

GORDON M. POOLE
The Ledge of the Proud

I.0. Dante's coming to grips, as pilgrim and author, with the sin of pride, is laid out over three Purgatorial cantos, X-XI-XII, more space than is given to any other ledge. The single cantos, or aspects of them, have been the subject of continual study through hundreds of years of exegesis. Yet, whether because of the canto demarcation characteristic of *Lecturae Dantis*, or the *Comedy's* seemingly boundless capacity to accept reinterpretation, or simply the need of every generation to do its re-readings, neither the structural connections between what is narrated on this ledge and the whole of *Purgatorio*, nor those knitting the three cantos together as a unit have been fully explicated. The present essay, divided into two main sections, takes the episode of the proud as its focus, in order to bring out inter- and intra-connections which, although they may well be evident to many readers, have not been dealt with in critical literature.¹

1 Discussions of this ledge are to be found in 1) editions of the *Comedy*; 2) *Lecturae Dantis*; 3) general texts dealing with *Purgatorio*, especially with pride. These divisions are respected in the appended bibliography. In general, scholars have shown little tolerance for Dante's word-play. Some have explicitly expressed their unhappiness with such structuring devices as the "V-O-M" acrostic in *Purgatorio* XII (Marcello Aurigemma: "Io darei importanza limitatamente negativa a questa presenza dell'acrostico"; Ernesto Trucchi: "Hanno grande valore artistico tutte queste sottigliezze? Oggi ci è lecito dubitarne"). John D. Sinclair, while considering the acrostic "childish," asserted the need for interpretation, on the reasoning that the acrostic "is even more childish if it does not mean anything." However, his gloss goes no further than acknowledging that the acrostic spells "VOM", i.e., *uomo*. The layout of the carved *exempla* in Canto XII is a matter of dispute. Most commentators, from Daniello in the 16th century on, see a correspondence between the number of tercets and the number of *exempla*, thirteen in all. For Medin, the personages under V were punished by a divine agent, those under O by their own remorse, those under M by other men and Troy, the thirteenth, by all three. According to Parodi, the V's were violent towards the divinity, the O's were vainglorious and self-destructive, the M's violent towards others; all three forms of violence are exemplified by Troy. In this line,

I.1. The episode of the proud establishes a pattern of events upon which the narrative structure of each of the following six ledges is modeled. This peculiar pattern, which we shall at once declare, sets Purgatory proper apart from Anti-Purgatory (Cantos I-X) and Earthly Paradise (XXVIII-XXXIII). The events are seven: 1) the rise to the ledge; 2) examples of virtue; 3) a group of penitent souls,

citing a precedent in Guittone d'Arezzo, Flamini (followed, with occasional modifications, by Ferruccio Ulivi, Ernesto Trucchi, Siro A. Chimenz, Carlo Grabher, and others) feels that the V's are punished by a godly power, the O's are self-punished and the M's by enemies or by their own victims, whereas Troy is punished by all three. It is not clear, however, that the personages under O were all self-punished and not punished by God or the gods. Niobe is punished by Diana and Apollo in the persons of her fourteen children, all slain; whereupon she weeps in despair until she changes or is changed into a rock. Arachne does, indeed, hang herself (self-punishment), but then Minerva changes her into a spider. Especially, Tehoboam is certainly not self-punished; he escapes being punished by his subjects by fleeing Jerusalem in a waggon. Giulio Marzot, forced by the acrostic pattern to seek some sort of ordering principle, sees the first four as "attentatori alla sovranità divina," the second four as "denigratori della legge civile e degli Dei," the third four as "quelli che fecero violenza altrui per cupidigia." Troy sums up all three of the species. The distinctions are hardly clear or precise, but Marzot's heart is not in it: "Invero la mente del lettore si ferma, magari con fastidio, sull'ordinamento strutturale e sintattico delle singole terzine ... Questa, non ne dubitiamo, non è poesia." Early commentators tended to unite Briareus and the other giants in a sole bas relief, even though between them they take up two tercets rather than one. The examples would thus be twelve in number, counting Troy, and not thirteen. In this they have been followed by some modern critics (Proto, Filomusi-Guelfi, Porena, Vallone, Chimenz), motivated by the desire for a symmetry determined by content rather than by the verse form. Proto divides the twelve tercets into three groups, representing three species of pride, following Thomas Aquinas. With an excess of subtlety, Filomusi-Guelfi adds four species distinguished by Saint Gregory, three by Saint Anselm, and twelve by Saint Bernard. Porena notes that by reducing the examples from thirteen to twelve, the Biblical examples all fall into one row and the historico-mythological ones in the other. Although he explicitly rejects any tripartite division of the *exempla* according to types of pride, he sees the first six as representing pride toward God and the last six (from Rehoboam through Troy) as pride with respect to man. Vallone, in a strange perception, sees the twelve squares as forming a cross, in the sense that the first six (pride against a godly power) are distinct from the last six (pride against mankind), while the left-hand six are

regularly reciting a prayer; 4) individual souls; 5) examples of vice; 6) an angel; 7) a chant from the Beatitudes.² What we have, then, is an almost musical conception, a "keyboard" consisting of seven *scale* (in Italian both 'scales' and 'stairways') of seven elements each. As in a succession of seven octaves, each element is repeated on a higher and higher register.

Dante uses this structure in important ways. Besides being

Biblical and the right-hand six are mythical. The "V-O-M-" acrostic, first noted by Teza, Toynebee, and Medin, although initially contested by by D'Ovidio, Mazzoni, and Savi-Lopez, is now accepted. Philip R. Berk, rather forcing the evidence, sees a flawed acrostic, "VQMO" in *Purgatorio* X, 61-72, by which Dante is implying that man, *uomo*, is a lesser *fabbro* than God. Having established the "Q" as a flawed "O", he sees another acrostic in the centrally located tercets (X, 67-75), where "DIQ" is a flawed "DIO".

Although the Scartazzini-Vandelli commentary sees numerical significance in the fact that the three examples of humility are opposed by thirteen (10 + 3) examples of punished pride, we have found only three scholars who have made explicit connections between the examples (Cantos X and XII) and the three purging souls Dante describes in Canto XI. Ernesto Trucchi compares the trio of examples in Canto X (Mary humble before a superior, David before equals, Trajan before an inferior) with the three souls in the next Canto, Oderisi, humble before a superior (the poet Dante), Salvani, who "nella sua potenza scende sino a farsi mendico" (before equals?), Aldobrandeschi who "piange la sua superbia dinanzi agli eguali" (but the designed structure required humility before an inferior!). Hence, apart from the impropriety of a structurally implied comparison between the archangel Gabriel or God and Dante, it is clearly not true, contrary to what Trucchi says, that "la stessa divisione dell'umiltà in specie si ripete nei tre episodi" of Canto XI. Better said, the critic has not succeeded in identifying the criteria of division which link the episodes to the examples of virtue. Pompeo Giannantonio notes, in his reading of Canto X, that the three examples are patterned similarly; three couples, males to the left (taking the angel as a male), females to the right. Having also noted that the "procedimento ternario" of the examples of humility and the purging souls is echoed in the acrostic, made up of three groups of four tercets, the scholar is reluctant to seek much significance in possible correspondences. Citing Gabriele Rossetti, the exile in England, as having set critics a bad example, he disparages "quanti hanno vaghezza di simili concordanze esoteriche quasi sempre inaccettabili sul piano razionale e critico, anche se acute e peregrine." Of more interest for our purposes are the considerations of John S. Carroll, expressed in his book on *Purgatorio*, published in 1906. Carroll identifies correctly the three forms of pride—in Ancestry, Art and Power—represented by the three souls, Oderisi, Salvano, and Aldobrandeschi, although he does not connect them with the examples. Perhaps

part of the self-imposed limitation (along with rhyme, meter, etc.) in which his technical mastery reveals itself, it is in such structure that he roots his symbolism. It offers him the possibility of breaking with the very expectations it induces in the reader. The slothful on the fourth ledge forego the customary prayer. This detail is part of the characterization of their purifying zeal and of the poetry of that characterization, borne out through other devices, e.g., Abbot Zeno's rapid-fire speech (XVIII, 118-126) and, in general, the prodigious brevity of the whole episode (taking part of cantos XVIII and XIX). Clearly the reader cannot miss the prayer if attention to structure has not led him or her to expect it.

In Canto X the seven tercets devoted to the first element, the rise to the ledge, are used to describe the nature of the steep pathway. On subsequent ledges the rise to the next ledge is often a chance for Dante to ply Virgil for enlightenment and may require more or fewer lines.

he is following Denton J. Snider here, who, in his 1893 book on *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, identified them as "Pride of Family, of Art, and of Authority."

Furthermore, Carroll contrasts the two groups of exempla. The "Vedea" group were proud towards Heaven; Mary was humble toward Heaven, and God humbled himself to be born of a woman. The "O" group were likewise proud against divinity, in antithesis to David. The "Mostrava" group were proud towards mankind, in contrast to Trajan's humility toward the widow. In Troy all three forms of pride are summed up: "Pride which would climb to Heaven and drag God from His throne; Pride which contemns His will and worship, and abuses His gifts here on earth; and Pride which tramples underfoot the sacred claims of humanity to justice and mercy." Carroll's indications are precious and unique, although he fails to indicate a clear distinction between the first and second examples of both humility and pride. This is a bit surprising, since Denton J. Snider, in his 1893 book, which Carroll certainly knew, had rightly divided the V-O-M personages into 1) angels and giants, 2) men and women, 3) whole peoples (although, separating the final M tercet from the preceding three, he sees the "whole peoples" category as including Assyria—the Sennacherib example—along with Troy).

2 I am indebted to the late Prof. Enrico De' Negri for having pointed out this pattern to me when I had the good fortune to be one of his graduate students in Berkeley in 1965-1966. Snider finds only six stages in each circle, but he does not count the rise to the ledge.

The examples of virtue corrective of the sin punished on the ledge, the second element, always open with one from the life of the Virgin, whereas the others come from various sources (Bible, mythology, etc.). On the ledge of the proud we have three examples of humility.

The third element is the group of penitent souls, depicted generally more briefly than in Hell, in their acts of expiation ("satisfactio operis"). Presumably this briefer treatment is purposeful; although the punishments are hideous, Dante warns:

Non vo' però, lettor, che tu ti smaghi
di buon proponimento per udire
come Dio vuol che 'l debito si paghi.
Non attender la forma del martire:
pensa la successione; pensa ch'al peggio
oltre la gran sentenza non può ire.
(Purgatorio X, 106-111)

The crowd of the prideful is meticulously described, and care is taken to stress how well the punishment fits the crime. In later episodes the reader will increasingly be expected to figure this out for himself without help from the author. Canto XI opens with a prayer on the part of the penitent, the "Pater noster" with interlinear comment (vv. 1-24). The reciting of a prayer, here in full, on other ledges merely a line or so, regularly accompanies the appearance of a group of souls.

Coming to the fourth element, most of Canto XI is taken up by three figures, two presented directly, the third indirectly. To a detailed discussion of these we shall return presently.

Next come the examples of the vice punished on the ledge, the fifth element. On the first ledge these are wrought into thirteen tercets (XII, 25-63) according to an acrostic pattern which many critics, especially Crocean, have found bothersome, but which serves to emphasize their structural unity. The first four tercets begin with "Vedeva," the next four with "O," the last four with "Mostrava;" the

lines of the thirteenth and last tercet begin, respectively, with "Vedeva—O—Mostrava." It is now commonly accepted that VOM spells out 'man,' nicely stressing the fundamental importance of pride in the corruption of mankind. On subsequent ledges the examples are presented in a less formalized manner and the medium in which they are communicated varies from ledge to ledge.

The sixth and seventh elements are the angel, whose function is to strike one of the 'P's (for *peccatum*) from the pilgrim's brow, escorting him to the stairway upward, and the chant, which on the ledge of the proud is the "Beati pauperes spiritu" (XII, 110).

I.2. Canto X and *Purgatory* proper is introduced as follows:

Poi fummo dentro al soglio della porta
che 'l mal amor de l'anime disusa,
perché fa parer dritta la via torta.

(*Purgatorio* X, 1-3)

Vandelli's reading of this passage would seem fairly straightforward, and is the traditional one:

La quale porta (ogg.) il malo amore delle anime, in quanto fa loro parere un bene (via dritta) ciò che è male (via torta) e le induce così ai peccati, fa che si apra di rado, ai pochi che si salvano, e che sia perciò disusata (la disusa).

It is comforted by his interpretation of the rusty gate in the preceding canto, "acra" (IX, 136), i.e., "resistente ad aprirsi come quella che si apre di rado." However, there is a *lectio difficilior* which is preferable for its closer correspondence to shrove ritual, basic to Purgatory, and—more to the point of this paper—because the structure of *Purgatorio* bears it out. Taking "porta" as the subject of the sentence, rather than the direct object, and giving *parere* its common Dantesque meaning of 'to be',³ the tercet would mean that the entrance, here standing for Purgatory proper as a whole, dishabituates the souls of

3 "Tanto gentile e tanto onesta *pare* / la donna mia".

their love of wickedness because it ("porta") makes the crooked way straight.⁴ The theme is restated at the opening of canto XIII of *Purgatory*:

Noi eravamo al sommo de la scala,
dove secondamente si risega
lo monte che salendo altrui dismala.

The crooked way would appear to symbolize the hardships and dangers besetting the freshly confessed penitent. Winding tortuously up and about the mountain, the crooked way is not the way of sin, as "via torta" is usually interpreted, but the way of righteousness, whereas it is the apparently straight and broad way before which one should beware. In the words of St. Matthew:

Intrate per angustam portam: quia lata porta, et spatiosa via est, quae ducit ad perditionem, et multi sunt qui intrant per eam. Quam angusta porta, et arcta via est, quae ducit ad vitam: et pauci sunt, qui inveniunt eam! (7:13-14).

There once was, indeed, a straight way up to God which Dante could have kept to, the one given him by baptism. However, he had already forfeited that way through sin, as the very first tercet of the Comedy tells us:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita.

And since baptism, the "prima tabula post naufragium"—I can still hear Enrico De Negri's voice as he offered the class this theological definition!—could be received but once, the sinner had to reach for the "secunda tabula," afforded by confession and penance. This is the "via torta" upon which he now embarks.

It is exemplified at once: Dante clammers upward behind Virgil

4 I am indebted to Enrico De' Negri for this suggestion and for the interpretation of *Inferno* I, 1-3. For the latter one may see De' Negri 1974, 1983.

through a steep, winding passage (vv. 7-21) which tries the limits of his perseverance and strength. His wise mentor recommends prudence:

"Qui si conviene usare un poco d'arte,"
cominciò il duca mio, "in accostarsi
or quinci, or quindi al lato che si parte".

To avoid backsliding the confessed sinner is well advised to dodge temptations discreetly until good habits have had a chance to form, shunning not only sin but even the occasions for sin.

Virgil helps his protegee seven times up ascents from ledge to ledge. The rise to the second ledge is eased by a stair such as leads to San Miniato's church outside Florence. Dante, purged of pride, the worst vice, notes: "Esser mi pareva troppo più lieve / che per lo pian non mi pareva davanti" (XII, 116). However, the passage is so narrow that "quinci e quindi l'alta pietra rade" (XII, 108).

The third stairway is easier still: the angel of Mercy invites them: "Intrate quindi / ad un scaleo vie men che gli altri eretto" (XV, 35). The stair up to the fourth ledge would likely have been easier except that night overtook the travelers, sapping Dante's strength, precluding any further progress until dawn. He soars from the fourth to the fifth ledge like a hungry falcon taking to the air "per lo disio del pasto che là il tira" (XIX, 66). The ascent to the sixth is even easier, a fifth 'P' having been struck from his brow:

E io più lieve che per l'altre foci
m'andava, sì che sanz'alcun labore
seguiva in su' li spiriti veloci.
(*Purgatorio* XXII, 7-9)

The passage to the seventh ledge, "che per artezza i salitor dispaia" (XXV, 9), would appear to be winding, unless "l'ultima tortura" of verse 109 is to be understood as meaning simply the passage to the ledge above, the 'last turning,' so to speak. Finally, in a

farewell speech closing Canto XXVII and standing as an "explicit" to Purgatory proper, Virgil says:

"Tratto t'ho qui con ingegno e con arte;
lo tuo piacer ormai prender per duce:
fuor sei de l'erte vie, fuor sei de l'arte".⁵

(*Purgatorio* XXVII, 130-132)

At that point Dante's penance is over; temptations can hold no further power over him. He has passed the baptism of fire and—as promised at X, 2, seventeen cantos earlier—purgation has made the crooked way straight: the eighth stairway "dritta salia ... per entro il sasso;" it is so wide that "ciascun di noi d'un grado fece letto" (XXVII, 73); and so easy to go up that "ad ogni passo poi al volo mi sentia crescere le penne" (XXVII, 123). As was prophesied in Isaiah, important authority for penitential theology, "Qui autem sperant in Domino, mutabant fortitudinem, assument pennas sicut aquilae, current et non laborabunt, ambulabant et non deficient" (XL, 31). The metaphor was often seized upon by Church fathers; Richard of Saint Victor writes: "Si filii sumus Sion, sublimam illam contemplationis scalam erigamus, assumamus pennas aquilae, quibus nos possumus a terrenis suspendere et ad coelestia levare".⁶ Thus, the opening tercet of Canto X is not a homily on love and the small number of saved souls (as Vandelli has it) but, in its position as a sort of "incipit" to Purgatory proper, a statement of the theme of the following seventeen cantos.

II.1. The series of examples of humility Dante finds upon reaching the ledge is carved into the marble wall, apparently at the base where it almost becomes one with the plane:

[...] io conobbi quella ripa intorno

⁵ "Arte" from Latin *artae*, 'narrow'.

⁶ Prologus of *De Trinitate* (books.google.it/books?isbn=2711606481, accessed April 10, 2013).

che dritto di salita aveva manco,
esser di marmo candido.

(*Purgatorio X*, 29-31)

The "ripa," as at verse 23, must be the cliffside, here the lower section which has the least ("manco") steepness ("dritto"). The carved panels are tipped at a low angle so that the penitent souls can twist their heads (as Oderisi does at v. 73) to observe them as they stagger by, bent down as they are, under heavy slabs of stone.

The panels are three, and the exemplary figures are a queen and two kings: Mary, David, and Trajan, in that order. Given the structural relationships between these exemplary figures and the rest of the episode, it will not prove idle pedantry to discern the precise location of the single reliefs and the distribution of the figures represented in them.

The first panel contains two figures, Gabriel and Mary ("L'angel che venne in terra ... dinanzi a noi pareva;" "iv'era imaginata quella / ch'ad aprir l'alto amor volse la chiave"), but how are they arranged? Virgil, to Dante's right ("m'avea / da quella parte onde il cuore ha la gente"), invites him to look further on. Dante takes his gaze from the first panel and sees the second behind Mary ("di retro da Maria ... un'altra storia ne la roccia imposta") and, crossing before or behind Virgil ("io varcai Virgilio"), places himself in front of it ("fe' mi presso / acciò che fosse a gli occhi miei disposta"). Since Dante and Virgil's direction of motion is to the right around the mountain, we know that Gabriel is to the left and Mary, facing him, is to the right.

The second panel shows a cart and oxen carrying the Ark of the Covenant, preceded by a multitude divided into seven choirs.⁷ In the vanguard is David dancing, and opposite the procession ("di contra") is Michol, his wife, at a palace window. That David and the

⁷ There are so many things pictured in this second panel, compared to the first and third, that I am inclined to assume that the whole is intended to constitute a triptych wherein the middle panel is twice the breadth of the other two.

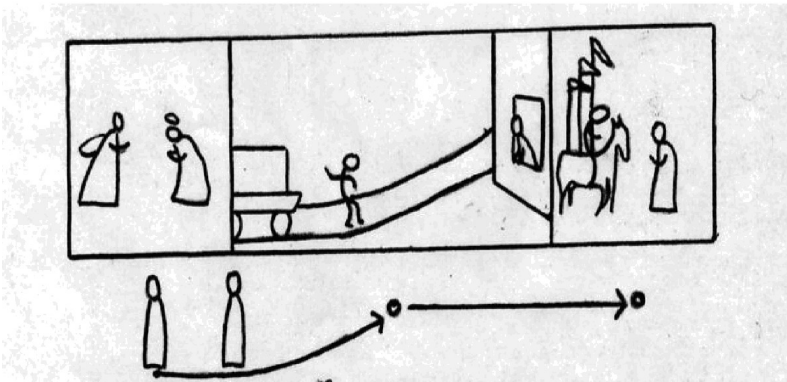
procession are to the left and Micol to the right is shown in the following tercet:

I' mossi i piè del loco dov'io stava,
per avisar da presso un'altra storia,
che dietro a Micòl mi biancheggiava.

(Purgatorio X, 70-72)

The third panel shows Emperor Trajan, surrounded by his knights (bearing medieval pennants!) and a widow at his bridle ("al freno") in the midst of them ("intra tutti costoro"). If the order of presentation—first Trajan, then the widow—indicates a "reading" of the figures from left to right as in the other two reliefs, the following sketch would depict the essential elements of the mural (although I have made no effort to represent its low inclination with respect to the way).

Clearly there is a symmetry to the three parts of this triptych—two main figures each, male to the left, female to the right. Unless this is trifling, its intent is to lead the reader to seek a symmetry of content.



The first example of humility is the Annunciation. As we have said, Mary, on each of the ledges, is the first of the examples of the several virtues, thus assuming a dominant thematic role throughout Purgatorio. One source for this conception is certainly St. Bonaventure's *Speculum Beatae Mariae Virginis*.⁸ Similarly, from the figure of Mary, as described in the New Testament, the essential facts are distilled in the "Ave Maria" and ordered in such a way as to suggest symbolic values which are the basis of the Marian cult through the ages and are operative in Dante's fancy. The "Ave Maria" is predicated on the belief in Mary's special intercessionary powers. Full of Grace, she is the epitomy of all earthly virtues. She is chaste for only the Lord is with her and, at the same time, she is the partaker in divine love. She is more than mortal for the "Ave" links her name to Jesus's for blessedness. She epitomizes motherhood. She is to be invoked in particular by the sinner throughout his life, even in the final moments when a contrite prayer to her can make the difference between salvation and damnation.

Mary's virtues and powers are often exemplified in the second Cantica: Buonconte di Montefeltro is saved *in extremis*, over the claims of the devil come for his soul, because of his "lagrimetta" and truncated prayer to Mary (v. 100). In the valley of princes her name is invoked against the terrors of the night, and two armed angels come down as sentinels, who "ambo vengon del grembo di Maria" (VIII, 37). In the case in point, on the ledge of the proud, Mary is to be seen in her quality of more-than-mortal woman ("benedicta") who is humble with respect to the will of God. Though humble, she is raised to the greatest glory: "ancilla Dei, mater Dei," handmaiden of the

8 Giovanni Getto (1984) stresses this source, quoting the following passage from Bonaventure: "Ipse enim Maria et omni vitio caruit et omni virtute claruit. Ipse, inquam, est Maria, quae a septem vitiis capitalibus fuit immunissima. Maria enim contra superbiam profundissima per humilitatem, contra invidiam affectuosissima per charitatem, contra iram mansuetissima per lenitatem, contra accediam indefessima per sedulitatem, Maria contra gulam temperatissima per sobrietatem, Maria contra luxuriam castissima per virginitatem fuit."

Lord, mother of the Christ.

But mortals too can be humble with respect to the will of God, as the next example, that of David dancing publically before the Ark of the Covenant, illustrates. Here David is specifically remembered as the "umile salmista," the humble singer and composer of psalms. Michol contrasts with the Virgin as pride with humility; Mary bears Jesus but Scripture tells us Michol is stricken barren "usque in diem mortis suae."

The third and final example is that of Trajan, who does justice to the widow, a man showing humility to a fellow and, at the same time, an emperor humbling his royal pride before a lowly subject. Whereas the Angel of God and Mary were in harmony and David and Michol were in discord, between Trajan and the widow there is an initial tension resolved through their words into an ultimate agreement of wills:

[...] "Signor, fammi vendetta
del mio figliuol ch'è morto, ond'io m'accoro."
Ed egli a lei risponder: "Or aspetta
tanto ch'io torni." E quella: "Signor mio,"
come persona in cui dolor s'affretta,
"se tu non torni?" Ed ei: "Chi fia dov'io
la ti farà." Ed ella: "L'altrui bene
a te che fia, se 'l tuo metti in oblio?"
Ond'egli: "Or ti conforta, ch'ei conviene
ch'io solva il mio dover anzi ch'io mova:
giustizia vuole e pietà mi ritiene."

(Purgatorio X, 83-93)

In addition to these relationships, suggested by the symmetry among the three panels, there are others which will become clear when we examine the three figures.

II.2. Having examined the first and second of the seven elements constituting the episode of the proud, viz., the rise to the ledge and the three examples of virtue, let us turn to the third, the

group of penitent souls. On the ledge of pride, serving as a prototype for the following six ledges, the description is handled with considerable detail. The first appearance of a crowd of figures moving along the deserted plane is at *Purgatorio* X 100. Standing at Dante's left before the carved examples, Virgil calls attention to something coming from his direction (thus, from left to right, as normally in Purgatory): "Ecco di qua, ma fanno i passi radi', / mormorava il poeta, 'molte genti'".

The awkward syntax suggests his hesitation to identify what he sees as human beings, so slowly they walk and so strangely. This indecision is the main theme of the following description: men who do not seem men. It is a variation, indeed a clever and significant reversal, of the art-reality motif of the carvings just seen by Dante ("d'intagli sì, che non pur Policleto, / ma la natura lì avrebbe scorno"— *Purgatorio* X, 32), which will be taken up again at the second series of examples: "Non vide me' di me, chi vide il vero" (*Purgatorio* XII, 68). Flanked by these examples of art more real than life, the deformation enacted by the penitent spirits of the prideful is brought into relief.

After a parenthesis in which Dante apostrophizes the reader, Dante the pilgrim states explicitly the theme hinted at above:

[...] "Maestro, quel ch'io veggio
muovere a noi non mi sembran persone,
e non so che è, sì nel veder vaneggio".
(*Purgatorio* X, 112-114)

Virgil explains what he has by now figured out:

[...] "La grave condizione
di lor torment a terra li rannicchia
sì che i miei occhi pria n'ebber tencione".
(*Purgatorio* X, 115-116)

Here the theme is amplified: his torment bends the sufferer down as if to fit him into a niche (*nicchia*) in a church wall, where sculptured

crouching or bent-over figures were often placed.

Virgil continues his amplification on the position of the penitent, emphasizing how hard it is, even with the eyes of pity and understanding, to recognize (*disviticchiare* basically means 'untangle') the human attributes of those whom pride has twisted out of shape:

"Ma guarda fiso là, e disviticchia
col viso quel che vien sotto a quei sassi:
già scorger puoi come ciascun si picchia".
(*Purgatorio* X, 118-120)

Once Dante has distinguished the stone carapaces from the human shapes beneath them, his guide invites him to scrutinize the apparitions more narrowly, singling out their formative elements. The penitent can be seen to beat a "Mea culpa" against their breasts (with their knees, as would appear from what follows).⁹

After a second parenthesis (an admonishment to the prideful on earth), the image is further displayed and amplified:

Come per sostentar solaio o tetto
per mensola tal volta una figura
si vede giunger le ginocchia al petto,
la qual fa del non ver vera rancura
nascere in chi la vede, così fatti
vid'io color, quando puosi ben cura.
(*Purgatorio* X, 130-135)

The art-reality imagery is further exploited: if a sculptured, bent-over figure upholding a roof or column makes the observer

9 The idea that the penitent are beating their breasts with their hands seems impossible to accord with their "grave condizione," particularly since Dante goes to such pains to emphasize how they are doubled up and how the weights are almost more than they can bear. They must be sustaining these slabs with the help of their arms and hands. *Picchiarsi* in the extended sense of 'punish oneself' or 'be punished,' advanced by Porena, is perhaps acceptable etymologically, but aesthetically one favors a concrete description of the specific position of the prideful rather than an abstraction.

uncomfortable, what pity must one feel before these sufferers! The *contrapasso* is spelled out:

Vero è che più e meno eran contratti
secondo ch'avean più e meno a dosso;
e qual più pazienza avea ne gli atti
piangendo pareva dicer: "Più non posso".
(*Purgatorio* X, 136-139)

"Più non posso"—this much I can take, but no more; a punishment apportioned, it would seem, according to the gravity of one's pride and in consideration of one's ability to bear. The rationality of this apportionment is borne out in the next canto at v. 26 where the sufferers are described again, with further *amplificatio*. Reciting the "Pater noster" they "andavan sotto il pondo, / simile a quel che tal volta si sogna, / disparmente angosciate, tutte a tondo / e lasse, su per la prima cornice." The "pondo," a carefully measured counterweight, is a fitting instrument of *contrapasso*. "Quel che si sogna" is that well-known sense of oppression and weakness felt when one tries to run or make some other such effort in a dream and cannot. Dante is perhaps recalling the *Aeneid*, Book XII, where Turnus has just raised an immense stone and heaved it at Aeneas;⁶ it falls short because Jove saps his strength (vv.908-911) :

Ac velut in somnis, oculos ubi languida pressit
nocta quies, nequiquam avidos extendere cursus
velle videmur et in mediis conatibus aegri
succidimus [...].

Dante's simile thus describes with what effort the souls of the proud are staggering around the mountain under the deforming weights which straighten their wills by bending their ethereal bodies.

II.3. We pass now to examining the fourth element, the single souls Dante discusses in detail, viz., Omberto Aldobrandesco,

Odserisi d'Agubbio, and Provenzan Salvani. In order to bring out the structural connections with the examples of humility described above, the three sinners must be seen in terms of the distinction, carefully specified by the Poet, of their specific types of pride. The first, Umberto Aldobrandeschi, with his resonantly pompous name, confesses:

"L'antico sangue e l'opere leggiadre
de' miei maggior me fer sì arrogante
che, non pensando a la comune madre,
ogn' uomo ebbi in despetto tanto avante
ch'io ne mori".

(*Purgatorio* XI,61-65)

That is, he sinned in pride over his high birth—an ancient lineage going back to the seventh century—and the noble works of his ancestors. But Mary's blood-line, according to evidence from Apocryphal books which, however, was accepted by the Church (neither Anne nor James is mentioned in the Bible), went back to King David, as did her husband Joseph's. Evidently Umberto's figure, first of the group of three, stands in haughty contrast to the Virgin's, first of the three examples of virtue. In the Valley of the Princes Dante has heard Sordello take a stand against the idea that real nobility ("l'umana probitate"—VII, 122) can be inherited through the blood. Furthermore, pride in one's birth, considered closely, is tantamount to pride in original sin, inherited generation from generation all the way back to Adam and Eve. Mary alone, conceived immaculately (a common belief although not a dogma in the Middle Ages), uniquely free of the taint of original sin, can atone for Eve's first disobedience (significance attached to the fact that "Ave" is "Eva" spelled backwards; Dante, according to Gmelin,¹⁰ may be suggesting this at X, 40-45 with the seal—wax imagery, the seal bearing the

10 Gmelin (1958, 1964, pp. 875-876). E.g., v. the ninth-century song "Ave maris stella": "Sumens illud Ave / Gabriellis ore, / funda nos in pace, / mutans nomen Hevae" (*The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse*, 1974, p. 94).

reverse image); Mary alone is worthy to bear Him who will make up for Adam's fall.

If Umberto is counterposed structurally to the Madonna, then the second soul, Oderisi d'Agubbio, could be expected to stand in some meaningful relation to David, the second of the three examples of virtue. He, no less than Umberto, spells out his sin clearly, confessing to "lo gran disio / de l'eccellenza ove mio core intese. / Di tal superbia qui si paga il fio" (XI, 86). "Ove mio cor intese" most certainly means his art, illuminating manuscripts; thus, his failing was inordinate conceit over his artistic accomplishments. Unlike the humble composer and singer of psalms, dancing piously before the Ark, Oderisi forgot that his true aim should have been to glorify God, not laud himself and embellish his own reputation.

In Purgatory he fittingly discourses with Dante on how even the glory of a poet, "il nome che più dura" (*Paradiso* IV, 19), is a puff of wind, even that of one who had achieved Dante's primacy and fame. The well-known reference to himself Dante puts into Oderisi's mouth does not reveal Dante's pride, we feel, but is a perfectly accurate assessment of his place in the history of Italian poetry. When he wrote the words "forse è nato chi l'un e l'altro (Guido) caccerà dal nido", one can assume that he had already done so, in the precise sense that his contemporary fame had objectively eclipsed theirs. Nevertheless, his creature mocks him:

"Che voce avrai tu più, se vecchia scindi
da te la carne, che se fossi morto
anzi che tu lasciassi il *pappo* e 'l *dindi*,
pria che passin mill'anni? ch'è più corto
spazio a l'eterno ch'un muover di ciglia
al cerchio che più tardi in cielo è torto".¹¹

(*Purgatorio* XI, 103-108)

The third soul of the three, the Ghibelline Provenzan Salvani, is, one would conclude, intended to be compared with Trajan, the

11 Mathematically: $M / \infty < \text{"muover di ciglia"} / 36,000 \text{ years}$.

third and last of the virtuous examples, by whom he shows himself surpassed in humility as in rank. His is pride in political power: "[E]d è qui perché, fu presuntuoso / a recar Siena tutta a le sue mani" (XI, 122). In the presentation of Provenzan, as in the example of Trajan, there is movement from pride to meekness. Provenzan humbles himself to save a friend from the prisons of Charles I of Anjou. But compare! Emperor Trajan yields to the widow with the harmonious dignity of legend:

[...] "Or ti conforta; ch'ei convene
ch'i' solva il mio dover anzi ch'i' mova:
giustizia vuole e pietà mi ritene".
(*Purgatorio* X, 91-93)

Provenzan, the would-be boss, thwarted in his petty dreams of conquest, begging for contributions to save his friend, "si condusse a tremar per ogni vena" (XI, 138). Set beside the sculptured nobility of the example, out of which everything contingent and historical has been purged, Provenzan's quaking in the Sienese field pulses with realism. As we have seen, the theme of art versus reality is recurrent on this ledge.

II.4. As the prideful are left behind, lurching forward under their weights, Virgil invites Dante's attention to the examples of pride punished, at his feet:

[...] "Volgi gli occhi in giue:
buon ti sarà, per tranquillar la via,
veder lo letto de le piante tue".
(*Purgatorio* XII, 13)

Good advice for the proud! The two travelers walk forward over the examples like church-goers over the tombs set level with the floor:

Come, perché di lor memoria sia,
sovra i sepolti le tombe terragne

portan segnato quel ch'elli eran pria,
onde li molte volte si ripiagne
per la puntura de la rimembranza,
che solo a' pii dà de le calcagne;
sì vid' io li [...].

(*Purgatorio* XII, 16-22)

Some annotators, wrongly I think, feel the metaphor "la rimembranza, che solo a' pii dà de le calcagne" is crude, unwieldy. It is justified by the context. Maybe Dante senses a certain impropriety in walking on the tombs; in any case, he cleverly reverses the imagery: the faithful turn the bottoms of their feet to the deceased; likewise, the deceased dig the heels of their feet figuratively into pious memories, spurring the living to tears and prayers for them, reminding them that man is dust and to dust must return. One recalls such typically medieval metaphors as "l'agute luci de lo intelletto" (*Purgatorio* XVIII, 16), "genua cordis" (*Oratio Manassae*), etc.¹²

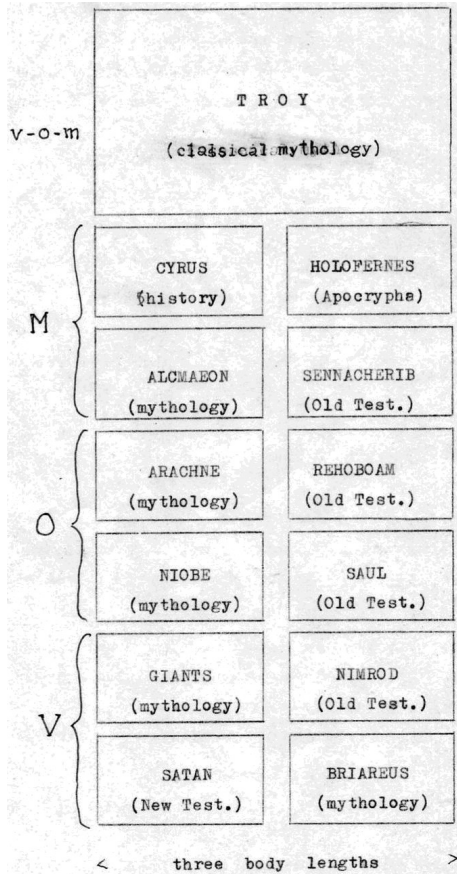
The reliefs take up the whole of the plane ("figurato quanto per via di fuor del monte avanza"), which measures three body-lengths (v. X, 22-24):

Vedea colui che fu nobil creato
più ch'altra creatura, giù dal cielo
folgoreggiando scender, da l'un lato.
Vedea Briareo fitto dal telo
celestial giacer, da l'altra parte.

(*Purgatorio* XII, 25-29)

The reliefs are arranged in pairs ("da l'un lato", "da l'altra parte"), as in the following figure, to be read from the bottom up, in the direction of march:

12 Cfr. Curtius (1963, pp.136-137). In Andreas Capellanus' *De amore libri tres*, we find: "Cor namque meum acutis meam cogit calcaribus voluntatem extra suae naturae semitam divertens vagari [...]".



Taking the hint furnished at XII, 16, we can imagine the figures to be in the form of reliefs in pavement-level tombs set side by side in a long double row to be trodden beneath the feet, a sober "memento mori" of the kind a typical medieval church might offer the visitor.¹³ And we realize retrospectively, if we had not guessed it at the time, that the slabs the prideful lug along on their backs are

¹³ One does not know which column is to the left, which to the right, but we should think it makes no difference symbolically.

like tombstones, the dead weight of their sinful inclinations pressing them down toward the floor of the ledge as they pass over the examples of pride punished, a fitting *contrapasso* to their inordinate desire to *superesse*, *superire*, and *superare*. Saint Augustine, followed in this by many Catholic fathers, defines pride: " Quid est autem superbia nisi perversae celsitudinis appetitus? " (*De Civitate Dei*, XIV, 13).

The "V-O-M v-o-m" acrostic is no mere trick but a significant structural device. The four tercets beginning with 'V' each deal with supernatural beings, viz., Satan the fallen angel in the first tercet and giants in the next three.¹⁴ The overweening pride of all had been the attempt to raise themselves to the level of God or Jove. The four personages under 'O' were mortals who sinned against the goldly power. Niobe boasted over her fourteen children while the goddess Latona had only two; both Saul and Rehoboam repeatedly disobeyed Jehovah; Arachne challenged Minerva with her weaving. The four examples under 'M' present mortals who were proud with respect to mortals. In the Theban myth of Alcmaeon, it is Eriphile whose pride is punished. Sennacherib's bellicose pride moved him to wage war on Israel; Cyrus the Persians' to wage war on the Massagetes; the Assyrian Holofernes' to attack Judah. With regard to the nature of the offender and the object of his offense, the above examples, in their three-fold division, clearly correspond to the three of the first series, Mary, David, and Trajan. Mary, more than mortal, is humble with respect to God; David, a mortal, is likewise humble with respect to God; Trajan too is a mortal and humbles himself before another mortal.

The thirteenth example, like the envoy of a sestina, recapitulates the previous verses, structurally with the repeated "v-o-m," in content because "superbum Ilion" offended both the gods and other men. Interesting enough, Troy illustrates the projection of individual pride onto the guilt of an entire people.

14 According to the Vulgate, Nimrod was a giant.

II.5. The lesson is over, the first 'P' is stricken from the pilgrim's forehead. As he rises with great effort to the ledge of the envious, the chant of the "Beati pauperes spiritu!" follows him. The structure of succeeding ledges will be less complex than that of the proud, although the reader will be rewarded for his careful attention to the correspondences among the series of examples and the purging souls singled out for special discussion. The more intricate interrelations between the elements of the ledge of the proud, including the trinal system which underpins it (three cantos, three-fold series of examples, three single souls), is a way of signaling the fundamental importance of humility in shrove ritual. Dante, since the entrance into *Inferno*, was apparently going downward, but since his conversion (*conversio*) in *Inferno* XXXIV, 76, he has been ascending, although his direction has never changed. Likewise, on the ledge of the proud, bending low to see and converse with the purgatorial sufferers, he learns that unless he bows down he can never rise.

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GORDON M. POOLE

The Ledge of the Proud

– Abstract –

The author sees a structural pattern uniting Cantos X, XI, and XII of *Purgatory* in ways which seem not to have been noticed in critical literature. Seven constituent elements of the ledge of the proud are identified, each of which will be repeated on the six subsequent ledges with significant variations. *Purgatory* proper, introduced by Ante-Purgatory and closed by Earthly Paradise, is ordered like a *scala*, a musical metaphor rising through seven octaves. The three examples of humility, the three purgatorial souls singled out for closer examination, and the thirteen examples of pride punished, mirror each other in significant ways. These various structural niceties, often frowned upon as medieval quibbling, is defended by the author as part of the poetry of *Purgatory*, attention to which brings out meanings that are otherwise missed. They create in the reader expectations that guide him, as they do Dante the pilgrim, in his ascent through succeeding ledges.