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## Sensation (Un)bound: Literary Synesthesia and Cross-Sensory Perception in Dante's 'Purgatorio' 24

Aistė Kiltinavičiūtė

University of Cambridge, aiste.kilti@gmail.com

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## Sensation (Un)bound: Literary Synesthesia and Cross-Sensory Perception in Dante's 'Purgatorio' 24

### Cover Page Footnote

My sincere thanks and appreciation go to Heather Webb, Robin Kirkpatrick, and the Cambridge Dante Circle, without whose support and probing examination of my ideas this article could not have come into being. I am also extremely grateful to the Bibliotheca Dantesca's two anonymous reviewers, whose constructive feedback represents the highest standards of peer review.

***SENSATION (UN)BOUND:  
LITERARY SYNESTHESIA AND CROSS-SENSORY  
PERCEPTION IN DANTE'S 'PURGATORIO' 24***

AISTĖ KILTINAVIČIŪTĖ, University of Cambridge<sup>1</sup>

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This article analyses Dante's cross-sensory metaphors in *Purgatorio* 24 and discusses the applicability of the term 'synesthesia' to describe the testing of the boundaries of the human sensorium that happens in the canto. The article then reconstructs some of the semantic contexts that the word *sentire* might have had for Dante and explains how it operates in the pilgrim's encounter with the Angel of Temperance. Finally, by comparing the use of *sentire* in *Purgatorio* 24 with the synesthetic imagery in the Earthly Paradise, this study outlines the broader significance of the canto in the context of *Purgatorio* as a whole.

Keywords: Dante, *Purgatorio*, Senses, Cross-sensory metaphor, Synesthesia, Angels

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In *Purgatorio* 24, Dante, Statius, and Virgil find themselves on the terrace where the gluttons, including Dante's friend Forese Donati and Bonagiunta da Lucca, expiate their inordinate tendency toward self-indulgence. At the end of the canto, the Angel of Temperance appears in order to erase the penultimate penitential mark, one of the seven P's that are inscribed on Dante's forehead as a sign of the vicious tendencies the pilgrim has to eradicate before he can proceed to Paradise (*Purg.* 9.112). It is precisely the angel's mysterious influence on Dante's sensorium (his perceptual apparatus and faculties) that this article addresses. In describing the sensory impact that the angel has on the pilgrim, Dante produces one of his most refined pieces of writing that blurs the boundaries between smell, taste, and hearing. The narrative pace slows down for the readers to experience the sheer sensory overload together with the pilgrim:

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L'aspetto suo m'avea la vista tolta;  
per ch'io mi volsi dietro a' miei dot-  
tori,  
com' om che va secondo ch'elli  
ascolta.

The blazing face had robbed me of  
my sight.  
And so behind my teachers I went  
on  
as someone will when led by what  
he hears.

E quale, annunziatrice de li albori,  
l'aura di maggio movesi e olezza,  
tutta impregnata da l'erba e da' fiori;

And as the breeze in May – first  
messenger  
of whitening dawn – is moved in  
fragrant waves,  
pregnant with grasses, greenery  
and flowers,

tal **mi senti'** un vento dar per mezza  
la fronte, e **ben senti'** mover la  
piuma,  
che **fè sentir** d'ambrosia l'orezza.

So here I **sensed**, mid-brow, wind  
touching me,  
and **sensed** the moving feathers of a  
wing  
that **brought ambrosial senses** to  
the air,

E **senti' dir**: “Beati cui alluma  
tanto di grazia, che l'amor del gusto  
nel petto lor troppo disir non fuma,

And **made me sense** the words:  
“The truly blessed  
are lit with so much grace that in  
their hearts  
a love of food fumes forth no false  
desire,

esuriendo sempre quanto è giusto!”

Esurient always for the good and  
true.”

(*Purg.* 24.142-154; trans. Robin  
Kirkpatrick)<sup>2</sup>

One immediately recognizes that this is a moment of special rhetorical and perceptual exuberance within the work. It remains less certain, however, *what* the pilgrim is perceiving, or indeed *how* this perceiving happens.

Historically, translators, commentators, and illustrators have all struggled with this passage. Among the relatively few existing pictorial depictions of the angelic encounter, the Victorian readers of Vellutello's *Commedia* tried to reproduce Dante's multisensory effects perhaps most emphatically, coloring the vibrating air around

<sup>2</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, trans. and ed. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2007).

the angel and thus marking out the zones where the miraculous manifests itself through the play of color and light (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> The more common attitude towards the deliberately broad Dantean *sentire* seems to have been to attribute to the episode far more sensory specificity than it actually provides. Robert Hollander's commentary, which speculates whether *sentire* should be translated as “feel,” “hear,” or some other sense verb, openly acknowledges the



Fig. 1. Detail from the woodcut illustrating the terrace of gluttony in *La Comedia di Dante Alighieri con la nova esposizione di Alessandro Vellutello* (Vinegia: Per Francesco Marcolini ad instantia di Alessandro Vellutello, 1544). Rare Book B85DL B44, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.<sup>4</sup>

problem.<sup>5</sup> Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi proposes that the pilgrim's perception undergoes temporal sensory activation (“il tatto,

<sup>3</sup> Compared to other cantos, there are very few attempts to illustrate the multisensory angelic encounter in *Purgatorio* 24, perhaps in part because of the significant conceptual and representative challenge it poses to the pictorial medium. Some notable examples are Dante, Statius and Virgil with the Angel of Temperance in MS Holkham misc. 48 (Oxford, Bodleian Library), and Sandro Botticelli, *The Angel of Temperance* (c. 1485), where Dante gestures as though to shield his face from the angel's overpowering sensory presence.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Jane Siegel, “Illustrations from Early Printed Editions of the *Commedia*,” *Digital Dante* (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2017): <https://digital-dante.columbia.edu/image/digitized-images/>, accessed May 20, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> In the translation of the canto by Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2003), the lines read as follows: “just such a wind *I felt stroking* my brow / and I *could feel* the moving of his feathers, / *my senses steeped in odor* of ambrosia. / I *heard* the words...” (148–151). In his commentary, Robert Hollander justifies the translation decisions with reference to the textual precedents in the *Commedia* and the history of Dante's reception, which in fact do not lead to unambiguous conclusions: “We have followed tradition in translating the verb *sentire* as meaning ‘feel.’ However, it certainly could mean ‘hear.’ The verb is used some 92 other times in the poem; some 32 of these mean ‘hear,’ while some 60 indicate a more general sense of sense perception [...]. Thus we have no reason to believe it could not mean ‘hear’

l'odorato, poi l'udito"), which, although a perfectly possible interpretative decision, does not explain why Dante does not refer to the individual senses with more specificity.<sup>6</sup> Robin Kirkpatrick's translation of the canto, which renders every instance of *sentire* simply as "sense," brings out the potential for semantic openness in the word and highlights that the insistence upon *sentire* is a conscious lexical choice. By keeping *sentire* deliberately multivalent, *Purgatorio* 24 introduces the possibility of multiple senses acting at once, supporting and supplementing each other in an encounter with the otherworldly being. Far from signaling the imprecision of Dante's sensory vocabulary, *sentire* can thus become a meeting point of several sensory-cognitive domains which the modern West usually prefers to keep distinct, namely, color, light, movement, and texture.

Even though any study that focuses on one particular instance of literary synesthesia is purposefully limited in scope, Dante's pushing of the semantic limits of *sentire* serves as an example of poetic language uniquely able to shed light on the broader medieval cognitive-sensory problematics. The sensory vocabulary of *Purgatorio* 24 allows Dante to interrogate the boundaries traditionally drawn between the five Aristotelian senses, as well as the limits and potentialities of the human sensory-cognitive apparatus in approaching the otherworldly realities. Moreover, as a crucial part of the purgatorial process that visibly marks Dante's changed status as free from the P of gluttony previously inscribed on his brow, the multisensory evocation in the canto emphasizes that the gradual sensory refinement which happens in *Purgatorio* is not a morally neutral process. If, for Dante, purgation involves a growing ability to face the sensory-cognitive paradoxes of the afterlife, the ability to confront sensory enigmas acts as a proxy for the pilgrim's developing receptiveness to purgatorial learning and ethical growth. Not only do Dante's cross-sensory metaphors represent the human sensorium at its best as extremely receptive and fluid, but their very existence shows that literature is capable of capturing at least some of this plasticity, and even of encouraging it in the readers, so that they can partake in the purgatorial sensory and ethical cultivation as well.

How exactly can poetic language test the boundaries of the human sensorium or, as Dante puts it in *Purgatorio* 15, "quanto

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here." Hollander's commentary is accessible via the Dartmouth Dante Project, <http://dante.dartmouth.edu>.

<sup>6</sup> Chiavacci Leonardi's commentary is available online via the Dartmouth Dante Project, <http://dante.dartmouth.edu>.

natura a sentir ti dispuose” (*Purg.* 15.33)? What pre-existing notions about the human sensory-cognitive apparatus does the poet interrogate in describing the encounter with the otherworldly being? Finally, why are the purgatorial cantos of the gluttons just the place to meditate upon both sensory deprivation and the perceptual evocativeness of a well-crafted poetic line?

In answering these questions, this article will look at how synesthesia, a figure of speech that helps Dante imagine a sensorium acting beyond the ways in which it normally does, articulates sensory-cognitive growth on the level of the individual and makes it communicable to others. After reconstructing some of the semantic contexts the term *sentire* might have had for Dante, the article will analyze why Dante chooses the word as a meeting point for various perceptual domains and how it allows the poet to address the balancing of thought and feeling in poetry. Finally, by showing how the depiction of the senses in the canto compares to the harmonious cross-sensory perception in the Earthly Paradise, the article will outline the broader significance of the episode in the context of *Purgatorio* as a whole, namely, as part of the ongoing recovery of the perfection of the human sensorium.

#### SYNESTHESIA: MEDIEVAL AND MODERN, COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL

Insofar as Dante's use of *sentire* in *Purgatorio* 24 envisages an interpenetration between various sensory modes, it functions as a figure of speech best known as synesthesia, in which, according to the *OED*, “terms relating to one kind of sense-impression are used to describe sense-impressions of other kinds,” or the meaning of a word is transferred “from one kind of sensory experience to another” (*OED* 2; 3b).<sup>7</sup> The distinction between the representation of multisensory perception, and cross-sensory perception itself, is indeed one of the possible challenges for literary critics working on synesthesia. Cognitive scientists are at pains to differentiate between synesthesia as a non-voluntary, spontaneous, life-long perceptual phenomenon, and cross-sensory metaphors as deliberately crafted, singular manifestations of a writer's imagination.<sup>8</sup> Yet if Dante's

<sup>7</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com>, accessed July 1, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> On synesthesia as a cross-sensory metaphor and synesthesia as a neurological phenomenon, see *Synaesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Reading*, eds. Simon Baron-Cohen and John E. Harrison (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997); Kevin T. Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendental Knowledge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); John E. Harrison, *Synaesthesia: The Strangest Thing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Cretien van Campen, *The Hidden Sense: Synesthesia in Art and Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT,

*sentire* is an instance of cross-sensory metaphor, then it is used to envisage a mode of perception which, like the modern-day neurological phenomenon, relies on the hyperconnectivity between sensory modalities that, in the regular functioning of the sensorium, act separately.

The applicability of the term to describe Dante's art is not unproblematic, since using the word "synesthesia" in the context of medieval literature carries the risk of anachronism. While Shane Butler and Alex Purves suggest that evidence for what is now known as synesthesia is ancient and cross-cultural, the word was used to describe diverse phenomena in different eras, and its current critical conceptualization in the West originated as recently as the eighteenth century. In both poetry and science, the interest in synesthesia peaked between 1860 and 1930, and, as a literary trope, it is most frequently associated with the French Symbolists, such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire.<sup>9</sup> Dante's understanding of sensory intermingling might thus have less to do with the literary term invented, according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia*, in 1892, than the faculty which, according to medieval physiology, acted as a collection and combination point for the impressions derived from the external senses: "...the *sensus communis*, an [...] artefact of Aristotelian philosophy [...], has quietly invaded the unsuspecting contemporary world disguised as synesthesia," as Eric McLuhan puts it.<sup>10</sup> What Dante had in mind when devising his picture of sensory intermingling in *Purgatorio* 24 was probably the Aristotelian *sensus communis*, or *koinē aisthēsis*. If we posit a degree of conceptual continuity that allows synesthesia to be used as a critical term for language that imitates the working of the *sensus communis*, the faculty by which "we perceive that we are having sensations" (Aristotle, *On Sleep*, 2.455a15; cf. 2.455a12–26), we must still acknowledge that talking about synesthesia in the *Commedia* inevitably involves translating medieval medical ideas into the modern terminology of literary criticism.<sup>11</sup>

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2008); Ophelia Deroy, *Sensory Blending: On Synaesthesia and Related Phenomena* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses*, eds. Shane Butler and Alex Purves (Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Eric McLuhan, *The Sensus Communis, Synesthesia, and the Soul: An Odyssey* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2015), xi.

<sup>11</sup> As I was reminded by one of the anonymous reviewers of this article, Aristotle also discusses *sensus communis* in *De anima* (III.1 and III.7), *De partibus animalium* (IV.10), and *De memoria et reminescentia* 1, where he describes it as the faculty which unites our sensations, making it possible for us to perform complex perceptual operations. See also Pavel Gregoric, *Aristotle on the Common Sense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).



There is in fact a good reason to posit this conceptual continuity, which emerges when we look even further back, past the influential *fin de siècle* poetics. As it happens, the term “synesthesia” was not entirely unknown already in classical antiquity and could describe perception both on the level of the individual and community. Close to its present-day meaning, the noun *synaesthesia* (Greek for *syn-*, “together,” and *aisthánomai*, “to perceive, apprehend by the senses”) is primarily used by Aristotle to designate the ensemble of perceptions that constitutes an animate being’s encounter with the world (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 9.9.1170b4).<sup>12</sup> Referring to synesthesia as a shared experience of multiple individuals “perceiving at the same time” in his *Eudemian Ethics* (8.12.1245b24), Aristotle additionally opens up the possibility for synesthesia to be conceptualized as the sharing of sensation in the public sphere.<sup>13</sup> Even if Dante is not directly aware of the Aristotelian precedents for understanding synesthesia, the rest of this section will show that the poet’s treatment of *sentire* in *Purgatorio* 24 similarly engages with ideas both about complex individual cross-sensory experience and its interpersonal communicability.

On the level of the individual, the effects of synesthesia on Dante’s *sensorium* are observable in the canto where the penitents experience one of the greatest degrees of sensory deprivation in *Purgatorio*: “è sì munta / nostra sembianza via per la dieta” (ll. 17–18). At the end of the canto, when Dante is deprived of sight after seeing the angel (“L’aspetto suo m’avea la vista tolta” (*Purg.* 24.142), the pilgrim himself participates in this sensory deprivation, even if to a much more limited degree, thus partaking in the communal expiation of gluttony and sensory rebalancing that penitents undergo.

Dante’s loss of vision is far from epistemologically neutral in *Purgatorio* 24. Vision was almost universally understood as the predominant, most elevated sense in medieval and early modern sensory hierarchies, and the privileged means of experiencing the world. The paradigm of the five senses—the most influential model

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Sarah Broadie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Woods, trans. and commentary, *Aristotle’s Eudemian Ethics. Books I, II, and VIII* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). For studies of Aristotle’s theory of perception, see Deborah K. W. Modrak, *Aristotle: The Power of Perception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); T.K. Johansen, *Aristotle on Sense-Organs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Stephen Everson, *Aristotle on Perception* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); and Robert Bolton, “Biology and Metaphysics in Aristotle,” in *Being, Nature, and Life in Aristotle: Essays in Honor of Allan Gotthelf*, eds. James G. Lennox and Robert Bolton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

of conceptualizing the human sensorium in Dante's time—ranks them from sight and hearing, the most “lofty” and “spiritual,” down to taste and touch, the most “lowly” and “bodily.”<sup>14</sup> Dante's sensory transpositions implicitly subvert this hierarchy, insofar as they suggest that the pilgrim's sensorium may not only continue to operate, but even perceive the supernatural in the absence of sight. As one of the many instances when the pilgrim “per veder, non vedente diventa” (*Par.* 25.120), Dante's loss of vision in *Purgatorio* 24 exemplifies what Jeffrey T. Schnapp calls an oxymoronic “dialectic of violence and guidance.”<sup>15</sup> Focusing on the laws of “optical repulsion and optical attraction” in *Purgatorio*, the critic describes how “the pilgrim is regularly ‘injured,’ ‘battered,’ ‘struck’ and ‘weighed down’ by the very light that guides him.”<sup>16</sup> While it causes bafflement, momentary blinding in *Purgatorio* is there to heal through a sequence of corrective and transformative blows: “Tosto sarà ch'a veder queste cose / non ti fia grave, ma fieti diletto” (*Purg.* 15.31–32). The primarily educative role of optical deprivation in the cantica and the bodily, cross-sensory nature of the terms used to describe it emerge clearly from Schnapp's analysis. What the critic neglects to mention, however, is that blinding is accompanied by the rejuvenation of the other senses. More than ever before, the loss of sight seems to sharpen Dante's auditory, olfactory and tactile perception in *Purgatorio* 24, as he begins to feel “l'aura di maggio movesi e olezza, / tutta impregnata da l'erba e da' fiori” (ll. 146–7), and navigates the afterlife by relying on hearing (“com' om che va secondo ch'elli ascolta” [l. 144]).<sup>17</sup> The

<sup>14</sup> *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England*, eds. Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse, and Wietse de Boer (Leiden: Brill, 2016). Plato seems to regard this as a commonly accepted classification (*Timaeus*, 61c–68d). For Aristotle, sight is also the most important faculty “for the mere necessities of life,” whereas hearing “makes the largest contribution to wisdom,” because it is through hearing that we participate in discourse (*De anima*, III.1). In the Middle Ages, this basically dualist anthropology was transferred to Christian religious discourse, which placed an emphasis on the “higher,” more spiritual senses, namely, hearing and sight, assuming that our seemingly least bodily senses would be the ones best able to know and ascend towards God. While these sensory hierarchies need not have been as inflexible as might appear at first (see H. Dugan and L. Farina, “Intimate Senses/Sensing Intimacy,” *Postmedieval* 3 (2012): 373–9), they were, and still are, influential in the conceptualization of the purpose of various senses in the human body.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey T. Schnapp, “Injured by the Light: Violence and Paideia in Dante's *Purgatorio*,” *Dante Studies* 111 (1993): 107–118 (109).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Critics are divided on whether the pilgrim is guided by the voices of his “dottori” (l. 143) Statius and Virgil, the voice of the angel, or some combination of the two. See Nicola Fosca's commentary on ll. 142–44, accessible via the Dartmouth Dante Project, <http://dante.dartmouth.edu>.

synesthetic richness of *Purgatorio* 24 thus establishes the *entire* surface of the pilgrim's body as a potential site of penitential reformation.

The loss of sight that rejuvenates Dante's other senses also constitutes an implicit comment on the mimetic techniques that depend upon a logic of visibility. Literary vividness is defined primarily in visual terms in late medieval and early modern rhetorical treatises, as the terms *illustratio*, *evidentia*, *ostendere*, and *pingitur*, all based on the notion of seeing and showing, suggest.<sup>18</sup> Through his discourse of non-visibility in *Purgatorio* 24, Dante shows that moments when vision cannot get past a perceptual stumbling block need not set the limits of sensation or representability. In Dante's temporary blindness, it is left to language to partly elucidate the celestial encounter. By demonstrating how multisensoriality can be mediated through a linguistic medium, the Dantean *sentire* becomes an example of a literary aesthetic that engages the human sensorium more fully. Moving beyond any simple oculocentric focus, the canto encourages Dante's interpreters to similarly advance beyond the visual paradigm and to rethink the representation of the senses in their plurality.

To come back to the second aspect of the Aristotelian synesthesia, namely, the communicability of sensation, one might say that it only ever makes sense to speak of literary synesthesia as existing in the realm of potential shareability, as its very *raison d'être* is precisely to depict an unusual configuration of perception in a form accessible beyond an individual to whom it belongs. In *Purgatorio* 24, Dante explores the extent to which shareable sensations are possible, and how a poet can create literary experiences that encourage them. This emerges most clearly from the first example of the non-identical repetition of *sentire*, which appears in Dante's encounter with Bonagiunta da Lucca (ca. 1220–1290), a fellow poet whom we meet early in the canto:

El mormorava; e non so che “Gentucca”  
sentiv' io là, ov' el sentia la piaga  
de la giustizia che sì li pilucca. (ll. 37–39)

While in this example, the first *sentire* is easily identifiable with hearing, and the second with the purgatorial pains of hunger and

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<sup>18</sup> See Ruth Webb, “Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre,” *Word and Image*, 15 (1999): 7–18; Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

thirst, which, appropriately for a glutton, the penitent feels on his lips and mouth, the chiasmic repetition highlights an important connection between the two. As generations of interpreters who have labored on the textual crux of “Gentucca” can attest, satisfactory explanations regarding the obscure meaning of Bonagiunta’s words seem to elude not only the pilgrim, but also the readers.<sup>19</sup> Precisely at the moment when Dante can make little rational sense of Bonagiunta’s enigmatic words and half-heard voice (“non so che” [l. 37]), *sentire* acts as a means of establishing an interpersonal connection, even if it is pointedly imperfect. Dante and Bonagiunta’s conversation is a kind of flawed collective synesthesia, since, as different as Dante’s *sentire* might seem from Bonagiunta’s *sentire*, the penitent still manages to get his message across, although it is also his emaciated appearance, and not just the unintelligible words, that constitute it. The admission to not knowing (“non so che ‘Gentucca’ / sentiv’io là”) is a sign of poetic honesty: an implicit acknowledgement of the difference between first-hand and second-hand perception, between Bonagiunta’s experience and Dante’s understanding of it as translated into the poetic form. In an elaborate tour de force to avoid using the word “mouth,” Bonagiunta’s locus of pain becomes a productive wound, the source of discourse that allows Dante to some degree partake in the penitent’s experience and channel it further in his own poetic voice. As cognitive scientists who study the effects of literature on the human mind attest, metaphors that rely on familiar corporeal references activate mirroring mechanisms in the body and might indeed leave an almost palpable impression on the readers.<sup>20</sup> In *Purgatorio* 24, Bonagiunta’s imperfectly articulate words are translated into a

<sup>19</sup> See Hollander’s commentary and, among others, Robin Kirkpatrick, “Dante’s Conception of Poetic Discipline,” in *Dante’s Paradiso and the Limitations of Modern Criticism: A Study of Style and Poetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 51–84 (58); and Raffaele Pinto, “Gentucca e il paradigma poetico del dolce stil novo,” *Tenzzone: rivista de la Asociación Complutense de Dantología* 3 (2002): 191–216.

<sup>20</sup> On sensory metaphors and how they are processed by the human mind, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Michael Jackson, “Thinking Through the Body: An Essay on Understanding Metaphor,” *Social Analysis: Journal of Cultural and Social Practice*, 14 (1983): 127–49; Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Metaphor, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology*, ed. James Fernandez (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Andrew Ortony, *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *Mirror-touch Synaesthesia: Thresholds of Empathy with Art*, ed. Daria Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

memorable image of justice that slowly gnaws away at the penitent (“la giustizia che sì li pilucca” [l. 39]). This image transmits some of the sensory impact of the penitential process to the readers, so that they too might imaginatively sense the nibbling of justice as mediated through Dante’s words.

In the canto punctuated with references to not knowing, as when Dante describes the penitents gathered around the tree shouting incomprehensible words (“Vidi gente sott’ esso alzar le mani / e gridar non so che verso le fronde” [ll. 106–7]), or the mysterious voice emanating from the tree (“Sì tra le frasche non so chi diceva” [l. 118]), the poet readily acknowledges that much of the purgatorial experience is prone to misunderstandings and failures to read the inwardness of others. In situations which the limited power of human reason alone cannot accurately assess, *sentire* seems to become even more important in mediating between the states of unknowing and partial elucidation, as in the case of Bonagiunta. In order to understand why *sentire* is such a potent linguistic tool in managing sensory-cognitive uncertainty, we should look at what *sentire* means in the medieval Italian context in general, and for Dante in particular.

#### THE MANY SENSES OF “SENTIRE”

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Dante’s cross-sensory experience that resists narrative paraphrase is how seemingly unremarkable the word that conveys it is. Defamiliarizing a word of everyday language by using it as if it were somehow foreign, Dante’s *sentire* is an instance of the marvelous that emerges from the ostensibly ordinary. The choice of *sentire* as the main verb of perception in *Purgatorio* 24 is not an arbitrary lexical decision forced upon the poet by a lack of viable alternatives. In fact, Dante could be incredibly precise in his definition and use of sensory terms.<sup>21</sup> Instead, I want to suggest that *Purgatorio* 24 is part of Dante’s lifelong examination of *sentire*, which might mean different things at different points in his career. It is precisely the broadness of the word’s semantic range that enables connection-making between different sensory-cognitive domains in the canto.

The *Enciclopedia Dantesca* notes that *sentire* is a verb employed with notable frequency by Dante, appearing 230 times in

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Hollander’s analysis of Dante’s use of *apparire*, *vedere* and *parere* in “*Vita nuova*: Dante’s Perceptions of Beatrice,” *Dante Studies* 92 (1974): 1–18; and Jerome Mazzaro’s discussion in *The Figure of Dante: An Essay on the Vita nuova* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), xvi.

his oeuvre.<sup>22</sup> As is to be expected, one finds a considerable variety of meaning in the word's usage. *Sentire* is a technical term in Dante's philosophical encyclopedia *Convivio*, where the writer discusses the faculties of the soul, partitioned into the vegetative, sensitive, and intellective. The capacity to *sentire* is the ability to experience the external world through the senses and to move in order to respond to the needs brought about by sense perception: "ogni anima che sente, o con tutti i sensi o con alcuno solo, si muove" (*Conv.* 3.2.11). The word is no doubt recalled in the same technical sense in Statius' description of the interrelatedness of body and soul in embryonic creation, which immediately follows the canto in question: "si move e sente" (*Purg.* 25.55). *Sentire* might refer not only to the human sensory capacities collectively, but also to any one of the traditional five senses. If we have trouble thinking of *sentire* as an all-inclusive cognitive-sensory term, it is partly because the meaning of the word has narrowed since Dante's time. Dante's medieval vernacular, which bears witness to an understanding of the senses less discrete than ours, allows the poet to employ *sentire* to refer to vision when he describes the smile of his "donna" as barely perceptible, which would be extremely unusual in modern-day Italian: "Ahi mirabile riso [...] che mai non si sentia se non de l'occhio!" (*Conv.* 3.8.12).

It is also true that Dante uses the word particularly unconventionally even within the late medieval context, presenting us with a range of seemingly contradictory ideas about *sentire* in the very same work. When Dante comments upon the line "l'anima ch'ascolta e che lo sente" (l. 6) from his poem "Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona" in Book 3 of the *Convivio*, he specifies that *ascoltare* refers to the rational meaning of words, and *sentire* to the sweetness of sound ("ascoltare' quanto alle parole, e 'sentire' quanto alla dolcezza del suono" [3.3.15]):

Lo suo parlar sì dolcemente sona,  
che l'anima **ch'ascolta e che lo sente**  
dice: "Oh me lassa! ch'io non son possente  
di dir quel ch'odo de la donna mia!" (ll. 5-8)

Yet the distinction between the intellective and the sensory that the poet makes in his analysis does not truly hold elsewhere in the *Convivio* or Dante's oeuvre. Already in the *Convivio*, *sentire* balances between opinion, judgement, and thought, even if the

<sup>22</sup> Alessandro Niccoli, "Sentire," in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/elenco-opere/Enciclopedia\\_Dantesca](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/elenco-opere/Enciclopedia_Dantesca), accessed on March 3, 2020.

contexts in which the word is used make it relatively distinct from the perceptual *sentire*. In Book 2 of the *Convivio*, *sentire* appears as a learned term signifying “to think or opine” (“del numero de li cieli e del sito diversamente è sentito da molti” *Conv.* 2.3.3), and when Dante describes the desired effect of “Ballata, i’ voi” on Beatrice, *sentire* becomes a mode of rational and moral comprehension, meaning “to realize” or “to understand”: “per questo sentirà ella la tua volontade, la quale sentendo, conoscerà le parole de li ingannati” (*Vita nova* 2.7). I believe that the distinction between *ascoltare* and *sentire* in “Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona” is therefore more usefully treated not as an absolute demarcation of categories, but rather as an example of Dante beginning to think about how perception and intellection interact in grasping the semantic meaning and appreciating the rhythm and sound of a poetic line. How exactly is thought implicated in what we sense, and how can sensory perception help us make sense of our experience? These issues are at stake in *Purgatorio* 24, where *sentire* represents a potential intersection between the intellectual and perceptual meanings of the word.

Throughout *Purgatorio* 24, Dante sets up a series of parallels which allow him to think about the balancing of the intellect and the force of the senses in perceptual acts. In fact, the canto opens with just such an image of a perfect balance between physical and mental motion:

Né 'l dir l'andar, né l'andar lui più lento  
facea, ma ragionando andavam forte,  
sì come nave pinta da buon vento... (ll. 1-3)

Placed between the two symmetrical “né,” the chiasmic “andar” imitates the ideal equilibrium established between the swiftness of physical movement and the speed of thought. Even when Dante comes under considerable mental strain, grasping after the truth of Forese’s final pronouncements, the movement of the senses similarly follows the motions of the mind: “li occhi miei si fero a lui seguaci, / come la mente a le parole sue...” (ll. 100–102). The parallel that Dante sets up (“a lui” / “a le parole sue”) indicates that the mental grasping after truth requires a comparable perceptual stretch.

Mental and perceptual exertions are not always easy to balance, however. As we shall see in the following section, the reliance on the senses increases, and reason appears to recede into the background, when Dante describes experiences nearly impossible to disentangle for the human mind, such as encountering an angel. In

trying both to rationalize his experience and convey some of its sensory impact to the readers, Dante relies on *sentire* to articulate what happens when a human being attempts to perceive and understand an otherworldly presence.

#### SENSING IN ANGELIC ENCOUNTERS

Angels are figures of radical perceptual alterity for Dante: they have no need of memory, as they never turn their gazes away from the face of God and see all things in Him. Angels therefore allow the writer to imagine what it must be like to feel and know without the restrictions of a mortal body:

Queste sustanze, poi che fur gioconde  
de la faccia di Dio, non volser viso  
da essa, da cui nulla si nasconde:  
però non hanno vedere interciso  
da novo obietto, e però non bisogna  
rememorar per concetto diviso... (*Par.* 29.76-81)

Even if a memoryless being might be hard to conceptualize for a human, the angelic presence is intensely felt as a source of multi-sensory bodily impressions in *Purgatorio*. Like many other purgatorial angels, the Angel of Temperance in *Purgatorio* 24 is not introduced diegetically, but rather through a series of synesthetic effects that it has on Dante.<sup>23</sup> The canto carefully registers the presence of a being who cannot be known if not by its effects on the pilgrim's sensorium, but the Angel of Temperance is never even identified as such. The supernatural creature is simply addressed as a "sùbita voce" (134) and "un che dicea" (139), and its other properties are enigmatically defined by means of *via negativa*: "già mai non si videro in fornace / vetri o metalli sì lucenti e rossi" (137-38). There is an element of narrative and cognitive surprise; the writing, marked by great elegance and delicacy, adheres to the sequence of impressions as they present themselves to the

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<sup>23</sup> In *Purgatorio* 9, for instance, the portrayal of the angelic "cortese portinaio" (l. 92) is preceded by a particularly sensuous description of the three steps that lead towards him: the first, made of polished white marble; the second, dark, rough and fissured; and finally the third, "sì fiammeggiante / come sangue che fuor di vena spiccia" (ll. 101-2). In some cantos, Dante even resorts to the same synesthetic *sentire* we have seen in *Purgatorio* 24. The arrival of "li astor celestiali" (l. 104) in *Purgatorio* 8 produces a cross-sensory metaphor that combines the tactile sensation of trembling air with the perception of sound: "Sentendo fender l'aere a le verdi ali, / fuggì 'l serpente" (ll. 106-7).



protagonist.<sup>24</sup> In trying to imagine how creatures endowed with such different perceptual faculties as humans and angels communicate, the poet suggests that beings who transcend the human condition can still be registered by earthly perceptual faculties. The synesthesia in *Purgatorio* 24 thus presents us with a positive view of the perfectibility of the human sensorium, which can receive and accommodate otherworldly sensory input.

Dante also invites his readers to experience at least some of the angelic alterity, even if the poet relies on much more recognizable sensations, such as the sweet smell of flowers (“tutta impregnata da l’erba e da’ fiori” [147]), the softness of feathers (“ben senti’ mover la piuma” [149]), and a gentle breeze caressing the face (“mi senti’ un vento dar per mezza / la fronte” [148–49]), to describe what, in Dante’s depiction, amounts to smelling the ambrosia, the divine food or drink of rarefied materiality.<sup>25</sup> A familiar sensory reference might indeed be the primary way for the readers to understand, at least in part, the encounter with the angel whose presence exceeds even the most extreme sensory comparisons. No glass or metal ever seen was so glowing or so red, says Dante:

Drizzai la testa per veder chi fossi;  
e già mai non si videro in fornace  
vetri o metalli sì lucenti e rossi,  
com’ io vidi un che dicea... (ll. 136–39)

The *Commedia*, set to appeal to sublunary minds, relies on recognizable sensory allusions to describe “la famiglia del cielo” (*Purg.* 15.29), but Dante is ready to remind us that his purgatorial

<sup>24</sup> These intimations, deduced from the examples of the purgatorial *sentire*, have been confirmed at greater length in Patrick Boyde’s study of Dante’s angels (*Dante, Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 172–204). The scholar even proposes that the seven angelic encounters in *Purgatorio* provide “an unusually coherent and systematic demonstration” of the didactic and narratological method of the *Commedia*, which involves inferring abstract concepts from sense impressions: “Learning should begin with concrete experience. The reader must be steered into working things out for himself [sic]” (174). On Dante’s angels, see also Stephen Bemrose, *Dante’s Angelic Intelligences* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1983); Zygmunt G. Barański, “Dante tra dei pagani e angeli cristiani,” *Filologia e critica*, 9 (1984): 298–99; Susanna Barsella, *In the Light of the Angels: Angelology and Cosmology in Dante’s Divina Commedia* (Florence: Olschki, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> On the treatment of ambrosia in various literary and mythological traditions, see “ambrosia” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., eds. Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and “ambrosia and nectar,” in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. M. C. Howatson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

experiences are also qualitatively different. Verbally close to the synesthetic description in *Purgatorio* 24, the arrival of the Angel of Peace in *Purgatorio* 17 is marked with a use of *sentire* that signals overlapping sensory modes: “senti’ mi presso *quasi* un muover d’ala / e ventarmi nel viso e dir...” (67–8; added emphasis). While Barbara H. Rosenwein asserts that *quasi* might have been no more than a traditional expression, a “rhetorical tic,”<sup>26</sup> Patrick Boyde’s paraphrase of the passage is particularly revealing: “Dante turns unseeingly to the first step, but with his other senses he feels *as it were* the moving of a wing and a breath of air over his face, and he hears the words of the appropriate beatitude” (added emphasis).<sup>27</sup> *Quasi*, “as it were”: the word signals the precise imprecision of Dante’s art, as the poet attempts to show that his increasingly demanding subject matter poses significant interpretative problems both to the intellect and the senses, and thus has to be communicated through analogies and approximations.

While in *Purgatorio* 24, Dante’s description of the angel relies on the readers’ pre-existing familiarity with sweet-smelling herbs and soft-plumed birds, the strangeness of the pilgrim’s experience compared to these more regular sensations is communicated through the lexical insistence on the word *sentire*. As Dante repeats *sentire* again and again at the end of *Purgatorio* 24, the semantic recall of the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile traces already present in the readers’ *theatrum memoriae* is set in motion by verbal reiteration – in other words, the inner motions of poetry, which appeal to our less conscious sense of rhythm and proportion. The memorial recall actively participates in the training of the readers’ minds, as the verbal echoing forces one to choose between the different definitions of *sentire*, or to harmonize the meanings of the word which might otherwise seem incompatible. In the generative, non-identical repetition of *sentire*, earthly senses are transformed in the presence of the angel, as sensations familiar to the reader and the novelty of the angelic touch are combined by means of the poetic form. Rooted in common-sense notions about sentience, but going beyond the everyday meanings of the word, *sentire* thus embodies the aspiration of metaphoric language to re-organize the human sensorium in order to expand what is possible for it.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 185.

<sup>27</sup> Boyde, *Dante, Philomythes and Philosopher*, 177.

## PURGATORIO 24 AND SYNESTHESIA IN THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The aspirational aspect of synesthesia, its ability to open the mind to otherworldly communication, becomes particularly evident when we realize that Dante's synesthetic perception on the terrace of the gluttons might be just a step on the road toward the recovery of the Edenic nobility of the sensorium. *Paradiso* has often been singled out as the synesthetic cantica par excellence, and it is easy to see why Dante's cross-sensory metaphors in *Paradiso*, inundating his readers with the descriptions of scintillating, spinning, singing, and dancing lights of souls, have attracted the most critical attention.<sup>28</sup> Yet it also seems important to ask what role *Purgatorio* plays in preparing the ground for this new sensory mode. If the cantica shows how the senses of an individual can be trained to perceive not only gradually more noble objects, but also with more precision, the intense focus on sensation in *Purgatorio* 24 may hold some of the important clues about how, according to Dante, the integrity of the senses can be restored.

As the gluttons gather around the tree that excites their desire for food and drink only to frustrate this craving, a mysterious voice (“[s]ì tra le frasche non so chi diceva” [l. 118]) identifies the tree as an offshoot of another tree located higher up, whose fruit was eaten by Eve: “legno è più sù che fu morso da Eva, / e questa pianta si levò da esso” (ll. 116–17). The lines about “i rami gravidi e vivaci / d'un altro pomo” (ll. 103–4) subtly remind us that patristic theologians who posited an original sensory unity before the Fall suggested that it was lost precisely through the sin of gluttony.<sup>29</sup> Augustine's contemporary Maximus of Turin puts it this way: “What the first man lost by eating, the second Adam recovered by fasting.”<sup>30</sup> As we have seen with the repetition of *non so che*, Dante

<sup>28</sup> Glauco Cambon, “Synaesthesia in the *Divine Comedy*,” *Dante Studies* 88 (1970): 1–16; Gino Casagrande, “‘Esto visibile parlare’”: A Synaesthetic Approach to *Purg.* X. 55–63’, in *Lectura Dantis Newberryana*, Vol. 2, eds. Paolo Cherchi and Antonio C. Mastrobuono (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 21–57; Marco Ariani, “Dante, la ‘dulcedo’ e la dottrina dei ‘sensi spirituali’,” in *Miscellanea in onore di Claudio Varese*, ed. Giorgio Ceroni Baiardi (Roma: Vecchiarelli, 2001), 11–39; and Claire Barbetti, *Ekphrastic Medieval Visions: A New Discussion in Inter-arts Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> See Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*, 94–119; Tonino Griffero, “I sensi di Adamo. Appunti estetico-teosofici sulla corporeità spirituale,” *Rivista di estetica* 12 (1999): 119–225; Toom Tarmo, *Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation: the Latin Fathers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Maximus of Turin, Sermon 50a, par. 3, ed. Almut Mutzenbecher, *Corpus christianorum, series Latina* 23 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1962), 203. See also Caroline Walker Bynum's discussion in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (London: University of California Press, 1988), 35.

deliberately stresses his own lack of intellectual understanding in the encounter with the offspring of the Tree of Knowledge, locating it on the terrace of gluttony as a reminder of what the final goal of sensory purification through synesthesia is. Dante's seemingly sparing sensory vocabulary in *Purgatorio* 24 thus becomes the linguistic equivalent of a spiritually enriching, if trying, fast, anticipating the sensual pleasures described upon the pilgrim's entry into the Earthly Paradise in Canto 28.

As Dante's *Monarchia* tells us, the Earthly Paradise is a figure of the blessedness of the earthly life, *beatitudo huius vitae* (3.15.7), the state of original harmony and innocence, which manifests itself as the perfect integration of spirit and body: "luogo eletto / a l'umana natura per suo nido" (*Purg.* 28.77-78). In the Earthly Paradise, synesthesia exemplifies Dante's desire to represent at least some of the prelapsarian perceptual fulness by means of his fallen sensory vocabulary:

Vago già di cercar dentro e dintorno  
la divina foresta spessa e viva,  
ch'a li occhi temperava il novo giorno,  
sanza più aspettar, lasciai la riva,  
prendendo la campagna lento lento  
su per lo suol che d'ogne parte auliva.  
Un'aura dolce, senza mutamento  
avere in sé, mi feria per la fronte  
non di più colpo che soave vento... (*Purg.* 28.1-9)

In Canto 28, the word *sentire*, which signals the (as yet) limited ability of the verbal arts to convey the sensory richness of an encounter with an otherworldly being in *Purgatorio* 24, does not appear even once. The writer finds new, perhaps more accurate, words to define the harmonious blending of sensations that constitutes Dante's experience of the Edenic landscape.

Dante offers an insight into his growing sensory awareness by means of a verbal repetition that puts emphasis on the deliberately slow exploratory tempo: "lento lento" (l. 5). As Dante's "temperava" (l. 3), derived from the Latin *temperāre* (to mix in a proportionate manner), suggests, the sunlight filtered through the leaves of the forest is no longer excessive or blinding, but subdued to match Dante's capacity to sustain it. The lexical choices of the canto refer only to the most subtle and refined of sensory impulses: *auliva*, referring to the perfumed odors that fill the Earthly Paradise "d'ogne parte" (l. 6), is a Latinate form of "olere" and a *hapax* in

the *Commedia*.<sup>31</sup> In a tradition going back to the Pseudo Aristotle, *aura* is a subtler, mistier, more impalpable spirit than the regular wind; yet the *aura* (l. 7) caressing Dante's face in Eden goes beyond even the most rarefied kind of earthly materiality.<sup>32</sup> The poet is using the word equivocally because, as we shall learn from Matelda (*Purg.* 28.85–87), while the terrestrial *aura* is a product of the humid exhalations of the earth, the serene circling of the living air ("l'aere vivo" [l. 107]) in Eden is caused by the unwavering movement of the highest sphere in the heavens, the *primum mobile*. The ambivalence of the mundane *aura* as opposed to its paradisiacal counterpart is preserved in the verb that Dante chooses to describe its action: the breeze appears to wound his forehead ("feria" [l. 8]), yet the narrative surprise here is that even a potential blow is a source of sensory pleasure ("dolce" [l. 7], "soave" [l. 9]). A gust of the wind, which signals progress in erasing Dante's penitential mark in *Purgatorio* 24, here indicates precisely the opposite: the strangeness of the forest which, against all earthly understanding, eschews all forms of changeability, allowing Dante to experience the same breeze that was blowing in Eden on the inaugural day of human history.<sup>33</sup> The paradoxical non-wound ("mi feria per la fronte / non di più colpo che soave vento" [ll. 8–9]) marks the change that has *already* taken place in Dante's soul and has made it possible for him to reach this changeless place. It is a reminder that Dante and his readers are given the gift of access to this prelapsarian perfection, tempered for the postlapsarian body and mind, only because of what they have already undergone in willingly exposing themselves to the sensory challenges of the previous cantos, including *Purgatorio* 24.

In *Purgatorio* 24, Dante proposes that when it comes to earthly sensations, gluttony is overcome by developing a *sense* of mental and physical balance. Satiety is presented not as an objective state of being, but rather of *feeling*:

Vidi messer Marchese, ch'ebbe spazio  
già di bere a Forlì con men secchezza,  
e sì fu tal, che **non si sentì sazio**. (31–33)

<sup>31</sup> Enrico Malato, "Aulire," in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/elenco-opere/Enciclopedia\\_Dantesca](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/elenco-opere/Enciclopedia_Dantesca), accessed on June 23, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> As the Pseudo Aristotle explains in *On the Cosmos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955; pr. 1992): "The breath (*pneuma*) that breathes in the air we call wind (*anemos*), and the breath (*ekpnoē*) that comes from moisture we call breeze (*aura*)."

<sup>33</sup> On the sensory descriptions in Dante's Earthly Paradise, see Davide Stimili, "Air and *Aura*," in *The Face of Immortality: Physiognomy and Criticism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 77–96.

The landscape of the Earthly Paradise, with its perfect balancing of sensations, would at first appear to present an example of just such sensory satisfaction. Yet, in its perfect completeness, it is also a source of insatiable longing. This becomes perhaps most evident when Dante describes the unquenchable thirst aroused in him by the water of Eunoè:

S'io avessi, lettor, più lungo spazio  
da scrivere, i' pur cantere' in parte  
lo dolce ber che **mai non m'avria sazio**... (*Purg.* 33. 136-38)

The description is pointedly incomplete: by mimicking the nature of “lo dolce ber” (l. 138) that he describes, Dante cultivates a poetics that stimulates an imaginative thirst for Paradise in his readers. As a teasing preview or a foretaste, Dante’s tantalizing fantasy of the ideal sensory harmony in the Earthly Paradise provides us with a vision of the human sensorium after which we, in our mortal lives, are destined to always hunger. In the meantime, while we live with this unsatisfied yearning, Dante’s meditation upon the various possible configurations of *sentire* in *Purgatorio* 24 acts as an invitation to look, listen, touch, and taste in a much more questioning, self-aware mode.

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In a poetics that engage the multiplicity of the readers’ senses, *sentire* allows Dante to explore the combination of intellectual and perceptual means that poetry has at its disposition to orchestrate the conditions of joint perception within and beyond an individual body. By presenting *Purgatorio* 24 as a synesthetic system that demands the engagement of multiple senses and the intellect from the pilgrim and the readers, I hope to have shown that the purgatorial *sentire* might expand our modern-day understanding of what counts as synesthesia, introducing a much-needed medieval flavor to the critical discussion.<sup>34</sup> For literary scholars, synesthesia is ultimately just a turn of phrase (*tropos* in ancient Greek, *conversion* in Latin) by which one “turns around” some expression to designate an object other than the one more conventionally meant. Yet if a trope can also be understood as “speech turned around toward us,

<sup>34</sup> See van Campen, *The Hidden Sense; The Oxford Handbook of Synesthesia*, eds. Julia Simner and Edward Hubbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Julia Simner, *Synaesthesia: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

i.e., toward our ways of behaving,” or “speech turning around, pertaining to the mind’s ways of behaving,” Dante’s synesthesia is more than just a verbal flourish.<sup>35</sup> Describing how the pilgrim’s senses change might not actually alter the readers’ sensorium in comparable ways. Yet Dante’s shaping of the sensory vocabulary, which appears among the most illustrative examples of synesthesia in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, and was in turn shaped and bent by writers up to the present day, might have influenced the way in which our sensations are expressed and, to some degree, felt.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2 (4), trans. E.M. Macierowski (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 200), 129.

<sup>36</sup> *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., 2012) singles out Dante’s “là dove ’l sol tace” (*Inf.* 1.60) as a paradigmatic example of literary synesthesia. Dante’s art in general has received plenty of critical recognition as particularly synesthetic, and all three *cantiche* have figured in various scholarly and non-scholarly discussions related to cross-sensory metaphors (see footnote 28). The experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, in his attempt to relax the “Western muscles in the eye,” paradoxically resorts to the Western poet par excellence, as he tries to capture what he calls the “aural intensity” of touch in his *Dante Quartet* (R. Bruce Elder, “Moving Visual Thinking: Dante, Brakhage, and the Works of *Energeia*,” in *Dante & the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*, ed. James Miller [Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005], 394–449).