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Presented here is a transcription of *Purgatorio* 22.61-93, in which Statius responds to Virgil's prying question into the nature of Statius's Christian faith:

"If that is so, then what sun or what candles
drew you from darkness so that, in their wake,
you set your sails behind the fisherman?"
And he [Statius] to him: "You were the first to send me
to drink within Parnassus' caves and you,
the first who, after God, enlightened me.
You did as he who goes by night and carries
the lamp behind him—he is of no help
to his own self but teaches those who follow—
when you declared: 'The ages are renewed;
justice and man's first time on earth return;
from Heaven a new progeny descends.'
Through you I was a poet and, through you,
a Christian; but that you may see more plainly,
I'll set my hand to color what I sketch."
Disseminated by the messengers
of the eternal kingdom, the true faith
by then had penetrated all the world,
and the new preachers preached in such accord
with what you'd said (and I have just repeated),
that I was drawn into frequenting them.

Then they appeared to me to be so saintly
that, when Domitian persecuted them,
my own laments accompanied their grief;
and while I could—as long as I had life—
I helped them, and their honest practices
made me disdainful of all other sects.
Before—within my poem—I'd led the Greeks
unto the streams of Thebes, I was baptized;
but out of fear, I was a secret Christian
and, for a long time, showed myself as pagan;
for this half-heartedness, for more than four
centuries, I circled the fourth circle."

Statius's deferential revelation of the spark of his own conversion to Christianity, along with his preceding discovery of the identity of Dante's guide, provide a connected pair of scenes that have independently inspired commentaries with varying focus on the historical and literary aspects therein. Disagreements arise both in interpretations of Dante's motivations and available sources, as well as in suggestions for the way we, as readers, ought to interpret the drama that is created for us. Dante's expeditious treatment of the angel that appeared in the transition from the Fifth to the Sixth Terrace allows us to, nearly without pause, continue the drama occurring at the end of Canto 21 and allow it to inform our discussion of the main passage that I have transcribed here (*Purgatorio 22.*61-93). In joining these two small passages and relating a few of the critical interpretations that I have come across, I will put forth my own understanding of this pair of scenes that is largely informed by the emotions I experienced as I imagined each character reacting to the information another reveals. Because I am both less knowledgeable about and less invested in the historical foundation required to comment on Dante's use of the sources that were available to him during the creation of his *Comedia*, my own interpretation will be primarily informed by the dramatic situation that he creates and my initial reaction to the scenes.

In order to appreciate the dramatic complexity of Virgil's silent "Be still" to Dante during which Dante's countenance reveals a secret that Virgil, for one reason or another, initially attempts to conceal from Statius, let us first examine the second of the these two connected scenes. The transcribed passage includes Statius's response to Virgil's questioning; Virgil learns that he was the rather surprising source of Statius's conversion to Christianity. Hermann Oelsner (1899) suggests that "No one who reads Virgil's fourth Eclogue can fail to be

impressed by its similarity to 'Messianic' passages of the Old Testament, particularly Isaiah." He goes on to point out the likelihood of Virgil having discovered Sibylline verses written by the Jews of Alexandria that could have inspired him to write his "remarkable poem"—a poem that would combine pagan traditions with Christian ideas. Oelsner's historical argument seems to passively allow for Dante to have, in good faith, placed Statius in his poem while believing that the Roman poet was converted to Christianity by virtue of his reading of a work that failed to save its own author.

But what if Dante did not really believe that Statius was converted to Christianity? Then Dante has introduced a character that was allegorical, or at least figural *and* fictive, to serve a dramatic purpose in the poet's treatment of Virgil. Robert Hollander (2000-2007) suggests that we should read into Virgil's remark (*Purgatorio 22.*55-60) about a lack of evidence in the *Thebaid* signifying Statius's conversion as evidence of Dante's intentions. On the one hand, Hollander says that diving down into Virgil's *Ecloque* [IV.7] yields phrases that match phrases in Statius's work, and thus precisely pinpoint at least one historical "fact" Dante may have clung to in order to justify a converted Statius accompanying Dante and Virgil from the Fifth Terrace upward in *Purgatorio*. On the other hand, Hollander admits that "while there has been recent work on the subject that is of some importance, the sort of careful monograph that would lay out the territory clearly and carefully is surely a serious lack in Dante studies." Therefore, Dante's intentions seem up for fairly wide interpretation. In a paper delivered as a talk at a conference held at Yale in 1985, titled "Dante's Virgil: A Light That Failed," Hollander emphasizes the drama and moralizing this passage contains, rather than becoming mired in a historical analysis of Statius and Virgil.

In Hollander's paper, the popular interpretation of Virgil as a merely allegorical figure is criticized, and it is Statius, instead, whose historicity Hollander believes is false—a choice made by the poet for either aesthetic or moral purposes. Hollander sees the lines, "You did as one who goes by night … teaches those who follow," (*Purgatorio* 22.67-69) as Dante's dramatic statement that Virgil is a failed prophet, and that Dante did in fact become a Christian again through his own reading of Virgil's text. The implication of this interpretation is that Dante-the-poet is blaming Virgil for failing to save himself as Statius did. John S. Carroll (1904) also comments on the passage I have transcribed, agreeing with Hollander's view that the conversion of Statius was "pure invention" while offering an alternative purpose: Dante wishes to show that "the natural heart grows prophetic in its yearning for His advent." In summary: Oelsner is rather apathetic about Dante's converted Statius, choosing to embrace the *possibility* of a historical basis; both Hollander and Carroll are fairly confident in Dante's invention of Statius's conversion, but Hollander emphasizes the blame that Dante heaps on Virgil, the guide who cannot profit from his own light, while Carroll suggests that Dante-the-poet was struggling to reconcile the fact that Virgil was not saved by virtue of his salvation of others—that he felt that it "violated some instinct of both love and justice in the human heart" for Virgil, the guide, to be *allowed to fail*.

I prefer to view Dante-the-poet's choice to introduce a converted Statius as a wonderful opportunity to deliver dramatic irony in these two connected scenes. At the end of Canto 21, lines 103 to 104, I could not help smiling as I saw Dante struggle to hide his emotions when he hears the high praise of Statius for Virgil despite Statius's ignorance of the identity of his company. Why does Virgil at first intimate to Dante not to speak his mind? When I first

encountered this passage, my eyes grew wide, for I could imagine not just the comedy of our solemn Dante submitting to his emotions, but also Virgil's *embarrassment* at hearing a fellow shade heap on him such adulation. But the question of whether Virgil is embarrassed for Statius, or more deeply troubled by the presence of a shade who both idolizes him and has surpassed him with the recent terrestrial rumblings of the Fifth Terrace, quickly becomes evident: "Brother, there's no need—you are a shade, a shade is what you see," is Virgil's response to being possibly irked by Statius kissing his feet. Before encountering Statius's assertion that it was Virgil who saved, this first over-enthusiastic reaction of Statius seems comic and humanizing for Dante and his "flashing of a smile" (*Purgatorio* 21.14) as well as for Virgil and his wanting to avoid the awkwardness of Statius's ardent reaction. Hollander urges us not "to read in too moralizing a light this extraordinary little scene." He says there is no serious consequence if Dante gives away Virgil's little secret; the scene is "perhaps as close to experiencing Christian fellowship as Virgil ever comes." I disagree, for when viewed alongside the passage revealing Statius's reading and conversion (*Purgatorio* 22.61-93), both scenes necessarily become agonizing for Virgil, who must make nice with a shade who will enjoy the Paradise Virgil is denied. I could only imagine, while learning of Statius's conversion, the pain Virgil must have felt to see one more example of a follower who heeded the signs he missed. While Virgil experienced many small failures along his descent through *Inferno*, here we see a naked, talkative, fawning fellow shade who forces Virgil to confront both the sad and tragically ironic nature of the failure that earned him a place in Limbo for all of eternity—the failure to follow the light of his own lamp.

Works Cited

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