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Eliot Davila

University of Maryland

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The Venetian Arsenal and Dante’s Poetic Purpose

Eliot Davila, Maryland

Eliot attended the University of Maryland Class, where he majored in Economics and minored in Philosophy. His academic interests are broad and include nearly the whole range of the humanities--literature, philosophy, languages, the history of ideas, and literary criticism are some of his favorites--as well as the social sciences. He is currently working on writing a collection of essays that he hopes to self-publish in the spring of 2012.
John Ruskin remarked that if we were to pick an “honestly studious” three or four out of every hundred of Dante’s admirers, then “we should rarely find one who knew why the Venetian Arsenal was described.”\textsuperscript{100} Indeed, the wonderfully elaborate description of the Arsenal in \textit{Inferno} XXI has long posed a problem for readers of the \textit{Commedia}. This paper approaches Dante’s representation of the Arsenal from a new perspective and finds that a more complete understanding of the image offers readers an original insight into what can be called the poetic purpose of Dante. For clarity of presentation, the paper is divided into three sections, each a succeeding step in the move outward from the passage to the poet. In the first section, the Venetian Arsenal image itself is examined through a close reading. It is shown that the image’s origins are etymological and that it has strong ties to the Western tradition of associating ships and states. The second section builds outward from the first by integrating the image into the broader motif of nautical imagery that pervades the \textit{Commedia}. Finally, the third section makes the concluding outward move by linking a new understanding of Dante’s nautical imagery with a new conception of Dante that helps to clarify his role as a Christian poet.

I

Quale ne l’arzanà de' Viniziani
bolle l'inverno la tenace pece
a rimpalmare i legni lor non sani,
ché navicare non ponno—in quella vece
chi fa suo legno novo e chi ristoppa
le coste a quel che più viaggi fece;
chi ribatte da proda e chi da poppa;
altri fa remi e altri volge sarte;
ché terzeruolo e artimon rintoppa—:
tal, non per foco ma per divin’ arte,
bollia là giuso una pegola spessa,
che ’nvivcava la ripa d’ognie parte.

(As in the Arsenal of the Venetians in wintertime they boil the viscous pitch to caulk their unsound ships because they cannot sail—one rebuilds his ship, while still another plugs the seams of his, weathered by many a voyage: one hammers at the stem, another at the stern, this one makes the oars, that one twists the ropes for rigging, another patches jib and mainsail—so, not with fire, but by the art of God, a thick pitch boiled there, sticking to the banks on either side.)\textsuperscript{101}

The Venetian Arsenal was built in 1104 to maintain the commercial and naval fleets of Venice. As Venetian commercial interests expanded throughout the Mediterranean after the fall


of the Byzantine Empire in 1204, the productive capacity of the Arsenal was increased through the economy of specialization and division of labor. Various expert craftsmen and workmen—“the woodchoppers who felled the logs, the sawyers, the assisting carpenters, the caulkers, and the entirely unskilled laborers employed to move materials about”—were coordinated by a foreman, who himself was subordinate to another individual. Over time, expansions were added to the Arsenal, including one around the year 1300. By Dante’s time, the Arsenal had become an icon of manufacturing, trade, commerce, and capital—a fact which Longfellow noted in his commentary to *Inferno* XXI.

The opening passage of *Inferno* XXI captures both the symbolism of the Arsenal and the excitement of its production process by cataloging seven different tasks being performed by seven different craftsmen. As many of Dante’s commentators have rightly noted, this catalog is unnecessary for the underlying comparison between *la pece* of the Arsenal and *una pegola* of the fifth *bolgia*. In fact, Dante’s catalog is *prima facie* quite distracting, since it draws the attention of the poem’s reader away from the simple simile being deployed—in a sense, the same simile that we still use when we say ‘pitch black.’ Not surprisingly, the prominence of the passage’s two middle *tercets* has prompted many readers to interpret the image by explaining its excesses. Although this is an appealing interpretative approach, it does not answer—much less address—the general question of why the boiling pitch is found in the fifth *bolgia*. C.J. Ryan’s explanation that the world of barranty is like sticky pitch because it draws in the innocent is undoubtedly true but leaves something to be desired. Thus, rather than consider why the specific details of the Arsenal’s process of specialization are incorporated in Dante’s image, we can begin by first asking a more general question: Why would Dante include a nautical image in the fifth *bolgia*—the place in *Inferno* reserved for barrators—at all?

William Sayers partially answers this question when he writes that the correlation involves an etymological association. The terms that Dante uses to denote the sin and sinners punished in the fifth *bolgia*—barrant, barratter, and barrateria—are derived from the Old French word *baraterie*, which meant “deceit, guile, or trickery.” The word was most likely brought to Italy by the sea-faring Normans when they invaded the southern part of the Italian Peninsula in the eleventh century. There, at least in the city of Amalfi, the term seems to have

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103 Perhaps the most famous of these commentators is Lodovico Castelvetro (1570): “Dante not having need of anything but the pitch in the arsenal, has also subsumed within the comparison the building of new ships, the making of oars, the mending and flying and sewing of sails: the things which don’t have anything to do with pitch…” *Commentary on Dante’s Inferno: I-XXIX*, in the Dante Dartmouth Project, http://dante.dartmouth.edu.

104 For example, two of the most widely read contemporary English translators, Charles Singleton and Hollander, comment (respectively) that the image’s excessiveness is the key to understanding its poetic efficacy and its aesthetic beauty. It may be more likely that the excessiveness is Dante’s formal imitation of Aeneas’ first impression of Carthage (*Aeneid*, I. 423-429):

> Insistently the zealous Tyrians work: some build the city walls, erect the citadel, and roll up the stones by hand; some choose a place for a house and close it off with a furrow; some appoint magistrates and a sacred senate, and lay down laws. Here others dredge harbors, there others lay the deep foundations of theatres, and cut out columns from huge cliffs, lofty decorations for the stages of the future.


107 See *Inferno*, XI.60, XXI.41, XXII.87, 136, XXII.53.
also carried an additional maritime connotation. A Latinized version of the term was used as early as 1150 in the city’s marine code, Tavola Amalfitana:

*Item pro tarenis quinque, si nauta non habet unde solvat debet carcerari et commictendo barattariam expressam saltim debet carcerari ad arbitrium officialium.*

(Item a further five *tari* [a local silver coin], if the mariner does not have the means to pay he ought to be incarcerated; also in the event that he commits evident baratry, he ought without further ado to be incarcerated at the disposition of the officials.)

Although it is not clear when the root first entered the Italian lexis, it is evident that by Dante’s time *barat-* was etymologically linked with both the sale of church or state offices and with maritime activity. On the basis of this connection, we may propose that Dante had either read Italian or European maritime laws directly, where he had found the root used, or had learned of the term’s twofold meaning through a second-hand source. We must keep in mind that Dante had spent a period of time studying with the professor of jurisprudence Cino da Pistoia at the university town of Bologna in 1287. Barbara Reynolds has written about the visit that “Dante’s position in relation to the University was equivalent to the modern situation of a poet in residence,” while Robert Hollander has suggested that Dante’s awareness of Roman law may have been gained from a proximity to Bologna. Why not, then, could the poet’s awareness of contemporary European law also have been gained as a result of this proximity? Needless to say, wherever Dante learned of the etymological connection, it provided him with a meaningful association between the Venetian Arsenal and the sin punished in the fifth *bolgia.* This is especially true given the fact that the Arsenal was a symbol of commerce, an activity subsumed within the concept of baratry.

In general, all nautical imagery is appropriate to the *bolgia,* since there is an implicit link between baratry and maritime activity. Dante stresses this point by deploying two more maritime images in the fifth *bolgia.* First, he compares the response of the devils to Malacoda’s signal with “nave a segno (a ship set sail).” Second, he likens the floating barratarios to “dalfini, quando fanno segno / a’ marinari con l’arco de’ peccatori ’l dosso / che s’argomentin di camper lor legno (dolphins, when they arch their backs above the water, giving sailors warning to save their ship).”

The relevance of marine imagery to the fifth *bolgia,* however, involves more than merely the clever wordplay that Sayers shrewdly noted. Dante is also capitalizing on an association

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108 The southern Italian city of Amalfi was conquered by the Norman adventurer Robert Guiscard in 1073. Dante mentions Guiscard in *Inferno* XXVII.14 and places him on Mars in *Paradiso* XVIII.48. This quote and this translation are taken from William Sayers, “Chaucer’s Shipman and the Law Marine,” *The Chaucer Review, Vol.* 37, No. 2 (2002): 148. Sayers shows that the term appears in other marine law documents from late-medieval Europe. For instance, the Catalan *Consulat de Mar,* which according to Sayers, “originated in Valencia in 1283,” uses the term *baratejava* to denote a fraudulent marine offense.

109 Perhaps the *Tavola Amalfitana* itself could be how the term came into Italian. Frederic Sanborn writes that the code consists of sixty-six articles, of which twenty-one are written in Latin, and forty-five in Italian. He also notes that many of the articles use strange hybrid words that mix Latin and Italian. Frederic Sanborn, *Origins of the Early English Maritime and Commercial Law* (New York: American Historical Association, 1930), 51.


between states and ships that has been used in the West since the Greeks. Though Dante knew no Greek, he would have been familiar with the metaphor through several Latin sources. Horace, for example, likens the state to a ship in his Carmina—a fact attested to by Quintilian in his discussion of allegory in Institutio Oratoria. Similarly, the poet Statius utilizes the state-ship metaphor in the first book of the Thebaid, during a peasant’s speech about the rulers of Thebes.

Ultimately, however, the Latin translations and commentaries on Aristotle are probably Dante’s principal source for the state-ship metaphor. In the Politics, Aristotle compares the span of a ship to the number of citizens in a polis: he writes that if it is either too large or too small, it will not “sail” properly. Aquinas picks up the image and uses it to describe the state in De Regimine Principum. What is interesting, however, is that both Aristotle and Aquinas discuss the state in terms that resonate with the language of economy used in Inferno XXI. At the beginning of the Politics, for instance, Aristotle makes a distinction between rulers and workmen that sounds similar to Dante’s catalog of tasks. Aquinas also adopts the language of specialization to his discussion of the state in De Regimine Principum, where he discusses the various tasks of those on board a ship.

Dante’s conception and usage of the state-ship metaphor follows the tradition set by Aristotle and Aquinas. In the Convivio, Dante picks up on both the metaphor and the language of specialization. Citing Aristotle, he writes:

E a queste ragioni si possono reducere parole del Filosofo ch’elli nella Politica dice, che quando più cose ad uno fine sono ordinate, una di quelle conviene essere

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112 The earliest appearance of the ship of state metaphor may be found in the poems of Alcaeus (Fragments 6 and 208a). The metaphor can also be found, more prominently, in Sophocles (Oedipus Rex, 105ff. and 880ff.) and Plato (Republic, 488a-c). For a brief history of the image, see Norma Thompson, The Ship of State: Statecraft and Politics from Ancient Greece to Democratic America (Chelsea: Yale University Press, 2001), 167-169.

113 Horace, Carmina, 1.14. Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, 8.6.44. Some modern scholars have challenged Quintilian’s reading of Carmina 1.14. For the purposes of this paper, these challenges are unimportant, since it only matters what Horace was perceived to have meant.

114 “Just as from here cold Boreas and from there cloud-bringing Eurus carry along the sails, chance sways the middle of the ship to and fro.” Statius, Thebaid, 1.192-194

115 “For example, a ship which is only a span long will not be a ship at all, nor a ship a quarter of a mile long; yet there may be a ship of a certain size, either too large or too small, which will still be a ship, but bad for sailing. In like manner a state when composed of too few is not, as a state ought to be, self-sufficing: when of too many, though self-sufficing in all mere necessaries, as a nation may be, it is not a state...” Aristotle, Politics, 1326a40-1326b5, trans. Benjamin Jowett.

116 “It nevertheless must be examined before, that to govern is to direct that which is governed in conformity with its required end. Similarly, in this way, a ship is said to be governed when it is deliberately led by a captain through a course unharmed. If therefore something is set toward an end outside itself, like a ship toward a port, its direction will pertain not only to the office of the helmsman, but also to that farther thing which directs it towards its end. If in truth there should be something of which there was no end outside itself, to this alone the direction of the helmsman would direct it, and which in that case it would preserve safe in itself perfectly.” De Regimine Principum, Liber I, Caput XIV.

117 “…to rule over men is better than to rule over wild beasts; for the work is better which is executed by better workmen, and where one man rules and another is ruled, they may be said to have a work.” Aristotle, Politics, 1254a25ff, trans. Benjamin Jowett.

118 “For in that case it plainly appears there will be one man who bears care and would preserve it in its being, but another from whence the principle of navigation is adopted, so that it may reach a lofty perfection, like in a ship itself. For the carpenter has the care of rebuilding, if there were something which collapsed on the boat, but the sailor bears care so that he may lead the boat towards its port.” De Regimine Principum, Liber I, Caput XIV.
regolante o vero reggente, e tutte l'altre rette e regolate. Si come vedemo in una nave, che diversi offici e diversi fini di quella a uno solo fine sono ordinati, cioè a prendere loro desiderato porto per salutevole via: dove, si come ciascuno ufficiale ordina la propria operazione nel proprio fine, così è uno che tutti questi fini considera, e ordina quelli nell'ultimo di tutti; e questo è lo nocchiero, alla cui voce tutti obbedire deono.

(Confirmation of this line of reasoning can be found in what the Philosopher says in the Politics: in a plurality directed to one end, one member must direct and rule, and all the others must be ruled and directed. A ship is a good example: on it the various tasks and ends pursued by the sailors are directed to a single end, that of reaching their destined port after enjoying a prosperous voyage. Here we see that just as each officer directs his particular activity to its particular end, so there is one person whose concern is all the particular ends, and who directs them to their single final end: he is the captain and all must obey his commands.)  

Not surprisingly, Dante invokes the same metaphor when he discusses the purpose of temporal government in De Monarchia. He writes that the duty of the captain (i.e. the Emperor) is to calm the fluctus cupiditatis and navigate the ship to its desired portum. This is the same image found in the memorable apostrophe of Italy from Purgatorio VI: “Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello / nave sanza nocchiere in gran tempest (Ah, Italy enslaved, abode of misery, pilotless ship in a fierce tempest tossed).” It later reappears in Beatrice’s apostrophe of Greed in Paradiso.

Taken together, these passages by Dante highlight the relevance of the Arsenal to the fifth bolgia. The state is a ship and the state’s leader is a ship captain. The ship of state must be directed toward its appropriate end by the captain, who also directs his crew in accordance with the ship’s final goal. On this view, the barrators of the fifth bolgia are captains who steered the ship of state off course. By selling public offices for money, they seized control of the ship and directed it toward an erroneous end. The language of specialization and division of labor is an integral part of this comparison. In contrast to the Arsenal, where labor is divided and appropriately managed in accordance with a final end, the barrators failed to coordinate the activities of their subordinate officers and sailors. They are captains who abused the trust placed in them by their crew and thereby created the very fluctus cupiditatis that they were supposed to calm.

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120 “...and by the Emperor, who following philosophical examples may direct mankind to temporal happiness. And either none or a few may be able to reach this port, and those that can may do so with very great difficulties, unless the waves of desire, having been calmed, allow the free human race to rest in the tranquility of peace. This is that sign to which the curator of the world, who is said to be the Roman Prince, ought to attend to most...” De Monarchia, III.xvi.10-11.
121 “Oh cupidigia, che i mortali affonde / si sotto te, che nessuno ha podere / di trarre li occhi fuor de le tue onde! (O greed, it is you who plunge all mortals so deep into your depths that not one has the power to lift his eyes above your waves!).” Dante, Paradiso, XXVII.121-123, trans. Hollander.
122 There are other allusions to the state-ship metaphor in the poem that should be noted here. In Purgatorio XX.93, Dante writes that Philip IV “portar nel Temple le cupide vele (spread his greedy sails against the Temple).” In Paradiso VIII.80, Robert Martel is said to be in command of a barca (boat). In Paradiso XVI.96, Cacciaguida says “che tosto fa iattura de la barca (that some cargo soon shall be hurled from the ship)” of Florence. Lastly, in Paradiso XXVII.139-146, Beatrice offers the following prophesy: “che ’n terra non è chi governi / ...ma prima che
II

Nautical imagery plays a central role in the *Commedia*, as readers like Gil Vicente have recognized (the Portuguese poet used the motif as the organizing image of his *Triologia das Barcas*). With this in mind, it is not unreasonable to assume that the opening passage of *Inferno* XXI, as one of the poem’s most prominent maritime images, is oriented toward something beyond itself, as a ship is to its *portum*. James Applewhite has hinted at the existence of such an orientation by picking up on the “moral overtones” that underlie the passage. We have already seen how Dante conceived of the state as a ship, a connection which clearly helps to explain the curious appearance of the Venetian Arsenal in the fifth *bolgia*. It remains then for us to explore how the Arsenal image fits in with the rest of the poem’s nautical imagery.

Let us jump ahead and initially consider the usage of nautical terminology in the first canto of *Paradiso*. We will return to *Purgatorio* in the third section. When Dante asks Beatrice in *Paradiso* how he is able to pass through fire and air, she replies with the following remark:

Ne l’ordine ch’io dico sono acclina
tutte nature, per diverse sorti
più al principio loro e men vicine;
onde si muovono a diversi porti
per lo gran mar de l’essere, e ciascuna
con istinto a lei dato che la porti.

(In that order, all natures have their bent according to their different destinies, whether nearer to their source or farther from it. They move, therefore, toward different harbors upon the vastness of the sea of being, each imbued with an instinct that impels it on its course.)

In this image, human beings are conceived of as ships with God at the helm. God pilots each ship to its *porti* via the natural instinct that He instills in it: “in la sua volotade è nostra pace: / ell’ è quel mare al qual tutto si move (in His will is our peace. It is to that sea all things move).” It is important to note, however, that in no way does this natural instinct negate the freedom of human will, since “così da questo corso si parte / talor la creatura, c’ha podere / di piegar, così pinta, in altra parte (sometimes a creature, having the capacity to swerve, will, thus impelled, head off another way, in deviation from the better course).” In other words, although we are watched over by God, we are “necessità pero quandì non prende / se non come dal viso in che si specchia / nave che per torrente giù discende (by that no more enjoined than is a ship, moved downstream

gennaio tutto si svern / ...rageran si questi cerchi superni, / la fortuna che tanto s’aspetta / le poppe volgerà u’ son le prore (on earth, there is no one to govern...but, before all January leaves the winter...rays from these lofty circles shall shine forth so that the long-awaited tempest turn the ships, setting their poops where now they have their prows).”


124 Dante, *Paradiso*, 1.109-114, trans. Hollander. Here Hollander has mistranslated the final word *porti*, glossing over its meaning with the English word “course.” Nevertheless, the meaning is clear enough.
on a river’s flow, by the eyes that mirror it).”

An even closer reading of the Venetian Arsenal passage suggests that this “people-ship” metaphor is also at work in the fifth *bolgia*, where barratry is punished. As we have seen in the Venetian Arsenal image, the sinful barratros boil in the pitch like “legni lor non sani, / ché navicar non ponno.” Each “unsound ship” is unable to stay afloat and must remain submerged in the pitch. The language of economy reappears here, but now in a different context than we examined before. The pitch burns “non per foco ma per divin’arte,” but the implementation of the punishment of the barratros is pragmatically performed under the direction of Malacoda, who directs at least ten other demons. These demons prod the unsound sinners with hooks when they try to remain afloat. Thus there is a sort of specialization and division of labor at work in *Inferno* XXI, made possible by God’s art. Just as a foreman coordinates the many men who work in the Venetian Arsenal, God is the foreman who coordinates the demons under Malacoda. This interpretation incidentally helps to clarify the *contrapasso* of the fifth *bolgia*: whereas the pitch of the Arsenal is used by caulkers for filling seams and fastening the timbers of a ship together, the pitch of the fifth *bolgia* is used to caulk the “unsound” ships of the barratros. In a strange reversal, the result of the entire procedure is not seaworthiness, but its opposite.

The image of man as a “vessel” appears prominently in the New Testament, particularly in the Latin Vulgate, a text that Dante was intimately familiar with and alluded to frequently. In 2 Corinthians 4:7, for example: “habemus autem thesaurum istum in vasis fictilibus ut sublimitas sit virtutis Dei et non ex nobis (we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us). Man is seen here as a *vas Dei* through which divine purpose is exercised. Man should shun earthly riches, because, in the words of 2 Timothy 2:21 “si quis ergo emundaverit se ab istor erit vas in honorem sanctificatum et utile Domino ad omne opus bonum paratum (if a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work).” The same language appears again in 1 Thessalonians 4:4: “ut sciat unusquisque vestrum vas suum possidere in sanctificatione, et honore (that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour).” Besides these, several more references to vessels can be found in the Latin Vulgate.

Before moving on to establish the connection between the Vulgate term *vas* and Dante’s nautical imagery, we must first deal with the objection that *vas* is used in the Vulgate to denote either a “vessel” in the sense of a jar or a utensil, and is never deployed in a strictly nautical context. Such an objection is mistaken, as a gloss of Acts 27:17 demonstrates: “Qua sublata, adjutoris utebantur, accingentes navem, timentes ne in Syrtim inciderent, summisso vasa sic ferebantur (Which when they had taken up, they used helps, undergirding the ship; and, fearing lest they should fall into the quicksands, strake sail, and so were driven.)” It may also be objected that *vas* was not used in a nautical context in classical Latin literature. This objection is true (so far as the author is aware), but it has little bearing on the claim that Dante formulated his people-ship image through the two-fold meaning of *vas*. The association between jars and boats has existed at least since Heracles sailed across the sea in a golden cup during his tenth labor.

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126 See Rom 9:21. Also, see Acts 10:11-16, where a *vas* descends from heaven and appears in one of Peter’s visions.
127 If Dante read Servius, as it has been argued by Edward Rand, “Dante and Servius,” *Annual Reports of the Dante Society, No. 33* (1914): 1-11, and Erich von Richthofen, “Traces of Servius in Dante,” *Dante Studies, No.*
Wherever and whenever the association between the Latin term *vas* and a sea-going vessel came about, it is clear that the connection was well known by Dante.\(^{128}\) There is no greater evidence for this than the writings of the poet himself:

Guido, i’ vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io  
fossimo presi per incantamento  
e messi in un *vasel*, ch’ad ogni vento  
per mare andasse al voler vostro e mio

(Guido, I wish that you and Lapo and I would be taken by enchantment and placed in a *vessel*, which with every wind would cut across the sea at our will.)\(^{129}\)

In this sonnet to Guido, Dante unambiguously uses *vasel* to refer to a sea-going instrument. It must be concluded, therefore, that Dante had knowledge of the term’s dual connotation. By transferring this dualism back onto the Vulgate term *vas*, Dante was able to find a term to describe the image of people as ships, an image which he could find in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 4:19: “*ut jam non simus parvuli fluctuantes, et circumferamur omni vento doctrinæ* (that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro by waves, and carried about with every wind of doctrine).”

Returning to the fifth *bolgia*, it now makes sense why Dante would refer to Fra Gomita as a “*vasel d’ogne froda* (vessel of fraud)” in *Inferno* XXII. Dante is using what Christopher Kleinhenz has called the “poetics of citation”—that is to say, he is recalling the usage of a particular word from the Vulgate.\(^{130}\) Fra Gomita and his fellow barrators were supposed to be vessels of God. They were authorized to pilot the ship of state in so far as they recognized that they were themselves piloted by God. Instead of being vessels of God, however, they became vessels of fraud and wretchedness. This connection is reinforced when the image of statesman as vessel appears again in *Purgatorio’s* Valley of the Princes. The early death of the son of Pedro III of Aragon is lamented by Sordello in the following terms: “e se re dopo lui fosse rimaso / lo giovanetto che retro a lui siede, / ben andava il valor di *vaso in vaso* (and if the youth who sits behind him had come to power on his throne, then indeed his virtue would have passed from *vessel to vessel*).”\(^{131}\)

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\(^{92}\)(1974): 117-128, then he would have been familiar with this story as well. See Servius’ *Commentary on Virgil’s Aeneid* vii. 662.

\(^{128}\) According to Richard Mayne, *The Language of Sailing* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 330, the English word “vessel” derives from the diminutive *vascellum*. Francesca Cangeri, *Anglicization of French Words* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2005), 11 writes that *vescellum* derives from *vasculum*, which itself is the classical diminutive form of *vas*. Like bartrary, it was used in late-medieval law documents. For example, the Latin term *vascellum* can be found in the *Consuetudines Civitatis Amalphpiae* from 1274: “Item, datur quandoque in societate vascelli, contingente pro pecunia ipsa tam de damno, quam de naulo et lucro quod habet, qui fecit *vascellum*. This document may be, perhaps, the clue as to how the nautical connotation entered the Italian language. This excerpt is taken from Archivo Storico per le Province Napoletane (Napoli: A Cura Della Societa di Storia Patria, 1879), 270.


III

It is now possible to move toward the conclusion by examining what this understanding of the Arsenal image says about Dante. That it should allow an understanding of the poet is supported primarily by the fact that Dante himself was permanently banished from his native city of Florence in 1302 on charges of barratry.132 The intensity of the Arsenal image—the pitch burns not by fire, a symbol of salvation that appears in Purgatorio XXVII, but “per divin' arte”—serves to highlight the preeminent importance of the bolgia to the poet. When Dante the Pilgrim first sees the pitch where the barratrors are submerged, he becomes so engrossed by it that Virgil has to warn him of the approaching devil.133 In Inferno XXII, the pilgrim again becomes mesmerized by the pitch: “Pur a la pegola era la mia ’ntesa, / per veder de la bolgia ogne contegno (my attention was fixed upon the pitch to note each detail of this gulch).”134 By pausing the narrative of the poem at these two moments in the fifth bolgia of Inferno, Dante draws attention to the sin of barratry and forces reflection on its significance. Perhaps this is the poet’s subtle reply to the charges of barratry leveled against him by his contemporaries. Dante is defining himself in opposition to the vessels of fraud found in the fifth bolgia. He wants us to pause with him and reflect on the fact that he was not a vessel of fraud, that he was instead a vessel of God led by divine art.

If this reading is right, then it should not come as a surprise to see Dante associating himself with nautical imagery several times throughout the Commedia. Composing a poem has been associated with nautical imagery since classical times. Ernst Robert Curtius has shown that figures such as Virgil, Horace, Statius, and Ovid compared themselves to sailors and their poems to boats.135 Dante is clearly familiar with the pattern, as he too thinks of his poem as a ship:

Per corer miglior acque alza le vele
omai la navicella del mio ingegno,
che lascia dietro a sè mar si crudele;
e canterò di quel second regno

(To run its course through smoother water, the small bark of my wit now hoists its sail, leaving that cruel sea behind. Now I shall sing the second kingdom...)136

In these opening verses of Purgatorio, Dante’s “ship” (i.e. his poem) leaves the mar crudele of Inferno behind and prepares to sail over the miglior acque of Purgatorio. Later in the same canto, Dante returns to the image, noting that “che mai non vide navicar sue acque / omo (upon those waters no man ever sailed).”137 The metaphor continues as Dante ascends the mountain of Purgatorio. When he becomes engrossed with Oderisi’s talk on the terrace of Pride, Virgil tells him to “pinger sua barca (speed his ship).” While climbing the mountain between the terraces of Wrath and Sloth, Dante is weary and stops “come nave ch’ a la piaggia arriva (as does a ship that

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132 See Barbara Reynolds, “The First Years of Exile,” in Dante: The Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man (United Kingdom: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006), 43-51.
133 Dante, Inferno, XXI.22-30, trans. Hollander.
134 Dante, Inferno, XXII.16-17, trans. Hollander.
comes to shore).” On the terrace of Gluttony, he moves as swift as “nave pinta da buon vento (ships driven by a favoring wind).” Fellow Italian poet Guido Guinizelli advises Dante to “per morir meglio, esperienza imbarche (take on board the knowledge that you gain)” from the divinely ordered journey through Purgatorio. In Dante’s dream on the terrace of Sloth, a “dolce serena (sweet siren)” even appears to wreck his poem’s voyage. Finally, in Paradiso, Dante writes that “non è pareggio da picciola barca (this is no easy voyage for a little bark).”

For Dante the poet himself, the poem-ship metaphor collapses, like a matryoshka doll, into the people-ship metaphor discussed earlier in the second section. It is this crucial obfuscation that we have hitherto been unraveling in the course of this paper’s voyage. Not only is Dante’s poem a ship with him as poet at the helm, but Dante himself is also a ship with God at the helm. Again, this is in contrast to the barrators, who were at the helm of the state but did not accept God as captain of their own ships. Upon seeing Lucifer’s wings, Dante writes that he has never seen such massive sails at sea, tacitly suggesting that he is on a voyage of sorts.139 Dante tells John that creation, redemption, and eternal glory “tratto m’hanno del mar de l’amor torto, / e del diritto m’han posto a la riva (have drawn me from the sea of twisted love and brought me to the shore where love is just).”140 In contrast to the classical poets, Dante is guided over the seas of his poetical voyage “per divin’ arte.” Through the aesthetic experience of writing the Commedia, he is led to the portum of beatific vision by three successive helmsmen: Virgil, Beatrice, and finally Bernard. Each of these is appointed by God, either directly or indirectly. In the language of economy, God directs his subordinate officers to lead Dante to safe harbor. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Beatrice is “quasi ammiraglio che in poppa e in prora / viene a veder la gente che ministra / per li altri legni, e a ben far l’incora (like an admiral who moves from stern to prow to see the men that serve the other ships and urge them on to better work).”141 She is indeed the admiral and commander of Dante-as-ship from the Garden of Eden to the Empyrean.

This image reappears in the opening passage of Paradiso, where Dante explicitly asks to be made a vaso of Apollo (who is associated with the Christian God): “O buono Appollo, a l’ultimo lavoro / fammi del tuo valor si fatto vaso, / come dimandi a dar l’amato alloro (O good Apollo, for this last labor make me a vessel worthy of the gift of your beloved laurel).”142 Dante is asking God to aid him in his ultimo lavoro: the poetical composition of Paradiso. As we have already seen, there is a strong association between the Latin root vas and nautical imagery in the Commedia. By likening himself to a ship (i.e. a vessel), Dante implicitly compares himself with St. Paul, who is called “lo Vas d’elezione (the Chosen Vessel)” and “il gran vasello / de lo Spirito Santo (the exalted vessel of the Holy Spirit).”143 These epithets, of course, are allusions to the label that God gives to Paul in Acts 9:15, the label of vas electionis. Dante too is a vas electionis, since he also is led by God to the portum of beatific vision. With this reading, Dante’s pronouncement at the beginning of the poem “io non Paulo sono (I am not Paul)” is anything but earnest. The proclamation itself is intended to bring Paul to the reader’s mind and thus associate the two figures with each other from the outset.

In fact, one of the central organizing images of the entire poem is the suggestion of a

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138 In order of reference here, these quotations appear in Purgatorio, XII.4-6, Purgatorio, XVII.78, Purgatorio, XXIV.3, Purgatorio, XXVI.75, Purgatorio, XIX.19, Paradiso, XXIII.67, trans. Hollander.
139 Dante, Inferno, XXXIV.48, trans. Hollander.
parallel between Dante and Paul, of the poet as *vas electionis* guided by divine inspiration. The first reference comes in the first canto of *Inferno*, in the first image of the poem, in its first use of the word *come*: “come quei che con lena affannata, / uscito fuor del pelago a la riva, / si volge a l’acqua perigiosa e guata (as one who, with laboring breath, has escaped from the deep to the shore turns and looks back at the perilous waters).” The allusion here is to Acts 27, where Paul is shipwrecked off the coast of Malta on his way to Rome and is forced to swim ashore. Other more minor comparisons between Dante and Paul are made over the course of the poem. Like Paul, Dante suffers fasting, cold, and sleepless nights in preparation of his visionary rapture. In *Paradiso* XXVI, Beatrice is compared with Ananias, the disciple of Christ who cured Paul of his blindness; by extension, the metaphor puts Dante in Paul’s position. Throughout *Paradiso*, Dante constantly tells his reader that he cannot repeat exactly what he saw and heard in the Empyrean, that he has lost some parts of his memory. These are, of course, allusions to the visionary experience of Paul as narrated in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4:

> Scio hominem in Christo ante annos quattuordecim, sive in corpore nescio, sive extra corpus nescio, Deus scit, raptum hujusmodi usque ad tertium caelum. Et scio hujusmodi hominem sive in corpore, sive extra corpus nescio, Deus scit: quoniam raptus est in paradisum: et audivit arcana verba, quae non licet homini loqui.

(I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, [whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;] such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, [whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;] How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.)

Much has been written on the parallels between Paul and Dante, beginning with the poet’s own self-exposition on *Paradiso* I in his Epistle to Cangrande. More recently, Joseph Mazzeo and Francis Newman have demonstrated the significance of the Pauline modes of vision to Dante’s *raptus*, while Giuseppe Di Scipio has shown that the three elements of light, water, and time underlie the visions of the two figures. Marguerite Chiarenza has also acknowledged the similarities between the two figures, but notes that Paul was silent about his vision while

145 There is also another reference here to Paul’s discussion of faith at 1 Tim 1:19: “habens fidem, et bonam conscientiam, quam quidam repellentes, circa fidem naufragaverunt (holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck).”
146 See *Purgatorio*, XXIX.37-39, where Dante writes “O sacrosante Vergini, se fami, / freddi o vigilie mai per voi sofferesi (O sacred Virgins, if fasting, cold, or sleepless nights I’ve ever suffered for your sake).” The allusion is to 2 Cor 11:27, where Paul describes himself “in labore et ærumna, in vigiliis multis, in fame et siti, in jejuniis multis, in frigore et nuditate (in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness).”
148 For the claims, see *Paradiso* 1.5-9, 1.70-74, XIV.80-81, XIV.103, XVIII.11, XXIV.24, XXX.97-99, XXXI.136-138, XXXIII.51-57, XXXIII.67-72, XXXIII.94-96, XXXIII.143.
Dante describes his meeting with God in imperfect images.\textsuperscript{150} I want to suggest a slightly different comparison, however, than all of these, including the poet’s own in his letter to Can Grande. When I say that Dante considered himself to be a Pauline figure, I mean to say that the historical figure of Paul of Tarsus, as constructed by Dante, provides a sort of \textit{private paradigm} (as opposed to a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense) that the poet uses to conceive of and express his own poetic purpose. In making this statement, I am extending Kenelm Foster’s claim that Dante “clearly [takes] St. Paul’s experience as a proto-type of his own.”\textsuperscript{151} It is true that Dante’s ascent into heaven is analogous to the ascent of Paul, and even that Dante’s descent into hell is analogous to Paul’s descent in the apocryphal Apocalypse of Paul. On a more abstract level, however, I am suggesting that Dante does not merely use Paul’s \textit{experience} as a proto-type of his own, but also that Dante uses Paul’s character, life, and work as a paradigm for his own character, life, and work.

Accordingly, the life of Dante parallels the life of Paul as narrated in Acts. The similarity between the \textit{via} to Damascus where Paul’s conversion takes place and the \textit{via} at the beginning of \textit{Inferno} I is strong enough to suggest that John Freccero was right in calling Dante’s poem a narrative of conversion.\textsuperscript{152} As stated above, Paul’s shipwreck at Malta is similar to the shipwrecked sailor from \textit{Inferno} I. Paul’s frequent persecutions, and his trial before Caesar in Rome, could have also reminded Dante of his own unjust exile, and the Apostle’s writing from his cell in Roman prison could have been Dante’s inspiration for his own exilic writings. Ruth Mary Fox also caught onto this comparison:

As Saint Paul became, as a result of his vision, the Apostle of Christian unity, sending out of his prison in Rome those dynamic letters to Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, exhorting those early Christians to unity, teaching that “who divides the Church divides Christ”; that “if one member suffer anything all the members suffer” (1 Cor. 1:10, 12:26), so Dante, imprisoned in the wide world outside his beloved Florence, urges unity among the Christians of his day who by their political feuding rend Christendom asunder. Though Paul had many visions, he goes back in all his teaching to that first vision on the road to Damascus, that vision of the Mystical Body. Dante’s vision, too, is ever present to him.\textsuperscript{153}

Perhaps the most attractive feature of Paul as a model for Dante was that he was a Roman citizen who considered himself a missionary of God, a \textit{vas electionis} called to spread the message of Christ.\textsuperscript{154} As such, Paul stood at the intersection of the three cultures that were most important to Dante: Rome, Christianity, and Letters.

The fusion of these three cultures pervades Paul’s thought. Frequently referred to as the \textit{Doctor Gentium}, Paul’s primary purpose was to spread the word of Christ among the Gentiles. The narrative of his three missionary journeys occupies a significant portion of the Book of


\textsuperscript{151} Kenelm Foster, \textit{The Two Dantes and Other Studies} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 71.


\textsuperscript{153} Ruth Mary Fox, \textit{Dante Lights the Way} (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1958), 240.

Acts.\textsuperscript{155} In order to spread God’s word, Paul called upon his familiarity with Greek literature and letters, writing in Greek and even quoting Greek poets when the occasion demanded. As Harold Bloom has noted, Paul was an exceptionally creative reader, finding ways to support his claims not only with excerpts from Greek thought, but also with passages from the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{156} In a sense, all subsequent Christian theologians have followed in the footsteps of Paul, rereading and reworking the scriptures to amass evidence for their beliefs and positions.

It is exactly this model which Dante used to conceive of his own poetic purpose. The \textit{Commedia} is built on reworking, rewriting, and reinterpretting old texts, both sacred and secular. Rewriting the sacred texts can be called Dante’s \textit{theological purpose}, and has been written about by many.\textsuperscript{157} Rewriting the secular texts can be called Dante’s \textit{aesthetic purpose}, or his Bloomian anxiety of influence, and has also been written about by many.\textsuperscript{158} This sort of division holds only on an artificial level, however. For Dante himself, these two purposes are united into a single \textit{poetic purpose} by the integration of theology with poetry—again, like matryoshka dolls. The unified purpose is to rewrite both the sacred and the secular at the same time: to simultaneously elevate poetic language to the level of theological discourse and to elevate theological discourse to the level of poetic language. Too much criticism has been directed at one or the other in isolation, but we must read Dante, like Paul, as a synthesizing figure. There are not “two Dantes,” as Foster posits. Dante is neither a \textit{theologus} nor a \textit{poeta}, but must properly be categorized as a \textit{theologus-poeta}, as both Robert Hollander and Dennis Costa have noted.\textsuperscript{159}

The final result of this fusion is a unique poetics and theology that cannot be called anything other than ‘Dantesque,’ an observation which has led Harold Bloom to call the \textit{Commedia} the ‘Third Testament.’\textsuperscript{160} Such a designation makes Dante an author of scripture, an apt characterization given that the poet’s unification of theology and letters was modeled on Paul, the author of the greater part of the New Testament. Paul belonged “to that group of Christians who have seen it as a part of their calling to articulate their faith in writing…and who have devoted a considerable portion of their lives to so doing.”\textsuperscript{161} Let us place Dante firmly within the same group, but now with a full understanding of the comparison’s meaning, built outward from the image of the Venetian Arsenal.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Harold Bloom, \textit{Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine} (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 2005), 45.
\item See, for example, Peter S. Hawkins, “For the Record: Rewriting Virgil in the \textit{Commedia},” \textit{Studies in the Literary Imagination Vol. 36, Iss. 1} (2003): 75-97.
\item James D.G. Dunn, \textit{The Theology of Paul the Apostle} (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 2.
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