

6 ‘Ponete mente almeno come io son bella’: Prose and Poetry, ‘pane’ and ‘vivanda’, Goodness and Beauty, in *Convivio* I

To understand Dante’s growth as a poet and the evolution of his poetics between his lyric youth and the massive achievement of the *Commedia*, one has to take a prosaic detour: that is, a detour through his prose,¹ or, rather, through three texts where prose becomes the vehicle for both expanding and reflecting upon the nature and function of Dante’s poetry. This is not a particularly astonishing observation, given the prominence that the *Vita nova* and *Convivio*, not to mention *De vulgari eloquentia*, of necessity assume in any account of the run-up to the ‘poema sacro’. In the two Italian works, the prose plays both narrative and exegetical roles – although those roles are dramatically reconfigured from work to work. More to my point here, it has an ‘apologetic’, that is, self-justificatory, function as well. In the *Vita nova* the latter function is largely confined to the chapter formerly known as 25, with explicit focus on the deceptive quality of the figurative language characteristic of poetry, with an implicit justification of the use

1 On the nature and importance of Dante’s prose, beginning with the *Vita nova*, see, notably, Domenico De Robertis, *Il libro della ‘Vita Nuova’* (Florence: Sansoni, 1972), 2nd edn enlarged, ch. 1, this chapter first published 1961; Aldo Vallone, *La prosa della ‘Vita nuova’* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1963); Francesco Tateo, “Aprire per prosa”. Le premesse critiche della poetica dantesca, in *Questioni di poetica dantesca* (Bari: Laterza, 1972), pp. 53–75. For the *Convivio* specifically, see De Robertis, ‘Il libro della *Vita Nuova* e il libro del *Convivio*’, *Studi urbinati di storia, filosofia e letteratura*, 25 (1951), 5–27; Cecil Grayson, ‘Dante e la prosa volgare’, in *Cinque saggi su Dante* (Bologna: Patron, 1972), pp. 32–60, this essay first published 1963; Vallone, *La prosa del ‘Convivio’* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1967).

of prose, namely, to reveal the authorial intentions behind poetic figures.² Implicit too is a relation of complementarity between poetry as the site of metaphorical substitutions and the literalizing explanatory power of prose.³

In the *Convivio* this apologetic function has taken on a far greater role. Now, instead of apologizing for his apparent mischaracterization of the nature of love as external force rather than as an internal subjective experience, Dante apologizes for confusion that certain of his poems have generated concerning the *object* of his affection: it is not an (other) woman, a *donna gentile*, but rather Wisdom personified as a woman, and, in fact, his love for Beatrice remains intact. In both cases the problem is one of figurative substitution in poetry then clarified by literalization in prose, although, in fact, here the clarification moves from the *libello*'s demystification of a personification replacing a human subject (Love for Dante-in-love) in the opposite direction (a female beloved for the abstract personification of Truth).⁴

This aspect of apology, anticipated briefly in book I, chapter i, is actually carried out primarily in the prose commentaries to *Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo cielo movete* and *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona* in books II and III respectively. Book I, rather, is largely dedicated to an apology in prose for (this) prose and for Dante's adoption of prose as primary vehicle of his philosophical teachings: its use of the first person singular; its occasional lapses into complex argumentation evidently too difficult for his supposed audience; and, of course, its having been written in the vernacular rather than in Latin, the usual language of prose commentary. Here, again, though in some but not all ways more explicitly than *Vita nova*, prose is at once

2 Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. pp. 193–201.

3 On Dante's use of metaphor in book I, see Zygmunt Barański, 'Il *Convivio* e la poesia: problemi di definizione', in *Contesti della 'Commedia': Lectura Dantis Fridericiana 2002–2003*, ed. by Francesco Tateo and Daniele Maria Pergorati (Bari: Palomar, 2004), pp. 9–64, and, especially, Laurence Hooper's important essay, 'Dante's *Convivio*, Book 1: Metaphor, Exile, *Epochè*', *MLN* 127 supplement (2012): S86–S104. Neither extends their analysis to consider the issue of figuration in the prose/poetry dialectic.

4 On Dante's 'two loves' generally, see Olivia Holmes, *Dante's Two Beloveds: Ethics and Erotics in the 'Divine Comedy'* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

contrasted with poetry but also posited as a necessary explanatory supplement to and double of that same poetry.

In what follows, then, I intend to trace the largely oblique and mostly unexamined process by which poetry and prose, Dante's poetry and Dante's prose, are placed in opposition to one another from the outset of the treatise and, at the same time, staged as complementary. What emerges, I believe, is a picture at once complicating and illuminating of Dante's evolving and surprisingly ambivalent attitude toward poetry in general and his own poetry in particular, at this stage in his career, especially as regards the newly defined epistemological and ethical aims that he hopes to realize through it.⁵

As I examine this unfolding process, particularly its dynamic enactment in book I, I will be operating on a series of methodological assumptions, the first and most important of which is that it is a mistake to assume a priori that Dante's representations of the prose/poetry dyad will be internally coherent, or at least resolve themselves into a stable and conclusive meaning. This teleological premise frequently guides and in some cases misleads the interpretation of Dante's texts, whether from the perspective of a traditional philology seeking to specify 'the' primary meaning of key words around and through which his thought is articulated, or from that of the 'history of ideas', pursuing the logically coherent concepts in whose service such words are deployed.⁶

- 5 I first elaborated this understanding of the prose/poetry dialectic in *Dante*, pp. 205–15. Rather late in the process of writing this essay, I discovered Zygmunt Barański's previously cited essay, 'Il *Convivio*,' with which my argument converges on a number of points. Like (and before) me, Barański insists on the point that the first book of the treatise is largely focused on the prose rather than the poetry, while still attempting to elevate the status of the latter. As will become apparent our methods and conclusions do diverge significantly, particularly as regards the anxieties and ambivalence I find in the prose/poetry dialectic.
- 6 Although his aims and methods are different, Andrea Mazzucchi's demonstration of the stylistic richness and multiplicity of *Convivio's* language, its effort simultaneously to address multiple rhetorical goals and its indebtedness to several generic discourses appears compatible with my claims concerning the competing discursive elements in the treatise. See Mazzucchi, *Tra 'Convivio' e 'Commedia': sondaggi di filologia e critica dantesca* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2004), chs 1–2, building on

Rather, I assert, it is important to recognize that Dante's text is driven by a 'rationalizing' impulse in a double sense: on the one hand, to produce a logical argument or arguments that demonstrate what the nature of the treatise is both as to form and to function; on the other hand, following the logic of a desire rather than of a demonstrable truth, to gloss over contradictions internal to those same arguments that might seem to undermine or subvert them. This procedure is largely intra-textual, and thus, while I acknowledge and make use of, to some extent, the biblical and other intertexts that have been evoked as determining the meaning of the *Convivio's* self-representation (notably, the 'pane de li angeli', [bread of angels]), my emphasis is on the ways in which those references, and the allusive baggage they bring with them, are subjected to and transformed by the double logic that guides the unfolding diachronic dynamic of Dante's text.

Finally, my own argument proceeds through an examination of the interrelated conceptual and figurative pairings: in the first place, prose/poetry, of course, and, then 'pane'/'vivanda' and 'bontade'/'bellezza'. Yet another key metaphorical pair that is deployed in this context is that of servant and master. That the explanatory, rationalizing prose from the outset makes extensive use of, and is thus deeply implicated in, the figuration that would seem to be proper to the poetry it seeks to elucidate is, in fact, one of the critical complicating factors to be considered.

The difficulty of the question to be confronted can be seen in the clearly contradictory deployment of the metaphors of bread and nourishment in the very first chapter, which, in glossing the title of the treatise, aims to give a general definition to the purpose of the work and, more specifically,

Vittorio Russo, 'Strutture innovative delle opera letterarie di Dante nella prospettiva dei generi letterari,' in *Il romanzo teologico. Sondaggi sulla 'Commedia' di Dante* (Naples: Liguori, 1984, this essay first published 1979), pp. 31–53. Others who have confronted the generic indeterminacy/multiplicity of the treatise are Marianne Shapiro, 'On the Role of Rhetoric in the *Convivio*,' *Romance Philology*, 40 (1986), 38–64, and, especially, Hooper, 'Dante's *Convivio*,' who, building on Barański, 'Il *Convivio*,' argues that Dante 'uses the versatile form of the commentary to syncretize diverse disciplines,' S87. One such modality – but not, I am certain, the only one – is satire: see Ambrogio Camozzi Pistoja, 'Il quarto trattato del *Convivio*, o della satira,' *Le tre corone*, 1 (2014), 27–53.

to preview the roles of both prose and poetry within that work.⁷ Initially 'pane' is used to figure the philosophical content currently available only to an intellectual elite fluent in 'grammatica', that is, Latin:

- 7 I will enter only marginally into the scholarly investigations that have elucidated the sources upon which Dante has drawn in elaborating his metaphors of bread and sustenance, confining myself to the problem of the intra-textual articulation of those figures. For these figures in general and for the specific categories of 'pane de li angeli' and 'pane orzato', see Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. David Ward (New York: Sheed & Ward, first published in French 1939), pp. 11–12; Carlo Curto, 'Pane orzato, luce nuova, sole nuovo nel *Convivio* di Dante', in *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, 118 (1941), 194–7; Bruno Nardi, "'Lo pane degli angeli'" (*Convivio I. i. 7*), in *Nel mondo di Dante* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1944), pp. 47–53, and 'La *vivanda* e il *pane* nel *Convivio* dantesco', in *Saggi e note di critica dantesca* (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1966, this note first published 1965), pp. 386–90; Gian Roberto Sarolli, *Prolegomena alla 'Divina Commedia'* (Florence: Olschki, 1971), esp. 35–8; Antonietta Buffano, 'Pane', in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, ed. by Umberto Bosco, 5 vols + appendix (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Dantesca, 1973), IV, 165; Attilio Mellone, 'Pane degli angeli', in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, IV, 266–7; Daniel J. Ransom, "'Panis Angelorum': A Palinode in the *Paradiso*", *Dante Studies*, 95 (1977), 81–94; William J. O'Brien, "'The Bread of Angels" in *Paradiso II*: A Liturgical Note", *Dante Studies*, 97 (1979), 97–106; Mary Alexandra Watt, 'Take this Bread: Dante's Eucharistic Banquet', *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 22 (2) (2001), 17–35; Maria Luisa Ardizzone, *Reading as the Angels Read: Speculation and Politics in Dante's 'Banquet'* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), esp. pp. 7–21; Hooper, 'Dante's *Convivio*'; Danielle Callegari, 'Dante's Nutritional Vernacular: Food, Hunger and Consumption from *Convivio* to *Commedia*', PhD diss., New York University, 2014, esp. pp. 59–76 (in her dissertation, Callegari supplies a wide ranging survey, with extensive bibliography, both of the metaphors of food and digestion in Dante and the later Middle Ages, but also the social context of food consumption in which it is embedded). Among earlier scholars, see also Robert M. Durling, 'Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell', in *Allegory and Representation. Selected Papers in the English Institute, 1979–1980*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 61–93; notable among recent scholars who have advanced our understanding of the intellectual context for the use of 'pane' as a figure of philosophical knowledge is Luca Bianchi, "'Noli comedere panem philosophorum inutiliter": Dante Alighieri and John of Jandun on Philosophical "Bread"', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 75 (2013), 335–55, who is careful to note that Dante invariably puts available figures of intellectual nutrition to new and different uses. Few of the above critics have tried

Oh beati quelli pochi che seggono a *quella mensa dove lo pane de li angeli si manuca!* e miseri quelli che con le pecore hanno comune cibo! (*Conv.*, I. i. 6–7; emphasis mine)⁸

[Blessed are the few who sit at the table where the bread of the angels is eaten, and most unfortunate those who share the food of sheep!]

In this initial figuration of philosophical teaching as a banquet, ‘pane de li angeli’ stands for an essential content, from which a vast majority of people, without access to Latin and/or time for serious study, are excluded.

The banquet metaphor is further elaborated, now to include Dante’s subordinate role in the acquisition and subsequent divulcation of philosophical knowledge, and, at first, we apparently remain within the terms of the initial figuration of the intellectual meal:

E io adunque, che non seggio a *la beata mensa* [where the ‘pane de li angeli’ is served] ma, fuggito de la *pastura del vulgo* [the food of sheep] a’ piedi di coloro che seggono ricolgo di quello che da loro cade, e conosco la misera vita di quelli che dietro m’ho lasciati, per la *dolcezza* ch’io sento in quello che a poco a poco ricolgo. (*Conv.*, I. i. 10; emphasis mine)

[Therefore I, who do not sit at the blessed table, but, having fled the pasture of the common herd, gather up a part of what falls to the feet of those who do sit there, and who know the unfortunate life of those I have left behind, for the sweetness that I taste in what I gather up piece by piece.]

to sort out in detail the relationship between the two primary kinds of ‘pane’, not to mention the various sub-categories (on which, see n. 14). One exception, which has had little echo in the intervening years, is Ransom ‘Panis Angelorum’, pp. 85–6; more recently, see Hooper, ‘*Il Convivio*’, esp. pp. 88–90.

- 8 Cited from Dante Alighieri, *Opere minori*, vol. 1, part 2, *Convivio*, ed. and comm. by Cesare Vasoli and Domenico De Robertis (Milan and Naples: Ricciardi, 1988). I have also consulted the edition of the *Società dantesca italiana*: Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, Vol. 2, *Testo*, ed. by Franca Brambilla Ageno (Florence: Le Lettere, 2015). Translations are taken from Richard Lansing, trans., *Dante’s ‘Il Convivio’ (The Banquet)* (New York and London: Garland, 1990); words in parentheses are my emendations.

As we then learn, not only had Dante provided for his own 'edification', albeit figured as a dog collecting scraps from beneath the table of the great,⁹ but he had also made provision for those who have no other access to taste of the 'bread of angels', the 'innumerabili [...]mpediti' '[those impeded [...] too numerous to count]' (*Conv.*, I. i. 6) who batten like sheep on 'bestiale pastura' (*Conv.*, I. i. 8), as he once did:¹⁰

misericordievolmente mosso, non me dimenticando, per li miseri alcuna cosa ho riservata, la quale a li occhi loro, già è più tempo, ho dimostrata; e in ciò li ho fatti maggiormente vogliosi.

- 9 On the likely biblical provenance of this image, specifically Matthew 15. 26–7, see Watt, 'Dante's Eucharistic Banquet', p. 23.
- 10 On the question of who Dante's intended readers were and how he constructs them and their interpretive practice, see Richard Lansing, 'Dante's Intended Audience in the *Convivio*', *Dante Studies*, 110 (1992) 17–24; Bianchi, 'Noli comedere panem'; Gianfranco Fioravanti, 'Il *Convivio* e il suo pubblico', *Le forme e la storia* n.s. 7 (2014), 13–21; Mirko Tavoni, *Qualche idea su Dante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), pp. 77–86; Franziska Meier, 'Educating the Reader: Dante's *Convivio*', *L'Alighieri*, 45 (2015), 21–33; Stanley Levers, 'From Revelation to Dilution in Dante's *Studio*', in *Dante Studies*, 134 (2016), 1–25. There are almost no studies on Dante's actual contemporary readers, for the simple reason that the text did not circulate widely, if at all, during his lifetime. On this, see Lino Pertile, 'Lettera aperta a Robert Hollander sui rapporti tra *Commedia* e *Convivio*', *EBDSA* (<<http://www.princeton.edu/~dante/ebdsa/>> accessed 2 February 2018), 8 October 1996, as well as Fioravanti, 'Il *Convivio*', p. 13. See also Luca Azzetta, 'La tradizione del *Convivio* negli antichi commenti alla *Commedia*: Andrea Lancia, l' "Ottimo Commento" e Pietro Alighieri', in *Rivista di studi danteschi*, 5 (1) (2005), 3–34, and 'Tra i più antichi lettori del *Convivio*: ser Alberto della Piagentina notaio e cultore di Dante', in *Rivista di studi danteschi*, 9 (1) (2009), 57–91. While it is important not to overlook Dante's interest in educating a growing vernacular middle class (see Imbach and Bianchi, among many others), or to be entering into a specific dialogue with the emperor and/or ruling political class (Lansing; Fioravanti; Tavoni), we cannot overlook the key point that *de facto*, Dante, obsessive exegete and reviser of his texts, was his own primary addressee here as in *De Vulgari*, and that in both works what is *finished* is what prepares him to take the next step down the road to genuine *auctoritas* (see Ascoli, *Dante*, pp. 219–22).

[moved by compassion, though not forgetting myself, I have set aside for those who are unfortunate something that I placed before their eyes some time ago, by which I have increased their desire.]

As we soon learn, the method of that demonstration, here given periphrastically in terms of a hoarding of crumbs from the ‘pane de li angeli’ he has collected (‘alcuna cosa ho riservata’), was the writing of philosophical *canzoni*, which were then circulated to a wider vernacular public.

However, even as the banquet metaphor is elaborated, things quickly become more complicated, not to say confusing. Suddenly, with a jarring shift in figurative referent, ‘pane’ clearly no longer refers to the ‘bread of angels,’ but rather to something different, and decidedly less exalted:

Per che ora volendo loro apparecchiare, intendo fare *un generale convivio* di ciò ch’i’ ho loro mostrato, e di *quello pane ch’è mestiere a così fatta vivanda*, senza lo quale da loro non potrebbe esser mangiata. (*Conv.*, I. i. 11; emphasis mine)

[Wishing now to set their table, I intend to present to all men a banquet of what I have shown them and of the bread which must necessarily accompany such (sustenance), without which it could not be consumed by them.]

Dante, just seen crawling beneath the table of the ‘beata mensa,’ is now himself preparing an apparently figuratively analogous, if derivative and subordinate, banquet, composed of ‘that which I have shown them’ (previously circulated materials, derived from the greater banquet, which will turn out to be his *canzoni*) and of that bread which is needed for such sustenance. Four paragraphs later there will be an explosion of references to this latter kind of ‘pane,’ culminating in the revelation that it stands for ‘la presente disposizione,’ that is the prose commentary. But for now the referent remains uncertain. As, in fact, does the meaning of ‘vivanda,’ which could either be the ‘crumbly’ content that Dante has collected or, a little more likely, the *canzoni* through which he first translated that content into the vernacular.

And the confusion only grows in the sentence that follows immediately after, a textual crux deriving from the notoriously defective manuscript tradition. What follows are the three principal reconstructions of

a hypothetical authorial original in versions offered by the work's most authoritative editors:

E questo [è quello] convivio, di quello pane degno, con tale vivanda qual io intendo indarno [non] essere ministrata. (*Conv.*, I. i. 11; following Busnelli-Vandelli; adopted by Vasoli)

[And this is that banquet, worth of that bread (or, of that worthy bread), with such sustenance which I intend shall not be ministered in vain.]

Or:

E [h]a questo convivio di quello pane degno cotale vivanda qual io intendo indarno essere ministrata. (*Conv.*, I. i. 11; Simonelli)¹¹

[And this banquet, worthy of such bread, has such food as I understood to be ministered in vain [or this banquet has some of that worthy bread together with such sustenance as I understand to be ministered in vain.]

Or:

Ed ha questo convivio di quello pane degno, co[n] tale vivanda qual io intendo indarno [non] essere ministrata. (Ageno; I. i. 11, 51)

[This banquet has such worthy bread, together with such sustenance as I intend should not be served in vain.]

Of the numerous interpretative problems posed by the editors in arriving at these conclusions, the one which concerns me here has not been posed by any of them. That problem has to do with which noun is modified by the adjective 'degnò'. Does, as the editorial tradition seems to agree, 'degnò' modify 'pane', in which case 'pane' and 'vivanda' are again paired as they were in the previous sentence to compose a new 'convivio', alluding to the

11 Maria Picchio Simonelli, *Materiali per un'edizione critica del 'Convivio' di Dante* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1970), p. 67. The translations of all three versions of the passage are my own.

poems plus commentary that will make up Dante's work?¹² Or, could 'degnò' also and perhaps better be understood modify 'convivio' (as is grammatically possible) and does it thus mean that Dante's secondary banquet lives up to, is worthy of, the 'pane de li angeli' from which it derives, that is to the originary meal of the classical philosophers, which it mirrors and doubles? This reading seems to be most in accord with the version of Simonelli, which is also the closest to the 'archetype', although my understanding of the sense of the passage as she reconstructs it is different from hers.¹³ It is

- 12 André Pézard, *La rotta gonnà: gloses et corrections aux textes mineurs de Dante. Tome 1: 'Vita nova', 'Rime', 'Convivio'* (Florence: Sansoni, 1967), pp. 125–8, tries to solve the problem by claiming that the sentence here discussed was actually an alternative authorial version of the preceding sentence, where the 'pane' is clearly in subordinate relationship to the 'vivanda'. The strength of his proposal lies in the overlapping lexicon of the two passages, but the hypothesis requires a highly speculative reconstruction of Dante's interactions with a scribal copy of the text (not to say that all of the proposals, including mine, are not speculative!), and, rhetorically speaking, such echoing would be appropriate in the culminating summary of the passage tracing the arc from the 'beata mensa' and the 'pane de li angeli' to Dante's vernacular 'convivio'.
- 13 One reason for preferring Simonelli's version is that it does not emend, as the others do 'cotale' to 'con tale', making 'vivanda' the direct object of the verb phrase 'questo convivio ha' and thus making it simpler to see 'di quello pane degno' as an adjectival phrase modifying 'convivio' rather than 'un partitivo che costituisce l'oggetto di ha' (Ageno, ed., vol. 2, p. 5, note to I. xi. 51). Just like everyone else, I have no particularly good explanation for the archetype's 'intendo indarno essere ministrata', without the inserted emendation of 'non', though if pressed I might suggest that it could refer back, a bit awkwardly, to the situation of the pre-commentary *canzoni* as 'vivanda' ('I understand that the "vivanda" had previously been served in vain, because no-one understood it/them on their own (see I. i. 10 and 14) but see also n. 27 on the parallel passage in I. xiii. 11 where 'intendere' means 'attend to' rather than 'understand' or 'have the intention of'). But my point is not that I am right and they are wrong, but rather that the text generates confusion by using 'pane' in two different ways without, at least at first, distinguishing clearly between them, and that this confusion shows up in the passage in question. For the debate, see, to start, Vasoli's note (p. 11); Simonelli, *Materiali*, pp. 67–9; Ageno, 'Introduzione', in Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 60. Ageno, note to I. xi. 51, in vol. 2, p. 5, at least goes to the trouble of explaining why 'degnò' should modify 'pane' and not 'convivio', though without noting the interpretative consequences of the latter choice. Fioravanti in his recent edition follows Ageno's reading, but observes 'anche con le correzioni proposte da

compatible with the heavily emended reading of Busnelli-Vandelli, while Ageno's version seems to exclude it.

The last passage, as just illustrated, is one of the many defective loci in the textual tradition that have been painfully and uncertainly reconstructed by editors, who have generally been guided by the subsequent pairing of 'pane' and 'vivanda' as the elements of Dante's text, and not by the opening metaphor of the 'pane de li angeli' in deciding which of the two kinds of bread is referred to in this third occurrence of the word. In any event, at this point the reader is still trying to sort out what the relationship between the two banquets and two kinds of breads is, and even if one is persuaded by the never entirely successful editorial attempts to bring clarity and consistency to the passage, a significant degree of contamination and confusion, to a greater or lesser degree sponsored by the author, exists between the 'beata mensa' and the 'convivio' that Dante is offering, between the two kinds of bread, and, indeed, between 'vivanda' as philosophical content and as the poetic vehicle with which Dante intends to deliver it.

Soon thereafter, when we come to the more explicit description of the structure of the bookish banquet Dante has prepared, 'pane' is again and unequivocally used as a figure for the supplementary prose, as it will be from then on, until the very end of book I.¹⁴ But even as one issue is seemingly clarified, another complication arises:

Ageno [...] il testo continua ad essere tutt'altro che chiaro'; Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. by Gianfranco Fioravanti, in *Opere*, Vol. 2, ed. by Gianfranco Fioravanti, Claudio Giunta, Diego Quaglione, Claudia Villa and Gabriella Albanese (Milan: Mondadori, 2014), p. 103n.

14 The word 'pane' used metaphorically appears 15 times in the *Convivio*, 14 in the first book (6 in the first chapter; 3 in the second), 1 at the beginning of book II, referring back to the meta-discursive apology of book I. Of these uses, 12 clearly refer to the prose commentary, one to the 'pan degli angeli', one ambiguously to either of the previous. One, to be discussed further on, comes at the very end of book I and adds a further wrinkle to the definitional problem. At a certain point, having used the word already 9 times, Dante unceremoniously introduces another distinction, this time between the respective qualities of Latin and Italian prose commentaries, which further muddies the figurative waters. Having qualified his prose 'pane' as 'del mio formento' (i.e. 'frumento'; i.e. wheaten; i.e. of good quality; I. ii. 15),

La vivanda di questo convivio sarà di quattordici maniere ordinata, cioè quattordici canzoni sì d'amor come di virtù materiate, le quali senza lo *presente pane* aveano d'alcuna oscuritate ombra, sì che a molti loro *bellezza* più che loro *bontade* era in grado. Ma *questo pane*, cioè la presente disposizione, sarà *la luce* la quale ogni colore di loro sentenza farà parvente. (*Conv.*, I. i. 14–15; emphasis mine)

[The (courses) of this banquet will be prepared in fourteen ways: that is, in fourteen canzoni, whose subject is both love as well as virtue. By lacking the present bread they possessed some degree of obscurity, so that to many their beauty was more pleasing than their goodness. But this bread that is, the present explanation, will be the light that renders visible every shade of their meaning.]

Fourteen courses, fourteen canzoni, will be the substance of the banquet, logically equivalent to the 'pane de li angeli'. Once again, however, the place and function of the second type of 'pane', that is, the prose commentary surrounding the poetic feast, becomes confused with another term with which it is paired, in what should be a subordinate and supplementary relationship. The purpose of this 'pane', the 'presente disposizione' of prose commentary, is to remedy the obscurity of the poetry, the (philosophical) 'bontade' of which has previously been overshadowed by its (ornamental) 'bellezza'. In other words, the prose 'pane' is subordinate to poetic 'vivanda'. And yet this prosaic bread immediately mutates into the 'light' ('luce') that

he then backtracks to address the issue of its being vernacular and not Latin: 'Poi che purgato è questo pane da le macule accidentali, rimane ad escusare lui da una sostanziale, cioè da l'essere vulgare e non latino; che per similitudine dire si può di biado e non di frumento'; (I. v. 1), an opposition he then twice repeats in purging the 'stain' of linguistic inferiority: 'Grande vuole essere la scusa, quando a così nobile convivio per le sue vivande, a così onorevole per li suoi convitati, s'appone pane di biado e non di frumento; e vuole essere evidente ragione che partire faccia l'uomo da quello che per li altri è stato servato lungamente, sì come di comentare con latino' (I. x. 1); 'puotesi vedere questo pane, col quale si deono mangiare le infrascritte canzoni, essere sufficientemente purgato da le macule, e da l'essere di biado' (I. xiii. 11). After which he introduces yet another quality of bread, namely 'pane orzato' (I. xii. 12), of which more below. (I am not entirely convinced by the emendation of Agno at I. ii. 15 of 'pane del mio formento' to 'pane del mio coment', which sensibly aims to eliminate the apparent contradiction of Dante referring to his 'pane' as both of 'biado' and of 'frumento', but has no solid basis in the manuscript tradition.)

reveals their hidden meaning ('sentenzia'), de facto usurping the role of the poems, thus reversing the hierarchy between them,¹⁵ and, incidentally, to a certain extent closing the gap between the two kinds of bread. It is no accident, as we will see, that the metaphors of light, once more conflated with that of 'pane', will be picked up at the end of the book (I. xiii. 11–12), although, yet again, with what seems to be a notable slippage in referent.

What I want to suggest, then, is that the shift in the use of the image of 'pane', which refers now to the blessed philosophical content of the *canzoni*, now to the prose supplement that will make the banquet edible, pre-figures a problem that Dante will continue to wrestle with throughout the treatise, and reflects a significant anxiety about the nature of his vernacular poetry in particular and of poetry as a discourse in general. And, further, I will show that this anxiety is especially visible in the tension between (formal, superficial, aesthetic) 'bellezza' and (hidden, substantial, intellectual) 'bontade' first announced in the passage just quoted: an opposition that draws upon available oppositions in the poetic, rhetorical, philosophical and theological fields.¹⁶

This problem clearly antedates the composition of the *Convivio*, with its addition of prose commentary supplements to previously composed poetic texts, as we can see when we come to the first of the *canzoni* to be commented upon, *Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete*, probably written

15 This point is anticipated in Barański, 'Il *Convivio*', p. 14.

16 Marianne Shapiro, 'Rhetoric', esp. pp. 56, 59–60, touches upon the importance of the *bellezza/bontà* opposition, especially in book II, linking 'bellezza' to rhetoric rather than poetry, but still in complex relationship to philosophical discourse. Barański, 'Il *Convivio*', pp. 44–53, argues that the pairing of 'bellezza' and 'bontade' in the account of 'Voi che 'ntendendo' given in II. xi is in the service of a dramatically new poetics, one which echoes but reconfigures the Horatian 'dulcis'/'utilis' opposition (*Ars Poetica* ll.333–44). He does not note the prior uses of these terms in book I, their use in relation to prose as well as to poetry, or the general applicability of the problematic of the *canzone's* 'tornata' to the function of the commentary as delineated in I. i. I would suggest, adding to Barański's analysis, that Dante probably also has in view Augustine's opposition of 'uti' and 'frui' in the context of his account of the Bible's mode of signification and the practice of biblical exegesis in *De Doctrina Christiana*, book I, esp. chs 4 and 20 [22].

some ten years before the work into which it has now been inserted was begun. From the very first Dante makes it clear that he addresses the divine ministers who move the heaven of Venus – in virtue of the act of pure and unmediated understanding characteristic of the angelic nature – precisely because they are the only ones he believes capable of understanding him:¹⁷

Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete,
udite il ragionar ch'è nel mio core,
ch'io nol so dire altrui, sì mi par novo.

[You whose intellect the third sphere moves, now listen to the speech within my heart, for I cannot speak to others, so (strange and new) it seems.]

The obvious corollary is that his human audience is unlikely to see the true meaning of the poem, hence the *congedo*, the final stanza in which the author represents himself to his work:

Canzone, io credo che saranno radi
color che *tua ragione* intendan bene,
tanto la parli faticosa e forte.
Onde, se per ventura elli addivene
che tu dinanzi da persone vadi
che non ti paian d'essa bene accorte,
allor ti priego che ti riconforte,
dicendo lor, *diletta* mia novella:
'Ponete mente almen *com'io son bella!*' (ll. 53–61, emphasis mine)

[My song, I think they will be few indeed who'll rightly understand your sense, so difficult and complex is your speech. So if by chance it comes to pass that you should

- 17 The address of the poem to angels as creatures of pure intelligence serves as a belated and partial gloss on the phrase 'pane de li angeli', by reinforcing the point that the sustenance of incorporeal angels consists of the *intelligibilia* which are the object of their incessant activity of understanding. What remains obscure is the object of that understanding, whether the rationally decipherable Truth of the natural world or the revealed and yet mysterious Truth of the Creator. For various interpretations of the latter question, see Nardi, 'Lo pane'; Vasoli, note to I. i. 7, Dante, *Convivio*, 8–9 (see also n. 7).

find yourself with some who do not grasp it well at all, I pray you then, (my new delight), take courage again and say to them: 'Consider at least how (beautiful) I am!']

This inability of Dante's readers to understand the rational content of 'Voi che 'ntendendo' is also responsible for the fundamental misunderstanding that Dante feels obliged to address in *Convivio*, namely that rather than hymns to the Love of Wisdom, that is, to Lady Philosophy, his *canzoni* are symptoms of a disposition to sensual love and hence to an inconstancy that has led him to trade in his dead beloved, Beatrice, for a new 'consolation', a *donna gentile* (see *Conv.*, I. ii. 16–17; also I. i. 16–18; II. ii. 1–6; II. vi. 7).¹⁸ This confusion is certainly not lessened by the fact that the address to the *canzone* doubles the love-relationship described in the poem, by casting 'her' as a beautiful woman with whom the poet is on intimate terms: 'diletta mia novella' and who is invited to declare shamelessly her own beauty in public.¹⁹

- 18 The poem's self-staging as susceptible to two different readings might seem to support the long-standing hypothesis that the poem was originally written as an allegory of Dante's 'love of Sophia', as re-articulated in persuasive detail by Enrico Fenzi, 'Boezio e Jean de Meun nelle rime allegoriche', in *Studi di filologia e letteratura, dedicati a Vincenzo Pernicone, vol. II–III* (Genoa: Tilgher, 1975), pp. 9–69. On the other hand, as Teodolinda Barolini has argued (*Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the 'Commedia'* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 36–7 and n. 28; pp. 57–84 *passim*), it might also be taken to mean that most readers are incapable of appreciating the subtleties of Dante's discourse on the conflict in his mind over thoughts of love for two different (flesh and blood) women. No doubt, however, that once placed in the context of the *Convivio* the poem lends itself to and apparently reinforces the allegorical reading Dante now gives of it. See also n. 24.
- 19 Thomas Clifford Stillinger, *The Song of Troilus: Lyric Authority in the Medieval Book* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), ch. 2, esp. pp. 50–1, shows how in the *Vita nova* Dante identifies prose with himself and as gendered male and the poetry with Beatrice and as gendered female. On the gendering of poetry in *Convivio*, see also Ascoli, *Dante*, pp. 212–13. Some interpreters, including Lansing in his translation, take 'novella' to signal a new birth, and the *canzone* then to be figured as Dante's child, not his lover. Still the language is appropriate to a lover, and its novelty is most easily assimilated to the thematics of a new beloved in the body of the poem.

The prose gloss on the ‘tornata’ of ‘Voi che ’ntendendo’ in book II, chapter xi. 2–5 rehearses the problem, focusing on the opposition between ‘bellezza’ e ‘bontade’, surface ornament and hidden meaning:

la bontade e la bellezza di ciascuno sermone sono intra loro partite e diverse; ché la bontade è ne la sentenza, e la bellezza è ne l'ornamento de le parole; e l'una e l'altra è con diletto, avvegna che la bontade sia massimamente dilettoza. Onde con ciò sia cosa che la bontade di questa canzone fosse malagevole a sentire per le diverse persone che in essa s'inducono a parlare, dove si richeggiono molte distinzioni, e la bellezza fosse agevole a vedere, parvemi mestiero a la canzone che per li altri si ponesse più mente a la bellezza che a la bontade. (my emphasis)

[Therefore I say here that the goodness and the beauty of every discourse are separate and different from one another; for goodness lies in the meaning, and beauty in the adornment of the words; and both the one and the other give pleasure, although goodness is the most pleasing. And so, since the goodness of this canzone was difficult to perceive because of the diversity of persons in it who are presented as speakers, where many distinctions are required, and since its beauty was easy to perceive, it seemed to me necessary for the canzone that others consider its beauty more than its goodness.]

This gloss reinforces what the ‘congedo’ or ‘tornata’ of the poem had already told us, namely that the poem is incapable of revealing its own ‘bontade’ to most readers and thus will require help from without if it is to do so.

The stakes for *Convivio* can be seen most clearly if we turn to a passage later in book I which recalls the initial assertion of a need to add a prose commentary to reveal the ‘bontade’ beneath the ‘bellezza’ of the poems, anticipates the exegesis of those terms in II. xi, and insists as well upon the personification of the *canzone* as a beautiful woman that has been and will again be seen in *Voi che ’ntendendo* (to repeat: later in the order of the treatise, though written much earlier):

Ché per questo comento (i.e. the prose) la gran *bontade* del volgare di sì (si vedrà) [...] (la quale non si potea bene manifestare) ne le cose rimate, per le accidentali *adornetze* che quivi sono connesse, cioè la rima e lo ri[ti]mo e lo numero regolato: sì come non si può bene *manifestare la bellezza* d'una donna, quando li *adornamenti de l'azzimare e de le vestimenta* la fanno più ammirare che essa medesima. Onde chi vuole ben giudicare d'una donna, guardi quella quando solo sua naturale *bellezza* si sta con lei, *da tutto accidentale adornamento discompagnata: sì come sarà questo comento.* (*Conv.*, I. x. 12–13; emphasis mine)

[For by means of this commentary the great goodness of the vernacular of *si* will be seen, because its virtue will be made evident, namely how it expresses the loftiest and the most unusual conceptions almost as aptly, fully, and gracefully as Latin, something that could not be expressed perfectly in verse, because of the accidental adornments that are tied to it, that is, rhyme and meter, just as the beauty of a woman cannot be perfectly expressed when the adornment of her preparation and apparel do more to make her admired than she does herself. Therefore, if anyone wishes to judge a woman justly, let him look at her when her natural beauty alone attends her, unaccompanied by any accidental adornment; so it will be with this commentary, in which the smoothness of the flow of its syllables, the appropriateness of its constructions, and the sweet discourses that it makes will be seen, which anyone upon careful consideration will find full of the sweetest and most exquisite beauty.]

Particularly striking, given Dante's indisputable vocation as poet, is the apparent dismissal of rhyme and metre as mere 'accidentali adornezze' and, to anticipate, the idea that the prose itself might be said to have a 'naturale bellezza' superior to such ornamentation.

What we have seen in our earlier reading of *Convivio* II. i. 1, then, is, among other things, a *post factum* attempt to articulate and resolve the dilemma already posed by 'Voi che 'ntendendo', with the introduction of the supplemental feature of prose commentary. But, as we have also already begun to see, there is an accompanying risk, namely that the prose will usurp the poetry's function entirely, and reverse the hierarchical structures it is supposedly meant to sustain. This point takes on additional force when we observe that the rest of book I is focused almost entirely on Dante-*prosatore*. The book has sometimes been described as an 'accessus ad auctorem', that is, a kind of scholastic prologue to (poetic) texts about to receive commentary,²⁰ but is in fact evidently an 'accessus ad commentatorem'²¹:

- 20 Mario Trovato, 'Il primo trattato del *Convivio* visto alla luce dell'*accessus ad auctores*', *Misure critiche*, 6 (1976), 5–14. See also Shapiro, 'Rhetoric'; Alastair Minnis, *Magister Amoris: The 'Roman de la Rose' and Vernacular Hermeneutics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 273–4; Bianchi, 'Noli comedere panem', pp. 341–2.
- 21 Alastair Minnis, 'Amor and Auctoritas in the Self-Commentary of Dante and Francesco da Barberino', *Poetica* [Tokyo], 32 (1990), 25–42 (p. 30), anticipates this point when he calls book I a 'veritable commentary on commentary'; Barański, 'Il *Convivio*', pp. 19–26, further highlights the fact that the *accessus* topics concern

the three ‘macule’ against which Dante defends himself over the course of the book (speaking about oneself; speaking in a way that is too difficult; using the vernacular rather than Latin) are all considered as attributes of the prose (*Conv.*, I. ii. 1–2; I. v. 1). Speaking about oneself is hardly a problem in lyric poetry of which it is a fundamental feature; rather, it is an issue, as the example of Augustine attests (and Boethius too, in fact, despite the *prosimetrum* character of the *Consolatio*),²² of an intrusive prose ‘I’ (*Conv.*, I. ii. 3–15). Speaking in a way that is difficult to understand *is*, as we have seen, an apparently insoluble problem endemic to poetry as linguistic mode, but the problem Dante addresses is that the divulgative prose, with which he sets out to give the reader access to hidden poetic *bontade*, itself from time to time takes on the very same difficulty it was intended to overcome: ‘Degna di molta riprensione è quella cosa che, ordinata a torre alcuno difetto, per se medesima quello induce; sí come quelli che fosse mandato a partire una rissa, e prima che partisse quella ne indusse un’altra’ (*Conv.*, I. iii. 1) [Deserving of severe censure is that action which, while intended to remove some defect, itself introduces it, like the man who was sent to break up a quarrel, and before breaking it up began another].

Finally, despite the fact that the attribution of profound intellectual content to vernacular poetry would seem to be a key problem to be overcome, the discussion of the use of the vernacular in chapters v–xiii is centred almost entirely on a defence of the use of an Italian prose commentary – most notably, but not exclusively, in the claim that, given the fact that commentary in general is the ‘servant’ of poetry, it would be inappropriate

Dante-commentator as much as or more than Dante-poet; see also Ascoli, *Dante*, p. 204 n. 60. In any event it is also crucial to note that although book I covers most of the traditional *accessus* topics, it does so in a way unprecedented and virtually unrecognizable in relation to the standard *accessus* format, or even an oddity such as Dante’s own, later ‘Epistle to Cangrande’ (on the relationship between *Convivio* and the *Epistle*, see Ascoli, ‘Access to Authority: Dante in the *Epistle to Cangrande*’ in *Seminario Dantesco Internazionale / International Dante Seminar I*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański (Florence: Le Lettere, 1997), pp. 309–52.

22 As has been observed, in Boethius’ *Consolatio* the prose does not serve as a commentary on the poems, rather the reverse (Stillinger, *The Song of Troilus*, pp. 41–2; Ascoli, *Dante*, p. 183).

to use the 'master' language, Latin, to comment on poetry written in a 'servile' tongue:²³

conviene questo comento, che è fatto invece di servo a le 'nfrascritte canzoni, esser subietto a quelle in ciascuna sua ordinazione [...]. Le quali disposizioni tutte li mancavano, se latino e non volgare fosse stato, poi che le canzoni sono volgari. Ché, primamente, non era subietto ma sovrano, e per la (sua) nobilità e per virtù e per bellezza. Per nobilità, perché lo latino è perpetuo e non corruttibile, e lo volgare è non stabile e corruttibile. [...] Ancora, non era subietto ma sovrano per virtù. Ciascuna cosa è virtuosa in sua natura che fa quello a che ella è ordinata [...]. Così lo sermone, lo quale è ordinato a manifestare lo concetto umano, è virtuoso quando quello fa [...]; onde, con ciò sia cosa che lo latino molte cose manifesta concepute ne la mente che lo volgare far non può [...] [e perciò] più è la virtù sua che quella del volgare. Ancora, non era subietto ma sovrano per bellezza. *Quella cosa dice l'uomo essere bella, cui le parti debitamente si rispondono, per che de la loro armonia resulta piacimento.* Onde pare l'uomo essere bello, quando le sue membra debitamente si rispondono; e dicemo bello lo canto, quando le voci di quello, secondo debito de l'arte, sono intra sé rispondenti. Dunque *quello sermone è più bello, ne lo quale più debitamente si rispondono [le parole; e più debitamente si rispondono] in latino che in volgare*, però che lo volgare seguita uso, e lo latino arte: *onde concedesi esser più bello, più virtuoso e più nobile.* (*Conv.*, I. v. 6–7. 11–14; emphasis mine)

[(1)t is fitting that this commentary, which is made to play the part of a servant to the canzoni placed below, be subject to them in all of its functions [...]. All of these dispositions would be lacking if it had been in Latin and not in the vernacular, since the canzoni are in the vernacular. For in the first place it would not have been subject but sovereign, because of its nobility, its virtue, and its beauty. Because of its nobility, for Latin is eternal and incorruptible, while the vernacular is unstable and corruptible. [...] Moreover, Latin would not have been subject but sovereign because of its virtue. Everything is virtuous in its nature which fulfills the purpose toward which it is directed; [...] Thus language, which is constituted to express human [conceptions], is virtuous when it does this, [...] therefore, since Latin expresses many things conceived in the mind which the vernacular cannot, [...] its virtue is greater than that of the vernacular. Furthermore, Latin would not have been the subject but the sovereign because of its beauty. One calls a thing beautiful when its parts correspond properly, because pleasure results from their harmony. Thus a man appears beautiful when his limbs correspond properly; and we call a song beautiful when its voices are

23 On this metaphor, see Grayson, 'Dante e la prosa', pp. 41, 43 and 47–51; Stillinger, *The Song of Troilus*, p. 26; Ascoli, *Dante*, esp. pp. 207–9.

harmonized according to the rules of the art. Therefore, that language is the most beautiful in which the words correspond most properly; and they correspond more properly in Latin than in the vernacular, because the vernacular follows custom, while Latin follows art; consequently it is granted that Latin is the more beautiful, the more virtuous, and the more noble.]

My reasons for citing this passage in its entirety, including the superiority of Latin in nobility (i.e. its immutability over time and in space), and in virtue (i.e. its superior ability to express ‘concetto umano’), as well as in ‘bellezza’, will become apparent shortly. At this point, there are two things to highlight. The first, as anticipated, is the affirmation of the two hierarchies, of poetry’s superiority to prose and of Latin’s to the vernacular, which, however, adds up to giving Dante’s vernacular prose the central place in the treatise. The second, less expected, point is that, as against the concept of poetic ‘bellezza’ as extrinsic adornment put forward in both *Conv.*, II. i. 10 and ii. 11 (not to mention I. i and the congedo to ‘Voi che ’ntendendo’), we are presented here with a different kind of beauty, *in bono*, namely, the harmonious blending of parts of speech into an integral whole. *This* beauty is not an extrinsic adornment, but rather a constitutive formal whole, put on a parallel footing with expressive content.

The process of justifying the use of vernacular prose reaches a culmination five chapters later in the following remarkable passage (cited only in part above), in which the hierarchical relationship of prose to poetry is effectively reversed, and in which even the superiority of Latin to vernacular is put into question:

nulla fa tanto grande quanto la grandezza de la propria bontade, la quale è madre e conservatrice de l’altre grandezze. Onde nulla grandezza puote avere l’uomo maggiore che quella de la virtuosa operazione, che è sua propria bontade [...] E questa grandezza do io a questo amico [the vernacular], in quanto quello elli di bontade avea in podere e occulto, io lo fo avere in atto e palese ne la sua propria operazione, che è manifestare concepita sentenza. [...] Ché per questo comento la gran bontade del volgare di sì [si vedrà]; però che si vedrà la sua virtù, sì com’è per esso altissimi e novissimi concetti convenevolmente, sufficientemente e acconciamente, quasi come per esso latino, manifestare; [la quale non si potea bene manifestare] ne le cose rimate, per le accidentali adornezze che quivi sono connesse, cioè la rima e lo ri[ti]mo e lo numero regolato: sì come non si può bene manifestare la bellezza d’una donna, quando li adornamenti de l’azzimare e de le vestimenta la fanno più ammirare che essa medesima. Onde chi vuole ben

giudicare d'una donna, *guardi quella quando solo sua naturale bellezza si sta con lei, da tutto accidentale adornamento discompagnata: si come sarà questo comento*, nel quale si vedrà l'agevolezza de le sue sillabe, le proprietadi de le sue co[stru]zioni e le soavi orazioni che di lui si fanno; le quali chi bene agguarderà, vedrà essere piene di *dolcissima e d'amabilissima bellezza*. (*Conv.*, I. x. 7–9, 12–13; emphasis mine)

[nothing makes them so great as the greatness of their own goodness, which is the mother and preserver of all other kinds of greatness – for man can have no greatness greater than that of virtuous action, [...] and this greatness I give to this friend, since what it possesses of potential and latent goodness I make it express actively and openly through its own proper activity, which is to make manifest [a conceptualized meaning] conceived. [...] For by means of this commentary the great goodness of the vernacular of *si* will be seen, because its virtue will be made evident, namely how it expresses the loftiest and the most unusual conceptions almost as aptly, fully, and gracefully as Latin, something that could not be expressed perfectly in verse, because of the accidental adornments that are tied to it, that is, rhyme and meter, just as the beauty of a woman cannot be perfectly expressed when the adornment of her preparation and apparel do more to make her admired than she does herself. Therefore, if anyone wishes to judge a woman justly, let him look at her when her natural beauty alone attends her, unaccompanied by any accidental adornment; so it will be with this commentary, in which the smoothness of the flow of its syllables, the appropriateness of its constructions, and the sweet discourses that it makes will be seen, which anyone upon careful consideration will find full of the sweetest and most exquisite beauty.]

Remarkably, the attribute that set Latin apart from vernacular, namely its 'virtuous' ability to 'make manifest [mentally] conceived ideas', is now the property of that same vernacular. And it is not the property whose *bontade*, if any, remains hidden beneath those 'accidentali adornezze', but rather of the prose which possesses not only expressive *bontade* 'quasi per esso latino' as well as a 'dolcissima e [...] amabilissima bellezza' that clearly echoes the beauty *in bono* that we saw attributed to Latin in the previous quotation.

It should now be quite clear why scholar after scholar has emphasized the importance of the prose in *Convivio*, and why, in fact, with very few exceptions, the poems are not themselves treated as a part of the text to be

interpreted when confronting the treatise,²⁴ given the subtly dismissive way in which Dante himself treats them. A paradox, then: *the* paradox which underpins my argument. Where Dante's poetry is initially presented as the vehicle by which the 'pane de li angeli' will be made into food for the un-learned multitudes, and to which the prose stands as mere servant, in fairly short order it, poetry, becomes effectively mute, in fact, in some sense cedes its 'bontade', even 'bellezza' in the most positive sense, to that same prose. I have, of course, offered elsewhere one explanation of why Dante's focus is so carefully directed away from the poetry and onto the prose: on the one hand, he stresses the worthiness of the poetry to receive commentary, to be treated as an authoritative discourse when everything in Dante's culture says that it should not be so treated; on the other, he simply avoids the problem of justifying that treatment by never actually discussing what it is that makes his poetry worthy of commentary.²⁵ Yet, while I believe that explanation to be accurate, I do not think it is complete: the relationship of prose and poetry clearly is made problematic in itself, as I believe has now been amply demonstrated.

What I would like to show in closing is that there is also, in book I, a counter-discourse, as it were, by which the essential value and priority of poetry is reaffirmed, albeit at the cost of overtly contradicting the language that had just been used in celebrating the triumph of the prose commentary. After being systematically ignored throughout most of book I, poetry finally is reintroduced into the discourse in support of Dante's choice of using the vernacular, in the thirteenth and final chapter of book I, in the climactic proof of Dante's 'amistade' for his mother-tongue:

Ciascuna cosa studia naturalmente a la sua conservazione: onde, se lo volgare per sé studiare potesse, studierebbe a quella; e quella sarebbe, acconciare sé a più stabilitade,

24 Symptoms of the scholarly inability to treat the poems and prose as part of the same text are the examples of editions in which the annotations to the former are made by a different critic than those to the latter, as in the cases of De Robertis and Vasoli, and of Fioravanti and Giunta, and the fact that by far the majority of attention given to *Voi che 'ntendendo* and *Amor che nella mente* as integral to the treatise comes in work concerned with explaining their later citation in the *Commedia*.

25 Ascoli, *Dante*, esp. pp. 205–18.

e più stabilitade non potrebbe avere che in legar sé con numero e con rime. E questo medesimo studio è stato mio. (*Conv.*, I. xiii. 6–7)

[Everything by nature pursues its own preservation; thus if the vernacular could by itself pursue anything, it would pursue that; and that would be to secure itself greater stability, and greater stability it could gain only by binding itself with meter and with rhyme. This has been precisely my purpose.]

'Rhythm and rhyme', previously dismissed as external adornments to be stripped away in order to reveal the true conceptualizing beauty and goodness of vernacular prose, are now recuperated as the instruments by which Dante-poet imposes unifying stability on the 'volgare', a stability which echoes both the 'nobility' and the 'bellezza' earlier attributed to Latin, and which will ultimately render it the equivalent of *grammatica* in the 'bene manifestare del concetto'. Poetry, suddenly, returns to the fore, and at least temporarily replaces prose as the vehicle by which the vernacular may aspire to equality with Latin.

Rather than resolving the 'dispute' between poetry and prose, however, this turn of conceptual events complicates our understanding of their relationship still further. Only three paragraphs along, Dante returns simultaneously to the opening and competing metaphors of the 'pane de li angeli' as the telos of the intellectual banquet and of the humble prose 'pane' serving as illuminating supplement to Dante's poetry, the two apparently conflated, as bread made of 'biado' that has been, miraculously, refined into 'pane orzato' (see again note 14):

Così rivolgendo li occhi a dietro [...] puotesi vedere questo pane, col quale si deono mangiare le infrascritte canzoni, essere sufficientemente purgato da le macule, e da l'essere di biado; per che tempo è d'intendere a ministrare le vivande. Questo sarà quello pane orzato del quale si satolleranno migliaia, e a me ne soperchieranno le sporte piene. Questo sarà luce nuova, sole nuovo, lo quale surgerà là dove l'usato tramonerà, e darà lume a coloro che sono in tenebre e in oscuritate, per lo usato sole che a loro non luce. (*Conv.*, I. xiii. 11–12; emphasis mine)

[So turning our gaze backwards [...] we can see that this bread, with which the canzoni placed below must be eaten, is sufficiently cleansed of its impurities and of being oaten. Therefore it is time to think of serving the (main courses). This commentary shall be that bread made with barley by which thousands shall be satiated,

and my baskets shall be full to overflowing with it. This shall be a new light, a new sun which shall rise where the old sun shall set and which shall give (illumination) to those who lie in shadows and in darkness because the old sun no longer sheds its light upon them.]

We saw earlier how the (meta-)metaphor of illumination ('luce') figuring the metaphor of bread figuring the prose commentary (*Conv.*, I. i. 14–15) distantly anticipated a reversal of roles between prose and poetry and, in the end, triumphantly, between vernacular and Latin.²⁶ In this passage we see the 'typological' fulfillment, as it were, of the earlier one. As the phrase 'tempo è d'intendere a ministrare le vivande' specifically reminds us, the humble 'pane' was initially prepared to be subservient 'minister' to the 'vivanda' of the *canzoni*, themselves a secondary vehicle for the 'divulgation' of the 'pane de li angeli'.²⁷ Still, it could not be clearer that the prose comment has now explicitly metamorphosed into something very like, but not identical to, that 'bread of angels', through an ascending series of demonstratives: 'Questo pane', 'questo sarà quello pane orzato', 'questo sarà quella luce nuova'. From merely and doubly (as handmaiden to the *canzoni* and to poetry) instrumental, the prose 'pane' of Dante's commentary takes on a higher, quasi-biblical function as redeemer of the previously ignorant and unlettered.

It is also crucial, however, to recognize that the 'pane di biado' become 'pane orzato', as well as 'luce nuova, sole nuovo' is now not a philosophical content per se, as the 'pane de li angeli' seemed to be in the first chapter, but rather a language, capable of expressing 'concepata sentenza' and thus able not only to equal but in fact to replace the 'usato sole', that is, Latin.²⁸ This

26 For the catachrestic convergence of light and bread in I. xiii, see again Hooper, 'Il *Convivio*', pp. 98–9.

27 This phrasing explicitly recalls the contested phrasing in I. i. 11 discussed earlier (see n. 13) and anticipates the phrasing in II. i. 2 where the referent of 'vivanda' seems, at least momentarily, to have been displaced from *canzoni* to commentary (see n. 30).

28 One of the basic 'querelles' about the relationship of I. xiii to I. i concerns whether the 'pane orzato' is a metaphor for language only or for epistemological content as well, and, by extension, whether it is simply an evolution of the second, humbler kind of *pane* or in some sense related or even equivalent to the 'pane de li angeli'.

shift was prepared, as we saw, in the earlier passage devoted to the 'bontade' and 'bellezza' of the prose (*Conv.*, I. x. 12–13). And yet despite this – and despite the fact that everything about the syntax of this passage in relation to its immediate context tells us that it is the 'comento', the prose, which is both 'quello pane orzato' and that 'sole nuovo' – we will hardly have forgotten that Dante has just told us that the vernacular's capacity to rival the durability and incorruptibility of Latin, the 'usato sole', is an effect of poetic 'rhythm and rhyme' – indeed of *his own* poetic 'rhythm and rhyme'. Here,

At least two factors make me propend for the latter, bearing in mind the extremely tortuous and self-contradictory route by which Dante arrives at this point. First is the fact that Dante, in the passages considered above, repeatedly makes the ability to communicate content the basis on which language is to be evaluated. Thus, if the vernacular has become capable of delivering 'concepta sententia' to at least the same degree of Latin, it is now not simply capable of relaying knowledge gathered from the 'beata mensa,' but indeed of constituting such a primary intellectual banquet in its own right – a point that will be fully illustrated only with Dante's claim to offer an original definition of true nobility in book IV (see n. 32). Second is the transference of biblical allusivity, which in I. i adhered to the 'pane de li angeli,' with its Old Testament echoes (Psalm 77: 25; cf. Wisdom 16. 20), but not, most commentators would agree, to the 'pane' of the commentary, to this latter and its language through the figure of 'pane orzato,' with echoes from the Gospels (esp. John 6. 5–13, as well as 48–52, verses that can easily be read as reinterpreting the OT 'manna' and 'bread of angels' to be Christ as Sapientia [see again Nardi, 'La "vivanda"' and esp. O'Brien, 'Bread of Angels', p. 99]). The movement from Old to New Testament might imply, but only imply, that Dante's *Banquet* supersedes the 'beata mensa' of the classical philosophers from which it initially was said to derive (cf. Ransom, 'Panis Angelorum', who notes the reprise of the banquet image in *Paradiso* 24.1–9, specifically echoing *Conv.*, I. i. 7 and 10). Among those who emphasize 'pane orzato' as a figure of intellectual and/or spiritual substance, see Curto, 'Pane orzato'; Vasoli, note to I. xiii. 12, Dante, *Convivio*, pp. 88–9; Ruedi Imbach, *Dante, la philosophie, et les laïcs* (Freiburg: Éditions Universitaires de Fribourg, 1996), pp. 134–8; For 'pane' as language, see Nardi, 'La "vivanda"'; G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli, 'Note', in *Il Convivio: Ridotto a miglior lezione e commentato*, ed. by Busnelli and Vandelli, 2 vols (Florence: Le Monnier, 1954, 2nd edn), pp. 85–6; Tavoni, *Qualche idea* (by implication). Two critics make the suggestive but perhaps unprovable argument that the metaphors of bread in book I and especially in chapters i and xiii anticipate the metaliterary reflections on the 'allegory of poets' vs. 'allegory of theologians' in ii. 1: see Sarolli, *Prolegomena*, pp. 35–8; Ransom, 'Panis Angelorum', esp. 85–90.

I submit, the previously mentioned double logic, of rational argumentation and an overriding desire that trumps consistency of argument, is at its most visible. That desire is itself double: to raise Dante's own humble banquet and its 'pane' up to the level of the *beata mensa*, and to overcome the obstacles he faces in valorizing the 'bontade' of his poetry, which has been overshadowed by its 'bellezza.' And one result, as we now see, is, after a gradual, book-long, reversal of the initial prose/poetry, 'pane/vivanda' hierarchy, this turn to an exalted vision of the vernacular which, at least by implication, owes as much to the enduring form that the rhythm and rhyme of poetry bestow as to the clarifying expressivity of prose.

In book I, then, the ambiguous relationship between servant prose and master poetry has not been explicitly resolved – indeed, the final chapter pushes the internally conflicted metaphor of 'pane' to an extreme, with the one clear result that the 'volgare' – whether prose or poetry or both – has now allusively been put on a footing equal, if not superior, to that of Latin. And when the metaphor of 'pane' returns, for the very last time, in the first chapter of the second book, this acquisition is a given, while a certain confusion persists between the standing of the prose and the poetry, notwithstanding the fact that the explicit focus is once again on the role of the prose as interpretive supplement in subordinate relation to the poetry:

Poi che proemialmente ragionando, me ministro, è lo *mio pane* ne lo precedente trattato con sufficienza preparato, lo tempo chiama e domanda la mia nave uscir di porto; per che, dirizzato l'artimone de la ragione a l'ora del mio desiderio, entro in pelago con isperanza di dolce cammino e di salutevole porto e laudabile ne *la fine de la mia cena*. Ma però che più profitabile sia questo mio cibo, *prima che vegna la prima vivanda voglio mostrare come mangiare si dee*. Dico che, sì come nel primo capitolo è narrato, questa sposizione conviene essere litterale e allegorica. (*Conv.*, II. i. 1–2; emphasis mine)

[Now that by way of a preface my bread has been sufficiently prepared in the preceding book through my ministrations, time calls and requires my ship to leave port; thus, having set the sail of my reason to the breeze of my desire, I enter upon the open sea with the hope of a smooth voyage and a safe and praiseworthy port at the end of my feast. But so that this food of mine may be more profitable, I wish to show, before it appears, how the first course must be eaten. As I stated in the first chapter, this exposition must be both literal and allegorical.]

In the first place, the language itself is confused, beginning with the drastically mixed culinary and nautical metaphors.²⁹ In addition, to go by the traditional placement of the *canzoni* before the prose in books II through IV, 'vivanda' could easily be taken to refer to the commentary,³⁰ rather than, as it has in seven previous references (and as it will be subsequently at *Conv.*, II. xi. 10) to the *canzoni*.³¹ And a problem remains even if one simply ignores this referential problem, as well as the difficulty of understanding what *precisely* is meant by 'come mangiare si dee' (what seems to be an instruction for the reader on how to consume the text immediately morphs into a description of what the text itself is doing). This is because, as the last sentence of the quotation states unequivocally, II. i, so often taken

- 29 Note, incidentally, the way in which Dante's mixture of metaphors, shifting between nautical and nutritional, both calls attention to the figurative quality of the prose and to a certain confusion in the way those figures are being deployed (as, again, in the apparent slippage between kinds of *pane*, as between *pane* and *vivanda*). Gian Roberto Sarolli, *Prolegomena*, p. 35, both calls attention to this conflation of figures and notes that the same juxtaposition recurs in *Paradiso* II.1–18 (the passage where 'pan de li angeli' notoriously reappears for the second and last time in Dante's œuvre (I. 11). On the nautical metaphor particularly applied to Dante himself, see Hooper, 'Il *Convivio*', S94–S96, who also notes the mixing of the two metaphorical strands (S99–S101).
- 30 In his edition of *Convivio* Giorgio Inglese proposes an innovative solution to this additional inconsistency, that is, that although modern editions generally place the poems before the prose in all three books, the authorial voice speaks of showing how the *vivanda*, previously identified with those poems, should be eaten before the reader encounters it. He does this by placing the *canzoni* after the first chapter in each of books II–IV. Inglese's justification is interpretive and lacks any basis in the manuscript tradition; Inglese, 'Avvertenza', in Dante Alighieri, *Convivio* (Milan: BUR, 1993), pp. 29–30; I am grateful to Beatrice Arduini for confirming that the *canzoni* are present, always placed at the beginning of the book in which they are commented upon, throughout the MS tradition, from the earliest examples forward.
- 31 I hesitate to add the final use of the word, at the very end of book II, because it has required emendation to make it refer to the *canzoni*: 'E qui si termina lo secondo trattato, [che è ordinato a sponere la canzone] che per prima vivanda è messa innanzi'. Without the emendation (common to Busnelli-Vandelli and to Ageno) the sentence is still coherent, but 'vivanda' now refers to the prose treatise, as it arguably does in II. i. 2 as well.

to reveal Dante's poetics, in fact concerns not the intentions of Dante-*poeta* in writing his *canzoni*, but how his poetry will be 'expounded', literally and allegorically, in and by the prose commentary.³²

This, of course, is not the end of the story. Whether or not II. i is 'about' the poetry or the prose, the application of a biblical model of signification to Dante's exegetical practices speaks eloquently about his ambitions for the *canzoni*, in despite of the fact that he does not then actually make use of the model he describes). And at the end of the 'literal' exegesis of 'Voi che 'ntendendo', immediately following the apparently dismissive account (cited earlier) of the *canzone*'s inability to make its 'bontade' known without the help of commentary, he partially reverses the thrust of his argument, and in the process goes beyond what could be literally derived from a reading of the *canzoni*:

Che non voglio in ciò altro dire [...] se non: O uomini, che vedere non potete la sentenza di questa canzone, non la rifiutate però; ma *ponete mente la sua bellezza*, ch'è grande sì per costruzione, la quale si pertiene a li gramatici, sì per l'ordine del sermone, che si pertiene a li rettorici, sì per lo numero de le sue parti, che si pertiene a li musici. [...] E questa è tutta la litterale sentenza de la prima canzone, *che è per prima vivanda intesa* innanzi. (*Conv.*, II. xi. 9)

[For I mean nothing (else) by this [...] save: (O you) who cannot perceive the meaning of this canzone, do not therefore reject (her); rather consider (her) beauty, which is great by virtue of its composition, which is the concern of the grammarians, by virtue of the order of its discourse, which is the concern of the rhetoricians, and by the virtue of the rhythm of its parts, which is the concern of the musicians. [...] This is the complete literal meaning of the first canzone, which, as has been indicated above, constitutes the first course.]

This 'bellezza' – which reflects the full powers of three of the liberal arts – and echoes/anticipates the famous definition of poetry in *De vulgari*

32 See 'Tradurre l'allegoria: *Convivio* 2.1', in a special triple issue of *Critica del Testo* entitled 'Dante Oggi', ed. by Piero Boitani and Roberto Antonelli, Fall 2011, vol. 3, 153–75. The point was earlier made by Jean Pépin, *Dante et la tradition de l'allégorie* (Paris: Vrin, 1973) and by John Scott, 'Dante's Allegory of the Theologians,' in *The Shared Horizon*, ed. by Tom O'Neill (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1990), pp. 27–40.

eloquentia as 'fictio rethorica musicaque poita' (*DVE* II. iv. 2) – is clearly more closely related to the beauty *in bono* earlier attributed to 'grammatica' and to the prose than to the superficial 'ornamento' negatively associated with poetry in book I and, apparently, earlier in the same paragraph.

In book IV poetry will come more fully into its own as the primary vehicle of the vernacular as 'luce nuova, sole nuovo', and this in two ways, one explicit, one implicit.³³ First, there is the third *canzone*, which explicitly departs from the 'dolci rime d'amore' – presumptively *Voi che 'ntendendo* and *Amor che nella mente* – that Dante used to write, and provides without need for any allegorical prose explication a philosophical content.³⁴ Not only that, but Dante now claims for himself and his poem no mere 'divulgation' of classical philosophical culture but rather genuine originality, namely the redefinition of 'nobility' as an individual trait, rather than as an effect of 'stirpe' and/or of wealth. Second, of course, there is the extraordinary etymological definition of the poetic *autore* from *avieo*, where the binding power of rhythm and rhyme is compared to, in fact, I dare say, implicitly equated with, the vowels that bind together language itself (*Conv.*, IV. vi. 4).³⁵ In book IV, then, we are offered an account of vernacular poetry able to express its 'bontade', actually its 'nobiltà', without the mediation of prose, and indeed as the agent by which a vernacular is given the permanence and stability that allows it to express 'altissimi e novissimi concetti'. The full fruits of this painstaking process of freeing his poetry from the need for a prosaic supplement, of course, will only be seen after the *Convivio* has been abandoned in favour of a new, poetry-only, project, of far greater ambition: the *Commedia*.

33 Ascoli, *Dante*, esp. pp. 115–16, 217–18.

34 The prose commentary is thus entirely literal, serving as an amplification of the poetry, not a revelation of hidden contents. It is nonetheless striking that the explicit change in the status of poetry does not translate into a shorter commentary, quite the reverse, since at thirty the number of chapters in book IV equals that of the two previous books combined. I will not attempt to account for this additional contradiction except to repeat what I have argued at length elsewhere, that the prose of book IV has as an implicit agenda of conferring on Dante personally the authority and nobility which are his explicit topics.

35 Ascoli, *Dante*, esp. pp. 108–21, 129.

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