”; Hollander, “Tragedia nella *Commedia*”; Jacoff, “Intertextualities in Arcadia”; Montemaggi, “Pride and Prayer”; Rushworth, “Proust’s *Recherche*, Derridean ‘demi-deuil’, and Mimetic Mourning.”

<sup>34</sup> “Suddenly fled in all directions from his eyes, like smoke into thin air, and though he grasped at the shadows and longed to say more, she did not see him” (translation mine).

between Dante's sensing of Beatrice's presence and her eventual self-announcement is especially noteworthy: an experience of absence is nested within an experience of presence in what Rachel Jacoff calls the "double motion of disappearance/appearance."<sup>35</sup> With this idea in mind, and if affect "arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*," as Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg have suggested, then it is little wonder that *Purgatorio* 30 constitutes the *Commedia*'s greatest affective crux.<sup>36</sup> For the first time since the *selva oscura*, after all, Dante is momentarily without a guide. Or, rather, he is momentarily *in-between* two guides, and this affective in-between-ness is heightened by the fact that this moment, characterized by departure and reunion, is overtly framed between language and silence; between presence and absence.

And Virgil himself falls into a *sui generis* form of "in-between-ness" after the moment of his departure. What Auerbach calls the "Vigilian element" persists into *Paradiso*, a realm where articulations of absence become all the more complex.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the concentrated interplay of presence and absence in *Purgatorio* 30 primes us for a new poetics of absence in the third *cantica*, where absence is experienced in radically different ways. Sure enough, when *scemare* appears in *Paradiso*, it acquires new resonances which retrospectively gloss *scemare* as applied to Virgil in the Earthly Paradise.<sup>38</sup> Glossing the divine logic of salvation in *Paradiso* 20, the Eagle of Justice entreats:

E voi, mortali, tenetevi stretti  
a giudicar: ché noi, che Dio vedemo,  
non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti;  
ed ènne dolce così fatto scemo,  
perché il ben nostro in questo ben s'affina,  
che quel che vole Iddio, e noi volemo (*Par.* 20.133-138)

In the upper reaches of Paradise, then, a *fatto scemo* is something not to be lamented, but celebrated. Lessening and lack are to be understood very differently in the third realm, where knowledge

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<sup>35</sup> Jacoff, "Intertextualities in Arcadia," 131. See also Howard, *Virgil the Blind Guide*, 133-134.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp.1-25, 1. Emphasis in original.

<sup>37</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*, trans., Ralph Manheim, (New York: New York Review of Books, 2007), 90.

<sup>38</sup> On retrospective understanding in the *Commedia*, see Heather Webb, "The *Inferno* from a Purgatorial (and Paradisiacal) Perspective," in *Critical Insights: The Inferno*, ed. Patrick Hunt, (Pasadena and Hackensack: Salem Press, 2012), 49-62.

operates in new ways, and where experiences of personal absence are disentangled from grief.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, given its radically new poetics of desire, *Paradiso* is able to dramatize the notion that experiences of lack need not be bound up with sensations of loss. If *scemare* functions throughout *Purgatorio* as a particular form of diminution, in *Paradiso* it reveals the importance of what is left behind. To that end, the word “dolce” in this passage should not be lost on us either. Alongside *scemare*, *dolce* serves to strengthen the linguistic connection between these words of the eagle and Dante’s farewell to Virgil in *Purgatorio* 30. As Barolini has observed, Virgil is referred to as *dolce* no fewer than twelve times in the second *cantica* and, most emphatically, as Dante’s “dolcissimo padre” in Canto 30.<sup>40</sup> Further, *Paradiso* 20 is a canto whose eschatological occupations are underpinned by the unexpected personal presence of Trajan and Ripheus: characters who bring the question of Virgil’s own personal absence once again to the fore.<sup>41</sup> In his work on the paradoxical presence/absence of Christ in the *Commedia*, Peter Hawkins posits that “rather than referring to his *absence* [...] we would do better to speak of his refracted presence within it,” and it is in such densely Virgilian moments in *Paradiso* that Virgil’s own refracted, intertextual presence is refocused despite, or perhaps because of, his personal absence.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, such persistent Virgilian resonances lead Vittorio Montemaggi to suggest that “it is precisely by being absent that Virgil can continue to nourish Dante.”<sup>43</sup> These are notions which have, in fact, been captured in revealing ways in artistic responses to Virgil’s *scemare* and final departure. One particularly striking example is Liam Ó Broin’s 2021 lithograph of *Purgatorio* 27:<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Rushworth discusses this aspect of the *Commedia*’s spiritual progression in terms of Freudian decathexis. See “Mourning and *acedia* in Dante” in *Discourses of Mourning*, 18-53.

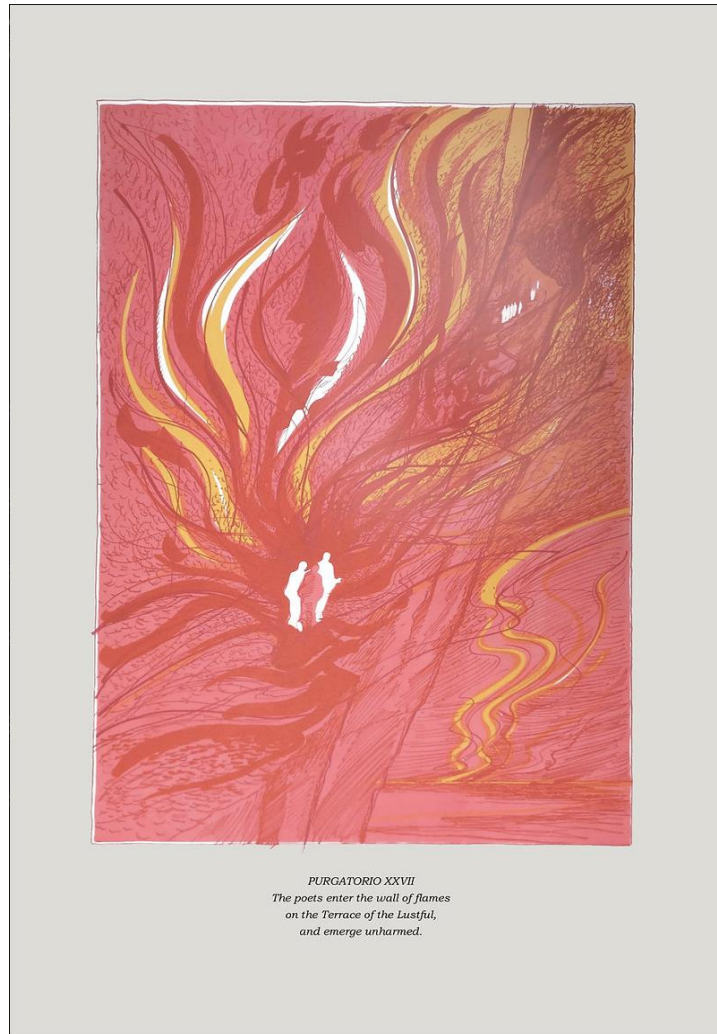
<sup>40</sup> Barolini, “Epic Resolution,” 245. On Virgil and *dolcezza*, see Franco Ricordi, “Canto XXX, Beatrice: La nascita dell’arte moderna e la fortissima accusa” in *Filosofia della Commedia di Dante*, vol. 2 (Milan: Mimesis Edizioni, 2020), 405-421, 411-412.

<sup>41</sup> On the unexpected presence of Trajan and Ripheus, see Robin Kirkpatrick, “Dante and his difficulties,” in *Dante’s ‘Inferno’: Difficulty and Dead Poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1-33, 18.

<sup>42</sup> Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 110. Emphasis in original.

<sup>43</sup> Montemaggi, “Pride and Prayer,” 237.

<sup>44</sup> Reproduced by kind permission of the artist. Following collaboration with the Centre for Dante Studies in Ireland, Ó Broin’s lithographs of the *Commedia* are available to view at <https://www.commediadivinaonlineexhibition.com/home>.



At the center of the flame in the foreground of Ó Broin's image, in a pictorial landscape that brims with color, the viewer's eye is drawn to two white silhouettes: one a nervous Dante, the other an erect, confident Virgil, guiding his charge through the "incendio senza metro" of the terrace of lust (*Purg.* 27.51). The focal point of the image, then, is a blank space describing the outlines of the two poets. In purely visual terms, Ó Broin harnesses empty space in order to prime his viewer's interpretative faculties in such a way that they cannot but read the image in terms of the presence/absence dialectic. We see absence on the visual plane here, just as Dante contrives for us to see it in the textual drama of the Earthly Paradise. Ó Broin fixes his viewer's attention on "Virgillessness," capturing in an image the textual interplay of presence and absence at this juncture in Dante's poem. We cannot but note, after all, that in *Purgatorio* 27 these two figures are approaching diametrically opposed teloi. For while Dante is on the verge of his culminating moment of purgation, and thus of personal and spiritual fulfilment, Virgil's personal presence in the narrative

is reaching its terminus.<sup>45</sup> Dante's personhood here verges on completion, and this is strikingly juxtaposed, in Ó Broin's image as in Dante's poem, with Virgil's immanent personal absence. This artistic response to "Virgillessness," then, allows us more fully to appreciate how absence functions in the *Commedia* at large. Like Spark's cat, the author of the *Aeneid* leaves a void behind him, yet he remains a vital intertextual presence throughout the third *cantica*, lasting even up to the poem's closing moments.<sup>46</sup> In the context of *Paradiso*'s paradoxes of *più e meno*, Virgil's presence is reduced, but not to zero. Approaching "Virgillessness," then, gives us an opportunity to interrogate more fully how absence functions between *cantiche*, and *scemare*, a word vital to Dante's articulation of absence, allows the poem to lay bare the continuum between presence and absence in operation across its three realms. It is not, Dante insists, a simple case of one or the other.

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<sup>45</sup> See Francis Fergusson, *Dante's Drama of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 175-215.

<sup>46</sup> cf. Hawkins, "For the Record," 91-93; Ledda, "Sulla presenza di Virgilio nel *Paradiso*," 42-143. I explore Virgil's allusive "presence" in *Paradiso* 33 further in "Centro del cammin," 141-149.