

Notes

Oderisi da Gubbio and the margins within margins of Dante's Purgatorio

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Amongst the figures of the proud on the first terrace of Dante's *Purgatorio*, described in Cantos X and XI, there appears a painter of marginalia: the manuscript artist Oderisi da Gubbio. He is, to history, himself a 'marginal' figure, whose work is questionably attested and who is primarily famous in this century for precisely this appearance in the *Commedia*. The examples of his work we have encompass much of what we might we might comprehend under the heading of 'marginalia'—from illustrative vignettes to hybrid figures of fantasy. With Oderisi's place in Purgatory, Dante shows an interest in the artistically marginal which he reshapes through a new, theological, account of the relationship between the centre and the margins and, ultimately, makes a case for the ideal marginality of all art.

In the imagined geography of Dante's intermediate realm, purgatory is a terraced hill which is itself an island. Its entire topography is that of a continuous 'margin' to water or air. The purgatorial terraces can be drawn as a single platform, spiralling upwards. Unlike hell's closed circles descending towards the frost-bound Satan, or indeed the overlapping spheres of the Empyrean centered on God, purgatory is all border and no centre—its site of convergence exterior to the realm itself.

On the first terrace this marginal aspect is especially present, interwoven with *Purgatorio's* interest in the place of the creative arts. This latter has been evident from the moment that poetry returns in ante-purgatory with the psalm-singing of the arriving penitents and the rendition by one, Casella of an early lyric of Dante's. In Canto X the terrace wall is itself a decorated border, edged with exquisite marble reliefs which illustrate pride's antidote of humility. Dante-poet also prefigures a particular focus on marginalia when he describes the bowed figures of the proud. He uses the image of kind of architectural grotesque, something like the classical atlantid or telamon:

Come per sostentar solaio o tetto
per mensola talvolta una figura
si vede giugner le ginocchia al petto¹

Just as in order to brace up a roof or vault
as corbel sometimes a figure
can be seen joining his knees to his chest.

¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy II, Purgatorio*, ed. by Robin KIRKPATRICK (London: Penguin, 2007), 10.130-2.

This *marginale* in stone is an almost-gargoyle, a figure forming or replacing the brace stone as a visual pun, expressing the architectural burden-bearing role of the corbel. (See Figures 1-3). Dante's image emphasises the vast weight of this sin of pride, but is also appropriate insofar as what the architectural figures bear is the perhaps Babel-like vanity of the vast edifice, a human achievement possibly redolent of pride.

These characters of the proud, like all those Dante encounters in the realms he travels, could be seen as themselves 'marginal' to our focus on the 'central' continuity of the narrative of Dante's journey in free will towards redemption, his approach to Beatrice and beatitude. At the same time they encroach on the centre, each moving out of the margins to constitute the narrative as one inherently more than individual, of the journey towards salvation of all.

To describe his own work on the margins of pages Oderisi da Gubbio uses the newfangled, french-derived word *alluminar*. The word implies a certain elevation of purpose and self-understanding: the manuscript painter's precious pigments and subtle techniques 'bring light' to the page. At the same time the image suggests a craft that reveals and unveils the text, certainly not by mere ornamentation, but nonetheless in a position of service. So Dante the poet here at once evokes his sin—the destructively overstated self-estimation of pride—and hints at the possibly redemptive function of his art.

The deployment by Dante of this ostentatious new term relative to Oderisi is in the purgatorial margin. His is not an utterly denigrated aspiration: it is in Purgatory we are made particularly aware of the role art and music is still here playing in salvation, as song, both psalms and Dante's own ambiguously secular canzone by his friend Casella, welcome us to ante-Purgatory and relief sculpture. Moreover the association of Oderisi's art with the luminous recalls that the progress towards light is that towards salvation, Paradise—the 'luce viva' the 'lume in forma di rivera' of the Empyrean.

In Oderisi, a creator of marginalia, Dante gives us is a theologically transformative account of the margins. The artist himself describes how it is proper to the depredatory progress of history that the centres are continually being pushed to the outer edge: as Franco Bolognese for Oderisi da Gubbio, so Cimabue makes way for Giotto, Guido Cavalcanti for Guido Guinizelli. Personal fame passes away, and the ascendancy of one reputation signals the decline of another, since in this cycle the margins are interchangeable with the centre.

In purgatory Dante is particularly engaged with one most real margin: that between salvation and damnation. Many of those who walk the hill of purgatory have only been saved at 'l'orlo della vita', the edge of life, by a death's door recantation or appeal. They are now in a between state, and Purgatory is marginal in that it is defined by its relation to the 'in' and 'out' of *paradiso* and *inferno*. However it is also a 'positive' margin in that its inhabitants, however far they may be along their purgations, are destined for salvation.

Once saved, as in Purgatory all are, a soul can move only towards more beatitude. There is an end to the cyclic motion of the Boethian Wheel of Fortune, whereby every rise generates a fall.

No longer does every centre inevitably generate margins, so that someone is always the loser by another's fame. Rather here it is sketched how the arts might be placed in the service of the good and, in so doing, how glory might generate glory. Praise-poetry, like

that of Oderisi about his master Franco Bolognese, exemplifies this possibility. Instead of 'marginalizing' the speaker, the illuminator's capacity to, inverting the secular pattern, praise and shed light upon his master is now precisely the proof of his reformed pride and thus spreads its light upon him, so that he is great in humility.

It is part of the tale of the *Commedia* that even minor figures can be made great in the history of their souls' redemption. Whilst Oderisi, paradoxically, never achieved the fame towards which his pride was orientated through his vaunted art, Dante elevates him into visibility and poetic 'fama' by featuring him in the grand project of his own poem, where he finds it precisely through his present humility.

This lesson is now one of how the idea of being major or minor, 'central' or 'marginal' is only a kind of illusion, a horizontal conception of earthly fame—and one timebound even in earthly terms, fading as the decades pass—against which the real order is the vertical order of status from the divine perspective, with its depths and heights which souls achieve. The question of how poetry and art can be purged of pride is also one of how marginalization and the logic of competition, human fame and pride, is itself transcended, so that, in pursuit of the good and the holy, all margins are to the one centre so that, in the Empyrean, there will really be only one circle in which all belong.

At the same time it is pride, not aspiration, that is the sin—and those borders towards a fairer country that stylistic fashions might seek to push onwards are not totally damned. Dante celebrates the rebirth of poetry: the *stilnovista* is one to which he belongs. And of course despite the soteriological destiny of the travels of his work it is also a grand instruction in the Christian life which can be lived on heaven's terms on earth.

There is true analogy between the aspirations of Da Gubbio and Dante's own. We are told that the sin of pride in one's work is one with which Dante above all identifies; it is in this circle he says he will be. The idea that his art might do something new and more than it has done—all the pride of Dante's noble vulgar, the scale of his epos, etc—these are all, and consciously, margins he is pushing towards the centre. Nor, by analogy, is this wrong: his purgatory is full of artistic display, relief sculpture, undead song, lyric and artistic output.

In the end Dante's poetic function attempts to mirror Oderisi's in its showing-forth of others lives and work in a medium which is nonetheless inevitably its own oeuvre of beauty and labour, which celebrates the artist whilst remaining at the service of the text. So it is that the canto begins with Dante's rendition of the Our Father, not poetry, but prayer, or poetry fully at the service of prayer. The 'Our Father' is reframed as a deep statement of dependence upon God, and thus also of praise-poetry to the divine. They 'offer up' a tribute of all they have, will and capacity.

As Dante's thought has already suggested, marginal 'illumination', light-bringing, as a form of textual beautification, has a kind of innate humility. Or rather the manner in which it relates to its central text—embodying and beautifying marginally—tells us something already about what art should be doing: glorifying the given. Just as Dante's text is a full-scale elaboration on the totality of the divine order—in its earthly reality as completed for the gamut of figures of history and contemporary life in the judgement, redemptive penitential journey, and illuminated reward to come.

Plates



Figure 1: San Zeno, Verona, s. xii

Figure 3: San Martín de Tours, Frómista, s.xi

Figure 2: Cattedrale di San Donino, Fidenza, s. xii