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In his epic journey, Dante experiences entrapments, digressions, and ultimately new apertures, leading him forward on his journey to Paradise. The hag-siren of *Purgatorio* 19 is one of the primary figures, whose song sways the poet in a moment of *reverie*, embodying a de-mobilizing entrapment most unique and perilous within the poem. While the patristic and medieval traditions have traditionally portrayed the siren as a figure for the deleterious effects of music on the soul, Dante scholarship has glossed the *dolce serena* as a coordinate for the Medusa of *Inferno* 9. The siren's association with the Medusa implicitly harkens the reader back to the highly sensual, fugue-like subtext of the *rime petrose* of an earlier Dantean repertoire. This essay explores the highly sexualized voice of the hag-siren, a voice and music which Dante must reckon with and purge from his poem in his journey toward the sublime musicality of the *Paradiso*.

Keywords: Medusa, Siren, *Rime Petrose*

Dante scholarship has indicated a nexus linking the episodes of the hag-siren of *Purgatorio* 19 and the Medusa of *Inferno* 9. Studies such as those of Freccero and De Bonfils Templer have amply demonstrated a link underpinning the two figures.¹ My own scholarship has sought to correlate the two emblems not only by virtue of their mythographic and iconographic connections, but also through their representation of the vice of avarice, which, according to Dante, is the utmost opposing force counteracting justice in society.² In this essay, I will discuss these two figures of female transgression vis à vis their connection to the poet's pursuit of euphony in the *Commedia*. I will argue that the Medusa is an emblem for an *anti-musica infernale* coined by Sanguinetti, that Dante goes

¹ John Freccero and Rachel Jacoff, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Maria Bonfils-Templer, "Il Virgilio dantesco e il secondo sogno del *Purgatorio* (*Purg* XIX)," *Italica* 59, no. 1 (1982): 41–52.

² Florence Russo, *Dante's Search for the Golden Age*. (New York: Forum Italicum Filibrary, 2011).

to great pains to expel from his poem—in his exodus from Hell and in his ascent to the Mountain of Purgatory—the *Comedy's* Parnassus. As Sanguineti indeed reminds us: “The soundscape of hell is a meditated and meaningful plenitude of anti-music, of disharmonic harshness and acoustic unpleasantness.”³ The Medusa episode is indeed a manifestation of this anti-music, signaling a moral misplacement, or *discordia*, in its literal sense, namely a displacement of the heart. The Infernal scene harkens back both in content and in form to the *rime aspre e chioce* of the stony rhymes, for the temporary impasse at the City of Dis and the threat of the Medusa’s gaze conjure the themes of impasse and obduracy imparted by the frustrated love story of the Poet for the Donna Pietra in the *petrose*. The implicit threat of the Medusa, and her snake-like hair, though she never actually appears in the episode, nonetheless is represented with the sibilants *alto/smalto/assalto*, which pervade the obsessive sestina of Dante’s earlier poetic repertoire.

The *Rime petrose*, the product of a younger Dante’s poetic virtuosity, represent frustrated poetics, where *eros* and *thanatos* meet, leading not to transcendence but to a transgressive, Cavalcantian outcome. Freccero has likened the poems to an idolatry of sorts, leading to petrification.⁴ Like the Medusa, the Hag-siren of *Purgatorio* 19, too represents the compromising, seductive aspect of music that leads to stasis. The episode of the *dolce serena* is thus similar to the transgressive musical interlude offered by Casella in *Purgatorio* 2. As noted in his famous essay’s *incipit*, Robert Hollander observes that “Casella’s song *is* a Siren’s song.”⁵ Indeed, Casella’s episode shares a common denominator with that of the siren: a seductive, enrapturing musical interlude that evokes Cato’s rebuke of the poet for delaying his ascent of the Mountain. Dante himself admits to this musical penchant, recalling the transgression in line 114: “la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona.” He also alludes to it in lines 106–108: “amoroso canto che mi soleva quietar tutte mie doglie.” These verses lead to further connections proving Hollander’s point, for the siren is too *dolce*, however false and misleading that sweetness may be. She proclaims: “Io son . . . Io son . . .

³ Edoardo Sanguineti, “Infernal Acoustics: Sacred Song and Earthly Song,” *Lectura Dantis* 6 (1990): 69–79.

⁴ See John Freccero, “Medusa: the Letter and the Spirit” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁵ Robert Hollander, “*Purgatorio* II: Cato’s Rebuke and Dante’s ‘scoglio,’” *Italica* 52, no. 3 (1975): 348.

dolce serena” (19). She too echoes *Purgatorio 2’s amoroso canto*, in her false promise to satisfy all of the Poet’s desires: “sì tutto l’ap-pago” (24).

Further in this essay, we shall see how the Medusa and the siren are emblems of the devious and perverse aspects of the musical experience, as they are embodiments of this illusory plenitude that gravitates around the female voice. The realization of that illusory nature will surface later in the poem in Beatrice’s rebuke of Dante, spanning *Purgatorio* 30 and 31. Here, Dante’s final guide chastises the Poet for having succumbed to images of falsehood, “immagini di ben seguendo false, / che nulla promission rendono intera,” (*Purg.* 30. 131–132) and she urges him to beware and to recognize the sirens’ seductive voices: “perché altra volta udendo le serene sie più forte” (*Purg.* 31. 44–45). This interesting plurality in the reference to *serene* has puzzled Dante scholars, who must rightly assume that with poets like Dante, coincidences are hardly ever occasioned. I should like to point to the plurality of the word *serene* as implying a cohort, and in this regard, I agree with Robert Hollander. Indeed, there are many siren songs that seduce Dante in the poem, which represent in their allure, potential impediments in his journey toward askesis. Casella is indeed one of them. I will argue that the Medusa, by virtue of the subtext that she implies (namely the *rime petrose*), though she never utters a word, nor actually appears in the poem, save for the invocation of the Erynnies made in her name, “Vegna Medusa sì ‘l farem di smalto” (*Inf.* 9. 52), is indeed one of the other sirens to whom Beatrice was referring in her rebuke. Beatrice, in fact, makes mention of a *pargoletta*, who weighed down Dante’s potential wings of spiritual flight, precluding his transcendence of the earthly: “Non ti dovea gravar le penne in giuso, / ad aspettar più colpo, o pargoletta / o altra novità con sì breve uso.” (*Purg.* 31. 58–60) Many scholars, such as Freccero, have speculated on the rhyme words’ connection with the *rime petrose*, which occurs in the last verse of “Io son venuto al punto de la rota.”⁶ Here Dante experiences a total absence of love, as he contemplates his beloved and her impenetrable heart of stony marble: “se in pargoletta fia un cor di marmo” (71).

⁶ Freccero, “Medusa,” 117.

Elsewhere in the *Rime*, Medusa-like imagery occurs. In “I mi son pargoletta bella e nova” death is the inevitable consequence of looking the Lady in the eyes:

io che per veder lei mirai fiso,
ne sono a rischio di perder la vita;
però ch'io ricevetti tal ferita
da un ch'io vidi dentro a li occhi sui,
ch'i' vo' piangendo e non m'acchetai più. (20–24)

While “Chi guarderà già mai senza paura” reinforces the use of the appellative *pargoletta* and its association with Medusa-like imagery:

Chi guarderà già mai senza paura
ne li occhi d'esta bella pargoletta,
che m'hanno concio sì, che non s'aspetta
per me se non la morte, che m'è dura? (1–4)

Returning to Dante's self-confessed love of music, as seen in *Purgatorio 2*, Boccaccio recounts Dante's attachment to the musical world in his *Trattatello*:

Sommamente si diletto in suoni e in canti nella sua giovanezza, e a ciascuno che a que' tempi era ottimo cantatore o sonatore fu amico e ebbe sua usanza; e assai cose da questo diletto tirato compose, le quali di piacevole e maestrevole nota a questi cotali facea rivestire.⁷

This love of music further compromises Dante in the *Purgatorio*, where he succumbs to his weakness for the song of the siren, a weakness that renders him ever more similar to his alter-ego, Ulysses. In the *Convivio*, music is assigned to the heaven of Mars, given the planet's harmonious proportion. It is the fifth planet, inhabiting the middle orbit. In its centeredness, it is equidistant from Earth and the Empyrean, possessing the ability to burn and desiccate. One could speculate whether this passage already implies the *Comedy's* take on music, in the latter's potential ability to create stasis, even petrify, like the Medusa, and thus delay or annihilate the Pilgrim's spiritual growth.

If the *Paradiso* is the realm where true music resides, the quest for music, which goes hand in hand with the quest for poetry,

⁷ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), 3.

begins in the second canticle, in the ascent to Mt. Purgatory, Dante's figural ascent to Parnassus. This, of course, is the canticle in which we encounter the siren. Nancy Jones points out the second canticle's ties to the arts and music that: "To view music and song as the central theme of the Siren episode accords with the widespread view of *Purgatorio*, as the canticle most specifically concerned with art. The long rosters of painters and poets . . . encountered in *Purgatorio* underscore Dante's highly self-conscious meditation on the power to convert other souls."⁸ Dante's spiritual depuration of his art implies a corrective of his own poetic precursors and of his own poetics. She adds that the *Purgatorio* "does not envision this process . . . in exclusively verbal and textual terms . . . it is also a meditation on poetry as a vocalized form of expression that has a special power to affect the soul."⁹

The *Purgatorio*'s first canto opens with an invocation to Calliope, after the Poet declares the resurrection of the reified poetry of the *Inferno*:

Ma qui la morta poesì resurga,
o sante Muse, poi che vostro sono;
e qui Caliopè alquanto surga,
seguitando il mio canto con quel suono
di cui le Piche misere sentiro
lo colpo tal, che disperar perdono. (7–12)

In the invocation to the Muse, apart from Dante's self-insertion into the victorious Muse's tradition, we learn of the Ovidian account from the *Metamorphoses*, which narrates a song competition amongst the mortal Pierides, and the divine Muses, whom Dante hails as *sante* (*le sante Muse*). The artistic challenge is considered an act of hubris initiated by the daughters of Pierus who challenge the Muses in song. The Pierides sing of a gigantomachy, glorifying the giants who rebelled against the gods, while Calliope, the Muses' competitor, instead chooses to sing a *sermo humilis*, narrating the abduction of Persephone by Pluto and Demeter's pursuant wrathful response to the abrupt separation from her daughter. Calliope stresses the role of divine presence in the vicissitudes

⁸ Nancy Jones, "Music and the Maternal Voice in *Purgatorio XIX*," in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, eds. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40.

⁹ Jones, "Music and the Maternal Voice," 70.

narrated in her song. She ultimately emerges from the competition as the victorious songstress.

The Ovidian account may be read on many levels, but I would like to suggest one germane to the topic at hand, mainly that there are two types of song: one mortal and earthly and one immortal or divinely inspired—an earthly song and a spiritual song. This dichotomy of music is one that Dante must have read in the *Confessions*. There, Augustine’s meditation on the religious music of his time leads to exaltation of the pivotal role that it played in his conversion experience. He expresses a repulsion for the exceedingly beautiful and ornate manifestations of music, for singing, he will say, is good as long as it does not abound in excessive auditory pleasure or in the glorification of the individual. The latter drives the mind and the spirit away from the melody’s significance as conveyed by words. Choral singing, that is polyphony, guards against this, as it is the surrendering of personal will in prayer to God. Augustine warns against the dangerous outcome induced by that music that compromises spirituality: “I am more moved by the singing than by what is sung. I confess myself to have sinned wickedly, and then I would rather not have heard the singing.”¹⁰ Thus, Augustine points to the potential danger of the musical experience, which can lead to a spiritual weakness, a potential effect that Dante faithfully echoes in Book 2 of the *Convivio*:

“La Musica trae a sé li spiriti umani, che quasi sono principalmente vapori del cuore, sì che quasi cessano da ogni operazione: sì è l’anima intera, quando l’ode e la virtù di tutti quasi corre allo spirito sensibile che riceve lo suono.” (*Conv.* 2. 13.24)¹¹

Let us now consider the two figures of this study and then view them in light of this theology of music that Dante inherits from Augustine. We turn to the Medusa episode. Having crossed the Stygian marsh, Virgil and Dante wait in terror at the gate of Dis. Virgil tries to keep Dante’s hope alive as this is the first time that the forces of Hell have not accepted his repetition of the magic

¹⁰ See Augustine’s *Confessions* (33). Also, on this topic, see Francesco Ciabattini, *Dante’s Journey to Polyphony* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

¹¹ “Music attracts human spirits, which are principally vapors of the heart almost, so that they almost completely cease their activity; this happens likewise to the entire soul when it hears music, and the virtue of all of them, as it were, runs to the sensitive spirit that receives the sound.” [My translation]

formula (“vuolsi così colà dove si puote ciò che si vuole . . .” Virgil’s anger at the stubbornness of the devils, his hesitation and momentary lapse of confidence do not reassure Dante, whose fear increases when, on the high tower above the gate of the City, the Furies appear, shouting in anger at the intruder and tearing their flesh with their nails. They summon Medusa to punish the pilgrim who has dared to enter their realm. “Vegna Medusa: sì ‘l farem di smalto / dicevan tutte riguardando in giuso / “Mal non vengiammo in Tesöo l’assalto” (52–54).

It is clear that the Erinnyes by themselves present no danger to Dante, even though they include themselves in the punitive action of the Medusa. They possess the same serpentine attributes as the Medusa, but they do not have her power. In fact, Virgil leisurely takes time to identify them by name one by one. Their summoning of the Medusa, however, prompts an immediate response from Virgil. His actions confirm that she is the dangerous one. Thus, he orders Dante to turn away from where she might appear and cover his eyes. In haste, Virgil places his hands over Dante’s to make sure that he does not see the Medusa, who never appears.

Instead, in *Purgatorio* 19, the threat, in the form of the hag-siren, actually appears. The canto opens in the early morning hours with Dante’s dream of a club-footed, stammering, hideous hag whom his desires transform into a bewitching siren, who brags that she has lured many men, even Ulysses himself, to their demise. A saintly lady (*donna santa e presta*) intervenes, and at her beckoning, Virgil unveils the Siren, uncovering her nudity and stench. Dante awakens in a deeply troubled state but only after Virgil had tried to rouse him three times.

Both the Medusa and the Siren episodes occur at transitional moments in the Pilgrim’s journey. In *Inferno* 9, the Pilgrim has gone through the circles where the sins of incontinence are punished and is about to enter the city of Dis where he will be confronted with the graver sins of Hell. The structural transition governing Dante’s encounter with the Siren in *Purgatorio* 19 is the exact reverse. In this case, the Pilgrim has made his way through the terraces of graver sins and approaches the terraces where the sins of incontinence are expiated.

The Medusa and the hag-siren encounters feature the saving grace of divine intervention, embodied in the *messo celeste* of *Inferno* 9 (who will come and open the gate of Dis and dispel the

impasse) and in the *donna santa e presta* of *Purgatorio* 19, whose actions are essential for the continuation of the journey. The episodes represent two crucial moments to demonstrate the weakness and the frailty of man when confronted with the female voice and her song and to illustrate the doctrine that divine grace is needed to overcome their seduction. They constitute forms of entrapment that point out the weakness of the Pilgrim's power of reason. That is why Virgil, who represents reason, fails to overcome the threat and must await the arrival of a higher power to dispose of the impediments.

A relevant passage in *Epistle* 5 reveals a discourse on the sweetness of the sirens, a sweetness so seductive to man that reason has no power:

“Nec seducat alludens cupiditas, more Sirenum nescio qua dulcedine vigiliam rationis mortificans.” (*Epist.* 5.13)¹²

Keeping this passage in mind, I believe that Nancy Jones is on point when she speaks of Dante's conscious effort in the *Commedia* to: “purge his song of its potential association with sensuality, artifice and individualistic virtuosity.”¹³ We must remember how in the *Commedia* the Siren manifests herself in *Purgatorio* 19 by accentuating her identity and her power to seduce: “Io son, Io son dolce serena,” where the emphasis on the self could not be more obvious, despite her stammering.

In the case of the Medusa, studies have pointed to the many ambivalences associated with her as a manifestation of the female voice. Charles Segal has traced the etymology of the name Gorgon to its Indo-European root *Garj*, which denotes a frightful shriek, an animal-like roar.¹⁴ In Greek tradition, she is associated with the dirge and the war cry. In Euripides' *Heracles Mad*, the Gorgon does not herself have to shriek, as she is crowned with 100 shrieking and hissing snakes.¹⁵

¹² “Do not be deceived by the wiles of avarice, which with a charm like that of the Sirens of old is able to destroy the vigilance of your reason.” [My translation]

¹³ Jones, “Music and the Maternal Voice,” 42.

¹⁴ Charles Segal, *Aglaia: The Poetry of Alcman, Sappho, Pindar, Bacchylides and Corinna* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 86.

¹⁵ See the studies of Alphonse A. Barb, “Antaura, the Mermaid and the Devil's Grandmother,” *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 1–23.

The iconography of the Gorgon Medusa depicts her in a way that heavily emphasizes her oral features, such as a protruding tongue, boar tusks, or gnashing teeth. The grotesquely extended tongue combined with the idea of an emerging roar from the face of the Medusa may indicate a lack of verbal coherence, likening the Medusa more to the realm of the beasts than to the human.¹⁶ In this way too the Medusa and the Siren are one, for the hag-siren is a stammering, stuttering figure in her first appearance to Dante as the *femmina balba*. Another trait that the two figures share is that they are both creatures of the sea. While the Siren's connection with the sea is evident (she is pictured with the lower body of a fish and the upper body of a woman), Medusa's connection with it has not been stressed by modern mythographers. Apollodorus, however, told the tale of Perseus who flew over the ocean and caught the Gorgons asleep and proceeded to behead Medusa with the help of Athena. It is not clear where exactly in the Ocean the Gorgons lived, whether on an island or in the watery depths. The Greeks, however, associated the creatures with the sea. The fact that Medusa was raped by Poseidon, the god of the seas, is another indication of her marine connection.¹⁷ In addition, the Gorgons were the offspring of Phorcys, who was known as the Old Man of the Sea and of Cetus, the sea monster.¹⁸ The most powerful attribute the Medusa and Siren share is their power to fascinate their victims to the point that they become unable to move and their power is effective only with men.

Returning to *Inferno* 9, we can say that the Erinnyes speak for Medusa (“Vegna Medusa, sì ’l farem di smalto” [52]), much like

¹⁶ See Alphonse A. Barb, “Diva Matrix,” *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16 (1953): 193–230, as well as *The Medusa Reader*, eds. Marjorie B. Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (New York: Routledge, 2003). Stephen Wilk’s scholarship explores the association between the Medusa and the primitive imagination in *Medusa: Solving the Myth of the Gorgon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ See Alphonse A. Barb’s *Diva Matrix*, where he cites the Gorgon represented with a fish tail.

¹⁸ See Florence Russo, *Dante’s Search*, 203, note 23: “The three Gorgons share their identities with the three sisters known as the Graiae who were also begotten by Phorcys and Cetus. Their story is connected with the Gorgons in that they were instrumental in helping Perseus reach the nymphs who possessed the magical devices he required to attack Medusa. According to one version of the myth, Perseus stole the one eye and one tooth the three Graiae shared and forced them to direct him to the Nymphs. The nymphs provided Perseus with the winged sandals that allowed him to fly and the cap that made him invisible. Hermes was the god who gave him the sickle-shaped sword he used to decapitate Medusa.”

the one hundred snakes of Euripides' representation. Yet she speaks by evoking in the *versi strani*, a subtext that is the product of Dante's earlier poetic repertoire, dating back approximately to 1296–1297, a subset of the *rime petrose* characterized by Contini as a surd element in Dante's poetic development. The rhyme words of *Inferno* 9 are for the most part sibilants (*alto/smalto/assalto*). They are indeed the same rhyme words that Dante will use in *Inferno* 32. One could speculate on the sibilants' onomatopoeia, in their reproduction of serpentine hissing. To this extent, this harsh violence on the language may perhaps be part of the anti-music that Sanguinetti references.

Further, the *sestina*, the poetic genre used in the stony rhymes, itself could be likened to a musical fugue, given the circularity and repetition of its six *parole rima*. The Medusa imagery also spells circularity and entrapment: the coldness and hardness of the heart of the lady, the Poet who is himself transformed into stone, the dry wintery scene of ice and crystal, the lack of transcending love that leads to life. The whole scene, in both form and content, points to a carnal and earthly poetics, devoid of spirituality. This carnal song of frustrated love, eros and death culminates in a rape fantasy in “Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro,” where the Poet pines for his lady, while realizing the futility of his unreciprocated love. He thus exclaims: “Ohmè, perché non latra per me, com'io per lei, nel caldo borro?” (60) And here the only voice associated with Dante's Medusa-like lady is a *latrare*, a howl which he envisions from her innards. Indeed, a carnal poetic song of sorts emerges from these poems and this animalistic cry of Dante's fantasy is akin to the cry of the Gorgon described earlier, where the danger of the female voice is associated with physicality. This is true for the most part in the lyric of the *Duecento*, in poets like Cavalcanti (see his *pasturella*). But we must remember that Dante's new aesthetics—that begin with his invocation of Calliope and the journey to the *Purgatorio*—imply what Amilcare Iannucci describes as an “ethical dimension . . . that . . . must direct the will toward God, not to indulge it into a contemplation of beauty for its own sake.”¹⁹

The immobilizing effect of the Medusa of the *Inferno* mirrored by her imagery in the *rime petrose* is echoed in Dante's encounter with the Siren, which represents a crisis midway through

¹⁹ Amilcare Iannucci, “Casella's Song and the Turning of the Soul,” *Thought* 65, no. 1 (1990): 42–43.

the Poet's journey to the Mountain of Purgatory. While the Medusa episode is much more indirect, here the Pilgrim comes face to face with the tempting power of the female voice in all its seductiveness. The Siren's song is a perfect conflation of hubris and the earthly song that Augustine had found so transgressive. Her self-glorification boasts of the seduction of Ulysses and a promise of an illusory plenitude, the *immagini di ben seguendo false*, of Beatrice's rebuke. In her allusion to Ulysses, she encompasses the admonition of Cicero's *De finibus*, guarding man against the lure of the sirens and their false promises to impart a secret knowledge on their victims.²⁰ The Siren's voice is so alluring that she must be silenced and unveiled in her vulgar and putrid sexuality by Virgil. Again, the allure of the female voice implies physicality, a compromising element for Dante Pilgrim and Poet. The revelation of her genitalia harkens back to the iconography of the Medusa, whose countenance for the Greeks represented the *hystera*, the actual female womb.²¹ Further, her stuttering babble may symbolize the destabilizing erotic themes and cacophonous language that are more appropriate to the realm of the infernal. In this sense, the Siren symbolizes potential spiritual and linguistic regression. Freccero has in fact alluded to a linguistic nexus between the aforementioned rhyme words of *Inferno* 9 (*alto/smalto/assalto*) with the rhyme words ending in *-olto* in *Purgatorio* 19 (*volto/disciolto/rivolto*).²²

Unlike Virgil's *Aeneid*, whose text mothers Statius, embodying both the aesthetic and spiritual in its charge, sending Statius on the road to conversion, instead the Siren's song represents what Nancy Jones describes as a: "monodic, incantatory performance in which music and sound are privileged over text. Spiritually debilitating in its effect, her singing so sates the senses that a seasoned will is required to break its spell."²³ Dante will have to progress in his spiritual journey before encountering the last songstress of the *Purgatorio*, Matelda, the third guide with whom he is able to engage

²⁰ "Neque enim vocum suavitate videntur aut novitiate quadam et varietate cantandi revocare eos solitae qui praetervehebantur, sed quia multa se scire profitebantur, ut homines ad earum saxa discendi cupiditate adhaerescerent;" *De finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 5.18.49, trans. Harris Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 448–51.

²¹ Barb, *Diva Matrix*.

²² Freccero, "Medusa: the Letter and the Spirit," 1–18.

²³ Jones, "Music and the Maternal Voice," 47.

in direct discourse, while progressing on his spiritual journey, balancing the beauty of her song and her text.

Like the *terzina* itself, Matelda's song, enunciated by Psalm 91, will lead Dante forward, dissipating the fog ("purgherò la nebbia che ti fiede" [*Purg.* 28. 90]) that obfuscated the air in *Purgatorio* 19. As Peter Hawkins reminds us, Matelda "presents us with the possibility that music and lyric, the work of art, can continue to serve as a form of worship."²⁴

²⁴ Peter S. Hawkins, "Watching Matelda," in *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante's "Commedia,"* eds. Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey Schnapp (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 200.