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Dante's use of Augustinian Rhetoric as a Tool for Instruction as Well as Persuasion Within the *Pugatorio*

While there are many distinct sections to the Divine Comedy, a division of particular interest is the portion of the narrative which takes place on earth where Virgil is the consummate guide for Dante the Pilgrim, and the celestial phase of the comedy where Beatrice (and ultimately St. Bernard) lead Dante through the divine realm and a series of visions that defy mortal reason. The language, style, and Dante's interaction with his guide are different in each section, making the journey into two distinct portions with different authorial motivations for each. While both *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* take place within the earthly realm, the mountain of Purgatory is striking in that no prior detailed literary representation has been created which bestows upon Dante the privilege and burden of portraying a detailed and convincing purgatory. In order to make his representation of purgatory believable, Dante must draw on the existing literary conventions of the time and employ them in such a way as to not merely instruct his readers on matters of purgation, but to persuade them to alter their behavior and follow the Christian model of life; Dante does this through the use of rhetoric.

While the rhetorical tradition that Dante follows is highly informed by the classical rhetoric practiced by the Greeks and his beloved Romans at the Bar, Simone Marchesi's illuminating piece correctly points out that Dante's rhetoric is chiefly crafted in the tradition of St. Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*, or On Christian Teaching. As Marchesi points out, St. Augustine's work "is based on a strategic recuperation of

classical textual culture, on which a new Christian cultural paradigm can be built" (191). A proponent of the use of language to persuade toward good ends, St. Augustine revived the classical art of rhetoric by seeking examples of rhetorical language and skill from the authors of the Holy Scriptures. Augustine allowed for a "rejection of the classical system of principles in its deepest foundation" and imposed a new system based on the importance of persuading the audience to do what is good (Marchesi 195).

According to Marchesi, the revolutionary facet of this new type of rhetoric was that it was willing "to give up any concern for its own outward appearance to achieve full and effective communication of its truth-content," thus promoting "a discourse in which the highest truth-content is conveyed in the humblest of styles" (203, 205). St. Augustine posits in his piece that "Since rhetoric is used to give conviction to both truth and falsehood, who could dare to maintain that truth, which depends on us for its defence [sic], should stand unarmed in the fight against falsehood," establishing the need for the use of, let us say a Christian rhetoric, in order to combat falsehood and move the audience toward truth and good (101). Since dialectic–argument lacking an emotional appeal to the audience–is the most suitable for the discovery of truth, Dante employs this method when earthly reason is of sufficient veracity to explain questions of faith. Christian rhetoric is used when seeking to persuade the audience to good ends, as rhetoric is more concerned with the application of eloquence to persuade people to conform to the will of the speaker.

An excellent example of Dante's use of dialectic is the treatise on love delivered by Virgil in canto XVII of *Purgatorio*. The topic, as Ciardi mentions in his notes, is heavily influenced by the writings of Aquinas and is fitting given the ultimate reunion of

Dante with Beatrice, and the nature of love as a fundamental basis for Christian teachings. As in the classical dialectic between Socrates and Phaedrus, the conversation begins as the pair pause in their journey and recline. Virgil, Dante's earthly guide and father figure (even addressed as "Father" by Dante), assumes the role of the Socrates-like master with Dante as the interlocutor. As in classical dialectic, the interlocutor begins with a broad question on a vast topic, in this case love. Dante, as Ciardi attests to, is in all likelihood asking for an explanation of this topic in order to demonstrate "zeal," a virtue which the slothful did not demonstrate in their mortal life (434). The treatise also gives an opportunity for Dante the author to demonstrate his knowledge of dialectic as a form and thus to use a properly humble style to embark on the discussion of a valuable topic to the Christian faith.

As indicated by the new form of Christian logic initiated by St. Augustine, the goal of the dialectic is to instill in people a valuable truth which leads to an increase in good knowledge. Dante uses forms of reasoning conventional to classical dialectic, but with the theologizing element of the Christian dialectic backing his logic. Virgil states his thesis for the treatise when he says, "love alone is the true seed of every merit in you, and of all acts for which you must atone" (XVII, ll. 103-105). In order to disprove the contrary of his statement (that hate for oneself or hatred of the creator is the cause of acts for which one must atone) Virgil states (as paraphrased excellently by Ciardi in his reference to Aquinas) that even harm done against the self is a result of love for the self and that one cannot assume that hatred of oneself is the cause of evil (434). Virgil next states that "since no being may exist alone and apart from the First Being…all beings lack the power to hate That One," meaning that a person would not even exist without the

creator so he/she cannot possess the ability to hate Him (XVII, ll. 109-111). By demonstrating through deductive reasoning that the opposite of his statement is false, the dialectical logic employed by Virgil assumes that his statement is correct. He concludes his line of reasoning by supposing that "the evil that man loves must be his neighbor's" (XVII, ll. 113).

In order to cement his assertion in the dialectic, Virgil utilizes inductive reasoning to demonstrate the instances of "bad love" which cause man to merit proper atonement. The first "three springs" of "bad love" are longing for failure of another, prevention of another's rise to power, and vengeance against one's neighbor, which correspond to the three sins of pride, envy, and wrath which Virgil intimates are the "threefold [types of] love those just below us here purge from their souls," referring to the prior three cornices that they have surmounted (XVII, ll. 124-5). The next example of love Virgil gives is sloth, and the final three examples logically correspond to the final three sins (avarice, gluttony, and lust) punished on the top three cornices of the mountain of Purgatory. The simple, yet instructive logic of the dialectic is that it accounts for the entire spectrum of deadly sins, thus concretely reinforcing the inductive reasoning by accounting for all possibilities of "bad love" and demonstrating how it is the "true seed…of all acts for which you must atone."

The truth which this dialectic exposes is that various perversions of love are responsible for the sins which mortals commit, which serves as a point of reflection for the reader and corresponds to the new Christian goal of the dialectic: to impart knowledge to be used in the Augustinian "[defense] of truth" by the righteous speaker.

Instruction alone was not the final goal for the Divine Comedy, which as Marchesi asserts is concerned with "spur[ing] human beings to action" (213).

An example of the use of Christian rhetoric comes in the sixth canto of *Purgatorio* when Dante the Pilgrim asks Virgil to explain the powers of prayer to alter divine will, which as Mira Gerhard explains is a literary allusion to a specific episode in Virgil's *Aeneid*. In the poem, Palinurus prays to Aeneas to ferry him across the river Styx prior to his earthly burial, a request analogous to "one of the inhabitants of Purgatory asking Dante to carry him to Paradise rather than progressing there by his own ascetic efforts…" (Gerhard 112). Hence, Dante asks Virgil "it seems to me one of your verses most expressly states prayer may not alter Heaven's fixed decree…Can all their hope be vain? Or have I missed your true intent and read some other there?" (VI, ll. 28-33).

Dante's response is an example of the new Christian rhetoric. He replies first by stating that "the hope of all these spirits [is not in] vain" and that "The towering crag of Justice is not bent, nor is the rigor of its edict softened because the supplications of the fervent and pure in heart cancel the debt of time" which the souls waiting to enter purgatory must "repay" before they may begin the purgation of their mortal sins (VI, ll.36-42). Virgil states implicitly that the prayers of those made to wait for their purgation are not without merit since the prayers of good people on earth are indirectly solicited by the will of God, hence drawing the distinction between praying to God for a prayer and praying to a man for a favor as in the case of Palinurus. It is the will of God that the sinners undergo purgation, therefore their prayers for assistance are not without merit.

Gerhard correctly asks why some pagans are allowed to pray to undergo purgation and others are relegated to Limbo and the first circle of hell. Virgil answers vaguely by stating that "The souls [he] wrote about were in that place where sin is not atoned for, and their prayers—they being pagan—were cut off from Grace," supposedly referring to himself as well since his prayers were not part of what Gerhard terms "Divine Will" (VI, 43-45; Gerhard 113). He then concludes his discussion of the matter by referring Dante to Beatrice, to which Dante's characteristic enthusiasm to rush up the mountain again surfaces. Gerhard concludes that Virgil's deferral of the question to Beatrice is made in order to "turn attention away from himself" since the topic "reveals his own 'shortcomings'" as a virtuous pagan (113). I claim that the deferral is a tactic that Virgil has used before to defer questions of divine explanation, and that it is not out of embarrassment over his own status as a pagan that Virgil defers, but rather that Dante the author views this topic as within the realm of divine explanation and Catholic rhetoric demands that the style not exceed the "truth-content" described by Marchesi. It would be inappropriate for the guide of earthly wisdom to broach a topic that is suitable only for address by divine authority, and the matter is one that should be reserved for divine explanation. Nevertheless, the goal of Christian rhetoric is still achieved in Virgil's brief address; prayer is not without merit so long as the motives are within "Devine Will," hence Dante persuades the audience that prayer is good. The example of the *Aeneid* and use of allusion is merely a device used by Dante to instruct his audience to the good of the act of prayer in this instance.

The deferral of a question of the divine is not merely a device of the *Purgatorio* alone; take for example St. Bernard's explanation of the ordering of the children not

saved by baptism in canto XXXII of the *Paradiso*. In this case, even St. Bernard refers to the "decree of the eternal law" which in a sense is a deferral to the divine mystery of God's intention. What may be seen in the classical rhetorical sense as an infinite deferral that can never be responded to, Christian rhetoric classifies as a deferral that is enough to still accomplish the goal of persuading the audience through use of the finite amount of information available to us in the Holy Scriptures. Since purgatory is a realm that is, in part, being defined by Dante's writing, it is not unusual that it would not be the place for such a large question of theological precedent to be debated and the question is ultimately deferred to Beatrice, but only after the audience is persuaded to good ends.

As Marchesi intimates in his essay, the question of "rhetorical pathos" is of importance when analyzing dialectic versus rhetoric, or instruction versus persuasion (199). The dialectic concerning love is without attempt to persuade, but uses instead a logical basis to instruct the listener (Dante the Pilgrim *or* the audience) in how love is a motivating factor for the sins which are removed through purgation; or as Augustine states, eloquence when used to instruct will "make clear what was hidden from [the audience] (117). The rhetorical speech concerning prayer is designed to persuade the audience that prayer within "Divine Will" is good and that they should alter their mortal behavior to that effect (the implicit contrary being to restrict prayer to appropriate subjects which are within God's purview and are not heretical). St. Augustine notes that it is the function of "the eloquent speaker…to persuade, and if he fails to persuade he has not achieved the aim of his eloquence" (140). Pathos is therefore outside the realm of instruction, and appropriate pathos is necessary in order to persuade. The reader is made to feel pity for those who wait for the opportunity of purgation through Dante's emotional

appeal to Virgil, and Virgil uses that emotion to invoke the righteousness of prayer. Thus pathos is used in the Christian rhetoric, but not in dialectic.

My analysis of the rhetoric of the *Purgatorio* is not done in order to indicate that it is a work of pure allegory; to be sure, the poem itself can be viewed as a work of art which is meant to delight as well as to instruct, just as Augustine recommends for the Christian rhetorician. When discussing style, St. Augustine indicates that eloquent writing is not merely for the delight of the audience:

> The aim of the mixed style—to give delight through the eloquence itself—should not be espoused for its own sake but so that assent for things which are spoken of for the general good and with honorable intent…may as a result of this delight be gained more readily and implant itself more firmly. (140)

Eloquence is the vehicle, then, by which the greater good may be accomplished more fully.

The eloquence of the *Purgatorio* and the entire Divine Comedy could then be considered a rhetorical device used to inspire "the soul to love both the representation and what is represented" (Durling 189). Although Robert M. Durling focuses on the visual arts, he refers to the vivid description of the visual arts on the cornice of Pride as "a major statement about the nature and function of the visual arts and, by implication, of poetry and of the *Comedy* itself" (188). The arts represent the spiritual element of the purgation process and Dante, by presenting an eloquent poem, seeks for the reader to transcend the appreciation of the poem's elegance alone and to love the representation of purgation within it and change their lives so that they may attain the greater good of salvation more readily.

Artistic eloquence as an extension of the Christian rhetoric falls within the use of modest style to achieve a positive change in the audience. Dante uses his artistic expression to move the audience toward positive change, something that St. Augustine mandates as the requisite feature of the new Christian rhetoric. The site of purgatory allows Dante to have a *tabula rasa* upon which to depict an environment where earthly concerns are related to divine will through the use of Christian logic and rhetoric. The use of dialectic is not counterproductive to his goal of inspiring positive change within the audience, but instead reinforces the existing construct of purgatory for the sake of theologically enhancing the position of his argument and inspiring the reader to ponder the completeness of divine logic.

The victory of Dante's *Purgatorio* lies in the elegance with which he constructs and achieves his rhetorical goals. The concision of his arguments and logic is representative of the classical tradition, but the content and ultimate aim of his rhetoric securely embeds his piece within the Catholic rhetorical tradition established by St. Augustine.