

Falconry as a Transmutative Art: Dante, Frederick II, and Islam

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Dante's *Purgatorio* and the Phenomenology of Falconry

When Dante the pilgrim is about to turn his gaze toward the first penitent souls he encounters in *Purgatorio*, Dante the author interrupts the narrative and addresses the reader. You should not, he argues, “smagar[ti] / di buon proponimento” as you hear what the “*forma del martire*” is; you should instead focus on “la successione”: the utter certainty that these souls *are* saved—no matter how frightening their present “martire.”¹

The reader is thus left to contemplate the dilemma that Dante has just put into focus.² If these souls really *are* saved, why do they need to be tortured? What lies between their future status as blessed-souls-to-be and their current condition of saved yet suffering souls is precisely a relentless process of penance *and* ascent, by means of which they will eventually become the magnificent creatures Dante so deftly evokes shortly thereafter (*Purg.* 10.125–26), the “angelica farfalla / che vola a la giustizia senza schermi.” What has to occur, in sum, is nothing short of a metamorphic miracle—a miracle intended to transmute a living soul into what nature, or rather divinity, had meant it to become in the first place.³

Purgatory is unquestionably Dante’s “newest” invention in the *Commedia*.⁴ Hell and Paradise, traditionally the two opposite and self-excluding loci of the beyond, were places that all Western cultures—classical, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic⁵—had previously visualized in their own ways.⁶ Each tradition had borrowed from the others, or argued against them, in order to offer their followers images of the beyond designed to

instill fear of punishment, or hope of reward. While building on previous mappings of these two realms, Dante unquestionably creates his own unique version of each.⁷ In particular, debate on the subject of Dante's alleged borrowings from the Muslim *mi'raj* has flourished, and even at times become heated, without producing much in the way of agreement.⁸

Leaving aside issues pertaining to the realms of the damned and the saved, I will focus on the *Commedia*'s middle canticle in the attempt to understand first what cultural and ethical motives led Dante to give this intermediate realm the peculiar, and wholly positive, figurative form of a mountain to ascend and, second, what overarching theme sustained him in his enterprise. As has often been noted, *Purgatorio* is the canticle that most ostensibly mirrors the condition of human beings on earth, caught as they are between the often unbearable burden of their past actions and the uncertainty of the outcome of their lives. And this is also the canticle that provides the blueprint for Dante's own journey of inner transmutation—hence, salvation—a journey he takes upon himself to narrate so that his readers might do the same.⁹

Until Dante's time, the notion of a purgatorial fire was the only possibility envisaged by the church as a temporary alternative to the definitive opposites of damnation and salvation, a path Dante clearly did not choose to follow in his visualization of the middle realm.¹⁰ Rather, walking through a wall of fire will be, for Dante the wayfarer, the *culmination* of a process of ascent implying *inner* transformation through (a witnessing of the souls') *outer* coercion.¹¹ This process once completed, Dante finds himself able to "soar" to the earthly Paradise (as presumably do all souls, once their penance is complete) rather than helplessly scramble toward it as Dante did at the beginning of his ascent of the mountain—thus fulfilling the announcement made by Vergil at the outset of their laborious, initially ineffectual climb.¹²

If learning how to soar is the purpose of Purgatory (in preparation, one could argue, for Paradise), the stress Dante puts on the issue of divine art versus human art in the encounters with the proud on the first terrace makes it clear that, in order to become saved souls, humans need to learn not just any kind of soaring,¹³ but rather that particular *art* of soaring which will allow them to ascend toward God, like a butterfly leaving its chrysalis behind—or, as I presently argue, like a tamed falcon "ch' esce dal cappello" (*Par.* 19.34) at the falconer's command.¹⁴

Upon reaching Purgatory's second terrace, Dante sheds tears of compassion in witnessing the kind of blindness imposed by Divine Justice on the envious to discipline them. This is in fact no ordinary, no "natural" form of blindness, but one that belongs to the preliminary procedures of the most sophisticated of all arts of taming: the art of falconry. In this perspective, the "seeling" of the souls' eyelids ought to be understood—figuratively, but at some level also literally—not as a punishment in and of itself, but rather as a redemptive device, and hence as an act of love that the penitent souls should learn to recognize as such. As we shall see in more detail soon, this is in fact *the* technique chosen by Divine Providence to enable the souls of the envious to learn to hear God's call so that they may eventually respond to it, in the same way that wild falcons are taught, through their forced blindness, to respond to the presence of the falconer and heed his call.¹⁵

Dante's Falconry in Context

If, as I believe, Dante saw both the condition of the penitent souls *and*, even more cogently, his own "taming" at the hands of Vergil, as a transmutative process most aptly understood in terms of falconry, then we should ask ourselves three questions. First, where and how did he become acquainted with the technical/textual aspects of falconry? Second, what ideological reasons or intercultural motives led him to adopt such a peculiar image as the most appropriate for his intermediate canticle?¹⁶ Third, knowing Dante's highly distinctive way of handling any preexisting "given," how did his reworking of the theme of falconry fit his own inner vision in relation to the larger scenery of the Mediterranean world? There, after all, falconry had long generated its own "interdiscursivity," not only as a technique, but also as a symbolic construct.

Because this investigation entails by its very nature the study of Dante's text in its connections with multiple aspects of the medieval art of falconry, it may be useful to call on the "methods of approach" (*modi dell'approccio*) that Maria Corti outlined in her attempt to probe the thorny issue of Dante's engagement with Islamic culture.¹⁷ As will soon become apparent, an understanding of falconry symbolism in the *Commedia* contributes to a renewed appreciation of Dante's interest in Islamic lore.

Corti groups her observations in three separate yet complementary "methodological possibilities" (*possibilità metodologiche*):

Prima: esistono nella cultura dell'epoca di Dante dei processi di *interdiscorsività*, cioè di circolazione fra i mondi culturali, per cui un dato, una notizia, un vocabolo tecnico divengono patrimonio comune in seguito appunto alla compenetrazione interdiscorsiva. In tali casi è impossibile, oltre che pericoloso, individuare una fonte diretta. Seconda possibilità: vi sono fenomeni definiti *intertestuali*, per cui può accadere che un testo x offra un modello di struttura a un testo y, come dire un modello analogico, il che non significa che il testo x sia necessariamente fonte di y, cioè che l'autore di y abbia letto, avuto sotto gli occhi il primo testo; può averne letto un riassunto, che già disegni la struttura, o averne udito un riassunto orale. . . . Terza possibilità: il testo arabo che si propone è, a parere dello studioso, *fonte diretta* di un'opera di Dante. In tale felice caso la derivazione dal testo arabo va provata dapprima con ragioni di storia letteraria (traduzione in latino o francese antico dal testo arabo; sua conoscenza nel contesto letterario dantesco). Successivamente va provata una corrispondenza non solo tematica, ma formale: estesa, perché non sia casuale, e isomorfa.¹⁸

Clearly these three “possible connections” (possibilità di rapporto) between texts are meant to trace a progression from oral to written, from borrowing to source, from general to specific, from coincidental to deliberate. The underlying assumption is the old “philological golden rule,” with which Corti no doubt wrestles, but to which she ultimately succumbs: thou shalt ultimately deem worth discussing nothing but the evidence of a direct textual source.

While I find Corti's categories useful, I also believe that we need to employ them differently. I will therefore reverse their order, so as to proceed from the textual to the intertextual to the discursive. By means of this reversal I intend to question the primacy of the “philological golden rule” as a parameter for inquiries that are inter- and multicultural in nature and thus ultimately to mitigate the (ideological?) strictures traditionally attached to an exclusively philological approach. Thus, rather than get caught between the rock of Dante's canonized originality and the hard place of his possible dependence on an ideologically objectionable “source,” I will sail toward the open waters of the Mediterranean—where Dante's unique achievements may stand a chance to appear in the larger dialogical scenery of the multifaceted cultures that helped shape his work, his mind, and his world.

“Fonte diretta”: Dante's Technical/Textual Knowledge of Falconry

Although it is unlikely that Dante *practiced* falconry himself, we can rest assured that he saw it practiced—and close up. Where and by whom is the next question.

Dante's first references to falconry appear in the *canzoni* "Tre donne intorno al cor," and "Doglia mi reca." This seems to indicate that Dante may have "discovered" falconry, along with its figurative potential, soon after he was exiled—more specifically via one of the two lords who hosted him at the time and whose "courtly" conduct he contrasts with the "savage" behavior of the Florentines.¹⁹ As a guest of Scarpetta Ordelaffi in Forlì and of Bartolomeo della Scala in Verona, Dante found himself in a Ghibelline milieu—among heads of a political coalition who still lived in the wake of Frederick II and his royal habits, the most peculiar of which was, as we shall see in more detail below, the practice of falconry.²⁰

Considering that Frederick II's many falconers must have sought (and found) employment among the rulers of northern Italy after Frederick's and Manfred's death and the demise of the Hohenstaufen curia, there is reason to believe that in the second half of the Duecento falconry remained a practice that distinguished if not Guelfs from Ghibellines, then certainly urban, communal *gente nova* from the rulers of north Italian courts, where "solea valore e cortesia trovarsi / prima che Federico avesse briga" (*Purg.* 16.116)—and presumably for some decades after as well.²¹ Not by coincidence, perhaps, the months following his stays in Forlì and Verona were also the time when Dante, having developed an increased awareness of the larger Italian political scene, decided to distance himself from the Whites so as to become "parte per [se] stesso" (*Par.* 17.69).²²

As I mentioned earlier, in Canto 13 of *Purgatorio* Dante refers to the "seeling" of the envious' eyelids, not merely by naming this falconry technique but also by explaining it in technical detail:

E come a li orbi non approda il sole,
così a l'ombre quivi ond'io parlo ora
luce del ciel di sé largir non vole:
ché a tutti un fil di ferro i cigli fora
e cuce sì come a sparvier selvaggio
sì fa però che queto non dimora.
(*Purg.* 13.67–72)

How did Dante learn about *ciliatio* (seeling) in the first place, and why would he go to such lengths in depicting it for his readers? The practice of seeling falcons is meticulously described by Frederick II in his *De arte venandi cum avibus*, although it is not to be found in any other Western treatise. One could argue that no other treatise was at the time as detailed

as Frederick's, yet if such an exacting practice had been current among Western falconers, we should expect to find at least cursory references to it elsewhere. However, the only other known reference appears in *Moamin*, a short Arabic treatise translated by Frederick II's philosopher Theodore of Antioch during the late 1230s. Furthermore, *ciliatio* was (and still is) a current practice among Arabic falconers (as its occurrence in *Moamin* attests). We can thus infer that Frederick II derived the technique of seeling falcons from the Arabs, along with other procedures on whose provenance he is quite explicit. Once he became convinced of its usefulness by testing it with his own birds, he proceeded to include it in his treatise and standardized the practice among his falconers.²³

Dante's precise description of the seeling of the souls in *Purgatorio* seems to indicate the poet's awareness of the fact that not very many people in the peninsula were acquainted with this Frederician taming technique of Islamic origin.

Did Dante learn about Arabic techniques such as *ciliatio*, or Persian ones such as the *capellum* (hooding),²⁴ from reading Frederick's treatise on falconry? Although this possibility cannot be ruled out, it is unlikely, as there is no documentary evidence that the massive *De arte venandi* ever circulated among north Italian rulers.²⁵ We may, however, easily visualize Dante watching falconers seeling falcons in one of the courts where he sojourned as a guest—and imagine perhaps that one of the falconers told him how he learned such a technique from one of his teachers in the emperor's service.²⁶

In other words, from a technical/textual point of view, Dante's knowledge of falconry is objectively grounded in Hohenstaufen practices, even if Dante does not make any explicit reference to Frederick's treatise on falconry. For at least two falconry images highly relevant within the *Commedia*'s inner structure (seeling and hooding, on which more below), it is possible to indicate a direct link to Frederick II's practices, which in turn originated from the emperor's contacts with, and avid study of, Islamic falconry techniques.²⁷ While we cannot demonstrate Dante's awareness that these Frederician practices were of Islamic origin, it seems beyond doubt that there exists a direct connection between Dante's interest in the imagery of falconry and the Ghibelline heritage of curial practices related to an ideal of imperial sovereignty advocated by Frederick II in his *De arte venandi*.

Intertextuality: Dante's Analogical Framework and Frederick II's Falconry Vision

We have, at best, scanty documentary records with regard to falconry in northern Italy in the years of Dante's exile. Paradoxically, the *Commedia* itself, through the richness of its references, testifies to the spread and consequence of this art among Dante's patrons more accurately than any other written or visual evidence we presently know of or may ever hope to identify.

One would like to imagine in particular that some of the splendor of Frederick's falconry practices lived on in Verona, where the Della Scalas had assumed the role of Ghibelline leaders.²⁸ Such may have been the case. In his poem *Bisbidis*, written to honor Cangrande, Immanuel Romano (or Manoello Giudeo, referred to as Dante's "Jewish friend") includes falcons and falconers among the wonders epitomizing the distinctiveness of this ruler's court:²⁹

Li falconi cui cui	li brachetti gu gu,
li levrieri guuu uu,	per volersi sfugare.
Qui falconieri,	maestri et scudieri,
ragazzi et corrieri,	ciascun per sè andare.
Et quanto et quanto	et quanto et quanto
et quanto et quanto	li vedi spaz[i]are!
	(101–12) ³⁰

Taken out of context, such references are so generic as to be virtually meaningless. Read within the poem, though, they help to project the aura of a court Frederician in flavor—complete with a zoo of exotic animals, open to wayfarers of any provenance, exiles from Guelph cities, and religious, political, or ethnic refugees of all kind, who were encouraged to share their thoughts in an atmosphere of acceptance, if not tolerance:

Baroni et Marchesi	de tutti i paesi,
gentili et cortesi	qui vedi arrivare.
Quivi astrologia	con Philosophia
et di Teologia	udrai disputare.
Quivi Tedeschi	Latini et Franceschi
Fiammenghi e Ingheleschi	insieme parlare;
	(65–76)

Qui babbuini,
Giudei et Sarracini

Romei et pellegrini,
vedrai capitare.
(121–24)³¹

Nor can we discount Dante's own recognition of the Della Scala brothers, Bartolomeo and Cangrande, who hosted him in 1303–4 and 1313, respectively. Their generosity toward him and other refugees, as well as their feats as rulers, shine—in Cacciaguida's prophecy—from under the wings of the imperial "santo uccello" (*Par.* 17.72),³² against the murky backdrop of Clement V's vile betrayal of Henry VII (see *Par.* 17.79–93). As for Cangrande in particular, in the opening of his renowned *Epistola* 13, Dante refers to his wisdom as a ruler and magnificence as a sovereign in Solomonic terms. In so doing, Dante employs an imagery that harks back to the imperial rhetoric of the Hohenstaufen and, beyond that, to the Islamic understanding of sovereignty—one steeped, unsurprisingly, in the practice and symbolism of falconry.³³

The very image of the imperial eagle had reached the Romans from the East. In Mazdaic and Sasanian traditions, the bird of prey represented the lord's sovereignty, wisdom, and power as emanating from a transcendental source and reaching down from the heavens into the realm of immanence. Such mythical birds were unrelated to falconry per se. However, once this iconography became integrated in the culture of the Arabic Islamic world, where the practice of taming birds of prey had long been widespread, the fusion of the symbolic and the cultural contributed to falconry's becoming the sovereign art par excellence. In this new context, the bird on the fist was still the sign of a superior wisdom, but now it was not so much received from above as it was acquired through the act of taming—taming the wild bird, and through that process, taming also one's own innermost self.³⁴

Frederick II inherited from his Norman ancestors, and vigorously embraced, the blending of the symbolic potential of falconry with the traditional imagery of the imperial eagle of ancient Eastern origin. To see how, let us focus for a moment on the *Stupor Mundi*'s accomplishments in falconry matters.

I shall deal first with Frederick II's desire to collect the best treatises available. Although we do not know exactly how many he managed to obtain, we know that he entrusted his personal philosopher, Theodore of Antioch, with the translation of two of these texts from Arabic into Latin.

These two treatises, known in the West by the names of their Islamic authors, *Moamin* and *Ghatrif*, respectively, were widely circulated throughout Europe until the Renaissance. Today they are ranked among the most authoritative Islamic treatises on the subject. In fact, they were composed in the ninth century at the 'Abbasid court of Baghdad, where, thanks to the presence at court of numerous Iranian falconers, a superior tradition of falconry thrived.³⁵ By no means coincidentally, Frederick II would pride himself on doing much the same thing *chez lui*: as he repeatedly declares in *De arte venandi*, he regularly invited Islamic falconers to his court to learn from them directly.³⁶

Second, more than any other Western ruler before (or, indeed, after) him, Frederick II advocated a daily practice of the art: this included closely observing the habits of birds (both those hunted and those doing the hunt), as well as testing various methods for taming and recalling birds of prey. This, he believed, would allow him to comprehend the world and his own place in it—better than would any other practice, science, and perhaps even religious doctrine. What Frederick intended to master was nothing less than an understanding of the workings of nature both in the animal world and in the human realm, so as to excel in the art that, to him, was eminently the emperor's own: that of taming, through the power of reason, the mind of nature *and* the human mind.³⁷

Clearly, Frederick II superposed and merged two distinct concepts: the *dignitas hominis* within the created universe, on the one hand; and the supremacy of the ruler within the political realm, on the other. But what truly stood out as original in the Swabian emperor's political philosophy was the fact that he established an actual analogy between those well-known philosophical abstractions and the tangible workings of the art of falconry. Such an epistemological shift triggered, in turn, a new approach to the morphological and technical aspects of falconry, which were now legitimately considered the foundations of an art that was noble as well as ennobling.

The imperial eagle—notably, in the form handed down by the Romans to later generations of European rulers—is the hypostasis of an absolute power conceived as “naturally” divine in origin. In contrast, the tamed falcon, at rest on the emperor's fist or being offered to him by his falconers, became for Frederick II the emblem of an *acquired* form of wisdom—of a nobility, that is, which must be educated so that its inborn

aggressiveness may be restrained and redeployed under the superior command of reason. The falconer thereby becomes the image of the ideal sovereign, he who succeeds in controlling the instinctual aggressiveness of humankind by way of his “taming power.” He is at one and the same time the self-aware and responsible repository of natural law and the guarantor of positive law, that is, of justice. The study and practice of falconry were therefore for Frederick II the best and noblest ways for the sovereign to deepen his understanding of the laws of the natural and of the human realm; to him they were indispensable tools in his honorably dispatching his mission as universal sovereign.

Frederick’s book of laws, the *Liber augustalis* (1231), states that universal peace and justice can only be achieved through reason. Reason is the instrument entrusted by Divine Providence to sovereigns for leading humanity back to the state of perfection it possessed before the Fall. In this view, reason and law play in the secular world a role parallel to that which Christ’s redemption performs at the eschatological level: accomplishing the *opus restaurationis* which allows humankind to reach back to its primeval, unspoiled *opus conditionis*. This political philosophy finds its most poignant symbol in the image of the falconer, who trains the noble bird of prey to subject itself willingly to the rule of reason so as to reach a higher degree of accomplishment than it would ever do in nature.

Regardless of what the emperor’s detractors claimed and in spite of the actions he undertook in the face of the challenges he met during the last years of his reign, there is no question that by identifying with the figure of the falconer, Frederick wished above all to stress the importance, for himself and humankind at large, of the principle of self-taming, that is, self-education, which, at least as he conceived it, was implicit in the very act of ruling as a universal monarch.

Although I can adduce no textual proof (no “direct source,” in Corti’s terms) in support of this observation, I do believe that Dante developed a keen awareness of Frederick’s understanding of imperial power as an act of taming. As we have seen, more than likely it was this very understanding that elicited Dante’s own interest in the symbolic potential of falconry shortly after his exile. That, however, is just the beginning, for—and this is what really matters—through such a process of in-depth assessment of the emperor’s worldview, Dante in turn undertook a radical critique of *that* notion of falconry as the epitome of the process of self-taming.

Despite the exemplary role he conferred to Frederick II as an earthly monarch, from the eschatological viewpoint Dante eventually condemns him to the depths of Hell, as foremost among those “che l’anima col corpo morta fanno” (*Inf.* 10.15). Not even allowing him, as the last among the universal sovereigns, a chance to state his own view regarding the eternity he seemingly disdained in life, Dante simply has Farinata evoke the emperor’s name, almost in passing, at the very end of his exchange with Dante (*Inf.* 10.118–20).³⁸

In this respect, it may be no coincidence if the *Commedia* introduces two revealing references to the transmutative worldview in locations numerologically correlated to Frederick’s infernal “nomination”; they obviously contrast with the emperor’s philosophical position and implicitly correct it. The first of these is to be found at the end of *Purgatorio* 10 (121–29), where Dante addresses those proud Christians who refused to believe in God’s transmutative powers and rebukes them by using the image of the butterfly I have already alluded to. The second occurs (*Par.* 10.125–26) in the three *terzine* that Dante dedicates to “l’anima santa che ’l mondo fallace / fa manifesto a chi di lei ben ode”—none other than Boethius of Dacia and the transmutative book he authored while languishing in the exile of his unjust imprisonment at the hands of a sovereign turned tyrant, just like Frederick II had been toward Pier della Vigna.

Dante’s condemnation of Frederick II to Hell was determined by what the poet considered to have been the emperor’s ultimate blindness to—and transgression of—the most sacred core of the art of falconry, namely, the transmutative taming of one’s instinctual pride as the only appropriate means of celebrating not the power of an absolute earthly monarch but rather “la gloria di colui che tutto move” (*Par.* 1.1). From this point of view, Dante’s understanding of falconry was strikingly similar to that of some of the greatest mystic poets of the medieval Islamic world.

Interdiscursivity: Mediterranean and Islamic Falconry Symbolism

To my knowledge, no text in Western medieval culture other than the *Commedia* turns the image of falconry into an overarching theme of symbolic import. The one exception is Frederick II’s *De arte venandi*, which, being a technical treatise, simply does not compare with Dante’s poetic and visionary endeavor. Nevertheless, it is only after becoming conversant with Frederick’s treatise that one can fully comprehend the importance

and the careful layout of falconry imagery in Dante's *Commedia*. This in turn makes one realize the logic behind the scarcity of philosophical elaboration about falconry in Western medieval literature: since the ideological postulates of this art have deep-seated Eastern (for our purposes, Islamic) roots, they were bound to seem foreign to Western culture—outside the Frederician area of influence, that is.

Dante's figurative use of falconry in the *Commedia* should therefore be understood as his own interpretation of the symbolic potential of this art—the result of an “interdiscursivity” where, as Corti rightly sees, there can be scant hope of identifying borrowings, direct or indirect, with any precision. And yet, would our appreciation of Dante's achievements not be enhanced if we could project them against the backdrop of a reality created out of a multitude of other voices, no matter how remote from Dante's own? Did our understanding of Frederick's “descant” to Dante's own song not produce a powerful form of hermeneutical counterpoint?

Here, I shall limit myself to discussing three Islamic authors of canonical rank, one or two generations older than Dante, whose achievements as first-rate poets are acknowledged in the West as well.

Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, a Sufi Persian poet active in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries (d. 1210–1230), stresses the importance of cleansing one's mind of its worldly components so as to direct it onto the path leading to the realm of the Lord—the mysterious and distant Simurgh. In his celebrated poem *Manteq al-ṭayr* (Conference of the Birds) this process of self-transformation applies in various ways to all species of birds; but when it comes to the falcon, it is the power of the transmutative arts of taming that ‘Aṭṭār evokes as a means of conversion. Such arts should in fact be understood as the earthly manifestation of the Supreme Lord's transcendental love:

Rare falcon, welcome! How long will you be
So fiercely jealous of your liberty?
Your lure is love, and when the jess is tied,
Submit, and be for ever satisfied.
Give up the intellect for love, and see
In one brief moment all eternity;
Break nature's frame, be resolute and brave,
Then rest at peace in Unity's black cave [i.e., the “seeling”].
Rejoice in that close, undisturbed dark air—
The Prophet will be your companion there.³⁹

Muhammad ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240), who lived in Moorish al-An-dalus, is perhaps best known among Dantists for having been signaled as one of Dante’s possible “sources”—although no direct connection has so far been traced back to any of his writings.⁴⁰ I will not allude here to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s various inner *mi‘rāj* and the interest they hold, as refined versions of the rougher *Liber scale Machometi*, with regard to the issue of the *Commedia*’s Islamic sources.⁴¹ Nor shall I dwell on the appeal that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (The Interpreter of Desires) presents in relation to Dante’s *Vita nuova*.⁴² I will focus only on a single passage in the last-mentioned book and on one specific falconry image that Ibn al-‘Arabī discusses in his own commentary to his poem. Dante visualizes that very image when Bonagiunta, in *Purgatorio* 24.55–60, voices to Dante the pilgrim his belated understanding of the knot which, in life, prevented him from following freely in the tracks of the *dittator*’s own soaring flight.⁴³

In the *Tarjumān* Ibn al-‘Arabī presents himself as a young lover-adept of divine beauty and wisdom. At one point in his crossing of the desert, he wishes to follow some enlightened travelers he has just chanced upon during his journey. However, he is prevented from doing so by these same beings, aware as they are of the fact that the poet-lover has not yet accomplished his earthly training. In his commentary Ibn al-‘Arabī evokes falconry images in order to elaborate on the predicament of the young poet-lover:

Son cœur prend, dès lors, son essor en voyageant derrière eux, comme le faucon attaché par une patte sur son perchoir et qui prend son envol par désir de s’élancer dans l’immensité des couches atmosphériques; cette attache le retient près de son perchoir. Il en est de même du lien qui maintient l’aspect subtil de cet amant pour qu’il gère cet habitacle corporel, attache comparable au perchoir du faucon, et qui le retient tant que Dieu l’ordonne.⁴⁴

The best known and best loved among Sufi poets is undoubtedly Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, a Persian by birth who lived his adult life in Konya (Asia Minor) under Seljuk rule (1207–73) and whose mission may be described as the opening of poetry to the universal dimension of divine salvation for humankind. At a time and in a geographical context that no doubt lent themselves to either conflict or concord with neighboring religious traditions, Rūmī fervently chose the latter. Although resting firmly within the grounds of his own faith, he grasped and manifested in his spiritual teachings that higher, universal unity of the divine, which each established

religious tradition casts in its own mold.⁴⁵ He also stressed the necessity of a process of inward transformation for the disciples, as *the* way for them to attain their higher nature and, ultimately, merge into God's.

Falconry images loom large in Rūmī's poetry. One of his favorite topoi is the image of the falcon as already tamed, single-heartedly devoted to returning to his lord's hand:⁴⁶

I am thy falcon, I am thy falcon, when I hear thy drum, O my king and Shahen-sha, my feather and wing come back.⁴⁷

In his *Fih̄r mā fih̄* (Discourses) Rūmī discloses the very reason why we should consider the art of taming a bird of prey as an act of absolutely selfless, purely divine love:

When someone lays a trap and catches little birds to eat and sell, that is called cunning. But if a king lays a trap to capture an untutored and worthless hawk, having no knowledge of its own true nature, to train it to his own forearm so that it may become ennobled, that is not called cunning. Though to outward appearance it is cunning, yet it is known to be the very acme of caring and generosity, restoring the dead to life, converting the base stone into a ruby, and far more than that. If the hawk knew for what reason the king wanted to capture him, it would not require any bait. It would search for the trap with soul and heart, and would fly to the king's hand.⁴⁸

Had Dante been able to read this passage by Rūmī, he would have smiled approvingly.

Dante's *Purgatorio* and Falconry as a Transmutative Art

As I hope this last quotation from Rūmī makes clear, flying away from the safe yet constrained pond of the "fonte diretta" toward the open and no doubt challenging sea of the "interdiscursive" realm is a risk well worth taking. Such an approach allows us to sight what would otherwise remain inaccessible—literally invisible to a short-sighted mind's eye. That long-range vision is, I submit, nothing less than the very grounding of Dante's poetic enterprise; it is the hallmark of the *Commedia*'s stance in the intermediate, visionary realm of the "imaginal"⁴⁹—a realm Christian Moevs has recently explored in his study of the poem's "metaphysics": "the awakening of the ultimate ontological principle to itself in us, which

is revelation, or, in Christian terms, to know or receive Christ.”⁵⁰ If the objective of the *Commedia* is to save humankind from itself and principally from its self-imposed rapaciousness,⁵¹ then we can usefully ask ourselves which figurative means Dante could call upon to evoke a process of taming and conversion that by its very nature aims at transmuting the individual’s instinctive ego-grasping into an artfully acquired—but nevertheless also grace-fully received—form of absolute surrender and self-sacrifice to the highest manifestation of selflessness and boundless love. How are we to visualize the very nature of a learning process that must be experiential if it is to become effective? Such is, after all, the goal of the *Commedia* as a whole—in direct opposition, that is, to the treacherous attempts at rational grappling with reality, which leave human pride misleadingly in charge of transcendent affairs. While in our postmodern world of concept-based existence there seems to be little or nothing to call upon in order to suggest such a salvific becoming, I hope to have shown persuasively that Dante saw in falconry the art most apt to express that process of surrender and taming of an individual’s own nature, in the form of a *return* to that very “hand” on whose universal fist the whole world is unknowingly perched.

For Dante, no art better than falconry could convey the sense of that sacrificial inner transmutation necessary for human consciousness to awaken to the vision of itself as a pure reflection of the transcendental source of all-encompassing love. No other art could as powerfully express the potential for universal salvation inscribed within a process meant to make human consciousness cognizant of its own divine origin—of its own participation in, and belonging to the very substance offered by the falconer to the falcon as its only rightful meal, as that “bread of angels” already evoked in the *Convivio*: purely celestial food, on which life itself unsuspectingly keeps feeding.

My principal aim so far has been to substantiate my contention that the art of falconry, along with its powerful symbolic potential, was a practice shared among Mediterranean cultures at the time. In this perspective, Dante’s choice of falconry stands out as a central metaphorical component of his pilgrim’s journey of conversion. Falconry is called upon to enact visually the universal potential that Dante, as poet and prophet, intended to ascribe to his transmutative poem.

But there is more. If in Dante’s *Purgatorio* falconry techniques as images of inner growth apply to Dante the pilgrim, they do so just as fittingly for

the souls undergoing penance. I have already discussed in some detail the case of the envious to be trained, through the seeling of their eyelids, for the hand of God. And we should equally bear in mind that the souls of the blessed—whose taming process is obviously completed—respond to Dante's question about God's justice with an eagerness comparable only to the proud countenance of a falcon suddenly freed from its hood: "Quasi falcone ch' esce del cappello, / move la testa e con l' ali si plaude, / voglia mostrando e faccendosi bello" (*Par.* 19.34–36). These very souls, who appear to Dante in the form of a celestial eagle, declare themselves blind to the depths of God's vision and ignorant of the unfathomable workings of predestination (*Par.* 20.134–38). No reader fails to see that the eagle's very eye is made of souls that lived on earth both before and after the advent of Christ; and yet very few seem ever to notice the dramatic irony contained in that eye's—those blessed souls'—ultimate blindness.

The warning is therefore unambiguous: humans must learn to suspend all judgment with regard to God's justice. It is unthinkable for those on earth to scrutinize the unfolding of events "dentro al consiglio divino" (*Par.* 13.141) when even blessed souls in Heaven are in a state comparable to that of a hooded falcon—who rejoices in the service of the only falconer-sovereign the universe knows, and to whose transcendence it willingly surrenders its very power of sight. This is to say that a human being aware of his own finitude would in no circumstance dare usurp the role of falconer. This insight into the ultimate nature of finite existence thus becomes Dante's answer to Frederick II's ill-advised wish to mould the human being (and the sovereign in particular) into the figure of the falconer: of the tamer, that is, rather than the one to be tamed.

At this point, we are left with one major unanswered question. What does Dante mean when he states (or rather indicates figuratively) that the very essence of Purgatory is a disciplinary process whose *transformative* outcome allows the souls to move from one terrace to the next, so that they may reach the top of the mountain and eventually Paradise?⁵² How does the cleansing process, as Dante envisions it, relate to the issue of past, present, and future salvation? The difficulty clearly lies in the fact that the penitents encountered by the pilgrim are *already* saved, while for him and his readers such a happy outcome is still in the balance.

Unlike the principles traditionally predicated upon the mutually exclusive realms of Hell and Heaven, the theological grounds on which the

Catholic institution of Purgatory rests are, to this day, difficult to define. More than one commentator has noticed—however elusively—the extent to which Dante’s deeply cathartic view of Purgatory is at variance with a merely punitive one. A first example that can be adduced is to be found in the introduction to Robert M. Durling’s and Ronald R. Martinez’s recent edition of *Purgatorio*, where the authors highlight the unexpected presence of the process of moral discipline as the basis for the penitents’ catharsis. Such an approach, they argue, is clearly at odds with Catholic orthodoxy. They argue that Dante’s comparing the process of moral discipline to the training of falcons or of horses

constitute[s] a transferring of the idea of moral discipline in this life to the next. . . . The traditional Catholic conception of Purgatory, however, is quite different. In it, although when one’s sins are forgiven the eternal punishment for sin—damnation—has been forgiven [*i.e.*, *revoked*], one is still subject to temporal punishment. . . . In the traditional Catholic view, then, Purgatory is the place where satisfaction, begun in this life, is completed. There is not a trace, in Aquinas’ (or pseudo-Aquinas’) elaborate discussion of Purgatory, of Dante’s idea of Purgatory as a place of moral discipline; for the author of *ST Supplementum* it is exclusively a place of punishment, and the only punishment envisaged . . . is fire. Dante repeatedly draws on the traditional punitive conception of Purgatory (for instance, in *Purg.* 11.53), but his emphasis is radically different from the traditional one, according to which the idea of moral discipline [and hence free will] is inapplicable to the afterlife.⁵³

Although Durling and Martinez do not elaborate further on the implications of Dante’s emphasis on moral discipline as a basis for penance, they do highlight the connection that Dante establishes between it and such procedures as the “training of falcons.”⁵⁴ And even though they fail to place their reference to “training” in the highly sophisticated context of the medieval “arts of taming,” they realize that Dante’s understanding of the process of penance as one of moral discipline implies that free will is still at work in the souls dwelling in the intermediate realm. This is all the more so in relation to the parallelism that Dante draws between the souls’ “taming” and that process of conversion which is the focus of the pilgrim’s inner experience during his ascent of the mountain—a process supervised by Vergil with loving care.⁵⁵

Furthermore, Peter Armour’s *The Door of Purgatory* radically questions the soundness of the established scholarly interpretation of *Purgatorio* 9, whose episode of the door of Purgatory is typically understood as an

allegory of the sacrament of penance. By removing that construct and exposing the inconsistency of the sacramental reading of that episode, Armour was able to reveal Dante's wholly positive, and hence radically innovative, view of Purgatory as a *redemptive* intermediate realm. In so doing, Armour also inevitably came to confront the issue of the souls' involvement in the process of their inner transformation:

Traditionally, Purgatory was a negative place of punishment or testing by fire, the fires of Hell and Purgatory being contiguous. Dante wished not only to separate Hell and Purgatory very clearly, to contrast them, to introduce a variety of penances, to add extra theological, moral, and liturgical elements, but also, ultimately, to present Purgatory as positive and redemptive. Thus, when the actual discourse on the theology of Dante's Purgatory occurs in canto xvii, he employs a different technique, and there the theology is Dante's major contribution to the whole *cantica*—the crucial, positive, and all-pervading definition of love as the principle of action in man. Through Purgatory, the soul's rational or elective love and natural love are made absolutely identical and co-extensive, *so that the soul regains complete liberty of choice which is also the innate natural love of the Supreme Good*, the cause of the soul's existence (*causa efficiens*) and the goal of its return (*causa finalis*) (cf. *Purg.* 16.85–90). This doctrine is conveyed clearly in disquisitions from Marco Lombardo and Vergil on the relationship between corruption and free will, between natural and elective love, and between the three types of wrong love and the true love of God.⁵⁶

A third and last quotation is in order. Faced with the challenge of summarizing the essence of Purgatory in just a couple of sentences for the benefit of the widest possible public, Robin Kirkpatrick completely bypasses the dualism cleansing versus coercion and brilliantly takes the reader into the structural “beyond” that buttresses the entire canticle:

The theme of the *Purgatorio* is freedom. . . . But how is Dante to reconcile his sense of the *potentialities* of human nature—a sense which increases throughout the *Purgatorio*—with his understanding—which also increases here—of the demands of Divine Law? . . . Slowly, Dante recognizes that the disciplines of purgation are not restrictions but the means by which the individual places himself in relation to other beings—both divine and human. Law *becomes* Love: and freedom finally is seen to reside in that interdependence of all beings which is fully enjoyed in Paradise.⁵⁷

If, as logic suggests, the transmutation of law into love amounts to sameness becoming perfected (or being now perceived from a perfected mind), what does this tell us about Dante the wayfarer and the souls that must

ascend the purgatorial mountain in order to perfect their salvation? How does this process of becoming affect their nature, their mind, their will as saved but penitent souls; and how does it affect our nature, our mind, our will as human beings on the path to salvation?

It may be that we ought to pay closer attention to the existential and experiential implications of the transmutative way to salvation explored and opened by Dante in his poem. As Christian Moevs rightly argues, “In the *Comedy* salvation is a self-awakening of the Real to itself in us, the surrender or sacrifice of what we take ourselves and the world to be, a changed experience that is one with a moral transformation. . . . The *Comedy*’s aim is self-knowledge, the self-experience of what is.”⁵⁸

That shift in vision has to happen through a process of taming that entails “death to the world” through the willing acceptance of a forced blindness (a temporary seeling of one’s inner eye) as the necessary preliminary to the awakening of a new insight into the ultimate nature of Reality. While the souls of Hell individually and collectively refuse to submit to that temporary blindness, thus falling into the definitive blindness of their own blinding worldview, Dante seems to indicate that once a soul accepts becoming temporarily blinded as part of the divine design, he or she can begin truly partaking in the eternal vision of self-awakening of the divine Real to itself.

To enter the dimension of salvation thus means to open the doors of one’s mind to the imaginal. As, regardless of their religious affiliation, all medieval visionaries knew, this is the only path to self-awakening, that is to say, a process of transmutation (and therefore of transcendental becoming) as inner taming at the hands of the Divine.

While the souls of the damned have condemned themselves to a quest for the summum bonum in an earthly, immanent perspective, the saved souls long for the eternal source of happiness. What they all have in common, regardless of their temporary separation from the First Cause, is the recognition of their transcendent belonging and hence of their inherent becoming: in Thomistic terms, they are aware—however dimly—of their *participatory* nature to the Divine. Without a doubt, that awareness stemmed from a free response of their earthly will to the call of divine grace. But that awareness—that repentance which is a turning-around of the soul—merely marks the initial step in a process of conversion whose purpose is the actualization of the participatory nature of the soul in the form of a journey of return—of ascent—to the First Cause.

Strange though it may seem, the very essence of that journey to freedom-as-love consists, as Armour puts it, in a reunion of the “amor d’animo” with the “amor naturale,” or even more precisely perhaps, in a surrender of the former to the latter. This means that “amor d’animo” (our reasoning mind, the seat of our free will) has to bend to “amor naturale,” that other mind, which knows nothing but its participatory nature to the Divine, and desires nothing but its return to that First Cause. In essence, then, this is the purpose of Purgatory as Dante understands it: a taming of the wild(ly) reasoning mind so that it may (un)knowingly find its way back to the loving freedom of “amor naturale.”

Indeed, at the very moment when Dante ascends from the earthly Paradise to the sphere of the moon by simply gazing into Beatrice’s eyes fixed in the sun, “pur come pelegrin che tornar vuole” (*Par.* 1.51), she explains to him the obvious, wholly natural logic of that apparently unnatural return. This is the return of the human soul to the state of perfect(ed) freedom in love which binds together “tutte nature, per diverse sorti” (*Par.* 1.110). Simply by virtue of being alive, all natures partake of the self-realizing nature of ultimate Reality. In this perspective, the “freedom” of falling out of cosmic harmony, of not responding to the call, of *not returning*, amounts to perversion; it is a rupture of the natural bond between God and the whole created universe that is but a fall of the will into the unresponsiveness⁵⁹ of matter.

The ultimate goal of this transmutation lies in what, according to Beatrice, is *the* founding paradox of free will: the moment it fulfills itself as such, human free will ceases to stray from divine will and becomes one with it. By this metamorphic process the fallible “amore . . . d’animo” (*Purg.* 17.92–93) can be subsumed into the ever infallible natural love, “sempre sanza errore” (94).

It is not by accident that the necessity of this convergence is revealed by Vergil in the canto at the center of Dante’s poem about love being the transmutative force that binds together in amorous longing the universe as a whole. And it is certainly no coincidence if, soon after being taught the lesson of “amore d’animo” and “amor naturale,” in facing the choice between answering his master’s call or heeding the seductive phantoms engendered by his own mind, Dante the pilgrim responds as a tamed falcon would, eager to receive his food from the hand of the Lord:

Quale il falcon, che prima a’ piè si mira,
indi si volge al grido e si protende

per lo disio del pasto che là il tira;
tal mi fec'io; e tal, quanto si fende
la roccia per dar via a chi va suso,
n'andai infin dove 'l cerchiar si prende.
(*Purg.* 19.64–69)

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NOTES

1. All references in this paragraph are to *Purg.* 10.106–11.
2. The reference is of course to *Par.* 10.22–24, although there Dante does not dwell on any sufferings to come, musing instead over “ciò che si preliba.”
3. Another instance of metamorphosis *in bono*, and thus especially relevant to the present discourse, is the one Dante evokes for himself by means of a reference to the Ovidian Glaucus at the moment of his “trasumanar” (*Par.* 1.67–72). Needless to say, Dante is also a master in showing us how humans excel in the art of metamorphosis *in malo*, the very perversion of the principle of becoming. On this subject, though, Dante seems to imply that, in order to achieve such destructive feats, humans need no teachers or guides other than their own misguided will. In this essay I shall not consider the negative/destructive aspect of metamorphosis; I focus, rather, on its positive, redemptive potential.
4. At least within Western culture, and as far as we know today. I will not provide a list of references here, as the topic is of a general nature and has been widely discussed. The basic reference is Jacques Le Goff, *La naissance du purgatoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), but I will make some more specific comments on the issue of how Dante's invention has been and continues to be understood. The greatest paradox is quite possibly the fact that the Catholic Church has to a large extent espoused a vision of Purgatory derived from Dante's, albeit *purged* (*figura etymologica* by all means intended) of precisely those implications that, as we shall see, are of paramount importance to Dante's distinctive poetics of transmutation.
5. My inclusion of the Islamic world within the sphere of Western cultures may seem odd to today's readers, but, as has been discussed in the introduction to this volume, it certainly was not to a medieval mind. Not only was Islam part of the Mediterranean world at large, as Dante himself shows in the *Commedia*, but Islam was then typically understood as no less—but also no more—than a wicked deviation from a shared religious origin. In the same perspective, we find the souls of some of the most accomplished Islamic figures in Limbo—on a par, that is, with the Latin and Greek heathens.
6. A number of classic studies deal with the origins and developments of these Mediterranean narratives of otherworldly travels. Among the most authoritative is I. P. Culianu, who points out that “le tradizioni arabe relative al ‘viaggio notturno’ e all’‘ascensione celeste’ del profeta Muhammad sono direttamente derivate dall’apocalittica ebraica” (*Psychanodia* [Leiden: Brill, 1983], quoted in Carlo Saccone, *Il libro della scala di Maometto* [Milan: SE, 1997], 182).
7. If it is doubtful whether “a description of the world beyond is [per se] an act of heresy” (Frederick Goldin, as quoted by Mark J. Mirsky, *Dante, Eros, Kabbalah* [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003], 201); it seems, however, likely that Dante's decision to write a poem based on his personal vision of the beyond was at the very least veering on the unorthodox. Hence the need either to condemn it or, conversely, redeem it by declaring it a poetic fiction, as did most of the early commentators, from Pietro Alighieri to Boccaccio. Ever since, the latter has been the most

elegant (and escapist) solution to the problem. See Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4, 10.

8. We owe one of the best syntheses of this thorny issue to Saccone, *Il libro della scala di Maometto*. For an earlier guide to it, see, in this volume, Vicente Cantarino, "Dante and Islam: History and Analysis of a Controversy," 37–55. In summarizing Cerulli's multiple annotations, Saccone rightly points to the most valuable contribution that book made to the field—the *one* contribution that scholars typically set aside in discussing Dante's supposed "borrowings" from Muhammad's journey: the fact that "vari testi contenenti riassunti più o meno ampi della leggenda. . . testimoniavano la più ampia diffusione in Italia e in Europa di notizie riguardanti il *mi' rāj* maomettano" (167).

Even in her most recent review of the issue, Maria Corti limits her references to the *Liber scale*. See "Dante e la cultura islamica," in "*Per correr miglior acque . . .*": *Bilanci e prospettive degli studi danteschi alle soglie del nuovo millennio*, ed. L. Battaglia Ricci et al. (Rome: Salerno, 2001), 1:183–202, translated in this volume as "Dante and Islamic Culture," 55–73. See also the recent French edition of this text, *Le livre de l'échelle de Mahomet. Liber Scale Machometi*, trans. G. Besson et M. Brossard-Dandré, préface R. Arnaldez (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1991); and Giorgio Battistoni, "Dante, l'Islam e altre considerazioni," *Labyrinthos* 11 (1987): 26–49.

9. *Epistola* 13.11, par. 15–16: ". . . omnia subtili investigatione, dicendum est breviter quod finis totius et partis est removere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis. Genus vero philosophie sub quo hic in toto et in parte proceditur, est morale negotium, sive ethica; quia non ad speculandum, sed ad opus inventum est totum et pars" (Dante Alighieri, *Opere minori* 2 [Milan: Ricciardi, 1979], 624). "Leaving aside any minute examination of this question, it may be stated briefly that the aim of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness. The branch of philosophy to which the work is subject, in the whole as in the part, is that of morals or ethics; inasmuch as the whole as well as the part was conceived, not for speculation, but with a practical object" (*Dantis Alagherii epistolae: The Letters of Dante*, ed. P. Toynbee [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920], 202).

10. Compare Peter Armour, *The Door of Purgatory: A Study of Multiple Symbolism in Dante's Purgatorio* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 137 quoted in extenso below, p. 174.

11. As we shall see, this is of course where the heart of the issue lies. Francis Fergusson set it in a classical framework: "The classical conception of the learning process may be put in the formula *poiema, pathema, mathema*; making, suffering, knowledge. . . . The rhythm of Purgatory is tragic in this sense; in many analogous figures, wisdom is acquired through effort and suffering" (*Dante's Drama of the Mind. A Modern Reading of the "Purgatorio"* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953], 56–57). Others, however, take a rather different interpretive stand. See, for example, Adriano Lanza: "Le tappe del viaggio che viene narrato corrispondono agli stadi attraverso i quali si opera la trasformazione del protagonista, il quale si viene spogliando della caligine corporea e si trasforma in essere di luce," *Dante all'inferno* (Rome: Tre Editori, 1999), 19. One of the most obvious textual references is *Purg.* 13.1–3 ("Noi eravamo al sommo de la scala / dove secondamente si risega / lo monte che salendo altrui *dismala*" [emphasis added]), which in and of itself is both clear and vague enough to warrant widely different readings of the purging process enacted on the slopes of the mountain.

12. *Purg.* 4.25–30, 4.88–96, 27.121–25. Of course, Dante is the one who faces the challenge, allegedly because of his body, and of course the intervention of Saint Lucy will prove decisive (the climb can be considered ineffectual because her intervention is required for Dante and Vergil to move from Antepurgatory to Purgatory proper)—but even so, Dante will have to ascend the mountain in its entirety so as to free himself of all of the seven *p*'s marked on his forehead, in order to experience the lightness he acquires by virtue of his purgative ascent.

13. And certainly not the kind of fraudulent art by which Ulysses had imagined he could deceive God as he had his shipmates—the art, that is of "making wings of our oars" (or *tuning our wings into oars* if we want to accentuate the metamorphic implications of the Italian "*de' remi facemmo ali*"), for a *volo* that from the depths of Hell the Homeric hero finally acknowledges as intrinsically "*folle*," hence bound to failure and ultimate death (*Inf.* 26.125).

14. "Set free from its hood," in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 169.

15. For a more detailed analysis of this and other falconry references in Dante's writings, and more in general on the subject at hand, see "La falconeria nell'opera di Dante" in Daniela Boccassini, *Il volo della mente: Falconeria e sofia nel mondo mediterraneo: Islam, Federico II, Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 2003), 335–88.

16. In *Il volo della mente* I have shown how images of falconry are present in the *Inferno*—the most glaring cases being Ulysses' and Ugolino's—to designate precisely those procedures which might have led the souls to salvation but were refused by them (*ibid.*, 359–61). Yet at the very outset of the poem the souls of the damned respond with desire to the call of Charon: a fearful proof of the laws that govern the universe and impose upon the souls the exacting urge to respond to their karmic stance even against their own inclination (*ibid.*, 353–55).

17. See Maria Corti, "Dante and Islamic Culture," in this volume, 57–75.

18. I quote from Corti, "Dante e la cultura islamica," 184: "Dante and Islamic Culture," in this volume, 58 (emphasis added). An earlier version of the same article was published as "La *Commedia* di Dante e l'oltretomba islamico," *Belfagor* 50 (1995): 301–14.

19. To my knowledge, Roberto Mercuri is the only scholar aside from myself who has established a connection between the emergence of falconry imagery in Dante's poetry and his exile. See "Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio," in *Letteratura italiana: Storia e geografia*, vol. 1, *L'età medievale*, ed. Alberto Asor Rosa (Turin: Einaudi, 1987): 238–39. For a more detailed reading of these *canzoni dell'esilio* from the perspective of falconry, see Boccassini, *Il volo della mente*, 341–47.

20. The *canzoni dell'esilio* cannot be dated any more closely than between mid-1303 to mid- or late 1304. Mercuri, for example, argues that "è probabile che la canzone ['Doglia mi reca'] sia composta nel 1304 quando Dante si trova nella provincia di Arezzo, subito dopo il soggiorno a Forlì presso Scarpetta Ordellaffi e la missione a Verona e il conseguente soggiorno presso Bartolomeo della Scala (forse come ambasciatore dei Bianchi presso gli Scaligeri), soggiorno databile dalla metà del 1303 alla fine del marzo 1304." "Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio," 238–39. In contrast, Stephen Bemerose states that "it is highly probable that Dante's literary output increased markedly in Verona. . . . Certainly two very important post-exilic *canzoni* can be dated to the years 1302–04, and may well have been written in Verona" (*A New Life of Dante* [Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000], 67).

21. However, even this "ideological" distinction no longer seems to hold by the mid-1300s, if we are to judge from Lorenzetti's fresco of the "Good Government" made for the staunchly Guelph city of Siena.

22. Giorgio Petrocchi, *Vita di Dante* (Bari: Laterza, 1993), 96–97.

23. Compare Baudouin van den Abeele's authoritative opinion on this matter: "D'après le *De arte venandi*, on passe une aiguille pourvue d'un fil à travers la paupière [*scil. inférieure*], en ayant soin de procéder de l'intérieur vers l'extérieur, et l'on mène le fil au-dessus de la tête, pour faire la même chose de l'autre côté; en tirant ensuite délicatement le fil, les deux paupières se lèvent, et le fil est alors noué au-dessus de la tête." This procedure, minutely described by Frederick II, is absent from all other Western treatises. Hence, Van den Abeele argues, this must be "une technique qui a sans doute été importée d'Orient. Le cillage était effectivement d'un usage courant chez les Arabes, ce qui est encore le cas. La seule autre allusion dans un texte latin figure par ailleurs dans le *Moamin*" (*La fauconnerie au moyen âge: Connaissance, affaitage et médecine des oiseaux de chasse d'après les traités latins* [Paris: Klincksieck, 1994], 126–27).

24. For other techniques on whose Arabic (or Persian) origins the emperor is more explicit in his treatise, most notably the hood (*capellum*, to which Dante once again makes specific reference in *Par.* 19.34), see Boccassini, *Il volo della mente*, 206–7.

25. We do know that Frederick II's autograph copy of the *De arte venandi* was stolen from his encampment during the siege of the city of Parma (1248), while the emperor was out in the countryside hunting with birds (*ibid.*, 104 n. 56). Years later, a Milanese merchant approached Charles of Anjou offering him a manuscript that may have been a copy of Frederick's autograph (*ibid.*, 113 n. 88). As for the other few extant copies of the treatise, none of them can be traced to any of the

Ghibelline courts of northern Italy (ibid., 107–10), despite the fact that Frederick II's illegitimate daughter, Selvaggia, for example, was married to Ezzelino da Romano in 1236.

26. The registers of Frederick's correspondence report that in the years 1239–40 there were more than fifty falconers at his court (ibid., 104). The emperor also took in young children of noble families, so as to educate them to future administrative tasks by teaching them the art of falconry in the first place (ibid., 113–14 and n. 91).

27. I use here the term Islamic to indicate the Persian cultural tradition, the Arabic tradition, and their later synthesis.

28. Both Bartolomeo and Cangrande's wives were Frederick's grandchildren. On the Della Scala brothers, their court, and leadership see Gian Lorenzo Mellini, "Verona, la Corte sveva, l'Oriente e le origini del Gotico," *Labyrinthos* 9 (1986): 3–49; and *Gli Scaligeri, 1277–1387: Saggi e schede raccolti in occasione della mostra storico-documentaria*, ed. G. M. Varanini (Verona: Museo di Castelvecchio, 1988).

29. We owe the most recent investigations on the controversial issue of Immanuel Romano in relation to Dante to Giorgio Battistoni, "Tramiti ebraici e fonti medievali accessibili a Dante, 3: Dante nel *Paradiso* di Manoello Giudeo," *Labyrinthos* 18 (1999): 41–80; and Battistoni, *Dante e la cultura ebraica* (Florence: Giuntina, 2003).

30. Here and below I quote from Vincenzo De Bartholomaeis, *Rime giuillesche e popolari d'Italia* (Bologna: Forni, 1977).

31. Various references to Cangrande's palace as organized to shelter those persecuted by Fortuna can be found in *Gli Scaligeri, 1277–1387*. We should not forget that Cangrande himself had been condemned as heretic by the papacy. See Battistoni, *Dante e la cultura ebraica*, 132 n. 55: "In uno scritto papale del giugno 1320 si legge: 'Ut Canem de Lascala, qui . . . de pravitate hereticae labe nec indigne suspectus habetur,' *Vatikanische Akten*, n.199, p. 107." From this point of view, Dante's choice of Cangrande as patron, and Cangrande's status among the blessed announced in the poem before his death, are issues loaded with ideological and political implications that Dantisti often seem—or prefer—to ignore.

32. It may be useful to quote *in extenso* Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio's insightful comments in their introduction to *Paradiso* 17: "I Della Scala furono sempre favorevoli a Ezzelino da Romano; alla morte di lui (1259) ne raccolse l'eredità Mastino, fondatore della fortuna della famiglia, continuandone la politica filo-imperiale; dal canto suo Cangrande fu fedele a Enrico VII sino alla morte di questo e oltre, unico, tra i signori d'Italia, a tener fede alla sua idealità imperiale al disopra dei partiti, dei particolarismi comunali e familiari (Manselli). Sono le idealità stesse di Dante, quali saranno da lì a poco ribadite e fissate nella *Monarchia*. Dato che Cangrande era il capo del ghibellinismo italiano, e che l'accusa fatta dalla Chiesa e dai Neri a Dante esule era appunto di ghibellinismo, la lode a Cangrande qui, e indirettamente nel canto IX, e la dedica del *Paradiso* sono ulteriore testimonianza del coraggio di Dante: mentre era sempre vivissimo in lui il desiderio di tornare a Firenze, e lo confermerà in uno degli ultimi canti del *Paradiso* (XXV 1–9), con questa devozione a Cangrande non esitava a tagliarsi la strada del ritorno. Ha pienamente ragione il Sansone: ben oltre che un semplice atto di grazie, l'esaltazione delle future imprese di Cangrande è 'l'atto stesso di fede di Dante nella salvezza dell'Italia, dell'Impero, del genere umano'. Ancora una volta, insomma, le considerazioni private, i personali sentimenti s'inverano nelle grandi concezioni politico-religiose" (Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Umberto Bosco e Giovanni Reggio, 3 vols. [Florence: Le Monnier, 1979], 3:280).

33. Although the Solomonic theme may be found among Guelph rulers as well, Dante's openly pro-imperial political position obviously colors his homage to Cangrande with that imperial, Frederickian and Ghibelline hue. For further contextualization of this issue, see Boccassini, *Il volo della mente*, 427–40; and Battistoni, "Dante, l'Islam e altre considerazioni," 45.

34. For further details on this subject see Boccassini, *Il volo della mente*, 56–80.

35. On these Islamic treatises, their translation at Frederick's court, and their circulation in the West, see ibid., 96–119, with further bibliographical references.

36. Ibid., 206–7 and *passim*.

37. On the importance of falconry in Frederick II's understanding of the art of ruling, see *ibid.*, 181–220.

38. Frederick II's condemnation (which, for lack of an actual encounter, effectively amounts to silencing the emperor's very voice) appears all the more harsh when we consider that Frederick's son Manfred will tell Dante the story of his providentially guided last-minute repentance (*Purg.* 3.118–20) and that Piccarda Donati will name Frederick's mother Costanza among the blessed souls in the sphere of the Moon (*Par.* 3.118–20). A few cantos later, Dante gives Pier della Vigna a chance to spell out the earthly view of the imperial power promoted by the emperor. The limitations of that secular worldview will be the cause for the death by suicide—and, most importantly, for the lack of faith in a transcendental horizon—on the part of the emperor's most faithful secretary (*Inf.* 13.58–72). This kind of distortion in the understanding of one's own process of self-taming is critiqued by Dante's alternative soteriological reading throughout *Purgatorio*.

39. Remarkably, 'Aṭṭār dwells in particular on the importance of the seeling phase. *The Conference of the Birds*, ll. 636–45, trans. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (Penguin Books, 1984), 29–30, with the following note for the cave: "A reference to the Companion of the Cave. During a period of danger the Prophet Muhammad and a close companion, Abou Bakr, hid for a while in a cave on Mount Thaur. In mystical poetry this episode became a symbol of withdrawal from the world." For a more extensive analysis of 'Aṭṭār's use of falconry in his poetry, see Boccassini, *Il volo della mente*, 290–300.

40. See <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/index.html> (last accessed on January 24, 2009) for a brief introduction to Ibn al-'Arabī, sizable selections from his writings, and a large sample of critical studies on his works.

41. See Miguel Asín Palacios, *Dante e l'Islam: L'escatologia islamica nella Divina Commedia* (Parma: Pratiche, 1997), esp. 389–410, as well as Saccone's comments in *Il libro della scala di Maometto and Storia tematica della letteratura persiana classica*, vol. 1, *Viaggi e visioni di re, sufi, profeti* (Milan: Luni, 1999). These topics are also covered in this volume in the essays by Cantarino and Corti.

42. See Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969); and my more ample remarks in Boccassini, *Il volo della mente*, 309–19 and 372.

43. For my discussion of this episode and further bibliographical references see *ibid.*, 372–74.

44. Ibn al-'Arabī, *L'interprete des desirs: Tarjuman al-ashwaq*, trans. M. Gloton (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), 377. On this passage and more in general on Ibn al-'Arabī's use of falconry imagery, see Boccassini, *Il volo della mente*, 309–19.

45. For example: "How many words the world contains! But all have one meaning. When you smash the jugs, the water is one," or "The window determines how much light enters the house, even if the moon's radiance fills the east and west," in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 8 and 10. It should be noted that this same perspective was cultivated by Ibn al-'Arabī, some of whose thoughts and images run parallel to these: "If the believer understood the meaning of the saying 'the color of the water is the color of the receptacle', he would admit the validity of all beliefs and he would recognize God in every form and in every object of faith" (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*). See Chittick's helpful remarks and further quotations in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 352–54.

46. The theme of the soul's return to its lost home is, of course, a Platonic and Neoplatonic one, which the writings of Avicenna had contributed to revive throughout the Mediterranean. But see one passage from the highly influential *Liber de causis* that thoroughly captures the essence of Rūmī's image of the returning falcon: "Omnis sciens qui scit essentiam suam est rediens ad essentiam suam reditione completa" (Every knowing being which knows its own essence returns to it by way of a complete return). Latin text cited from Pierre Magnard et al., *La demeure de l'être: Autour d'un anonyme: Étude et traduction du Liber de causis* (Paris: Vrin, 1990), 62–63, no. 124 (my translation).

47. *Dīwān* 1394/14785. For this quotation and a remarkable survey of the topic, with many more examples, see Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (London: Fine Books, 1978), 117–18. See also Boccassini, *Il volo della mente*, 303–9.

48. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Discourses of Rumi (or Fihi ma Fihi)*, based on the original translation of A. J. Arberry, ed. Doug Marman (Ames, Iowa: Omphaloskepsis, 2000), 47–49, <http://www.omphaloskepsis.com/collection/descriptions/discour.html> (last accessed on January 24, 2009).

49. As defined by Corbin in *Corpo spirituale e terra celeste: Dall'Iran mazdeo all'Iran sciita* (Milan: Adelphi, 1986), which was originally published in French, without introduction, as *Corps spirituel et terre céleste* (Paris: Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1979). In its role as *nexus* between the intellectual and the sensory worlds, the imaginal proves to be the realm most proper to the fulfillment of the human being's potential; as such it plays a crucial role in the development of a number of Islamic authors, Ibn al-'Arabi in particular. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, esp. 112–24.

50. Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy,"* 9.

51. As Dante makes clear in his letter to Cangrande. See note 9, above.

52. Dante does not tell us how the souls who have completed their process of penance access Paradise; there is no evidence that they need to enter earthly Paradise so as to be washed in the waters of Lethe and Eunoe, as Dante did (Statius simply helps with the ritual for the benefit of Dante, not of himself). Thanks to Statius's example and Dante's reference to his own case, it seems possible to infer that the souls must go through all terraces, although the length of their stay in each varies depending on each soul's actual predicament.

53. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. Robert M. Durling and Ronald R. Martinez, vol. 2, *Purgatorio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 10.

54. "The souls who arrive on the shores of the mountain have repented their sins and have been forgiven—and they are actually now incapable of sinning, their state of grace is permanent. But most of them are still suffering from the effects of sin. In classical terms, they have brought their vices with them, and these must be corrected before they can rise to beatitude. The process of moral discipline that they must undergo is conceived partly in Aristotelian terms and is repeatedly compared to the training of falcons (see 14.143–51) or of horses (see the terminology of "spurs" and "reins" for instance, in 13.37–42)—an analogy that goes back at least as far as Plato's myth of the chariot of the soul in the *Phaedrus*." Ibid., 9–10.

55. That process of taming culminates in Vergil's famous last words to his pupil, *Purg.* 27.139–42. On Vergil's role as falconer for the hand of God, see Boccassini, *Il volo della mente*, 361–77.

56. Peter Armour, *The Door of Purgatory*, 137 (emphasis added).

57. Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante: The Divine Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 78–79 (emphasis added).

58. Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy,"* 8 and 9. Moevs, however, does not address the issue of how this happens; he does not discuss the nature of the purgatorial process. If, as he states, 7, "to achieve salvation or eternal life" means "to know oneself not only as a thing in space-time, but also as one with the source of space-time. It is to awaken to oneself Christically as the *subject*, and not only the object, of experience, by voluntarily sacrificing the attachment to, or obsessive identification with, the finite," we are not told how this can be, literally, "achieved." This, I believe, is the focus of Dante's *Purgatorio* and of the transmutative process therein enacted.

59. This is the fitting word chosen by Mandelbaum, 9, to translate Dante's "la materia è sorda" (*Par.* 1.129).