



“La penna abborra” - (*Inferno* 25. 142-144)¹

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The verb *abborrare* occurs three times in the *Divine Comedy*, twice in *Inferno* and once in *Paradiso*. For the purpose of this note I will take into consideration only the first occurrence, the one in *Inferno* 25.

Here a brief background is necessary. We are in the eighth circle of Hell—in the seventh Pouch—and the thieves are the object of Dante's Canto. At the beginning of the Canto we find Vanni Fucci, then Cacus the Centaur, and finally five Florentine thieves. Dante observes astonishing metamorphoses undergone by them. He describes these fantastic changes and then formulates a critical judgment. Dante says that the metamorphoses he has been witnessing are far more remarkable than anything found in ancient writers, adding that his own ability to invent and to describe them surpasses by far that of the ancients.² Dante continues the description and a few lines later he apologizes to the reader in these terms: «Così vid'io la settima zavorra / mutare e trasmutare; e qui mi scusi / la novità se fior la penna *abborra*» (ll. 142-44).

¹ A full version of this article, entitled “Parole di Dante: *abborrare*”, was published in *Studi Danteschi*, vol. 68, pp. 243-254. That article is now available online.

² See *Inferno* 25. 94-102.

The verb *abborra* derives from the noun *borra*, and *borra* comes from the Latin BURRA. So far BURRA has been documented as having only two meanings: (1) 'reddish color', and (2) 'shreds of wool or other material used for padding or stuffing'. It is from this second meaning that most commentators have given Dante's *borra* the sense of "alla rinfusa, confusamente".³ This is an old interpretation, and "è la sola che non ci costringa a ricorrere a pazze etimologie".⁴

However, it seems incomprehensible that Dante, having boasted of his superiority over the ancient poets, is now apologizing for his presumed confusion. Thus a research in the lexicographers of the time — in particular Papia and Uguccione — would be appropriate to try to find another meaning for the Latin BURRA.

Leafing through Papia's *Ementarium* we find the word *burrae*. Papia explains that such a noun means *fatuae*, or *stupidae*. He also tells us that this word derives from *Burra* — the title of a comedy — or from a courtesan dubbed *burra*, the readhead. Papia's definition has been confirmed by W. M. Lindsay.⁵

In Uguccione *burrus* is a synonym of *balbus*, and both words pertain to the semantic area relating to defects in linguistic articulation and expression.⁶ But this meaning is connected to Papia's *burrae* in the sense of *stupidus*, 'stupefied' or 'dumb', and to Uguccione's definition of the terms *stultus* ('one who doesn't react because is astonished') and *stupor* (a situation in which the tongue is impeded due to surprise, astonishment). A defect of this nature can be caused not only by old age — as Dante himself tells us in the *Paradiso*⁷ — or by a natural imperfection, but also by certain emotional stimuli which influence the phono-articulatory apparatus. One of these stimuli is *stupor* which may produce an impediment of the tongue and may even erase temporarily memory and judgment. Stupor is a "stordimento d'animo", or 'a bewildering of the mind', as Dante writes in the *Convivio* (IV xxv 5).

In this canto Dante tells us that he is *confuso e smagato*, 'dazed and bewildered' (ll. 145-46), observing things that he himself can scarce believe.⁸

Dante's visual perception is before something totally new, strange and powerful, hence the stupor. It follows, as briefly mentioned above, "a stordimento d'animo per grandi e meravigliose cose vedere", 'a bewildering of the mind seeing new and

³ 'Putting things in a confused manner'. Cf. the interpretation of Natalino Sapegno (*Inferno* 25, note 144).

⁴ E. G. Parodi, *Bullettino della Società Dantesca Italiana*, III/6-9(1896), 139-140, n.3.

⁵ W. M. Lindsay, "The Comedian Vatronius", *The Classical Quarterly*, 23(1929), 30-32.

⁶ Uguccione, *Derivationes*, s.v. *balo*.

⁷ *Paradiso* 27. 130, 133.

⁸ *Inferno* 25. 45-47.

marvelous things'. We must mention again that this passage from the *Convivio* is precisely the definition of "stupor" given by Dante. In addition, we must take notice that in this short passage from *Convivio* the adjective "*stupido*", 'stupefied', is repeated three times. In the canto of *Inferno*, Uguccione's definition of stupor fits very well with its psychosomatic effects on the memory, reason and judgment. And, consequently, the Poet's impossibility to express his thoughts through the tongue or the pen: "*stupor, casus memoriam et rationem auferens, linguam impediens*", 'stupor is a situation that takes away memory and reasoning, and that impedes the tongue' (Uguccione).

Here comes to mind the "rough and rustic mountaineer" of the *Purgatorio* who, seeing the city for the first time, is overcome by stupor and becomes speechless.⁹

In *Inferno* 25 Dante's pen 'si ammuta un poco', falls bit silent. And for this reason the Poet excuses himself with the reader. Obviously, this is a poetical expedient. Dante has described two metamorphoses of four Florentine thieves out of five. He has surpassed in this the ancient writers and therefore, poetically, he is justified to go no further. Yet, in the *zavorra* of the seventh bolgia, the changing and rechanging continue in an extraordinary fashion:

Così vid'io la settima zavorra
mutare e trasmutare; e qui mi scusi
la novità se fior la penna abborra.

Thus I saw the seventh rabble change
and change again, and let the newness of it
be my excuse if my pen has gone astray.

E avvenga che li occhi miei confusi
fossero alquanto e l'animo smagato,
non poter quei fuggirsi tanto chiusi,

And though my eyes were dazed
and my mind somewhat bewildered,
these sinners could not flee so stealthily

ch'i' non scorgessi ben Puccio Sciancato;
ed era quel che sol, di tre compagni
che venner prima, non era mutato;
(*Inferno*, 25, 142-150).

but I with ease disherned that Puccio
Lameshanks,
and he alone, of the three companions
in that group, remained unchanged.¹⁰

These lines hide a technical vocabulary. It is the aesthetic language pertaining to sensation and perception. Dante's vision becomes blurred and hence his perceptive functions are diminished. This is due to the "*novità*", the extraordinary power, the *magnitudo* of the object of perception. In classical Latin writers the term *novitas* has the meaning of 'strange', 'singular', 'unusual', 'unheard of'. But

⁹ *Purgatorio* 26. 67-69.

¹⁰ Translation by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (*The Inferno*, New York, Anchor Books, 2002, pp. 465-67).

Uguccione, in his dictionary, also registers the new medieval meaning of *novitas*, as 'grand', 'mighty', 'weight', 'momentous'.¹¹ Here we are on technical grounds and strictly in accordance with a passage from Aristotle's *De anima* where it is said that "sentient impressions in excess destroy the organ of sense".¹² Aristotle's passage was interpreted by all medieval commentators; and the idea became a common place among the scholastics who coined the phrase, "*sensibilium excellentia corrumpit sensum*" (an excess in the sensibles overpowers the sense).

Such an idea was very well-known to Dante. The Poet expresses it in several parts of his *Comedy*, including *Purgatorio* 8 (ll. 34-36) where he uses the same verb *confondere* ('to be bewildered'), and *Purgatorio* 15 (ll. 7-15) where the word "*stupor*" is used in connection with the idea of "*soverchio visibile*", 'excessive visible'.¹³

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Back to our canto 25 and concluding: it is the "mutare" and "trasmutare" of the "zavorra" that blurs Dante's vision, and therefore his perceptive function is diminished. There is no jumble in Dante's poetry and there is no confusion in his pen here. On the contrary, line 144 ("se fior la penna abborra") doesn't mean 'if my pen is confused', but rather 'if my pen is a bit stupefied' by the continuous change and rechange of the thieves, and consequently it becomes dumb, it cannot "speak", it cannot describe anymore. Which, I submit, is an ingenious way to avoid the description of the last metamorphosis — that of Puccio Sciancato.

The last thieves try to flee secretly from Dante, but they cannot. Even though the Pilgrim's vision is blurred and his perceptive power diminished ("*smagato*"), he can still recognize and name them. The *contrapasso* of the thieves is that of being bitten by serpents¹⁴, and of going "naked... without any hope of a hole in which to hide or eliotrope"¹⁵ — the stone that makes you invisible. This is the *contrapasso* because in life they have operated secretly and hidden. Therefore the Poet unmasking them by revealing their names is in fact a part of their punishment.

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¹¹ Uguccione, *Derivationes*, s. v. *novus*.

¹² *De Anima*, ll xii 424a.

¹³ The noun **visibile** is a technical term meaning the object of perception, which here is the "**splendore**". "...fecemi il solecchio, che del soverchio visibile lima" can be rendered into English as, 'I shielded my eyes, which [action] reduces the excess of the visible'.

¹⁴ Being bitten by serpents, as a punishment for a thief, is quite an appropriate *contrapasso*. *Serpens* comes from *serpere*, meaning *laternter ire*, namely 'to go secretly'. Thieves steal, as it were, the nature of serpents; and it is very fitting that they loose their human nature and are metamorphosed into the animal's.

¹⁵ *Inferno* 24. 92-93.

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