

JUSTIN STEINBERG

DANTE'S CONSTITUTIONAL MIRACLES  
(*MONARCHIA* 2.4 AND *INFERNO* 8-9)

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già diretta da Vittore Branca e Giovanni Getto

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# LETTERE ITALIANE

— Anno LXVIII • numero 3 • 2016 —

## Dante's Constitutional Miracles (*Monarchia* 2.4 and *Inferno* 8-9)

POLITICAL theorists have long invoked the miracle as an analogue to the sovereign's right to operate outside the law in times of crisis. Just as God can intervene within the reigning order of creation by directly suspending the laws of nature, the Monarch can suspend the constitutional laws of the community he is charged to protect – a secular miracle.<sup>1</sup> Despite its fraught history, this political-theological concept continues to influence our ideas about the relationship between the laws of a nation and those who are charged to uphold them.<sup>2</sup> Yet the depiction of the miracle as a divine act entirely outside the laws of creation is only one possible account of how miracles work. In the later middle ages it was still the minority view, one held primarily by propagandists for papal absolutism.

Acutely aware of this political context, Dante's own comments about miracles should be understood dialectically, as a counterweight to the role miracles play in legitimizing papal absolutism. His treatment of miracles in *Monarchia*, for instance, responds to canon lawyers' min-

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<sup>1</sup> See especially C. SCHMITT, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, ed. and trans. G. Schwab, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 36-37: «The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism, a theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world. This theology and metaphysics rejected not only the transgression of the laws of nature through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as is found in the idea of a miracle, but also the sovereign's direct intervention in a valid legal order. The rationalism of the Enlightenment rejected the exception in every form».

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, G. AGAMBEN, *Il regno e la gloria: Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2009, pp. 287-304. For a contemporary example of the politicization of the miracle, see B. HONIG, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 87-111.

ing of theological writing to justify the “miracles” of papal dispensations even in extreme cases when these dispensations overturn the established order of the church, the *status ecclesiae*, by temporarily suspending natural and/or divine law. Dante does not subscribe to this voluntarist view of the miracle. His own account is much more normative – almost “constitutional”.

Dante cites Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles* twice in the theory of miracles he elaborates during his discussion of Roman history in book 2, chapter 4 of *Monarchia*. These allusions align Dante with Aquinas’s categorization of different levels of miracles; borrowing the angelic doctor’s classification, Dante proposes an understanding of miracles as beyond nature, rather than above or against it. He then pits this more normative, ordained conception of the miracle against the absolutist conception of the canon lawyers. I investigate how Dante constructs and tests out this normative conception through a close reading of his discussion of miracles in *Monarchia*. In conclusion, I also briefly consider how Dante’s conception of the miracle informed his poetics as well. Examining the descent of the angel at the Gates of Hell in *Inferno* 8-9, I ask what it might look like, in narrative terms, when the sovereign artist intervenes directly, miraculously, in his own creation?

In Book 2 of *Monarchia*, having asserted that the human race requires a universal empire to flourish, Dante turns to the question of whether Roman rule in particular was predestined as an incarnation of this rule. To argue for this claim, he must demonstrate that Roman rule was established lawfully instead of merely by force. Arguing from the premise that whatever God wills in his Providence is “right”,<sup>3</sup> he seeks to illustrate the various “signs” of God’s providence as revealed in the historical establishment of Roman empire.<sup>4</sup> The most telling “signs” of Rome’s destiny are the miracles God performs for it, as they are direct expressions of his plan.

Dante’s theological justification for Roman imperialism and colonization has long troubled modern critics. They find the argument about divine miracles, together with the argument that Roman military victo-

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<sup>3</sup> «Et cum voluntas et volitum in Deo sit idem, sequitur ulterius quod divina voluntas sit ipsum ius» (2.2.4): Latin text and English translation based on DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Monarchia*, ed. and trans. P. Shaw, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> «et per efficacissima signa divinam providentiam hoc effecisse cognovi» (2.1.3); «ex manifestis signis» (2.2.7); «divina voluntas per signa querenda est» (2.2.8).

ries were akin to trials by combat, especially unconvincing, even puerile.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Dante's depiction of Rome's civilizing destiny can appear to have too much in common with the jingoist propaganda of more recent imperial powers. Yet there is a significant difference between justifications of foundational violence set in an epochal past and justifications for contemporary violence perpetuated by an imperialist nation state. In his theological history, Dante actually tries to clamp down on those emerging political institutions which would form the seeds for the modern state, namely the recently centralized Church and the French Monarchy, «who usurp control of public affairs falsely believing the Roman people to have done the same thing» (2.1.6).<sup>6</sup> Faced with these new claims of sovereign power and territorialized jurisdiction, Dante counters with the universal principles of a shared common law. In this light, trials-by-combat – rooted in communitarian justice, longstanding ritual, and the facticity of what Peter Brown has described as an “everyday miracle” – stand in stark contrast to the top-down statutes emanating from the rationalized state.<sup>7</sup>

In his legal vision, Dante privileges enduring norms over merely positive law. Even when the divine sovereign miraculously suspends the laws, the *leges*, of nature, the constitutional principles, the *iura*, of providence still reign. In his definition of miracles in the beginning of chapter 4, Dante emphasizes this ultimately normative or “constitutional” conception of the miracle:

Illud quoque quod ad sui perfectionem miraculorum suffragio iuvatur, est a Deo volitum; et per consequens de iure fit. Et quod ista sit vera patet quia, sicut dicit Thomas in tertio suo *contra Gentiles*, miraculum est quod preter ordinem in rebus comuniter institutum divinitus fit.

(Moreover, whatever is brought to full realization with the aid of miracles is willed by God, and consequently comes about by right. And

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<sup>5</sup> See Vinay's note to *Monarchia* 2.8.1 in DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Monarchia*, ed. G. Vinay, Firenze, Sansoni, 1950, p. 158: «Se tutto il secondo libro è stato ripetutamente giudicato un insieme di puerilità, si deve in gran parte a questo capitolo e al seguente. Non ha persuaso nessuno questa interpretazione della storia come gara o duello presieduto da Dio. Il sistema sembra effettivamente non condurre più in là di una esaltazione del successo».

<sup>6</sup> «qui gubernacula publica sibi usurpant, hoc ipsum de romano populo mendaciter extimantes».

<sup>7</sup> See P. BROWN, *Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval Change*, «Daedalus», 104, 2, 1975, pp. 133-151.

it is clear that this is true because, as Thomas says in his third book *Contra Gentiles*, a miracle is something done by divine intervention outside the normal order in our created world).

*Outside of the normal order in our created world* («preter ordinem in rebus comuniter institutum»): with this expression, Dante signals that he subscribes to an “ordained” rather than an “absolute” conception of the miracle, one lucidly articulated by Aquinas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

As one of the few contemporary theoretical texts Dante explicitly references, Aquinas’s treatment of the status of miracles is worth considering in detail.<sup>8</sup> For Aquinas, miracles do not suspend the inexorable laws of nature, but rather occupy a parallel space outside of (*praeter*) the normal course of nature («consuetus cursus naturae»)<sup>9</sup> For him, the natural order consists of what “usually” (*solet*) occurs, and what happens “in most cases” (*frequenter*) – not in a set of inexorable physical laws, as will come to be the view in the Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> Given this rule-based rather than law-based perspective, Aquinas can allow that, without ever impinging on his Providence, Nature can on rare occasions miss its mark and, for example, produce a man with six fingers. If such wonders can occur within the created world through secondary causes, surely God can operate directly, outside the normal course of nature, when he produces miracles.

By acting outside the normal order of nature, God makes his power manifest, demonstrating that the whole of nature is subject to his will. Yet the question arises: given his omnipotence, can God also act outside of his own Providence? He could, responds Aquinas, echoing prevailing opinion, were we to consider his power abstractly, “absolutely”. But because he is utterly immutable, it is impossible for God to will something which he has previously rejected or to learn something new or order it in a new way. God will not change his mind about Creation. The ordained order of nature and grace is thus secure from future divine modifications.<sup>11</sup> Resembling Dante’s dispassionate Monarch, who may be above

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<sup>8</sup> I am indebted for this entire discussion of Aquinas and miracles to L. BIANCHI, “‘*Cotidiana miracula, comune corso della natura e dispense al diritto matrimoniale: Il miracolo fra Agostino e Tommaso d’Aquino*,” «Quaderni storici», 131, 2, 2009, pp. 313-328.

<sup>9</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.100, in Id., *Summa Contra Gentiles. Book Three, Part Two: Providence*, Notre Dame, Ind. University of Notre Dame Press, 1975; and *Summa Contra Gentiles. Editio Leonina Manualis*, Apud sedem Commissionis Leoninae et apud Librariam Vaticanam, Roma, Desclée and Herder, 1934, pp. 79-81.

<sup>10</sup> *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.99.

<sup>11</sup> For the theological discussion of God’s absolute and ordained powers, see L. BIAN-

the law with respect to its means but not with respect to its ends, Aquinas's divine sovereign is limited by His own justice.

Until now I have contrasted Dante's and Aquinas's view of miracles with a modern one. But I don't want to suggest that medieval views on miracles were homogenous or undifferentiated. Although Aquinas aptly represents the majority view, other views circulating in Dante's time stressed a more "voluntarist" perspective on God's relationship to his creation. For the theologian Duns Scotus, for example, absolute and ordained powers were no longer two *perspectives* on God's omnipotence but two forms of divine *action*. God-as-monarch either operated according to his ordained power, *de iure*, or according to his absolute power, *de facto*, that is, miraculously. Even when acting against his own created order, God never acted inordinately because whatever he willed was law.<sup>12</sup>

Dante would have been especially sensitive to how canon lawyers such as Johannes Andreae and Hostiensis tilted this absolutist vision of divine action for political purposes. Hostiensis, for example, ignoring precedent and established doctrine, argued that the pope could by his fullness of powers relax even the substantial monastic vows of poverty and chastity. Provided it were for the greater good of the Church, he could in specific instances change the nature of the monastic state "not through his ordained but through his absolute power".<sup>13</sup>

In *Monarchia*, Dante rejects the excesses of such papal miracles, insisting that there are limits even for divine action. God cannot will what he does not will (3.2.4). He cannot change the past and make undone things that have been already done (3.6.7). And he cannot absolve someone who has not already repented (3.8.7). If God is not loosed from the laws of his own ordained universe, his vicar on earth must of course be

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CHI, "Cotidiana miracula", pp. 313-328; W.J. COURTENAY, *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power*, Bergamo, P. Lubrina, 1990; F. OAKLEY, *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1984; and E. RANDI, *Il sovrano e l'orologio: Due immagini di Dio nel dibattito sulla "potentia absoluta" fra XIII e XIV secolo*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> For Scotus's perspective, see discussion in W.J. COURTENAY, *Capacity and Volition*, pp. 100-103; and E. RANDI, *Il sovrano e l'orologio*, pp. 56-65.

<sup>13</sup> «Non de potestate ordinata, sed de absoluta.», Hostiensis to X 3.35.6, in *Cum ad monasterium: Lectura in quinque Decretalium Gregorianarum libros*, Venezia, 1581 (repr. 1965), III, fol. 134r. See discussion in COURTENAY, *Capacity and Volition*, pp. 92-95; and F. OAKLEY, "Absolute and Ordained," 446. In *Paradiso* 5, in apparent contrast with Hostiensis, Dante instead denies that the Pope could abrogate religious vows; see M. PASTORE STOCCHI, *Il canto V del Paradiso*, in *Nuove letture dantesche*, vol. 5, Firenze, Le Monnier, 1972, pp. 341-374.



even more constrained, as Guido da Montefeltro learns from the demonic lawyer at the end of *Inferno* 27.

Consider instead the miracles of Roman history Dante culls from pagan historians and poets (primarily Lucan and Vergil) to include in *Monarchia*: 1) the holy shield or “ancile” falling from the sky during the sacrifice of Numa Pompilius; 2) the crying of the goose on the top of the Capitol, warning the guards of the attacks of the Gauls; 3) the sudden hailstorm that delayed and ultimately prevented Hannibal from conquering Rome during the Second Punic War; and 4) the hostage Cloelia’s breaking her chains and crossing the Tiber back into Rome during the siege of Porsenna. All four of these cleave to a preternatural understanding of the miracle; as I discuss below, all four support an “ordained” rather than an “absolutist” vision of divine action.

It is well known that, for much of *Monarchia*’s treatment of Rome’s providential destiny, Dante draws on and re-elaborates a strikingly similar discussion that he had articulated in *Convivio*.<sup>14</sup> In *Convivio* 4.5, Dante divides the divinely willed marvels of Rome into two categories. Both categories can be traced to God’s promise to Moses in Exodus to redeem the Israelites with a “strong hand and outstretched arm.” In the first category, Dante places the “strumenti” through whom we can discern the force of God’s outstretched arm, «più volte parve esse braccia di Dio essere presenti» (4.5.17).<sup>15</sup> These exemplars of Roman virtue include Fabricius, Curius, Mucius, Brutus, Torquatus, the Decii, the Drusi, Regulus, Cincinnatus, Camillus, and Cato. In the second category, he lists those actions through which we can discern God’s direct intervention in history using his own hands, “le mani proprie”: the first battle between the Albans and the Romans, the warning of the goose against the attacking Gauls, Scipio’s victory against Hannibal, and the new citizen Cicero’s defense of liberty against Catiline. Dante carefully selects many of these exemplars and re-organizes and redeploys them in three sections of Book 2 of *Monarchia*: the section on miracles (2.4), the sec-

<sup>14</sup> See TH. SILVERSTEIN, *On the genesis of De Monarchia, II, V*, «Speculum», 13, 3, 1938, pp. 326-349; DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Monarchia*, ed. B. Nardi, in DANTE, *Opere minori*, vol. 2, La letteratura italiana: Storia e testi 5, Milano e Napoli, Ricciardi, 1979, pp. 241-506; and the excellent discussion in Chiesa’s and Tabarroni’s introduction to their edition, *Monarchia*, ed. P. Chiesa, A. Tabarroni, and D. Ellero, Roma, Salerno Editrice, 2013, pp. LIV-LX.

<sup>15</sup> Text from DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Il Convivio*, ed. D. De Robertis and C. Vasoli, in DANTE, *Opere minori*, vol. 1, pt. 2, La letteratura italiana: Storia e testi 5, Milano e Napoli, Ricciardi, 1988, pp. 3-885.

tion on the virtuous governance of the Romans (2.5), and the section on duels or trials-by-combat (2.9). The reuse of the materials between the two works is so striking that when compared side by side, they give us an intimate glimpse into Dante's poetic laboratory.

In the section on miracles in *Monarchia*, Dante makes a series of targeted, significant changes to the material from *Convivio*. First off, two of the miracles are new: the shield dropping from the sky – transported by the strong Libyan winds, according to the cited authority of Lucan – and the crossing of the Tiber by Cloelia. For the third miracle, Dante reuses from *Convivio* the example of Rome's victory against Hannibal. Where in the earlier work that victory had depended on the "blessed" Scipio's functioning as God's instrument, however, in *Monarchia* Dante ascribes it to a miraculous hailstorm. The story of the crying goose is the example closest to the text of *Convivio*, but even here Dante adds an important detail, one that actually contradicts his pagan sources. In *Monarchia* the goose had never been seen before (according to Livy geese were raised on the Campidoglio, as sacred to Juno).

Through these subtle reworkings of previous materials, Dante elevates his discussion of Roman miracles from the subjective and phenomenological – they are what cause wonder – to the objective and ontological – they are caused by direct divine action without the mediation of secondary agents. Imbuing his Roman miracles with a philosophical and theoretical framework they lacked in the *Convivio*, he thus enters the political-theological fray.

Yet even so revised, these Roman wonders remain substantially "normative" – preternatural rather than supernatural, they belong to the lowest rung of the hierarchy of miracles Aquinas describes in the *Contra Gentiles* (3.101). For Aquinas there are three grades of miracles. Miracles of the first degree (supernatural) are those events in which something is done by God which nature could never do,<sup>16</sup> such as the sun reversing its course or standing still; or the parting of the sea. Miracles of the second degree (contra-natural) are those in which God does something which nature can do, but not in this order:<sup>17</sup> life after death; sight after blindness; walking after paralysis. Miracles of the lowest and third degree

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<sup>16</sup> «Nam summum gradum inter miracula tenent in quibus aliquid fit a Deo quod natura nunquam facere potest».

<sup>17</sup> «Secundum autem gradum in miraculis tenent illa in quibus Deus aliquid facit quod natura facere potest, sed non per illum ordinem».

(preternatural) are when God does something ordinarily accomplished by Nature, but without employing “principles of nature”:<sup>18</sup> making it rain suddenly from a cloudless sky or spontaneously curing a fever.

Dante tailors the mythic events of Roman history in *Monarchia* so that they fall within Aquinas’s classification of third degree miracles. In each case he foregrounds a singular phenomenon – a shield transported by powerful winds, a goose appearing out of nowhere, a sudden hailstorm, an exceptional feat of strength performed by a woman – that *could* happen naturally but which, in these instances, occur outside the normal course of secondary causes. Most evidently, Dante shifts focus from Scipio’s virtue in the Punic war to the sudden hailstorm because sudden rain is used by Aquinas to exemplify miracles of the third degree.<sup>19</sup>

The providential hailstorm also serves Dante’s purpose because it recalls the deadly hailstorm God rained down upon the Egyptians, the seventh of the ten plagues of Exodus. Dante sets the stage for this association when he explicitly mentions the third plague, gnats, at the beginning of the chapter as an instance of God’s direct intervention into the created world. He casts the plague as a manifestation, once again, of the workings of God’s “hand” within the text of history: «*Digitus Dei est hic*» (*Monarchia* 2.2; *Exodus* 8.19). The miraculous status of this potentially natural phenomenon, Dante further explains, was demonstrated when Pharaoh’s magicians, relying solely on “natural principles”, «*naturalibus principiis*», failed to recreate it. This detail about natural principles is missing from the account in Exodus but derives instead from Aquinas.

<sup>18</sup> «*Tertius autem gradus miraculorum est cum Deus facit quod consequutum est fieri operatione naturae, tamen absque principiis naturae operantibus*».

<sup>19</sup> In truth, even their place on this lowest grade is tenuous. As an early critic of the *Monarchia* Friar Guido Vernani astutely points out, these supposed miracles normally occur naturally (*naturaliter*). Vernani especially focuses his ridicule on the alarm-sounding goose since geese are wont to stay awake at night and even have been known to squawk (!): «*De ansere vero magis ridere debemus, quia aut ille anser fuit verum animal vivum, aut fantasticum; si fuit verum animal, naturaliter est animal multum vigilans, et si dormit ad sonum modicum excitatur et clamat; unde non est pro miraculo sed pro ridiculo reputandum*»: G. VERNANI, *De reprobatione Monarchie composite a Dante*, 2.3; text in DANTE, *Monarchia*, ed. P. Chiesa, A. Tabarroni, and D. Ellero, p. 344. Vernani bolsters his attack by citing Augustine, who in the *City of God* (2.22.2) similarly ridicules the miracle of the Capitoline goose. In fact, Dante seems to be consciously reworking Augustine’s critique. For Dante’s relationship to the Augustinian source material in *Convivio* and *Monarchia*, see E. BRILLI, *I Romani virtuosi del Convivio: lettori e modalità di lettura del De civitate Dei di Agostino nei primi anni del Trecento*, in *Il Convivio di Dante*, ed. J. Bartuschat and A. Robiglio, Ravenna, Longo Editore, 2015, pp. 135-156; and CH. TILL DAVIS, *Dante and the Idea of Rome*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1957, pp. 40-73.

nas's discussion of third degree miracles, which occur «absque principiis naturae operantibus», as when it rains «sine operatione principiorum naturae». Through this subtle interpolation into the Exodus narrative, Dante attempts to fuse early Roman marvels and Aquinas's miracles of the third degree with Old Testament portents.

To summarize: in Book 2 of the *Monarchia*, Dante uses *preternatural* miracles to legitimize the foundational violence establishing Roman law and Roman rule. In Book 3, however, he rejects the use of *supernatural* miracles as justification for unbound action on the part of a papal sovereign. While Hostiensis argued that, just as God at times acts absolutely within the universe in violation of its ordinary laws, the pope possesses the absolute power to release a monk from his vows, Dante reminds canon lawyers instead that, just as the Pope cannot “make earth rise or fire descend” (3.7.5), he cannot loose a wife from a husband and bind her to another while the first is still alive or absolve someone who has not first repented.

This contrast between Old Testament, preternatural miracles of the third degree and Christological, supernatural miracles of the first and second degrees also helps explain the final difficult sentence of chapter four. Dante concludes his treatment of Rome's miraculous providence thusly:

Sic Illum prorsus operari decebet qui cuncta sub ordinis pulcritudine ab eterno providit, ut qui visibilis erat miracula pro invisibilibus ostensurus, idem invisibilis pro visibilibus illa ostenderet.

[It was utterly fitting that he who ordained all things from eternity in harmonious order should operate in this manner: that just as he would, when visible, perform miracles as testimony for invisible things, so he should, while still invisible, perform them as testimony for visible things.] (2.2.11)

This passage has long irked commentators who blame Dante's unbridled love of parallelism for its obscurity and clumsiness.<sup>20</sup> Yet when viewed within the context of the politics of miracles, I believe its sense is clear. On the one hand, the preternatural miracles God performed before his Advent should be considered providential signs of Rome's right to rule. On the other hand, the supernatural miracles he performed incarnate should by no means serve to justify practices of secular govern-

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<sup>20</sup> See most recently the commentary of Chiesa and Tabarroni, *ad loc*: «La forma in cui il concetto è espresso risponde al gusto di Dante per il parallelismo, in questo caso un po' contorto».

ment here on earth, such as the Pope's exceptional fullness of powers, but are instead figural anticipations of a purely celestial government.

Dante's insistence, moreover, in this concluding sentence that *all* miracles (preter-, contra-, and super-natural) ultimately fall within the jurisdiction of a providential plan established *ab eterno* is more significant than previously realized. If he begins the chapter contemplating phenomena that, in Aquinas's terms, are "outside of the normal order", «*praeter ordinem*», he concludes it by re-inscribing them "under a harmonious order", «*sub ordinis pulchritudine*». He thus clearly states that miracles belong to an ordained universe, a divine manifestation of extraordinary rather than absolutist action. Dante's view is, of course, theologically orthodox. We have already seen how Aquinas, for instance, similarly argues that miracles fall within the sphere of providence. But Dante's description of providential plan as "harmonious" or "beautiful" adds a suggestive aesthetic dimension to this theological stance. It's almost as if Dante admires how well these extraordinary events fit within a globally conceived plot.

In fact, one of the fundamental premises of Book 2, as set forth in chapter 2, is that God is an artist and that the world is his work of art. Using the heavens as his instrument, he seals the material of the sublunar world with the impression of his divine mind. In order to understand the artist's intelligible plan, we can read back from his artwork, from the impression in the wax to the seal. In this way, we can discern God's will in history, what he declares as lawful and right, through signs (*per signa*), just as human will is revealed through linguistic signs. This image of God-as-craftsman has a long history and was a favorite metaphor of the scholastics.<sup>21</sup> For Dante, however, divine artistry extends from designing in space to signifying in time. It is crucial for him that, in addition to being a craftsman, God is also a narrator.

Dante's predilection for depicting God as an artist is of course well known. But what if we were to take the analogy as seriously as he does by reversing its terms? If God is like an artist, how is the artist like God? Or, more pertinently for our present discussion, what kind of "miracles" does the artist perform on his own artwork? In Aquinas's discussion of miracles, one of his most suggestive metaphors is that of the divine artist revisiting his completed work: «The whole of nature is like an artifact of the divine artistic mind. But it is not contrary to the essential charac-

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Chiesa's and Tabarroni's commentary to *Monarchia* 2.2.

ter of an artist if he should work in a different way on his product, even after he has given its first form. Neither, then, is it against nature if God does something to natural things in a different way from that to which the course of nature is accustomed». <sup>22</sup> In lieu of this image of Petrarchan revisionism, in which the sovereign artist returns to his already existing artifact to rework and perfect it, what might Dante's "internal" and "ordained" miracle look like? What changes when God is understood not as a craftsman but as a narrator?

In my recent book *Dante and the Limits of the Law*, I argue that the descent of the heavenly messenger in *Inferno* 9 to settle the combat between Dante and the devils at the Gates of Dis should be viewed as a regulated or "constitutional" miracle. <sup>23</sup> It occurs outside of the normal conventions of the journey but is still beholden to higher providential norms. Usually, Vergil's invocation of God's will and power are enough to make the infernal guardians respect the wayfarers' passage. In this singular case God intervenes directly, outside the normal order of secondary causes. Remaining within the legalistic framework of the *Monarchia*, Vergil functions as God's *vicarius* with limited discretionary powers while the "messo celeste" is his *nuncius*, directly manifesting his will in his extraordinary function as special ad hoc legate. <sup>24</sup>

Yet both rule and exception, Virgil's formula and the angelic intervention, fall within a higher, constitutional order, «sub ordinis pulchritudine». The devils cannot kick up their heels against what has been decreed, «Che giova ne le fata dar di cozzo» (9.97). The violation of the sovereignty of Dis, the trumping of municipal laws, the inoperative *scritta morta* of "abandon all hope ye who enter here" by higher *ius commune* principles is justified because the devils are always *already* guilty by

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<sup>22</sup> «Non est autem contra rationem artificii si artifex aliter aliquid operetur in suo artificio, etiam postquam ei primam formam dedit. Neque ergo est contra naturam se Deus in rebus naturalibus aliquid operetur aliter quam consuetus cursus naturae habet.», *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.100.

<sup>23</sup> *Dante and the Limits of the Law*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, pp. 105-111.

<sup>24</sup> For the distinction between *vicarius* and *nuncius*, see *Monarchia*, 3.7. For a crucial discussion of the legal significance of this passage (and in general on Dante's engagement with contemporary legal thought in *Monarchia*), see the section "La *Monarchia* e il diritto pubblico dei secoli XIII-XIV", in D. QUAGLIONI's edition to the *Monarchia*, Milano, A. Mondadori, 2015, pp. LVI-LXXI. See also the commentary of R. KAY, *Dante's Monarchia*, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998; excellent discussion of the ramifications of these two figures for the construction of Dante's authority in A. RUSSEL ASCOLI, *Dante and the Making of the Modern Author*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 240-263.

their primordial violation of Heaven. They are «cacciati del ciel, gente dispetta» (9.91). In this way, the entire dramatic replay of the Harrowing of Hell can be seen as a “test”, a “prova” (*Inf.* 8.122), rather than a pure act of force. As a trial-by-combat, a *iudicium* rather than a *litigium*, unfolding “sanz’alcuna guerra” (9.106), it serves to manifest the discernible, readable order behind seemingly contingent events.

The re-inscription of the marvelous within the ordinary is further accomplished through the dramatic structure of the angel’s descent. On the one hand, the unprecedented lack of narrative resolution between cantos 8 and 9 infuses the episode with an aura of suspense. Similarly, the digression of Vergil covering Dante’s eyes to protect him from the specter of Medusa adds to the uncanny atmosphere, as if we were preparing for a theophany. Yet when the angel finally arrives he seems more annoyed than anything else, since he has to be forced to set aside his preferred task of glorying in the beatific vision to deal with the devils’ recalcitrance. Once they are effortlessly dispatched he immediately returns home, without even acknowledging Dante or Vergil, as if he had more important things on his mind, «fé semiante / d’omo cui altra cura stringa e morda» (*Inf.* 9.101-102). In this bathetic climax, Dante presents the political-theological miracle not in the form of an absolutist sovereign operating in a legal no-mans-land, but in the guise of a bureaucratic functionary who is bored with his job.<sup>25</sup>

But Dante not only describes a miracle in these cantos, he also poetically enacts one. In both *Convivio* and *Monarchia*, we have seen examples of the divine craftsman suddenly setting aside his instruments and directly influencing his creation with his “own hands”. Critics have long noted that the *Commedia* functions as a microcosm, reproducing structurally harmony of God’s art. Yet where is the space for the miracle within its fashioned universe? What would it mean, in other words, for the human artist to intervene directly upon his creation, without relying on secondary causes?

I propose that while waiting for the protagonists to enter the Gates of Dis we encounter for the first time such an artistic miracle, whose wonder has only been blunted, as Augustine says, by daily familiarity.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> On angelology and bureaucracy see G. AGAMBEN, *Il regno e la gloria*, cit., pp. 161-185 and E. COCCIA, “Cristianesimo: Introduzione”, in *Angeli: Ebraismo, Cristianesimo, Islam*, ed. G. Agamben and E. Coccia, Vicenza, Neri Pozza Editore, 2009, pp. 436-513.

<sup>26</sup> «assiduitas experiendi paulatim subtrahit admirationis incitamentum”, Augustine, *City of God*, 21.4 in SAINT AUGUSTINE, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Books XXI-XXII,

I'm referring, of course, to the addresses to the reader in *Inferno*, 8.93-96 and 9.61-63. For the most part, Dante-the-poet speaks through his characters, the instruments of his art, just as God spoke through the virtuous pagans or even, as Dante tells us in *Monarchia* (2.11.6), through an unwitting Herod and Caiaphas. Yet in these addresses to the reader, the poet makes himself known immediately. Although these interventions occur outside of the normal course of the plot, they remain within the bounds of the preconceived work as a whole. In an extradiegetic miracle, the author descends, like God through his angel, upon his own creation, manifesting himself and reminding us of the hand fashioning the work: «'l poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra» (*Par.* 25.2). Reaching out of the mimetic frame, Dante miraculously substantiates the real presence of his voice: *Pensa, lettore*.

JUSTIN STEINBERG

#### ABSTRACT

Political theorists have long invoked the miracle as an analogue to the sovereign's right to operate outside the law in times of crisis. Just as God can intervene within the reigning order of creation by directly suspending the laws of nature, the Monarch can suspend the constitutional laws of the community he is charged to protect – a secular miracle. Dante, however, does not subscribe to this voluntarist view of the miracle. His own account is much more normative – almost “constitutional.” In the first part of this essay, I argue that Dante's discussion of miracles in his treatise *Monarchia* is a direct response to the absolutist model of the miracle as it was promoted by canon lawyers. In the second section, I propose that the addresses to the reader in the *Commedia* should themselves be understood as a kind of narrative miracle.

#### RIASSUNTO

I filosofi politici hanno a lungo equiparato il miracolo al diritto di operare al di là della legge che il sovrano si arroga in tempo di crisi. Così come Dio può intervenire entro l'ordine vigente della creazione sospendendo le leggi della natura, allo stesso modo il Monarca può sospendere le leggi costituzionali della comunità che ha l'incarico di proteggere: un miracolo secolarizzato. Dante, però, non aderisce a questa visione volontaristica del miracolo; il suo resoconto è molto più normativo,



quasi “costituzionale”. Nella prima parte di questo saggio si propone la tesi che la trattazione dantesca dei miracoli nella *Monarchia* sia una risposta diretta a quel modello assolutista del miracolo che era promosso dai canonisti. Nella seconda sezione si propone invece quella che gli appelli al lettore nella *Commedia* vadano letti a loro volta come una sorta di miracolo della narrazione.

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