

REVISITING THE CELESTINE QUESTION IN *INFERNO* III: “*VIDI E CONOBBI L’OMBRA DI COLUI CHE FECE PER VILTADE IL GRAN RIFIUTO*”

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This study aims to respond to those who have identified Celestine V as the unquestionable referent of *colui* (him who) in Dante’s *Inferno* III, ll.58-60. I will attempt to demonstrate that Celestine is not *colui* due to the inaccuracy of certain historical facts and philological details attributed to him. Rather, this passage is intentionally ambiguous and assigns a heightened interpretive role to the reader, who must determine who *colui* is in relation to cowardice. It is a textual indication that points toward a poetical indefiniteness and therefore works as a machine to generate interpretations:

Poscia ch’io v’ebbi alcun riconosciuto,
vidi e conobbi l’ombra di colui
che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto.
(*Inf.* III, ll.58-60)¹

Countless studies and notes have been published on *Inf.* III, ll.58-60, from the earliest to the most recent commentators. Most of the critical interpreta-

tions focus on two significant, opposing views of the *terzina*. On the one hand there are those who believe that Dante wanted to refer to a specific person when he states: “vidi e conobbi l’ombra di colui che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto”. For these critics, *colui* is undoubtedly Celestine V, the hermit from Isernia who renounced his pontificate about five months after he was raised to the throne of Peter. On the other hand, there are those who identify *colui* in Esau (especially early commentators), Pontius Pilate, or other minor yet possible candidates.² A third view held by Francesco Mazzoni, Michele Barbi, Giorgio Petrocchi and Natalino Sapegno leaves *colui* anonymous and, in my view, merits revisiting. I would like to explore this perspective as a point of departure

² Possible candidates who have been suggested by early and modern commentators, other than Celestine V, are: “Diocletian, the Roman Emperor who abdicated in the year 305; Romulus Augustus, the last Roman Emperor in the West; Pilate [for refusing to judge Christ]; Vieri de’ Cerchi, incapable head of the Florentine Whites (see n. to *Inf.* VI, l. 61); and Giano della Bella, leader of the popular faction in Florence and author of the Ordinances of Justice” (Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. Singleton).

¹ “After I had identified a few, / I saw and recognized the shade of him /who made, through cowardice, the great refusal”.

for a new working hypothesis that attempts to untangle the knot of this *terzina* —one that still constitutes an unsolved hermeneutic problem for Dante scholarship.

One of the most authoritative supporters of the theory that Celestine V is the only candidate for that unidentified *colui* is Giorgio Padoan (“Colui”, 75-130). In support of his argument, he focused on several aspects of the text, the first of which is the sin of cowardice. He discussed several reasons that might have led Dante to place Celestine among the cowards, and argued that he is the exemplary figure of cowardice confined within the infernal vestibule. Padoan’s reasons for identifying Celestine in *colui* may be summarized as follows:

1. Celestine’s was an “unprecedented abdication” which tore apart Christianity, since his papacy aroused great expectations among all those who hoped for reform and a return to the Church’s original purity, to the poor Church of the Apostles, to a Church totally removed from the intrigues of earthly powers.
2. The popular feeling about Celestine’s abdication during Dante’s time would justifiably motivate the candidacy of Celestine as *colui*.
3. Although Dante does not openly state the name of the coward, which might make his allusion seem generic and out of focus, it must nevertheless be taken as an allusion corresponding to a very specific identity. The entire episode is constructed upon the personality of the unnamed, the precursor of the pusillanimous souls, that is, Celestine V.
4. Celestine voluntarily renounced the papacy because of his inadequacy and his decision must therefore be considered an act of cowardice. In *Inf.* XXVII, ll. 103-105, Dante has Boniface assert this through Guido da Montefeltro: “Lo ciel poss’io serrare e disserrare, / come tu sai; però son due le chiavi / che ‘l mio antecessor

non ebbe care»”.³ And here *‘l mio antecessor* is undeniably Celestine V.

A more recent interpretation that sees Celestine in the shadow of “colui che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto”⁴ is that of Maria Picchio Simonelli (“*Inferno III*”, 41-58). In addition to carefully recollecting the most important studies and major commentators who annotated the *terzina*, she made an interesting historical point regarding the changing view of these commentators who, instead of seeing Celestine as *colui*, began to consider the validity of other historical references like Pilate, Esau, Diocletian, Giano della Bella, Vieri de’ Cerchi, and Romulus Augustulus. She began with Padoan’s position, a view that addressed “the historical and political reasons that led the fourteenth-century commentators to change their tone and modify the gloss” (50). Citing Padoan here is instrumental for Simonelli’s thesis, which argues that earlier commentators, including Boccaccio, Pietro Alighieri and later Dante criticism in general, had to restore the image of Celestine for fear of excommunication, for reasons directly connected to the “Roman Question”. She argued that it was the intention of the Curia to “reassert some measure of their power over practicing Catholics. For this reason, the ecclesiastical authorities withdrew behind a rigid line of Counter-Reformation religiosity, even threatening to excommunicate those Italians who exercised their right to vote. Dante criticism did not escape the pressures created by this climate. By then, the commentators no longer sought to defend Dante. After five centuries, the poet hailed as the «bard of resurrected Italy» [...] was in no danger of being excommunicated; the Catholic commentators could thus defend Saint Celestine, that is to say, Saint Peter the Confessor” (46-47). On this

³ “«You surely know that I possess the power to lock and unlock Heaven; for the keys my predecessor did not prize are two»”.

⁴ “Him who made, through cowardice, the great refusal”.

point Simonelli did not make reference to Mazzoni's study which suggests that Pietro's change of heart, particularly in the second and third annotations (1344-1355?, 1359-1364?) of the *Divine Comedy*, was prompted by the *De vita solitaria* of Petrarch, in which the poet defends Celestine's abdication as a sign of his true vocation as a hermit, rather than an act of spiritual cowardice:

[Celestinus] ...pontificatu maximo velut mortifero fasce deposito, in antiquam solitudinem tam cupide repedavit, ut hostili compede liberatum crederes. Quod factum solitarii sanctique patris vilitati animi quisquis volet attribuat — licet enim in eadem re, pro varietate ingeniorum non diversa tantum sed adversa sentire —; ego in primis et sibi utile arbitror et mundo (*De vita solitaria* II, viii).⁵

Furthermore, Petrarch's view might have reinforced Pietro's change of position through direct correspondence with him, and by which Petrarch might have adduced further reasons on Celestine's case (Mazzoni 1967: 395). Another significant point to keep in mind is the process of canonization of Celestine, officially initiated in 1306 and concluded in 1313. The Church's decision was announced the same year in a letter by Pope Clement V. At the Celestinian Centre in Sulmona, there was already his Bull of canonization in 1314.⁶

⁵ "Celestine having renounced the great pontificate as deadly burden, with much greed returned to his previous solitude. You would view it as having freed himself from the captivity of his enemy. One may attribute to this fact the coward soul of the solitary, holy father, since regarding the same thing, and given the variety of talents, not only one may express a different opinion, but likewise feel the contrary. I certainly praise and consider him useful to himself and to the world". (The English translation from the Latin is mine).

⁶ On the issue of canonization and historical facts, see Padoan (*Saggio di un nuovo commento*, 94). Also cited in Padoan: U. Cosmo (*Le mistiche*, 42-45); P. Laurelli (*Dante e Celestino V*, 145); P. Celidonio (*S. Pietro del Morrone*, 433).

In light of the historical reasons listed above, and the philological ones that we shall examine below, neither Padoan's nor Simonelli's findings may be accepted as hermeneutically convincing to put to rest the controversies generated by the tercet. Even though Celestine's contemporaries considered his act an "unprecedented abdication", we must not depart from the context in which *colui* is found, nor can we forget that we are dealing with the *canto* of the cowards. If indeed the sin of cowardice is generated by the inability to choose and act in accordance with or against certain principles, can we appropriately attribute this sin to Celestine without forcing the meaning of the *terzina*? His renunciation cannot be taken as a form of inability to choose and act, because it is intrinsically motivated by a reason leading to action. He renounced the Seat of Peter in order to return to his contemplative life. Through his renunciation, as Petrocchi argued, Celestine "non rimase neutrale nel conflitto di sentimenti che gli si agitavano nell'anima; scelse" (*Itinerari*, 60).⁷ Moreover, Petrocchi continued, "Pietro del Morrone non era stato soltanto un candido anacoreta, impotente ad arginare gli intrighi della Curia una volta eletto a pastore, ma anche un suscitatore d'energie spirituali, un creatore di organizzazioni monastiche, uno di coloro che avevano contribuito a vivificare la vita benedettina e a restituire la semplicità al Monaco" (59).⁸ His renunciation is *de facto* likened to action and not to rest; therefore it cannot be considered a model for cowardice. With Celestine, there is no indication of the

⁷ He "did not remain neutral about the conflict of his feelings that were upsetting his soul, he chose". (The translation from the Italian is mine).

⁸ "Pietro del Morrone was not only a truthful hermit, incapable of stemming the intrigues of the Curia once he had been elected pope, but he was also a generator of spiritual energy, a founder of monastic organizations, one of those who contributed to enlivening the Benedictine life and to the restoring of monastic simplicity". (The English translation from the Italian is mine).

cowardice suggested by *Ecclesiastics* XL, ix, 10 in the expression “*et nati sunt, quasi non nati*”.⁹ From the very beginning of his pontificate, Celestine chose to make his will prevail, consistently with the ideal of reaffirming an *Ecclesia Spiritualis* (Spiritual Church) over an *Ecclesia Carnalis* (Material Church). Instead of choosing Rome as his residency, he repaired to Naples in order to avoid the royal privileges of the Roman Curia. When he arrived at the court of Charles II of Anjou, he did not take the royal quarters set up for him but rather occupied an area of the basement in the royal palace, and ordered that he be given only bread and water to closely follow the strict teaching of Christ.¹⁰ This radical way of administering the affairs of the Church —that is, as an exemplary model of poverty among the poor— had no precedents and was considered deplorable, if not dangerous, for the Church. When he realized that there was a dramatic incompatibility between his way of life and the way imposed upon him by the cardinals, he resigned¹¹ so as to remain loyal to his ideal of poverty and forgiveness; he thus returned to that *loco magis solitario*¹² that was his hermitage. Dante himself praises the contemplative above the active life:

⁹ “Born almost not born”.

¹⁰ While some critics find in this event an image of Celestine as the puppet of Charles, this reading is questionable.

¹¹ Upon his resignation Celestine V pronounced the following words in the consistory meeting of December 13, 1294: “Ego Caelestinus Papa Quintus motus ex legitimis causis, idest causa humilitatis, et melioris vitae, et conscientiae illesae, debilitate corporis, defectu scientiae, et malignitate Plebis, infirmitate personae, et ut praeteritae consolationis possim reparare quietem; sponte, ac libere cedo Papatui, et expresse *renuncio* loco, et Dignitati, oneri, et honori, et do plenam, et liberam ex nunc sacro caetui Cardinalium facultatem eligendi, et providendi duntaxat Canonice universali Ecclesiae de Pastore” (see Natale Alexandre, *His. eccl.*, Saec., XIII, ch. I, art. 13, 1892-1897, cited in *La Divina Commedia di Dante con commenti secondo la scolastica del P. Gioachino Berthier*). (The emphasis on the verb *renuncio* is mine).

¹² “The most solitary place”.

Veramente noi potemo avere in questa vita due felicitadi, secondo due diversi cammini, buono e ottimo, che a ciò ne menano: l’una è la vita attiva, e l’altra la contemplativa; la quale, avvegna che per l’attiva si pervegna, come detto è, a buona felicitade, ne mena ad ottima felicitade e beatitudine, secondo che pruova lo Filosofo nel decimo de l’Etica. E Cristo l’afferma con la sua bocca, nel Vangelio di Luca, parlando a Marta, e rispondendo a quella: “Marta, Marta, sollecita se’ e turbiti intorno a molte cose: certamente una cosa è necessaria”, cioè “quello che fai”. E soggiunse: “Maria ottima parte ha eletta, la quale non le sarà tolta”. E Maria secondo che dinanzi è scritto a queste parole del Vangelio, a’ piedi di Cristo sedendo, nulla cura del ministerio de la casa mostrava; ma solamente le parole del Salvatore ascoltava. Che se moralmente ciò volemo esponere, vole solo nostro Signore in ciò mostrare che la contemplativa vita fosse ottima, tutto che buona fosse l’attiva; ciò è manifesto a chi ben vuole porre mente a le evangeliche parole (*Conv.* IV, xvii).¹³

Although Dante draws a clear distinction between the active and the contemplative life, nonetheless

¹³ “We must know, however, that we may have two kinds of happiness in this life, according to two different paths, one good and the other best, which lead us there. One is the active life, the other the contemplative life; and although by the active, as has been said, we may arrive at a happiness that is good, the other leads us to the best happiness and state of bliss, as the Philosopher proves in the tenth book of the *Ethics*. Christ affirms this with words from his own lips in the Gospel of Luke, when speaking to Martha and replying to her: «Martha, Martha, you are distressed and trouble yourself about many things; truly one thing alone is necessary», that is, «what you are doing». He adds: «Mary has chosen the best part, which shall not be taken from her». As made clear in the verses just preceding these words of the Gospel, Mary, who was sitting at the feet of Christ, showed no concern for domestic affairs, but simply listened to the words of the Saviour. The moral sense of these words is that our Saviour sought thereby to show that the contemplative life was the best, even though the active life was good. This is evident to anyone who considers well these words of the evangelist”. (The translation is from Richard Lansing, ed., *Dante’s Il Convivio*). Also see Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, particularly book X, chapters vii, viii, in which the philosopher identifies the contemplative life as the highest sense of human happiness.

he concurs with Aristotle's *Ethics* in identifying the process that leads to contemplation as an active endeavour: *la [vita] contemplativa; la quale, avvegna che per l'attiva si pervegna*.¹⁴ That is, in order to arrive at a state of contemplation —**desirable because human beings experience the highest form of human happiness through it— active involvement is required, and contemplation originates from such involvement; it is that which leads to motion and not to rest.** On the pursuit of ultimate happiness, Thomas Aquinas adds: “the active life, which is busy with many things, has less of happiness than the contemplative life, which is busied with one thing, i.e. the contemplation of truth”.¹⁵ The annotation of *Conv.* IV, xvii, the clear Aristotelian influence on Dante, and the poet's special affinity with Thomas Aquinas' philosophical and theological thought converge toward irrefutable evidence that would conflict with the attempt to identify Celestine as *colui che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto*. If we indeed continue to share this view of Celestine, we must return to discuss the moral structure of sins and punishments in *Inferno*, and legitimately question the ambiguity emerging from the sin of cowardice. As Dante and Virgil enter the gate of Hell in the third *canto*, Dante questions his master about the words written above the door. Virgil replies:

“Noi siam venuti al loco ov' i' t'ho detto
Che tu vedrai le genti dolorose
C'hanno perduto il ben de l'intelletto”.
(*Inf.* III, ll.16-18)¹⁶

¹⁴ “By the active life we may arrive at the contemplative one”.

¹⁵ “Activa vita, quae circa multa accupatur, est minus de ratione beatitudinis quam in vita contemplativa, quae versatur circa unum, id est, circa veritatis contemplationem” (*Summa Theologica*, 1a2ae, Q. 3, A. 2). On magnanimity comparable to Celestine's act, see 2a2ae, Q. 129, AA. 3, 9, and Q. 132, A. 2. For St. Thomas' view of cowardice, see 2a2ae, Q. 133, A. 2, Q. 162, A. 1.

¹⁶ “For we have reached the place of which I spoke, / where you will see the miserable people, / those who have lost the good of the intellect”.

In this passage, the identification of Celestine as the unquestionable figure concealed behind the cumbersome relative pronoun becomes even more difficult to accept. For Celestine is not only an alleged coward but he is also the one who, among countless damned souls, has lost “il ben de l'intelletto”. This condition of losing *il ben de l'intelletto* must be intrinsic in the soul as the premise for all sins punished in the pit of hell. What we have been discussing so far is sufficient to clarify the exegetic problem introduced by those scholars who still annotate the tercet by identifying Celestine as the only figure befitting the relative pronoun. The major interpretative incongruity emerges from the need to account for the praise Dante expressed for the contemplative life as superior to all forms of active life in *Conv.* IV, xvii. Celestine renounced the Holy See in order to return to his contemplative life, and his renunciation constituted not an end in itself but a genuine act of free will, an act aimed at the highest form of happiness, which, once again, could only be experienced through contemplation.

In support of the choice for a *ratio superior* (superior reason) regarding the hermit del Morrone, there is another instance in which Dante praises Peter Damian who, in his youth, had declined his career and the honour of master of jurisprudence in the schools of Ravenna and Faenza to become a Benedictine monk:

In quel loco fu' io Pietro Damiano,
e Pietro Peccator fu' ne la casa
di Nostra Donna in sul lito adriano.
(*Par.* XXI, ll.121-123)¹⁷

When he entered the monastery:

“...Quivi
al servizio di Dio mi fe' sì fermo,

¹⁷ “There I was known as Peter Damian / and, on the Adriatic shore, was Peter / the Sinner when I served Our Lady's House”.

che pur con cibi di liquor d'ulivi
lievemente passava caldi e geli,
contento nei pensier contemplativi".
(*Par.* XXI, ll.113-117)¹⁸

Notwithstanding his personal determination to conduct a type of life withdrawn from the world, in his old age he was made Cardinal against his will:

Poca vita mortal m'era rimasa,
quando fui chiesto e tratto a quel cappello,
che pur di male in peggio si travasa.
(*Par.* XXI, ll.124-126)¹⁹

Here it is important to remember that a few years after being named Cardinal in 1057, Peter Damian renounced his cardinalship to return to his monastery of Fonte Avellana to spend the last years of his life in the same way he was first called to monastic life, as an anchorite. Moreover, Dante places Peter Damian in *Paradise*, in the Heaven of Saturn, in the place where we find the contemplative souls. Both this piece of evidence and that which we find in *Conv.* IV, xxvii are the most authoritative textual sources which definitively disqualify the candidacy of Celestine as *colui che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto*. They support and elucidate Dante's consistency regarding the moral structure of all the souls in the three *cantiche* and suggest a new interpretive trajectory.

Nevertheless, before proposing a new reading of this *terzina*, we should also clarify a philological detail which aims at the semantic specificity of the

noun *rifiuto* (refusal). The question that emerges almost spontaneously is: did Celestine refuse the Holy See or did he not? And the answer, rigorously semantic, is that he did not refuse: rather he renounced, or at best, he abdicated by divesting himself of his office. On this aspect Padoan argued that the meaning of *rifiuto* in the sense of renunciation is a common one in 14th century Italian. Further, he continued, "one must notice that in *Conv.* IV, v the verb *rifiutare* (to refuse) is used in the exact sense of "resignation" ("*Colui*", 95; see note 1 on the same page).²⁰ Even though *rifiuto* and *rifiutare* are used interchangeably both as "refusal" and "renunciation", and "to refuse" and "to renounce" in 14th century Italian, what Padoan neglected to extrapolate from the annotation of *Conv.* IV, v, which makes reference to the Roman dictator Cincinnatus, is that his act was indeed an act of refusal for he refused to accept, after his mandate expired, to remain in a position in which he had been previously vested by the Senate. And Dante says it without a shade of doubt:

...Chi dirà di Quinzio Cincinnato, fatto dittatore e tolto da lo aratro, e dopo lo tempo de l'officio, spontaneamente quello rifiutando a lo arare essere ritornato? (*Conv.* IV, v)²¹

Not only does Dante make reference to Quintus Cincinnatus' act as a refusal, he also makes reference to Fabricius and Curius in the same vein. The first, by "divine inspiration":

¹⁸ "...There, within that monastery, / in serving God, I gained tenacity: / with food that only olive juice had seasoned, / I could sustain with ease both heat and frost, / content within my contemplative thoughts".

¹⁹ "Not much of mortal life was left to me / when I was sought for, dragged to take that hat / which always passes down from bad to worse".

²⁰ The quote in Italian goes as follows: "si noti che in *Convivio* 4. 5. 15 si usa il verbo «rifiutare» proprio nel senso di «dare le dimissioni». ("One should note that in *Conv.* 4.5.15 «to refuse» is used in the specific sense of «resigning»").

²¹ "...Who will say of Quintus Cincinnatus, who was made dictator and taken from the plough, that he refused his office after having completed his term and returned of his own accord to the plough?"

Infinita quasi moltitudine d'oro rifiutare, per non volere abbandonare sua patria? (*Conv.* IV, v)²²

The second, Curius:

Da li Sanniti tentato di corrompere, grandissima quantità d'oro per carità della patria rifiutare, dicendo che li romani cittadini non l'oro, ma li possessori de l'oro possedere voleano? (*Conv.* IV, v)²³

It is quite clear that Cincinnatus's refusal is connected to a further assignment that the Senate asked him to carry out and that he refused to accept. In fact, Dante speaks of a refusal that took place *dopo lo tempo de l'officio*. Analogous circumstances are those related to Fabricius and Curius, for in this context the verb *rifiutare* aims at the specificity of the act which, in essence, is an unwillingness to accept and to *act* upon something before *starting to act*.²⁴ This detail is a fundamental point that clarifies Dante's use of both the verb *rifiutare* and that of the noun *rifiuto* in the *Commedia*. It is rather unconvincing, as Padoan suggested, that Dante used *rifiuto* in the sense of *resignation*. He used *rifiuto* in its unequivocal and precise sense, that is, as "refusal", and those examples from *Conv.* clearly corroborate this reading.

Furthermore, we cannot overlook, in this specific context, the Latin meaning of *renuntiatio* (abjuration, declaration) and *refutatio* (refutation). The first term is essentially an abjuration or a declaration

²² "Refused to accept an almost infinite amount of gold because he would not abandon his country?" In addition, Dante praises Fabricius' example in *Pur.* (XX, ll.25-27) and in *De monarchia* (II, v). In *De monarchia* II, v is also renewed admiration for Cincinnatus' praiseworthy act.

²³ "Whom the Samnites attempted to corrupt, when he refused to accept a huge quantity of gold for love of his country, saying that the citizens of Rome sought to possess not gold but the possessors of the gold?"

²⁴ I italicized "act" and "starting to act" to emphasize my point about refusal.

(the official declaration to leave the Holy See, and not failing to recognize it), while the second, *refutation*, contains the specific sense of opposing or contradicting a proposed argument in the capacity of rejection.²⁵ Hence, not only is this a situation leading to *aporia*, but it also opens a theological debate somewhat beyond our scope and purpose here. With this situation in mind, the *terzina* presents insurmountable textual problems for the very simple reason that Celestine does not belong there. Those scholars who continue to identify the anchorite Del Morrone in that *colui* must realize that such an interpretation is both doubtful and lacks hermeneutic legitimacy.

At the same time, if we indeed want to identify a specific soul in *colui*, and to give it a trace of historical specificity (although the purpose of this article is not to prove this), I would support the candidacy of Pontius Pilate, consistently with Sapegno's initial annotation, on the basis of the passage in which Hugh Capet identifies Philipp the Fair: "Veggio il novo Pilato sì crudele" (*Pur.* XX, l. 91).²⁶ According to Picchio Simonelli's annotation:

Pilate is far worse than the pusillanimous souls of the ante-Inferno who could not, and would not, make a decision. By washing his hands, Pilate consciously condemned "that just one" ("quel giusto"); and Philipp the Fair repeated Pilate's act when he granted freedom of actions to Guillaume de Nogaret. The two characters are both guilty of that malice "that wins hate in Heaven" ("ch'odio in ciel acquista"). To erase the guilt, it is not enough to say "I did not know" or "I did not want to know," when that "not knowing" means a certain and undeserved condemnation. [...]

²⁵ In connection with the act of renunciation of Celestine V, in the official document he read in front of the cardinals in the consistory of Dec. 13th, 1294, he used the verb *renuncio*, which, in my view, must not be overlooked, since it is the most relevant detail capable of substantiating the exactitude of word choice in reference to his resignation.

²⁶ "I see the new Pilate, one so cruel".

in my opinion that very verse [in *Purgatorio*] destroys the entire construction of *colui* as Pilate (*"Inferno III"*, 48).²⁷

Even though Simonelli's interpretation sounds rather convincing and somewhat acceptable, she nevertheless neglects to focus on what eventually led to Christ's crucifixion, which was clearly an act of cowardice. This was the cause that led to the crucifixion, rather than a direct order from Pilate himself. We also recognize that Pilate knew the consequences that awaited Christ, though he refused to judge him, which constitutes a major difference and categorically represents an act of cowardice, the inability to express judgment when one is required to do so. Furthermore, *il* (the) in front of *gran rifiuto* (great refusal) is a major indication of a superlative act, the highest level of comparison whose value has no equal. Pilate's refusal has no equal, and even if we want to take Celestine's act as a refusal, it certainly cannot be compared to the former, in terms of consequential magnitude in the history of Christianity. The fact that a form of behaviour can produce expected or unexpected effects in relation to its surroundings is something clear and peremptory on which we need not to spend time. Also, I also do not find how a careful reading of *Pur.* XX, l. 91 can show evidence that "destroys the entire construction of *colui* as Pilate". Simonelli probably focused on the comparison drawn between Philipp the Fair and Pilate, but she neglected that *novo Pilato* (New Pilate) is an epithet coined by Pope Benedict XI in one of his discourses delivered in Perugia, in 1304, referring to Philipp the Fair, and which Dante, with great probability, knew and transcribed in *Pur.* XX, l. 91.²⁸ This, of course, does not mean that Philipp's declaration of non-involvement regarding the arbi-

trary and illegal robbery and spoliation of the patrimony of the Order of the Knights Templar is the same act as that of Pilate, by which he refused to judge Christ. Here Dante is simply a scribe of such an epithet: verse 91 doesn't claim to represent textual relevance with regard to the structure of sins in *Inferno*. Therefore, Pilate's candidacy in *Inf.* III, l. 59 still holds under scrutiny if we indeed plan on identifying a specific soul in that *colui*. However, once again, the purpose of this article is not to identify a specific person behind that *colui*, but rather to consider Dante's intentions in maintaining such a level of anonymity, to contemplate what kind of critical exegesis to apply to the *terzina* and establish its meaning.

At the beginning of this study we mentioned Mazzoni, Barbi, Petrocchi, and Sapegno, and how their view, magisterially discussed in Sapegno's commentary of *Inf.* III, ll.58-60, constitutes what might quite possibly allow us to untangle the philological knot of such a *terzina*. In Sapegno we read: "La figura dell'innominato non ha nel contesto un suo risalto specifico; è piuttosto un personaggio-emblema, termine allusivo di una disposizione polemica, che investe non un uomo singolo, ma tutta la schiera innumerevole degli ignavi" (Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia*, ed. N. Sapegno).²⁹ Sapegno's annotation of the *terzina* is a significant exegetic point which, besides relegating a precise figure of the widespread notion of *colui* to a level of secondary importance, aims, more convincingly, to recall the function of poetry and its allegorical overtones. Dante himself alerts the reader that his text is a work of art and that it must be read as poetry:

²⁹ "The figure of the unnamed, in this context, does not have a specific prominence, it is rather an emblem-character, an allusive term of a polemical disposition which involves not only one man, but the entire group of the innumerable cowards". (The English translation from the Italian is mine).

²⁷ On this aspect see also Padoan ("Colui", 75, n. 1).

²⁸ See Giuseppe Giacalone's commentary on the *Divine Comedy* (Dante Alighieri, *Divina commedia*, 322, n. 91).

O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani,
 mirate la dottrina che s'asconde
 sotto 'l velame de li versi strani.
 (*Inf.* IX, ll.61-63)³⁰

Poetry is what Dante calls *factio rethorica musicae poita* (*De vulg.* II, iv).³¹ With this definition we capture the notion of a poet in the act of writing who, while writing, codifies an unprecedented experience of which only an ephemeral present remains. This is the reason Dante uses the term *factio*, for its ephemeral present and what remains of it are only vehicles, the *signa*, which allow the reader to re-enact other ephemeral experiences of possible worlds. Rhetoric, or what we call disguise or lying, is only apparent because poetical truth is very slippery, and cannot be immortalized discursively. Yet through signs we are able to find its vestiges. This particular state of the world takes us unavoidably to understand that a work of art, Dante's *Divine Comedy* included (and the poet makes a point of it) is an open work.

The first consideration and a true awareness of poetry viewed as an open work, in addition to Dante's mentioning of it *en passant* in *Conv.* II, i, which we will discuss later, can be found in Stephane Mallarmé's proverbial statement: "Nommer un objet c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème, qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer [...] voilà le rêve" (cit. Eco, *The Open Work*, 8).³²

³⁰ "O you possessed of sturdy intellects, / observe the teaching that is hidden here / beneath the veil of verses so obscure". Even though in Dante's *Divine Comedy* we find two types of allegory, namely the allegory of poets and that of the theologians, they will not be discussed here. For a detailed study on this topic, see Charles Singleton ("*Commedia*": *Elements*, 91). Singleton's position is that the allegory of the *D.C.* is an "allegory of theologians". On this point see also *Convivio* II,i.

³¹ "A creation according to rhetoric and music".

³² "To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which is composed of the pleasure of guessing little by little: to suggest [...] there is the dream".

Dante does not fail to tell the reader how to approach his work, even though there is a much more rigorous context within which the fruition of poetry must take place. With Dante, possible poetical creations are crafted by pre-established cultural canons and arranged by encyclopaedias, bestiaries, and lapidaries. In his thirteenth epistle, the one he dedicates to Can Grande Della Scala, Dante explains that the *Comedy* is a polysemous work and that it must be read according to different levels of signification:

Ad evidentiam itaque dicendorum sciendum est quot istius operas non est simplex sensus, ymo dici potest polisemos, hoc est plurium sensuum; nam primus sensus est qui habetur per litteram, alius est qui habetur per significata per litteram. Ut primus dicitur literalis, secundus vero allegoricus sive moralis sive anagogicus.³³

This hermeneutic exposition is in reality a widespread medieval theory of allegory: "its roots go back to Saint Paul ("videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem"),³⁴ and it was developed by Saint Jerome, Augustine, Bede, Scotus Erigena, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Alain of Lille, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and others in such a way as to represent a cardinal point of medieval poetics" (Eco *The Open Work*, 5). As we can see, although we are required to read Dante's poetry within recognized referential categories of signification, a

³³ "For me to be able to present what I am going to say, you must know that the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of that which is signified by the letter. And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical". (The translation is from "Dante's Letter to Can Grande" by James Marchand, <http://www.english.udel.edu/dean/cangrand.html>). Also, based on the latest study by Robert Hollander (*Dante's Epistle*), we consider such a letter "authentically Dantean".

³⁴ "We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face".

degree of ambiguity or openness is maintained at all times. This means that poetic discourse must be directed towards specific structural coordinates, yet, within such structural coordinates, words have the dynamism to combine in many possible relations and produce different aesthetic sensations. In other words, Dante's poetical text is open only insofar as it is closed within pre-established fields of signification or referential categories of signification directly controlled by the author through the text. In the same manner, we must approach the *terzina* which is the object of our study and recognize, from the outset, that we are *vis-à-vis* a poetical text and not a laundry list.

The very first clue we find in the *terzina* that points in this direction is the relative pronoun *colui*. I am certain that if Dante had wanted to clearly identify its subject, he would have, just as he did in other instances in the *Divine Comedy*. He names Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan in *limbo*; in ante-purgatory, Casella, who sings Dante's song *amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*;³⁵ in the heaven of Mercury, in *Par.* VI, l. 10, the emperor Justinian, and many others. The point is that poetically Dante chose to use *colui* because he aimed at maintaining a level of indefiniteness in the *terzina* and, at the same time, to remain within the intended field of signification. The ambiguity of the term helps to clarify the sin of cowardice and shows the textual consistency Dante deliberately employs in the canto of the cowards, that is, the deliberate choice to leave them in anonymous: "Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa" (*Inf.* III, l.49).³⁶ It is an ambiguity required and motivated by the fact that the text has to suggest, it has to evoke possible associations with real people, and certainly even in the capacity of reading the text as an "«aberrant» code (where «aberrant» means different from the ones envisaged by the sender)" (Eco, *The Role*,

22). Therefore, the use of *colui* as part of the poetical discourse in this specific context is representative. It functions as a 'rupture' or a 'departure' from "the linguistic system of probability, which serves to convey established meanings, in order to increase the signifying potential of the message" (Eco, *The Open Work*, 58). Here *viltà* (cowardice) is proposed to the reader as a personified sin, which can be seen not only in this or that person, but also as a shortcoming rooted in the human condition. Therefore, *il peccato* (sin), which in Italian even maintains a consistency of gender with *colui*, is that which constitutes a sort of Ur-code or the Code of codes upon which a process of textual inferences is articulated. This is because it is the presupposed existence of the sin of cowardice that allows us to make connections and associations with real people. For example, we are able to infer that *colui* may very well be Pilate or someone else, as proposed by several commentators of the *Divine Comedy*, and certainly by adducing reasons of textual legitimacy. However, this type of inference is made possible only insofar as the condition of the sin of cowardice exists. Hence, *pusillanimitas* (cowardice) is a type of referential coordinate that we clearly recognize from the term *viltà* (cowardice), and more specifically from Virgil's words: "Questo misero modo/tegnon l'anime triste di coloro/che visser senza 'nfamia e senza lodo".³⁷ Also, the cowards here cannot take on any human figure embedded in historicity because this would subvert and contradict Virgil's statement:

"Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa;
misericordia e giustizia li sdegna:
non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa".
(*Inf.* III, ll.49-51)³⁸

³⁷ "This miserable way is taken by the sorry souls of those who lived without disgrace and without praise".

³⁸ "The world will let no fame of theirs endure; / both justice and compassion must disdain them; / let us not talk of them, but look and pass".

³⁵ "Amor that in the mind reasons with me".

³⁶ "The world will let no fame of theirs endure".

What we have discussed gives us a good understanding of the textual intention emerging from the *terzina*. Moreover, in support of our claim, in *Conv.* II, i, Dante becomes a commentator of his own work and explains, as in epistle XIII, the polysemous makeup of his poetry.³⁹ Dante discusses the first level of signification called “litterale, e questo è quello che non si stende più oltre che la lettera de le parole fittizie, sì come sono le favole de li poeti. L’altro si chiama allegorico, e questo è quello che si nasconde sotto ‘l manto di queste favole, ed è una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna”.⁴⁰ In this citation, the focus of our attention is on *parole fittizie* and *veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna*. Here we should ask ourselves, what does Dante mean by *fictive words* and *truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie*? Even on the literal level, we cannot fail to recognize the referential quality of language and therefore avoid taking it as *veritas in facto* (factual truth) but only as *veritas in verbis* (verbal truth) insofar as it is able to signify. Therefore, *colui* too, taken *sub specie veritatis in verbis* (as a sort of verbal truth) contains a sign function capable of signifying, yet while signifying it cannot be taken as the object of signification itself. This means that *colui* can be anyone, provided that this anyone fits well in the text and satisfies the state of affairs of *Inf.* III, ll.58-60. Dante’s *terzina* reminds us that we are dealing with poetry and that poetry is like a machine to generate interpretations. At the same time, within the natural predisposition of the reader remains that

humana curiositas, the desire to find out who is that *colui* by means of tangible *exempla*, regardless of the fact that Virgil tells Dante and the reader: “«non ragioniam di loro, ma guarda e passa»” (*Inf.* III, l. 51).⁴¹ Lastly, being in search of truth and eternal salvation through the fruition of Dante’s *Commedia*, which works as our own conversion, the truth that is *hidden beneath a beautiful lie* can only be experienced when the expiation of sin, and of cowardice also, has taken place. At that point, the *logos* (word) is no longer needed: we can throw it away, because we will ultimately be face to face with God, with “l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle”.⁴²

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³⁹ Regarding Dantean auto-exegesis, in addition to the epistle to Can Grande della Scala, see Amilcare A. Iannucci (*Forma ed evento*, 83-114).

⁴⁰ “Literal, and this is the sense that does not go beyond the surface of the letter of the fictive words, as in the fables of the poets. The next is called the allegorical, and this is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie”. Lansing’s translation presents some inaccuracies and consequently has been slightly modified: there is an addition that reads of the fictive words that can be noticed in brackets, and the last word, “fiction”, has been replaced with “lie”.

⁴¹ “«Let us not talk of them, but look and pass»”.

⁴² “The Love which moves the sun and the other stars”.

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