INSCRIPTIONS OF DANTE'S BEATRICE IN GERMAINE DE STAËL'S *CORINNE*

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Like a goddess veiled in clouds ("une divinité entourée de nuages") the heroine of Germaine de Staël's 1807 novel, *Corinne ou l'Italie*, rides to the capitol in an antique vehicle drawn by four spotless horses (51). Illuminated by a dazzling Roman sun, Corinne accepts the poet's crown of bay and laurel, and her glory is similar to that of Dante's Beatrice, who in the *Purgatorio* appears in a triumphal chariot drawn by the celestial griffin—its wings emanating light that would put the Roman sun to shame. Beatrice is accompanied by four and twenty white-robed elders and seven maidens, holy virgins representing the cardinal and theological virtues, while Corinne is escorted by an unspecified number of white-robed maidens.[1] Exquisite music accompanies the procession of both Beatrice and Corinne, and flowers are lavished upon both divinities (*Divine Comedy* 2: 392; Staël, *Corinne ou l'Italie* 51-52). Staël's questing pilgrim, Oswald, Lord Nelvil, is, like Dante, mesmerized by the eyes of the transfigured lady. The eyes of Beatrice—the eyes of divine Grace—fix Dante and pierce his soul ("con li occhi li occhi mi percosse"), and he is compelled to follow her to Paradise (*Divine Comedy* 2: 434). In Staël's novel Corinne Nelvil emerges from his own Dark Wood of grief and despair when he encounters Corinne. Her eyes meet his and he also follows her, struck by "l'inspiration divine qui se peignait dans ses yeux" (81). But there is a significant contrast: the divine Beatrice retrieves Dante for Paradise, while Nelvil eventually leaves his divine Italian to return to his duty as an English gentleman and patriot—an exchange of the aesthetic for the active life, the poetic for the domestic. Although the iconography of a triumphal procession appears elsewhere and although Staël's Corinne

is a composite of several myths of idealized womanhood, Staël who, according to Madelyn Gutwirth had been reading her Dante in the months prior to writing *Corinne*, makes particular use of the Beatrice allusion (*Staël* 171). Specifically, she invokes Dante by means of an icon of the Divine Lady and via a text that is a hymn to liberty, but she parts with him on the doctrine of empire, which Dante affirms but Staël—basing her judgment on Napoleon's injustice—soundly rejects. Her inscription of Beatrice into the story of Corinne allows Staël to comment on politics as well as aesthetics and to endorse both the active and the contemplative life.

The poet, artist, singer, actress, and *improvisatrice* of *Corinne* is, according to Ellen Moers, a figure of "heroinism" of the cult of genius (181). Corinne is many women and goddesses in one. She wears the attire of Domenichino's Sibyl and the name of the female poet who rivaled Pindar. She is Apollo's Pythian, Sappho's daughter, Virgil's Sibyl, and "l'image de notre belle Italie" (57). On stage she performs the roles of both the lustful Assyrian queen Semiramis and Shakespeare's innocent maiden Juliet. Like Agrappina, Cornelia, and Portia—women loved by heroes—she represents patriotic womanhood. Doris Y. Kadish suggests that at the Capitol she also resembles the goddess allegory of Lady Liberty prominent in French political art, the tricolors of the Republic symbolized by her virginal white tunic and blue drapery and the scarlet hanging in windows forming the backdrop (116).[2] The mesmerized Nelvil, to whom she is a spell-binding Shcherazade, calls her "une magicienne" (158), and he succumbs as Odysseus to a Siren, Aeneas to Dido, Antony to Cleopatra, Adam to Eve. Thus Staël's heroine is seductress and goddess, divinity and politician, and, as I shall demonstrate, Dante's heavenly Beatrice. Yet Staël deliberately rewrites the outcome in that Dante's Beatrice teaches her disciple the ideal balance of the political and contemplative life, while Staël's Nelvil is incapable of finding in Corinne a permanent answer to the dilemma of contemplation versus action—the fault being (to Staël's thinking) his obtuseness, not her deficiency.

There is no doubt that Staël was drawn to Dante in part because

his figure for the grace and wisdom of God is of the female sex. Paul A. Olson notes that Beatrice "send[s] down flamelets of fire to her earthly lover in the form of right desire culminating in right acts" and "informs both the contemplative and the pragmatic active life" (158). This, however, is where Staël's Nelvil departs from Dante's chosen path in that her Nelvil mistakenly splits the contemplative and active aspects of life, as characterized by his love for Italian and English half sisters. Nelvil loves both sisters—Corinne for her scintillating personality and intelligence, Lucile for her duty and domesticity—but he sacrifices the former for the latter, thus failing to follow Corinne's divine example in "right desire [. . .] right acts" and fragmenting the personal from both the political and the spiritual life.

In Staël's novel the English patriot Nelvil is weary of life, numbed by war, disappointed in amour, grieved by the recent death of his father, and teetering on the precipice of hell until he beholds Corinne, who has charmed Rome as *improvisatrice* and *salonnière*. As Joan M. Ferrante comments about Dante in the Dark Wood, Nelvil is "cut off from his family, his city, and any public function"—in other words, personally and politically stranded (137). The rapt Englishman eagerly hears Corinne's instructions, not only on *affaires de cœur* but also on aesthetics, politics, and national character (topics of particular interest to Staël). With Corinne as his loving guide, Nelvil makes a progress across an Italian landscape increasingly littered with Dantean imagery. Among other scenes, for example, the lovers visit the volcano Vesuvius, where the inferno of crater, lava, flames, and ash are like the whirlwind, pitch, and sulphur that inspire Dante's depictions of hell (338). And just as Beatrice's divine eyes lift Dante to the beautiful summit of Paradise ("per lo monte del cui bel cacume/li occhi della mia donna mi levaro") Corinne directs Nelvil's sight upward from Vesuvius to the mountains nearer heaven to remind him of "*la vie terrestre*" as exchange for our hellish existence (*Divine Comedy* 3: 248; *Corinne* 339). Here Staël illustrates that Corinne is not a sensualist but, like Beatrice, a guide to a spiritual plane. But the Anglican Nelvil cannot accept Corinne's fervent Catholicism As he says, "je vois la divinité dans la raison comme dans

l'enthousiasme"—he sees God in rationalism as she does in enthusiasm, Staël's term for both Corinne's religion and her art (and an echo of the *enthusiasmos* that Plato labels as the poet's frenzy endangering rational thought) (274). In addition Anglicanism, British patriotism, and Lucile are all related to Nelvil's sense of right being in the world, whereas Catholicism, Italy, and Corinne are, collectively, the life that he must negate. Recalled to England to take his rightful place with the landed English aristocracy and the military, Nelvil leaves Corinne in Italy, and from the day of his departure, she begins to die.

In the *Purgatorio* Dante is prepared for the vision of Beatrice by a dream of the sisters Leah and Rachel, wives of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob, and a foreshadowing of Dante's encounter with the allegorical figures Matilda and Beatrice, who represent, respectively, the active and contemplative life. Leah, the flower-gathering vocalist, tells Dante of the sweet Rachel who sits at her mirror in self contemplation, while Leah adorns herself: "lei lo vedere, e me l'ovrare appaga" ("She with *seeing*, and I with *doing* am content") (*Divine Comedy* 2: 354). Nelvil's Leah/Matilda is of course his English bride, Lucile, as his Rachel/Beatrice is Corinne. The docile and dutiful Lucile is also the wife chosen for Nelvil by his late father, and the son eventually abandons those captivating eyes of his Beatrice to accept the "manteau de plomb" worn by the hypocrites of Dante's *Inferno* (hypocrisy because Corinne is the great love of his life) (364).[3] Upon his marriage to Lucile, Nelvil abandons his rigorous intellectual life with Corinne in Italy and espouses vigorous military service to his nation.

After Dante has learned true repentance, Matilda baptizes him in the River Lethe. Nelvil's Lethean baptism, his marriage to an English Matilda, permits him to "forget" his love affairs with foreign women—the French Mme d'Arbigny and the Italian Corinne, but also to repent his entanglement with the life of the mind and soul that Corinne represents. Staël presents it as an ill-advised exchange because Corinne, like Beatrice, is prepared to guide her votary to all aspects of wisdom—cultural and aesthetic but also historical and political.

After his marriage Nelvil serves as a colonel in the Napoleonic

wars, thrills to the tumult of battle, marries, becomes a father, and ends the novel living an exemplary—albeit unhappy—domestic life of an English lord. When peace is declared and travel is once more permitted, Nelvil, Lucile, and their child go in winter to the ailing Corinne at Florence. On their way the wintry fog reminds one of the River Styx, while the frozen landscape that they traverse brings to mind the sheet of ice of Dante's Cocytus (pit of the Inferno reserved for the treacherous, both political and religious). With Corinne Nelvil had witnessed the fiery Inferno; with Lucile he encounters the frosty one.

Both the *Commedia* and *Corinne* are, among other things, political art, and Dante is for Corinne the poet of sacred mysteries, animated "par l'espirit des républiques" (60-61). No doubt Staël felt a bond of kinship with Dante because both writers had, by their political actions and statements, brought down upon their heads the disfavor of their governments, Florence and France respectively, and both were exiled (he for life by the Guelph faction in power, she by Napoleon for the remainder of the Emperor's life). In her improvisation at the Capitol, Staël's Corinne recites, "Le Dante espérait de son poème la fin de son exil; il comptait sur la renommée pour médiateur; mais il mourut trop tôt pour recueillir les palmes de la patrie" (62). The Victorian poet L.E. Landon translates his "Chant of Corinne at the Capitol" as:

> Methinks that Dante, banish'd his own soil,
> Bore to imagined worlds his actual grief,
> Ever his shades inquire the things of life,
> And ask'd the poet of his native land;
> And from his exile did he paint a hell. (54-58)[4]

As a Dante (or a Petrarch or Tasso) is "le poète valeureux de l'indépendance italienne" (62), Corinne, and by extension Staël herself, serves as valorous poet of *French* independence, peace, and prosperity and as an enemy to Napoleon's rule. Further, Dante's political doctrines include the belief in self-destiny through the exercise of right reason and free will—an equivalent to Staël's emphasis on "liberté." Yet Staël comments in *Considérations sur les principaux événements*

de la Révolution Française, that the "free will" of man is, under the regime of Napoleon, merely a metaphysical question and pointless to consider (*Œuvres posthumes* 221).

As noted above, Dante advocates empire as the most acceptable form of government because the unity of one nation-state most nearly approximates the unity that is in the holy Trinity—the oneness to which, he believes, all things rightly aspire. Furthermore, he posits that it is within an empire that the civic virtue can best develop. In *De Monarchia* he holds that the goal of human existence is the exercise of moral, intellectual, and theological virtue. Therefore, the work proper to the human species is to keep the whole capacity constantly actualized *for thought and for action*. As the ideal state allows humans to thrive in both the contemplative and the active spheres, the ideal condition of peace provides the most conducive environment for both thought and action to prosper.[5] Dante suggests that a single ruler, one whose position renders him incapable of desire for still more prestige or power, can best assure universal peace (*Latin Works of Dante* 141). In other words, empire exists to achieve civic perfection—in both the active and contemplative spheres. As U. Limentani observes, peace, the "*leitmotif*" of the *Monarchia*, is a state in which both emperor and citizen are liberated from cupiditas (117).

Furthermore, according to Joan Ferrante in *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy*, the *Commedia* itself can be read as a political allegory, and retracing the journey of the citizen from a corrupt to an ideal society is one way of seeing Dante's progress from the City of Dis to the City of God (136). From his encounters with the assassins Brutus and Cassius and the schismatic Bertran de Born in Hell, to the litany of negligent rulers in Purgatory, to a reunion with the noble Cacciaguida, knight of Empire, in Paradise, Dante makes a political ascent toward the empire of God. Even Beatrice indirectly endorses the principle of empire, assuring her pupil that he may trust as gods the spirits he meets in Paradise, whereupon Justinian, the first of these godly speakers, defends the Roman empire as the method willed by heaven to bring all the world to its state of peace ("redur lo mondo a

suo modo sereno") (*Divine Comedy* 3: 80, 3: 88). Thus Beatrice, the grace and wisdom of God, is also the active and contemplative life joined into one, a unity which Dante had learned from his great master Aristotle and which his divine Beatrice also endorses.

Germaine de Staël, on the other hand, attacks the politics of empire. A monarchist whose father, Jacques Necker, served as financial minister in the government of Louis XVI, Staël despised the Revolution and the usurper Bonaparte, who named himself emperor in 1804 and king of Italy in 1805. In *Considérations*, Staël compares the Reign of Terror to Dante's Hell, each circle of torment being worse than the one that preceded it. First the nobles, then the priests, then talent, beauty, and goodness were destroyed, she says (*Œuvres posthumes* 178). Then after the Terror came Napoleon, who—she claims in *Dix années d'exil*—committed more acts of arbitrary insolence every day of his life than any monarch of Europe would commit in a year (*Œuvres posthumes* 363). She concedes that the whole radical experiment once bathed in blood should be permitted to run its course—too great a price having been paid for the nation to turn back. She still maintains, though, that it is monarchy, not republicanism, that developed the French national character and that it is the system that the French most desire. Yet in *De la littérature* she asserts that only in free states can both genius of action and of reflection be achieved (*Œuvres complètes* 2: 232, 288-300).

Staël was fascinated with the history of civilizations and the theory of national character. She saw modern history as having evolved in three stages: feudalism marked by inroads of the bourgeoisie, the modern era despotisms, and the representative forms of government that she observed in England and in the new American democracy. Because different countries have evolved under different political systems and in different social and religious climates, Staël notes that different national characters result. As demonstrated in Nelvil's conscience, the English character is open, patriotic, and dutiful, although rational and rigid, and—in its attitude toward women—unenlightened. Under a monarchy and in the milieu of the Court, the French have developed wit, sophistication, and urbanity. Corinne explains that the Italians are without pride,

ceremony, and hypocrisy, and as a people they value genius beyond all gifts. Thus theirs is a national character that—like pre-Revolutionary France—inspires a woman's genius. One of the many flaws of empire is that it goes against the concept of national character.

While writing *Corinne*, Staël's best hope for human liberty and political virtue lay in the hope of a French republic and the fall of Napoleonic empire. Surely republicanism would be preferable to tyranny. Staël believed in the perfectibility of humankind (as did several Enlightenment thinkers, such as Marie-Jean Condorcet and William Godwin), and she holds that throughout history humans have been moving along a continuum of progress. In *Corinne,* the heroine's references to Italian art, Etruscan through Renaissance, illustrate this progress of the human mind, while the political chaos and miasma she points out to Nelvil are the by-products of tyranny (136). Kadish reads the Dantean landscape that the lovers discover outside Rome as an allegory for French warfare and politics: the "pernicious effects of [the] bad air" of Rome suggest the decline of the Revolution after 1791, just as earlier scenes of Corinne and Nelvil's Italian idyll had represented early hope for the Revolution, and just as the hellish scenes they later encounter symbolize the Terror and the Empire (118). In Staël's view the contemporary despotism of Jacobins and of Napoleon is regressive, retarding human progress toward freedom and representative government. For all human institutions either assist in movement toward perfection or impede the progress *toward* perfection and happiness, which Staël defines as the Good without its opposite Evil—hope without fear, liberty without license, competition without factionalism. Although the human passions of enthusiasm and ardent devotion produce creativity in all fields of artistic and civic endeavor, the passions of avarice, pride, ambition, and pettiness undermine the perfectibility to which human political institutions tend. They are the obstacles to political happiness; they steal from individual citizens the independence of free will that Dante valued and that is essential, Staël says, for any kind of individual happiness. As previously noted, she asserts that only in free states can both genius of action and of reflec-

tion be united—and in this she echoes Dante, although he endorses this unity in a holy Roman empire, while she hopes it can be attained in a republican France. Under despotism, however, even art makes no progress because the artist serves the state—unless, of course, the artist is "*l'esprit des républiques*" like Dante or Germaine de Staël.

In *Corinne* the condition of Italy, then, simultaneously represents both itself and the condition of the Napoleonic empire. Reflecting upon the Italian national character, Corinne reminds Nelvil that Italy's great achievements, as well as her great artists and poets, were of the past and that currently Italy suffers politically because she is neither unified and nor free. Liberated from the ignorance, envy, discord, and sloth to which fate has reduced her, she could again become great, but self-interest, not national pride, seems to be the ruling principle (57; 71). Because the representative republics of Europe and the New World are free—that is, they have attained the third stage of human destiny—they are nations of the present. Because France and Italy are under the despot, they are frozen in the second stage—their glory now being dead, their future in doubt.

When Corinne and Nelvil arrive in Naples, they find the worst excuse for government that they have yet seen. Marie-Claire Vallois rightly notes that their excursion to Naples and beyond is a descent to Hell and Purgatory (144). The Neapolitans are unattractive because they are dullards—indolent and sluggish. In Dantean language, one would say they are in the *bolgia* of the Slothful. While Nelvil, an observant but critical citizen of a third-stage nation, remarks that people acquire the government they deserve, Corinne responds that rather the government has determined the character of the people—a viewpoint that more closely matches Staël's. Since the government of Naples rules as a sultan and citizens experience the confinements of a seraglio, naturally they behave as odalisques (neither active nor contemplative). Staël and her readers make note that the code of Napoleon is a throwback to despotism, not a move forward toward a representative government, and therefore the French citizens will behave as the Neapolitans, not in energetic, active commitment to the state as Staël finds in representative

republics like England and which Nelvil later demonstrates, albeit at the cost of his heart and soul.

While *Corinne* is a statement on the political repression of the empire, it also serves as Staël's version of gender politics (a cause not on the agenda of Dante's Beatrice). National character counts not only for civic behavior, but also for the expectations and behavior of women. Because the English political system is open and free, English men like Nelvil feel called to duty without compulsion; at the same time—as Staël repeatedly notes in *Corinne*—English women must bloom in the shade. English men have dignity; English women, only modesty (447). Staël suggests that in places in which the national conventions deny respect to women, females too behave like odalisques rather than like a Corinne. As the *salon* of Mme Necker, Staël's mother, permitted young Germaine Necker to become a precocious intellectual, mother Italy allowed Corinne to develop into pythoness, sibyl, and Beatrice. Staël sees the condition of woman as one telltale sign of the progress of nations on their road to perfection, and here again Napoleon fails. She charges that Napoleon hates brilliant women, and certainly he does hate "*cette harpie*" whom he exiled.

Parallel to Dante's Beatrice in the shaping of Staël's Corinne is Virgil's Cnmæan Sibyl of *The Aeneid*. Corinne arrives at the Capitol attired in the simple robe of Domenichino's painting of the Sibyl; her private villa is located facing the Sibyl's temple (230). The connection among the Sibyl, Beatrice, and Corinne is an important one. Virgil was not only Rome's classical poet of empire—as Dante is Italy's poet of Christian empire—he is also Dante's master and author ("lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore") (*Divine Comedy* 1: 26). Therefore when the divine Beatrice commissions Vigil to the Dark Wood to lead Dante into her light, she has chosen both a poetic and a political mentor. Further, Corinne's guidance of Nelvil through an Inferno parallels not only Beatrice's leading of Dante into Paradise but also the Sibyl's of Aeneas in the Underworld. It is ironic that, while the Cnmæan Sibyl leads Aeneas *to* his father, Anchises, Nelvil reclaims his father when he flees *from* Corinne—who seems at this point not a wise Sibyl, but

a foreign Dido luring him to a Carthage of sensuality. When Nelvil abandons the wisdom of his Sibyl for the duty that his English nature requires of him, however, the prophetess is silenced: "La Sibylle ne rend plus d'oracles; son génie [. . .] est fini" (562).

Staël's protagonist, although born of the Enlightenment, is generally considered a passionate Romantic, as is her creator. Claire L. Dehon says, "on connaît le rôle de Mme de Staël dans l'élaboration de la pensée romantique," and Gutwirth notes that Corinne "lay[s] claim to the ambient Romantic individualism," that she is "grandiloquently neoclassical in the style of her person, but Romantic, both in the dialectic of her character and [. . .] the unreconciled nature of her revolt against the world" (Dehon 1; "*Corinne* and *Consuelo* as fantasies of Immanence 23; "Mme de Staël's Debt to *Phèdre*: *Corinne*" 175). It should be recalled that Staël is just as much a child of the Enlightenment as is the Nelvil who can respond only to a religion of rationalism. While "l'enthousiasme" or "vivacité de l'esprit" is an essential element of Corinne's art, religion, and patriotism, she considers herself a rational creature (55). Similarly, Staël's aesthetics are those of a Romantic, her discourse that of a rationalist. For example treatises on government, justice, literature, and history appeal to reason, and a story (perhaps apocryphal) narrates that she once commented to Napoleon, "I should prefer that you judge me worthy to talk reason with you" (*Corinne; or, Italy* ix). In Staël's philosophy, it should be recalled, enthusiasm inspires art, love, and patriotism, but the passions of avarice, pride, and ambition (those punished in Dante's Inferno) destroy human happiness. Therefore passion alone is an ineffective ruler. Corinne's rational discourse on Rome's former civic virtue and Naples's current moral lassitude are intended to reveal her as an insightful student of history and politics. So much so that Nelvil is overwhelmed, remarking that the highest destiny of man or woman is not "l'exercice des facultés intellectuelles" (343). Neither in political, aesthetic, nor metaphysical thought does Staël want her reader to admire Corinne's passion at the expense of her reason.

In Michel Foucault's theory the *épistème* of the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries was that of order, taxonomy, and classification, while at the brink of the nineteenth century new theories of labor, life, and language appeared as "transcendentals" that "toppled the whole of Western thought" (238). Foucault posits, "The fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—establish for every man . . . the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home" (xx). Nelvil's hierarchy insists upon duty at the apex—duty in marriage, chauvinism, patriarchy, and religion. In Foucault's thought, however, there exists between eras a disequilibrium or rupture, and Staël's Corinne seems to be caught in such a fault line between the Enlightenment past and the post-Classical *épistème*. While Nelvil decides to have both feet restored to the firm foundation of reason, duty, and order, and his eyes set to the future, Corinne appears to be on shifting ground. She is pious but ardent, meek but vivacious, rational but passionate, made for *jouissance* but dying of sorrow. Nelvil cannot conceive of Corinne as a woman for the political future, but as a reminder of a dying era that cannot be restored. At the Capitol Corinne acknowledges that Rome's—and by implication Italy's—glory is with its glorious ancestors in the tomb ("Rome maintenant n'est-elle pas la patrie des tombeaux!") (65). The present is the tyranny of Napoleon's empire, not the freedom of Dante's utopian one. The turbulence of Europe's history prevents her from becoming for Nelvil what Beatrice is for Dante—the contemplative and active life united. To Staël the time is out of joint when reason and enthusiasm cannot be coterminous in love and in politics.

Staël's inscriptions of Beatrice are not window dressing. Beatrice serves Dante as the Wisdom of God, the contemplative and active life in a harmonious whole, and the potential of utopian empire. As a modern Beatrice, Staël offers Corinne as sibyl of wisdom and as ideal balance of the contemplative and the active, but as a *negation* of the current world empire. Throughout Dante's works, the one who would seek spiritual bliss must gaze into the eyes of the Divine Lady of glorious light ("faccia che li occhi d'esta donna miri"), for the eyes are the

pathway to the soul, and Beatrice's eyes, in particular, are filled with the light of God (*Il Convivio* 34). But unlike Beatrice, who unveils herself to the hymn of an angelic choir singing "Volgi, Beatrice, volgi li occhi santi"—'turn your holy eyes on your acolyte'—Corinne *veils* herself before the face of her former acolyte who has proven himself blind to her vision (*Divine Comedy* 2: 408).

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NOTES

[1] That Corinne mirrors Beatrice has been noted by several critics, for example, Marie-Claire Vallois (*Fictions féminines* 144).

[2] For a detailed description of the female figure as icon of the Revolution, see Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (252-84).

[3] The allusion to the lead mantle of Dante's hypocrites is actually spoken by Corinne to describe the marriage of her father to her English *belle-mère*, Lucile's mother, but naturally it also fits the mirrored choice of Nelvil to marry Lucile.

[4] Translation by the English poet L.E.L. (Letitia Landon) in Isabel Hill's translation of Staël's novel (26).

[5] According to A. P. d'Entrèves, the connection between peace and unity is not original to Dante, and was likely encountered in St. Augustine's *City of God* (*Dante as Political Thinker* 31).

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