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Im/perfection and Bliss in Dante's Heaven of the Moon

Almut Suerbaum's paper, 'Between "unio" and alienation: Expressions of Desire in the strophic Poems of Hadewijch', was written for a conference on Desire in Dante and the Middle Ages that we organised in Oxford with Elena Lombardi and Tristan Kay in 2010 and was first published in a volume that we edited thereafter. Almut's contribution assesses how Middle Dutch mystic and poet Hadewijch transforms motifs from the courtly love lyric — especially the relationship between the (male) lyric 'I' and the (female) beloved familiar from Northern French (*trouvère*) and Occitan (*troubadour*) songs — within the theological framework of her songs, and articulates a central element of mystical theology by means of the secular discourse on love. Specifically, Hadewijch's strophic songs express a paradoxical relationship between desire for 'unio' as a movement transcending the gap between the created world and God, and an awareness that because of the fundamental difference between the human soul and the divine creator, such desire is inherently unrequitable. Through analysing the dynamics of desire in three strophic songs by Hadewijch, which demonstrate also how Hadewijch's blending of erotic and sacred motifs resignifies some key tropes of the courtly love lyric (the seasonal nature opening; the idea of love as conquest; desire as a journey and experience of exile; images of hunger and satiety), Almut shows that Hadewijch transcends the oxymoronic coexistence of desire and happiness and instead turns desire into happiness. As a consequence, "joy, like satiety, is an expression of dulled senses, whereas hunger and suffering are the expression of perfect desire which hence paradoxically is closest to achieving the ultimate goal".

Dialoguing with this specific aspect of Almut's reading, we will now look at the representation of desire and bliss in the episode of Piccarda Donati from canto III of Dante's *Paradiso*. Although it is written by a man and deals with souls united with God in heaven, through this encounter with a female figure, Dante's text presents a model that, like Hadewijch's, considers desire as an integral part of happiness but that, unlike Hadewijch's, neither excludes fulfilment nor considers joy as dull either.

Piccarda belonged to the powerful Donati family and was a young woman who took holy vows and entered the convent of St Clare but was removed from it by force by her brother Corso Donati, who forced her into marriage for political and dynastic reasons.¹ She never returned to the convent.

Dante encounters Piccarda in the Heaven of the moon, the slowest of the planetary spheres, still in the shadow of the Earth, where souls appear to Dante who in life did not fulfill their vows and where their bliss is therefore less intense than that of the souls Dante meets in the higher spheres. In fact, Beatrice explains that all the souls are perfectly happy and they actually are all in the Empyrean in joyous union with God: they are just showing themselves to the pilgrim in the different heavens so that he can precisely understand the paradox whereby their beatitude is different and yet at the same time has no lack and is always perfect.

As Piccarda explains to Dante when he asks her whether she desires a higher degree of bliss in heaven, the blessed souls do not desire anything else and find fulfilment and peace in conforming their wills to God's and in finding their place in his order:

¹ Inga Pierson, 'Piccarda's Weakness: Reflections on Freedom, Force, and Femininity in Dante's *Paradiso*', *Speculum*, 94.1 (2019), 68–95; Laura Ingallinella, 'The Canonization of Piccarda Donati', *Forum Italicum*, 55.2 (2021), 463–84.

Anzi è formale ad esto beato esse
tenersi dentro a la divina voglia
per ch'una fansi nostre voglie stesse;
sì che, come noi sem di soglia in soglia
per questo regno, a tutto il regno piace
com' a lo re che 'n suo voler ne 'nvoglia
E 'n la sua voluntade è nostra *pace*:
ell' è quel mare al qual tutto si move
ciò ch'ella crïa o che natura face.”

(*Paradiso* III, 79-85)

[Nay it is the very quality of this blessed state that we keep ourselves within the divine will so that our wills are themselves made one; therefore our rank from height to height through this kingdom is pleasing to the whole kingdom, as to the King who wills us to His will. And in His will is our peace: it is that sea to which all things move, both what it creates and what nature makes.]²

It is a complex introduction to Dante's heaven that confronts two counterintuitive issues: it explains that heaven is structured in a paradoxical way that combines unity and difference – and specifically shows that some souls are granted a lesser degree of beatitude and yet are

² The text of the *Comedy* is quoted from Dante Alighieri, “*La Commedia*” secondo l'antica *vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 2nd rev. edn, 4 vols (Florence: Le Lettere 1994). Translation by John Sinclair, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. III: Paradiso* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

perfectly happy.³ It also raises the question of how it is possible or just that souls like Piccarda who were forced not to fulfill their vows should enjoy a lesser degree of beatitude because of that.

The latter question is later addressed by Beatrice's quite shocking explanation that while Piccarda's "absolute will" remained faithful to her vows, by not going back to the convent (or embracing the possibility of an eventual form of martyrdom), she let her "relative will" bend to violence and therefore cannot be fully excused:

Se vïolenza è quando quel che pate
niente conferisce a quel che sforza,
non fuor quest' alme per essa scusate:
ché volontà, se non vuol, non s'ammorza,
ma fa come natura face in foco,
se mille volte vïolenza il torza.

(*Paradiso* IV, 73-78)

[If violence is when he that suffers takes no part with him that enforces, these souls were not excused on that account. For will, if it will not, is not quenched, but does as nature does in fire though violence wrench it aside a thousand times.]

³ Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 166–93 (esp. 182–87). See also Manuele Gragnolati, "Heavenly Paradoxes and Their Pleasures", in *A World of Possibilities: The Legacy of 'The Undivine Comedy'*, ed. Kristina M. Olson (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2025), 297–312.

Recently, Inga Pierson has dwelled on the problematic aspect of Dante's presentation of Piccarda and argued that a sense of diminishment taints the souls' bliss in the Heaven of the Moon as though the acceptance of their fate were another form of yielding to force that means that they are somehow punished for the violence they suffered on Earth.⁴ Alison Cornish, on the other hand, has explicitly addressed Pierson's reading and argued that rather than yielding to God's force the souls' peace comes from understanding how good his order is, and that the lower status that these souls have in Heaven is actually a celebration of their difference and individuality within a realm that leaves space for, and grants, full happiness to everybody, also for those unable to be martyrs.⁵

In their significantly different readings both Pierson and Cornish emphasise that in conforming her will with God's order Piccarda finds "peace" and indeed throughout the *Paradiso* the reader is constantly reminded of the contentment granted to the souls by their beatific vision⁶:

Lume è là sù che visibile face
lo creatore a quella creatura
che solo in lui vedere ha la sua pace.

(*Paradiso* XXX, 100-02)

⁴ See Pierson; See also Richard H. Lansing, 'Piccarda and the Poetics of Paradox: A Reading of *Paradiso* III', *Dante Studies*, 105 (1987), 63-77, on the melancholy/nostalgia characterizing this heaven.

⁵ Alison Cornish, *Believing in Dante: Truth in Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 156–207

⁶ 'Però parla con esse e odi e credi; / ché la verace luce che le appaga / da sé non lascia lor torcer li piedi.' (*Par.* III, 31-33) ['Therefore speak with them and hear and believe, for the true light that gives them peace does not let them turn their steps from itself'.]

[Light is there above which makes the Creator visible to every creature that has their peace only in seeing Him].

The peace/contentment that the blessed souls find in Dante's heaven is different from the burning desire which Almut has analyzed in Hadewijch's poetry, and this difference has to do with the fact that while Hadewijch is still longing for God on Earth, the blessed souls described by Dante are in heaven and have attained their object of desire. This sense of fulfilment resonates with a passage of Dante's philosophical treatise, *Convivio*, which explains that desire is defective and originates from lack while perfection and happiness consist precisely in the cessation of desire:

E la ragione è questa: che, con ciò sia cosa che ciascuna cosa naturalmente disia la sua perfezione, senza quella essere non può [l'uomo] contento, che è essere beato; ché quantunque l'altre cose avesse, senza questa rimarrebbe in lui desiderio: lo quale essere non può colla beatitudine, acciò che la beatitudine sia perfetta cosa, e lo desiderio sia cosa defettiva: ché nullo desidera quello che ha, ma quello che non ha, che è manifesto difetto. (3.15.3)

[The reason for this is that since everything by nature desires its own perfection, without this perfection man could not be happy, that is to say, could not be blessed; for even if he had every other thing, by lacking this perfection desire would still be present in him, and desire is something that cannot coexist with blessedness since blessedness is something

perfect and desire something defective; for no one desires what he has but rather what he does not have, which is an obvious deficiency.]"⁷

In this model, there is no space for lack in happiness and therefore no space for desire. Yet, while up until this point, the *Paradiso*'s idea of "pace" is aligned with *Convivio* on the question of happiness as fullness and perfection, nonetheless the *Paradiso* radically alters this model by reintroducing desire into the equation.

Again it is Piccarda's words that enable us to grasp this difference when she explains that she does not want any higher degree of blessedness, and the peace she enjoys comes from yielding her will to God, and yet she 'burns' with desire:

Con quelle altr' ombre pria sorrise un poco;
da indi mi rispuose tanto lieta,
ch'arder pareva d'amor nel primo foco:
"Frate, la nostra volontà quïeta
virtù di carità, che fa volerne
sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta."

(*Par.* III, 67-72)

⁷ The *Convivio* is quoted from Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. by Franco Brambilla Ageno, 3 vols (Florence: Le Lettere, 1995); English translation is taken from *Dante's 'Il Convivio'*, trans. by Richard H. Lansing (New York: Garland, 1990).

[With the other shades there she first smiled a little, then answered me with such gladness that she seemed to burn in the first fire of love; ‘Brother, the power of charity quiets our will and makes us will only what we have and thirst for nothing else.’]

Reading this passage in dialogue with Almut’s comments on Hadewijch’s ardent longing for God as the expression of perfect desire, one appreciates only more that in Dante’s heaven peace does not exclude desire even though they would seem incompatible (as they were in the *Convivio*): at ll. 67–68 Piccarda’s contentment is conveyed both by her smile and her happy demeanor, but at l. 69 a new intensity emerges that breaks the binary logic that makes desire and fulfilment mutually exclusive. Without disavowing contentment, three loaded words (‘ardere’, ‘amor’, ‘foco’) bring the lyric within the sacred and remind us that the human soul is kindled by a desire which continues to burn in heaven: “ch’arder parea d’amor nel primo foco”. Not only, as in Hadewijch, does the courtly sustain heaven’s imagining and reactivate the idea that longing can be pleasurable. But also one perceives the same sensuality with which in another passage of the *Paradiso* the soul is said to desire God since its very creation: “ma vostra vita senza mezzo spira; / la somma beninanza, e la innamora / di sé sì che poi sempre la disira” [But your life the Supreme Beneficence breathes forth immediately, and He so enamours it of Himself that it desires Him ever after] (*Par.* VII, 142-44).

Moving back to the second tercet of the passage from canto III, we see once more that there is no desire in the blessed souls that remains unfulfilled — and the phrase ‘quel ch’avemo’ confirms that bliss is the contentment deriving from possession. And yet neither possession nor perfection preclude desire: unlike on Earth, heavenly desire does not originate from lack and indeed what strikes us here is Dante imagining an unusual form of desire without lack whereby

the blessed souls continue to desire precisely what they already have: “fa volerne / sol quel ch'avemo e d'altro non c'asseta”. Moreover, “d'altro non c'asseta”, especially if put in contrast to the points Almut made about the devouring hunger of yearning which is never satiated, expresses desire as a thirst paradoxically at once quenched and felt.

Differently from Dante, in Hadewijch's strophic songs there is no 'pace', just striving in imperfection, “wandering lost in love” in a precarious and difficult journey, as Almut writes. God is distant and unfathomable but in that gap Hadewijch finds bliss, offering an original reworking of the courtly dynamics of desire predicated on lack and non-possession. Hadewijch's sense of bliss exceeds logic and has nothing to do with being reasonable. Through Piccarda, Dante instead imagines that blessedness is about having a place that appeases you and yet in which desire continues to burn without lack.