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SINGING FOR DANTE IN ‘PURGATORIO’
30–31

Helena Phillips-Robins
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 si lo stempre?’,
lo gel che m’era intorno al cor ristretto,
spirito e acqua fessi, e con angoscia
de la bocca e de li occhi usci 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 tempre” 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

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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

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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.  

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. 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.” 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.

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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.

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 si tacque; e li angeli cantaro
di sùbito “In te, Domine, speravi,”
ma oltre “pedes meos” non passaro.
Si come neve tra le vive travi
per lo dosso d’Italia si congela,
soffiata e stretta da li venti schiavi,
poi, liquefatta, in sé stessa trapela,
pur che la terra che perde ombra spiri,
si che par foco fonder la candela;
cosi fui sanza 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 si lo stempre?,’
lo gel che m’era intorno al cor ristretto,
spirito e acqua fessi, e con angoscia
de la bocca e de li occhi usci 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 si lo stempre?” 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 stempre” 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. That the angels—though conveying the sentiment expressed by the “Donna, perché sì lo stempre?” 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. 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 justitia 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 spatiioso 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 stempre.”
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.]

The singing voices cry out in petition, trusting not in their own merit but in God: “in justitia tua” (2) and “propter nomen tuum” (4).¹⁰

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

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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].
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 compartire 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:

cosi fui senza lagnime 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 Gragnolati 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. 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 heavens—and sing in concord with it.

In both interpretations, the angels’ singing is a way of directing themselves toward God. 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 “I cantar” (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.

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

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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 Ciabattoni, 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 tempera/tempre—are present 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’arretri
movendo l’ali tue, credendo oltrarti,
orando grazia conven che s’impetri
grazia da quella che puote aiutarti;
et 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 disleghi
di sua mortalità co’ prieghi tuoi,
sì che ’l sommo piacer li si dispieghi.
Ancor ti priego, regina, che puoi
ciò che tu vuoli, 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, segnor 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.

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 sanza 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 Isräēl 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:

Ella si tacque; e li angeli cantaro
di subito, “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 spa-
tioso pedes meos.” 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). 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’ design-
ates pedes meos as a stopping place, but also points to the unut-
tered 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.

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. 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, utter-
ing 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.
25 Helena Phillips-Robins, “Liturgical Song in Dante’s Commedia” (PhD diss., Uni-
versity 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;  
abbracciammi 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.

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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.\textsuperscript{28}

In the Latin liturgy the \textit{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.\textsuperscript{29}

It is, however, worth examining the Aspersion 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 \textit{Asperges} and other prayers.\textsuperscript{30} The rite might include or be followed by a procession. For our purposes, the crucial point is that the \textit{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 \textit{Gloria patri}, and then the \textit{Asperges} verse again. The \textit{Asperges} antiphon, with its accompanying verse or verses from the \textit{Miserere} was sung every Sunday of the year, with the exception only of the Sundays in Eastertide, when the \textit{Asperges} was replaced by the paschal antiphon \textit{Vidi aquam} and the first verse of Psalm 117.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Ritus in ecclesia servandi} (complied between 1173–1205 and used throughout the thirteenth century),

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{L’Ottimo commento}, gloss on Purg. 31.97–9.
\textsuperscript{29} On the baptismal resonances of Dante’s immersion in the Lethe, see Dunstan J. Tucker, “\textit{In exitu Israel de Aegypto: The Divine Comedy in the Light of the Easter Liturgy},” \textit{American Benedictine Review} 11 (1960): 59–61.
\textsuperscript{30} Francesco da Buti notes in his commentary (gloss on Purg. 31.91–102) that the \textit{Asperges} “si canta la domenica mattina.”
prescribes how the Aspersion 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 magnum misericordiam tuam; et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum, dele iniquitatem meam.


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.


\(^{33}\) 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 Aspersion liturgy (a ceremony familiar to medieval readers, if less so to modern scholars) strongly suggest that it is the chant used in the Aspersion 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.

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). 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,

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