When the Sky Was Paper: Dante's Cranes and Reading as Migration

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In a little-known paper entitled "Und wenn der Himmel war Papier," the late-nineteenth-century German philologist Reinhold Köhler marked the fascination of patterns formed by birds against the sky as they fly and noticed how they have provided a symbol for writing itself. Whether one considers Homer's ἀεὶ πτερόντα, or "wingèd-words," or the richly developed topos of Zugvögel, or migratory birds in nineteenth-century German poetry, many poets have discovered compelling patterns in bird formations. Not surprisingly, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida also use such figures to reveal the way the graphic representation of speech comes to engender and encase meaning. Their amplification of such topos is not as unique as sometimes appears when viewed by students whose reading horizon extends little beyond the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida would readily acknowledge, their work extends inquiries begun centuries ago. Within the early Christian tradition, it is Augustine in particular who challenges readers to discover in the flight of birds divine writing spread across the heavens, as over an expensive parchment. The medieval poet who most fully employs such a topos, and whose strategies pose vital questions for modern hermeneutics as well, is Dante.

As the Pilgrim enters the orbit of Jupiter in Paradiso 15, he notices that spiritual creatures are flying among its holy scintillations in such
a way that they form patterns he can recognize as the Latin language. As a conscientious celestial traveler, the Pilgrim tries to comprehend the unique scene before him by comparing it to earthly experience.

lo vidi in quella giovan facella
lo sfavillar dell'amor che li era
sognare a li occhi miei nostra levella.
E como augelli sorti di riva
quasi congetulando a lor postauro,
fanno di se o tonda o altra schiera,
si dentro ai lunghi sante creature
volendo cantavano, e faciensi
or D, o I, o L in sue figure.

(Par. 18:70–78)

I saw in that torch of love the sparkling of the love that was there to trace out our speech to my eyes; and as birds risen from a river-bank, as if rejoicing together over their pasture, make of themselves, now a round flock, now another shape, so within the lights holy creatures were singing as they flew and made themselves, in the figures they formed, now D, now I, now L.

Although the passage does not identify these “augelli,” late medieval and Renaissance commentators on Dante suggest that we may think of them as cranes with confidence. Jacopo della Lana, L’Ottimo, Benvenuto Rambaldi da Imola, Francesco di Buti, and Cristoforo Landino all mention cranes in their gloss of the passage. That they should so identify the birds is not surprising, for Dante’s description alludes to a long tradition that found in the flight of cranes a metaphor for writing and reading. The gloss is even less strange when we recall that it occurs within a sequence of references to cranes placed carefully throughout the Commedia. After considering all these facts, we learn that these references delineate aspects of language and the difficulties of its interpretation. In Inferno 5:46–49, Dante signals the vigilance associated with the crane and entwines the exemplary function of the bird with the careful attention required by the act of reading. In Purgatorio 14:64–69 and 26:43–49, cranes are again linked with letters. Here, however, it is not the reading but the writing of letters which is of concern, especially within literary communities. In Paradiso 18:73–78, cranes make another appearance and again are linked with writing, but rather than being expressions of secular writing, here they depict God’s Word, the political message that it bears, and the manner in which this message should be read.

Ernst Curtius has reminded us that we should approach such tropes with more than an impulse to classify them within rhetorical tradition. While gleaning references to such tropes provides an instructive field in which to examine particular examples, it should not dominate research. Tropes are more than ready-made figures waiting for installation in narratives; they afford the reader an opportunity to understand the inherent structure of the text. In particular cases, tropes might even be thought of as narrative ligatures that tell us a considerable amount about the way Dante expected his reader to assimilate his story. Every time the trope appears, the field of the metaphor expands. So, by following the progression of the trope, we discover an implicit acknowledgment of the reader’s progress through the text as he or she configures its evolving significance. Indeed, as we shall see in the case of the crane trope, the reader is challenged not simply to configure but to refigure the trope in such a way that it becomes an indication of the way in which readers were expected to recreate the text as they read. After briefly noting the extensive use of the figure in classical and medieval culture, I shall follow Dante’s use of it in the Commedia. Finally, I shall argue that Dante’s figure quite literally works to instruct readers how, exerting vigilance and diligence, they should negotiate their way through the narrative. As we shall see, Dante’s cranes challenge readers to view the very process of their reading as a migration toward illumination.

A long tradition of classical and medieval commentary sought to explain the habits of cranes and draw from their flight and behavior on the ground meanings that could enhance human life. For the early naturalist, cranes exhibited two habits that were of special interest: (1) they flew in patterns that suggested letters and (2) they appeared to live in disciplined communities with a system of revolving leadership. Aristotle emphasized the unusual intelligence of cranes and recorded his observations about their abilities to fly at great heights, forecast weather, and maintain air and ground patrols. Pliny inquired
into cranes’ nocturnal habits and found that “they have sentries who hold a stone in their claws which, if drowsiness makes them drop it, falls and convicts them of slackness.” Virgil, Statius, and Lucan found a metaphor for military organization in the flight of cranes. In the Aeneid, Virgil compares a shower of arrows and the cries that accompany it to a flock of cranes. Statius compares them to a column of marching soldiers, and Lucan to an orderly naval fleet fighting the wind.  

*Sed nox saeva modum venti velique tenorem*  
*Eripuit nautis excussisque ordines puppes.*  
*Strymona sic gelidum bruna pallentem relinquunt*  
*Potusse te, Nile, gruas, primoque volata*  
*Effingunt varias casu monstrantque figuras;*  
*Mox, ubi percussit tenax Notus altior alas,*  
*Confusos temere inmixtae glomerantur in orbes,*  
*Et turbata perit dispersis litteris pinmis.*  

(5.709–15)

But night, proving unkind, robbed the sailors of steady wind, stopped even the progress of the sails, and threw the ships out of station. Thus, when cranes are driven by winter from the frozen Strymon to drink the water of the Nile, at the beginning of their flight they describe various chance taught figures; but later, when a lofter wind beats on their outspread wings, they combine at random and form disordered packs, until the letter is broken and disappears as the birds are scattered.

By comparing the orderly flight patterns of cranes to the formation of letters, Lucan also alludes to a considerable mythological tradition that associated the invention of the Greek alphabet to the figures cranes form in flight. Classical allusions that stressed cranes’ intelligence, ability to live in orderly groups, and the vigilant and magnanimous behavior of the lead crane, and that saw letters in their ordered flight patterns, provided fertile material for medieval commentary.

Vigilance, seen in their nocturnal behavior and ordered flight patterns and applied to civil and monastic life, unifies all medieval commentary on cranes. For Ambrose (333–97), cranes become a justification for an elaborate discourse on government and an exemplum for those brothers who would run to the refectory to grab a place. For Rabanus Maurus (780–856), the way cranes followed a single leader provided a model for cloister life in general and offered an exemplary description of how brothers should follow a leader while singing psalms. By the twelfth century, the stone described by Pliny had become a symbol for Christ, the bird community was compared at length with monastic life, and the lesson of the crane was condensed into the virtue of vigilance.

Isidore of Seville (567–636) was the first to draw attention to the “lettered” flight of cranes. “Hae autem dum properant, unam sequuntur ordines litterae. De quibus Lucanus: Eb turbata perit dispersis litteris pinmis” (PL 82.460–61) (“While they hastily move along together they follow a lettered order. About this Lucan says the following: ‘The letter is broken and disappears as the birds are scattered’”). Isidore was also the first medieval commentator to emphasize that the lead crane orders the pattern of flight with its voice: “Caedigat autem voce qua coit agmen. At ubi raucuscitur, succedit alia” (PL 82.460–61) (“The crane who compels the procession forward calls out with its voice. But when it grows hoarse it is replaced by another”). The most extensive elaboration of “litterae ordines” appears in Hugh of St. Victor (1097–1141):

Grues cum de loco ad locum transvolant, ordinem procedendo volando servant. Illos autem significat, quod ad hoc student ut ordines vivant. Grues enim ordine litterae volantes designat ordinate viventes. Cum autem ordine volando procedunt, ex se litteras in volatibus fingunt. Illos autem designat, quia in se praecipe Scripturae bene vivendo format. Una eam reliquis antiqua, quae clamore non desinit, quias praclatus, qui primum locum figuram optavit, suos sequaces moribus et vitae praeside debet, ita tamen ut semper clamer, et viam bonae operationis sequacibus suis praedicando demonstret. Quae autem alias antiqua, si raucus facia fuerit, tunc alia succedat, quae: praclatus si verbum Dei subjectis non praedicet, vel praedicato nesciat, cum nactus fuit, necesse est ut alius succedat. (PL 177.40–41)

When they fly from one place to the next, cranes protect their order by flying one after the other. Indeed, they signify to those who examine this subject that they may live with order. Surely cranes, with their lettered order, point out living with order. As they proceed in flying order they fabricate from themselves letters in flight. They signify those who living justly formulate in themselves the precepts of Scripture. One of them precedes the others, one who does not cease to cry out because going in
front, he who holds the first position of the column, ought to go before
his followers with his life and habits so that he always calls out and
exemplifies the life of good works by preaching to those following him.
If he who proceeds the others becomes hoarse then another would take
his place because if he who goes before does not preach the Word of
God to those subject to him, or neither know not how to preach because
he is hoarse, it is necessary that he be replaced by another.

Hugh's commentary—which probably draws on Isidore and others—is
significant for its extension of the disciplined order of cranes beyond
the mechanics of Christian communities exhibited in the rectorcy, or
at watch, or at singing. It finds in the lettered order of cranes a way to
represent the lettered order of a Christian who follows scriptural pre-
cepts. Rather than simply emphasizing physical order, Hugh identifies
the divine force that has inscribed itself in scripture, in human commu-
nity, and in nature. For Hugh, and as we shall see for Dante too,
the crane topos offers a means for joining two books: the book of scripture
and the book of nature.

Although the reception of cranes in the Middle Ages could be elab-
orated further, we now have a sufficient matrix of connotations before us
to understand what riches the image of cranes could offer to a
medieval poet. With these miniature narratives in mind, I would like
to return to the Commedia—not, however, to the configuration of spir-
its in the celestial sky, but to the progression of references that precede
them.

II

Vigilantia When the Pilgrim descends into the circle of carnal sin-
ers in Inferno 5, he first hears the wailing of souls whose reason was
overwhelmed by carnal desire. Their appearance is conveyed by two
similes. What first appears is the nervous, disordered flight of starlings
is qualified by the more ordered flight of cranes.

E come li storni ne portan l'ali
nel freddo tempo, a schiera larga a piena,
cosi quel fato li spiriti mali
di qua, di là, di giù, di su li mena;

nulla speranza li conforta mai,
non che di posa, ma di minor pena.
E come i gru van cantando lor lari,
facendo in aere di sé lunga riga,
cosi vi'do venir, treando guai,
ombre portato do la detta briga;

As in the cold season their wings bear the starlings along in a broad,
dense flock, so does that blast the wicked spirits. Either, thither,
downward, upward, it drives them; no hope ever comforts them, not to say
of rest, but of less pain. And as the cranes go chanting their lays, making of
themselves a long line in the air, so I saw approach with long-drawn
wailings shades borne on these battling winds.

The double simile depicts the visual resolution of a chaotic swarm into
a more ordered entity. The two-step simile, used frequently by Dante—
another example would be his ordering of the falling-leaf image in
Inferno 3.112–17—describes a process through which the imagination
seeks to define or resolve something that at first appears indistinct or
unknown, by associating it with a series of known things. The
sequence of similes literally renders the windblown spirits intelligible
to Virgil and the Pilgrim. After first appearing noisy and indistinct in the
rushing wind, they fall into a long line, "lunga riga," that permits
Virgil to identify them as they pass overhead. More precisely, the
"riga" which appears in the sky invites us to think that Dante has
represented Virgil in the act of reading.

This assumption is based on the medieval meaning of riga, the
subject of the canto—the cranes lead to the Pilgrim's interview with
Paolo and Francesca—and of the crane figure itself. DuCange notices
that riga comes to refer to the "fulcus literarum" a common metaphor-
ical representation of writing as a furrowed field in which seeds are
planted.28 Here the furrowed field becomes transformed into aeronau-
tical sententiae that may be reviewed by teacher and student alike.
Virgil's role as teacher is specified—"il mio dottore" (70). The context
also supports the link between riga and reading. As they pass overhead
in their airborne lines, the spirits are chanting poetry or lays: "E come
gi gru van cantando lor lari, facendo in aere di sé lunga riga" (46–47).
And who are the spirits Virgil reads in the sky? The figures include
Semiramis, Dido, Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, Achilles, Paris, and Tristan, and more than a thousand others ("più di mille," 67)—all men or women about whom Dante would have read. In the case of Semiramis, identified as a woman "di cui si legge" this is even overtly stated. By describing all of them singing lays, Dante further emphasizes an association with secular poetry. It is hardly coincidental that this long line of romantically corrupted figures leads the Pilgrim to his interview with Francesca and the revelation that she and Paolo were led into adultery by reading the romance of Lancelot (127–28).

The crane simile reinforces the meditation on reading. I have already mentioned how "the order of letters" ("ordine litterato") was found in crane formations by church fathers like Isidore. It is, however, not simply a graphic link between the flight of birds and writing that Dante would have us notice, but the attribute that permits such an ordered pattern to be generated. Like Isidore, Rabanus Maurus, and others, Dante finds in the flight of cranes an emblem for vigilance, above all demonstrated by the calling voice of the lead crane. "One of them precedes the others, one who does not cease to cry out; he who holds the first position in the column, should go before his followers with his life and habits so that he always cries out and demonstrates the life of good works to those following him" ("Una aequalis reliqua antecedit, quae clamore non desinit, quia praebet quod prius locum regiminis obtinet, suos sequaces moribus et vita praebet debet, ita tamen ut semper clamet, et viam bona operacionis sequacibus suis praedicando demonstrat," PL 177.40). The crucial responsibility attributed to the vigilant leader in Hugh's twelfth-century commentary must next be considered within the canto's own configuration.

By joining a symbol of vigilance to a seemingly unending line of misdirected figures, Dante shows how a single book, wrongly perceived as a guide, can lead many to error. For Paolo and Francesca, naive faith in one book's authority resulted in misinterpretation—and adultery. Above I drew attention to the double simile (starlings/cranes) and now want to note how it creates what is only an illusion of order. As a rhetorical figure, the crane simile renders what is disordered legible. Here the perception of order is only artifice. The figures in the sky are like cranes so that they can be read and finally understood as leaderless and eternally condemned to chaos. Viewed in such a way, the crane figures require critical analysis. Like the Pilgrim's sympa-

thetic reaction to Francesca's story, which at first appears so logical, our reaction to the writing that moves before us must be guarded.

Recognized as a symbol for vigilance, the cranes complement the central motif of the canto. Finally, the "lunga riga" refers not only to the line of spirits in the infernal sky but marks out the very lines that Dante has placed before his reader. Just as the Pilgrim must learn to interpret figures for himself, so Dante's reader must learn to decipher the "lunga riga" or "ordine litterato" that moves before him on the page. Virgil acts as a teacher for Pilgrim and reader alike. But for the reader the text's own referential structure also works as a teacher. As he proceeds, the reader recognizes in encounters with rhetorical figures like the cranes that there are features in the text which can only be intended for his own education. In fact, the very placement of vedi in the lines invites the reader to discover a graphic V that reinforces the importance given to vigilance. Three times in succession Virgil uses the word vedi to direct the Pilgrim's attention to the spirits passing above in the "lunga riga." By linking them, we can see they form a large wedge that literally points in the direction of our reading.

*Elena vedi, per cui tanto reo*  

tempo si volete, e vedi' i guerre Achille,  
che con amore al fine comincio.  

*Vedi Paris, Tristan; e pia divelle*  

ombre mostrommi e nominomi a dito,  
ch' amor ci nostra via disappare.  

*(inf. 5.54–69; italics mine)*

See Helen, for whose sake so many years of ill revolved; and see the great Achilles, who fought at the last with love; see Paris, Tristan—and he showed me more than a thousand shades, naming them as he pointed, whom love parted from our life.

The graphic pattern is emphasized not only by the repetition of vedi but through the juxtaposition of mostrommi and nominomi, words that literally call attention to the patterns before the Pilgrim. Gian Roberto Sarilli has shown that textual symbolism such as this is not extraordinary in the Commedia.17

Another nuance is here as well. By comparing the figures to birds known for travel, Dante reminds us that his own words, physically
transmitted by the scribe, are leading the reader or listener on a migratory flight. The words not only move beneath the reader's eyes but quite literally sustain his movement or progression through the text. The lesson of the canto's skywriting comes when we realize that true migration can happen only when one is certain of the direction in which one is going. Certainty, however, is not an individual decision alone but becomes bound up with the movement of the group one is part of.

**Communitas** While the association of cranes with vigilance marks a particular emphasis of *Inferno* 5, it is the exemplary nature of cranes' cooperation and communal life that draws our attention in *Purgatorio*. Having provided the ancient Romans with a metaphor for military organization, and the patriotic fathers with a model for monastic obedience, the ordered groups of cranes become for Dante a model for politicians and poets as well. In both *Purgatorio* 24 and 26, where Dante looks back upon his own poetic enterprise, we discover the crane metaphor used as an image of faithful cooperation and moderation.

After bunching together to look at the Pilgrim's shape in *Purgatorio* 24, the spirits resume their ordered movement along the terrace.

*Como li augoi che verman lungo il Nilo,
  alcuna volta in aere fanno schiera,
  poi volan pila e frettà e vanno in filo,
  cosi tutta la gente che li era,
  volendo il viso, raffrettuo suo passo,
  e per magrezza e per voler leggera.*

(Purg. 24.64–69)

As birds that winter along the Nile sometimes make a troop in the air, then fly with more speed and go in file, so all the people that were there, facing round, quickened their steps, being light both with looseness and desire.

The simile describes a visual resolution similar to that found in the transformation of the disordered swarm of starlings into the "lungs rige" of the cranes. Here, however, the simile bears no ironic meaning. Rather than forming a "riga" as they did previously, the cranes' bunched flock, or "schiera," is resolved into a single line, or "filo," which encourages the reader to think of a military line or file. Status, whose literal presence in the canto now guides the Pilgrim, provided Dante with the model. Having described the way troops are marshaled for a long march, the Latin poet compares their disciplined ranks to birds in migration. The Latin passage, which also anticipates the journey's end, reminds us that a similar argument is implicit in Dante's comparison. By virtue of their disciplined ranks, the souls of Purgatory will one day reach Paradise.

Dante's allusion to cranes is sustained much further. Immediately following the crane reference, Forese, the executed leader of the Blacks, appears:

*E come l' uom che di trotta è lasso,
  lascia andar li compagni, e si passeggia
  fin che si sfogli l'affollar del casso,
  si lasciò traspassar la santa greggia
  Forese, e dietro meco sen veniva,
  dicendo: "Quando fa ci' ch'i riveggia?"

(Purg. 24.70–75)

And as one tired with running lets his companions go on and then walks till the heaving of his chest is relieved, so Forese let the holy flock pass and came on with me behind, saying: "How long will it be till I see thee again?"

Forese's actions model another quality attributed to cranes, one described most vividly by Latini in his *Tesoro*. When a lead crane grows weary, he may be helped to renew his strength by being held aloft by his compatriots.9

*E quando questa chi è capitano è stanza di guardarle, che la sua bocca è arantolata e rosa, non si vergogna, che un'altra ne genga in suo luogo, ed ella toma a schiera, e vole con le altre. E quando v'è alcuna che sia stanza, che non possa volare con l'altre, ella l'entano allora sotto, e tanto la portano in questo modo, ch'ella ricovera sua forza, tanto che la vole con l'altre.*

And when the one who is the captain becomes tired of holding watch, because his voice is dry and worn, without disgrace another takes his place, and he returns to the flock and flies with the others. But if he is
so exhausted it is impossible for him to fly with the others, they fly under him and support him until he regains his strength and can fly with them.

Like a tired crane being supported by the flock, Forese appears to have momentarily fallen back to regain his strength. The crane metaphor takes on another nuance as well. By raising questions about the political leadership of Florence, Forese and the Pilgrim also specify the issue of leadership conveyed by the crane metaphor. When he departs to join the migratory group now ahead of him, Forese appears refreshed and ready to resume his journey. The description of him surging forward like a rider that has separated himself from a cavalry band also recalls Latini’s account of the cavalry-like cranes: “Grue sono una generazione d’uccelli che vanno a schiera, come i cavalieri che vanno a battaglia, e sempre vanno l’uno dopo l’altro, si come i cavalieri in guerra (185)” (“Cranes are a kind of bird who travel in groups like cavalry troops riding into battle, and always travel one after the other like cavalry troops in battle”). The idea of rest does not pertain to Forese alone. Just as Forese is a member of a band that seeks renewal, so the Pilgrim desires renewal in his journey—renewal that comes from acknowledging his position as a follower.

The theme of leadership and renewal shifts from Forese to the Pilgrim himself as the cantico progresses. As he moves forward behind Virgil and Statius, Dante is suddenly recognized as the innovator of “le nove rime.” “Ma di sì’ veggio qui colui che tore / trasse le nove rime, cominciando / ‘Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore’” (“But tell me if I see here him who brought forth the new rhymes, beginning with ‘Ladies that have intelligence of love,’” 49–50). Bonagiunta’s remark, which quotes the first line of the Vita nuova, makes it evident that he looks to the Pilgrim as one who goes before the others. The Pilgrim’s response, however, qualifies Bonagiunta’s idea of leadership by reverently reminding him that he follows another spiritual leader.

E io a lui: “T’hai son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
di detta dentro no significa.”
(Purg. 24.52–54)

And I said to him: “I am one who, when love breathes in me, takes note, and in that manner which he dictates within go on to set it forth.”

The corrective response once more enlarges the crane topos. Rather than following a leader whose acts and words are physically manifest, the Pilgrim diligently follows the inspiration of another leader. The comparison is amplified in Bonagiunta’s confession that his love of style (stilo) had impeded his capacity to comprehend spiritual authority.

Io veggo ben come le vostre penne
dietro al dittatore sent vanno strette,
che delle nostre certo non avvenne;
e qual più a gradiere oltre si mette
non vede più dall’uno all’altro stilo.
(Purg. 24.58–62)

I see well how your pens follow close behind the dictator which assuredly did not happen with ours, and he that sets himself to examine further sees nothing else between the one style and the other.

The reference to cranes follows immediately, formally linking the discourse on political and poetic leaders. Here, as in Inferno 5, discussion of poetic models is reinforced by the allusion to cranes. In fact, three rhyming words, stilo, Nilo, and filo weave the comments on composition with the cranes and encourage the reader to explore the relation between the literary discussion and the symbolic use of cranes. Once again, the reference to cranes is supported by tradition. Just as the lead crane determines the formation of an “ordine litterato” and signifies persons who shape themselves upon God’s Word, so the Pilgrim affirms that he shapes his own words upon divine inspiration. In both cases, divine dictates are metaphorically linked to the lead crane whose cry provides guidance to those following.

Dante alerts readers both to the vigilance needed for interpretation and to the watchfulness important for a community where members
may be spiritually nourished and replenished. In Purgatorio 26, cranes appear once more in a setting that helps to define the idea of poetry and leadership. Just as the Pilgrim is about to identify himself to his beloved teacher and previous leader Guido Guinizelli, he is distracted by a strange sight: At the appearance of a new troop of souls, Guido’s group and the one that has just arrived rush toward each other to exchange greetings and information. As they separate, each group seeks to outshot the other with slogans proclaiming their sins. Their subsequent departure is compared to the flight of cranes.

Poi, come grue ch’a in montagne flete
volassero parte e parte inver l’arane,
questo del gel, quello del sole scifte,
l’una gente sen va, l’altra sen venge;
e torran, lacrando, a’ primi canti
e al gridar che più lor si convene;
(Purg. 26.43–48)

Then, like cranes flying, some towards the Xiphian Mountains and some towards the sands, these shunning the frost and those the sun, the one crowd goes and the other comes on and they return with tears to their former chants and to the cry that most befits them.

The simultaneous northerly and southerly flight of cranes described here is impossible, as the subjunctive volassero attests. The reason for this implausible phenomenon—at least in general—is not difficult to understand. The unnatural description of cranes’s behavior corresponds to the varied ways in which penance must be sought by those who have followed unnatural sexual habits or habits contrary to God’s law. The Sodomites, for example, move in the “wrong” direction here to undo the impulsive direction they had followed in life. Just as cranes follow God’s law in seeking a warmer climate, so the souls must follow the way of purification appropriate to them.

As before, the crane simile helps to order the references to writing and poetry. The shouts of repentant souls, like the calls of cranes, are warnings that urge vigilance. The Pilgrim’s reaction to what he has witnessed shows that he would read and learn from the reactions of these new craneslike souls. Seeing the crowd of souls streaming behind Guido, the Pilgrim is prepared to have their meaning dictated to him.

The situation is reminiscent of Virgil’s identification of the “rime” of spirits in Inferno 5. But there is a critical difference: early in his journey the Pilgrim’s impulse was to react to the pathos of the figures before him rather than to try to fathom God’s justice. Now he is better prepared to listen and learn, showing that he is ready to follow the warning given by Virgil at the beginning of the canto: “Guarda giov’il ch’io ti soletto” (9) (“Watch, take heed of my warning”).

In Purgatorio 24 Bonagiusanca testified to the Pilgrim’s prominence as the innovator of the “dolce stile.” Now, in his conversation with Guido Guinizelli, the Pilgrim testifies to the model he found in his teacher. Their exchange becomes modulated, not by a facile attention to rank and order as in the case of Bonagiusanca, but by an appreciation that poets belong to a community that changes over time. The first thing Guido observes when he sees Dante is that he follows others: “O tu che val, non per esser piú tardo / ma forse reverente, a li altri dopo” (Purg. 26.19) (“Oh thou who goes behind the others, not from tardiness but perhaps from reverence”). Guido now recognizes the Pilgrim’s secondary position, a ranking the Pilgrim himself acknowledged in Purgatorio 24 as he followed his “gran menescalchi.” Here, Guido’s observation affirms the importance of such a position and anticipates his own humble deference to Arnaut Daniel. Humility characterizes Guido. Even the way he takes his leave of the Pilgrim emphasizes his willingness, like the lead crane, to retire so that another may occupy his place: “Poi, forse per der luogo altrui secondo / che presso avea, disparve per lo foco, come per l’acqua il pesce andando al fondo” (Purg. 25.133–35) (“Then, perhaps to give place to others who were near him, he disappeared through the fire as through the water a fish goes to the bottom”).

The relationship Dante depicts between Guido and the Pilgrim is even more complex. At the same time as Guido has inspired the Pilgrim’s own verse, his invention has led to his own corruption. Love poetry, for Guido, became not a vehicle for purification but for venery. Consequently, Guido and the Pilgrim illustrate the contrary impulses evoked by the “dolce stile.” The anxious movement of the line of cranes—movement of which Guido is part—graphically portrays the different ways in which poetry may be taken. When the Pilgrim meets his teacher and lovingly acknowledges the importance of Guido’s “rime” for his own verse, he is responding to the spirit of love he
found in the rhymes themselves rather than to the sexual fantasies
Guido came to enact.

By presenting the problem of contrary responses to poetry, the
canto returns to the interpretive issues raised in *Inferno* 5. Now, how-
ever, the question of response is more sophisticated. While the canto
warns that love poetry should not incite sexual play, it raises questions
about interpretation and authorial intention. I have already said that
Dante’s own generous response to his teacher must be regarded as a
reaction to Guido’s spiritual influence. But this is not all. In contrast
to the warmth the Pilgrim shows toward Guido, one cannot help but
notice his cool response to Arnaut. Even though Guido specifically
concedes that Arnaut should go first because he is the “miglior fabbro”
(117), there is reason to wonder whether Dante is not more sympathetic
to Guido’s spirit than to Arnaut’s artifice. By having Arnaut describe
himself as one “que plor e vaux cartan” (142), Dante recalls the volatile
figures of *Inferno* 5 who “van cantando lor lai” (46). The echo carries
an implicit warning that readers must practice vigilance when looking
at Arnaut’s “verse d’amore e prose de romanzi” (118). The fact that
Arnaut now appears at the head of the phalanx of poets and inspires
others makes it even more crucial not to mistake his voice.

*Illustratio*  Dante’s thorough incorporation of the crane topos in the
first two canticles of the *Commedia* allows him both to represent the
problem of reading and writing his text and to draw attention to the
reader’s own assimilation of the work. When we return to the passage
from the *Paradiso* mentioned at the beginning of this essay, acts of
reading become more articulated.

The reading metaphor associated with cranes becomes explicit in
*Paradiso* 18 when cranelike spirits spell out against the heavens the
first verse of the Book of Wisdom: *DILIGITE IUSTITIAM / QUI IUDICATIS
TERRAM* (“You who judge the earth / love justice”). Only after the
Pilgrim has carefully examined and synthesized letters does he perceive
a message in the flight of the holy creatures. At first he is only con-
scious that the “figure” (78) being formed appears letterlike. Then, like
a child who can recognize letters but cannot yet make out words, the
Pilgrim seeks instruction.

O diva Pegasea che li ‘ngegni
fai gloriosi e rendili longevi,
ed esse teco le cittadi e’ regni,
The caution suggested by the invocation to the muse is also present as the Pilgrim describes what he has seen. Three times the nature of his experience is noted, and each time with greater clarity. Seeing letters, he qualifies their appearance: “come mi parve detto” (90) (“what they seemed to me to mean”). When the heavenly creatures maintain their order in the shape of the M in terram he compares the new figure to an ornamental capital: “Poscia ne l’emme del vocabol quinto / rimasero ordinate; si che Giove / pareva argento li d’oro distinto” (94–96) (“Then in the M of the fifth word they kept their order, so that Jupiter seemed there silver pricked out with gold”). Finally, watching and listening to the figures descend on the summit of the M, he believes, “credo” (99), that what they sang concerned “il ben che se le move” (99) (“the good that draws them to itself”). “Credo” does not simply mean that the Pilgrim “thinks” this is what they sang but joins his perception to an act of belief. Faith is a prerequisite to the vision unfolding before him, just as it is manifest in the spirits that conform to divine inspiration.

The faithfulness of the Pilgrim’s transcription is heightened when the reader is reminded that false interpretation is still possible. As the sparking creatures disperse from the M they have joined to create, Dante compares them to the shower of sparks that fly upward when burning logs are struck. But then, as if to call into question his own simile, he warns that such earthly sparks cause foolish interpreters to hunt in vain for meaning in empty things that fly up from earth. The verb augurarsi—which refers to “divination by consulting the behavior of birds”—directs our attention back to the scriptural formations made in the heavenly sky and affirms that they stand forth with authority.22

Early in the canto, Beatrice appears as “quella donna ch’a Dio si menava” (4), followed by Cacciaguida’s presentation of the holy military leaders (28–51). But as the Pilgrim seeks guidance from both, it is also evident that they are only instruments to reveal the presence of a more absolute guide. In the letters that shape themselves against the celestial sky the Pilgrim recognizes the force that needs no guide.

Quel chi dipinge li, non ha chi ‘l guida;
ma esso guida, e da lui si rammenta
quella virtù ch’e forma per l’ani.
(Pur. 16.109–11)

He that designs there has none to guide Him. He Himself guides, even as we recognize to be from Him that power which is form for the souls.

The lines acknowledge the power of God’s guiding inspiration inherent in the heavenly configuration of scripture. They also affirm such guidance by inviting the reader to think of God as the illuminator of His holy text. God is described, not only as the inspiration for the biblical text, but as the artist or illuminator who completes an ornate manuscript book. The lines literally appeal to the greater freedom customarily granted to the medieval illuminator.23 While the scribe would be expected to copy a text line by line, following the ruled page before him, the responsibility for illumination would be saved for a more experienced and trusted artist. By alluding to the process of medieval book manufacture, Dante plays with the evolving structure of his own book. While the material of the earlier canticles may be thought of as more mundane and crude, the subject matter of Paradiso warrants artistic elaboration. It is as though one’s progression through the Commedia takes one from a common manuscript to one that is richly ornamented because it is finished in Heaven.

The lines appeal to another progression as well. By comparing God’s guiding inspiration to the nesting instinct of birds, Dante also appeals to the force inherent in his earlier description of the migratory flight of cranes. Dante’s own words set before us since the first line of the Inferno comprise a migratory progression. By following the pattern of those words, readers may think of themselves as part of a body of spirits borne through stages of evolving illumination. Through vigilance and the affirmation that all personal action bears responsibility to the community, the reader’s mind is finally drawn to the heavens. Words, like birds, will find their ultimate force in the power of God’s spirit.

III

The crane topos not only tells us much about the evolving structure of the Commedia but comprises an example of Dante’s hermeneutical practice. While the figure of the crane is used as a component in the work, its incorporation also indicates how Dante approached writing
as a form of interpretation. In his recent work on narrative, Paul Ricoeur describes reading as a process that involves prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. Each time we encounter Dante's cranes we prefigure their significance through our own experience and our knowledge of the trope. In each case such prefiguration also becomes adjusted as we adopt our projected meaning to the particular context. Eventually, the way we configure the meaning of the cranes at a particular moment brings about a refiguration of the text's evolving meaning. In effect, Ricoeur's formulation describes the hermeneutical circle in which projected meaning is tested and augmented by our ongoing experience of the text.

I want to emphasize the active force of the trope by briefly comparing its use in the Commedia to a reference to migratory birds in a recent consideration of language in a phenomenological setting. In response to a paper that had surveyed Heidegger's examination of references to animals in early Greek philosophy and their bearing on “human” language, Derrida asked the author David Krell about the appearance of Zugvögel—or migratory birds—in Heidegger's writing (49). Playing on Heidegger's use of Zug (drift or pull) to describe the human tendency to become preoccupied by the inessential, Derrida's question momentarily opens another possibility that has a bearing on our discussion. Migratory birds, or Zugvögel, when used to represent writing, do not only have a negative connotation but may also describe the capacity of words to pull or draw the reader into previously unimagined meanings. Krell's response indicates such a dual significance. Referring to Heidegger's lectures on Parmenides, he noticed that here “birds fly into and show us the open, das Offene and in singing they call us and make announcements; it also says that the bird ensnare us in the open or the bird is itself ensnared—sein, the origin of the word siren. Sirens are those who ensnare” (47).

It is not an exaggeration to compare Dante's cranes to such Zugvögel, for as we follow them they play openly and finally stage Dante's idea of reading and writing. In Inferno 5, they too fly before the Pilgrim and signify their capacity to ensnare or to liberate. By surveying Dante's progressive references to cranes, we notice that they also mark an effort to extend the very idea of writing. While their configurations initially convey stories of figures who have been led astray, they ultimately set before the reader divinely illuminated signs. The cranes we have followed in this discussion show how Dante devised strategies to expand or open a narrative that Derrida would describe as logocentric. Ultimately, the crane figure does not limit the idea of writing but graphically extends it, by allowing Dante to constantly involve writing with questions of interpretative authority. Dante's poem would be a vehicle for meaning, a text where the letters crossing the page like the wealdlike patterns formed by cranes function as a lure that can ensnare or free the properly faithful reader.

My digression on Zugvögel may remind us as well of the connection between philology and philosophical hermeneutics. Curtius and Heidegger are not as distant from each other as we might think, for the simple reason that they both bear the stamp of nineteenth-century German philology. While Curtius surveys topoi within Western literature, Heidegger delineates philosophical topoi. Study of the relationship between them would make a valuable project. I want to emphasize their relation because it is far too frequently assumed that an abyss lies between their two enterprises. Theorists might look more carefully at medieval hermeneutics, just as medievalists could enhance their work by noticing how much they actually share with much critical inquiry. Dante's text is not simply a field in which to identify topoi, but a philosophical narrative that challenges readers constantly to negotiate meaning.

The trope acknowledges how words always pull the reader into negotiation and reminds us of how much of what Dante placed in the category of religion we, as descendants of the Enlightenment, place in the realm of interpretative theory. We desire to understand how meaning becomes generated through our interaction with texts, and Dante allows us to follow the progression of such meaning in abundance. The invitation to textual migration and transformation afforded by the crane topoi ultimately challenges us to negotiate meaning between two different books—the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. For neither the Pilgrim nor the reader are meaning and understanding constituted solely in one or the other. Rather, meaning and understanding are attained through the integration of the two books in the reader's own experience.

Dante's cranes challenge us to undertake a kind of dialogical migration, or to enter an evolving hermeneutical procedure, involving the construing of figures that reach backward and forward into the text. Cesare Segre has described a process by which readers orient themselves by projecting or anticipating the movement of a plot or fabula.
The discussion—which parallels Wolfgang Iser's notion of narrative blanks in interesting ways—is useful because it permits us to recognize that the plot itself is affirmed through the negotiations of smaller narrative structures. As we follow Dante's cranes, they become part of our memorizing synthesis of the Commedia's evolving narrative and contribute to its unfolding signification. The crane topos is not employed as an ornamental figure but as a constitutive metaphor. It is not a static figure drawn into the text to ornament an idea momentarily but a dynamic figure through which meaning becomes negotiated.

The crane topos attracted Dante because it figures social order and leadership intimately related to the act of writing and reading. Although the patterns perceived by the Pilgrim in Inferno tell stories of persons who have sinned, simultaneously, allusion to the wedge-like formations of cranes warns of the need for vigilance as one follows and learns from their negative examples. In Purgatorio 24 and 26, cranes reappear—but to admonish vigilance in writing and reading; although reading and interpretation appear as group activities in Inferno 5, hero writing is portrayed as an act that has a bearing on political and poetic communities as well. While one poet may momentarily lead the flock, he too must be prepared to retire and make way for new voices, whether he be Guinizelli, Arnaut, or Dante himself. The recapturing of earlier motifs of reading and writing occurs in Paradiso 18, as the Pilgrim strives to make out the text formed in the heavens by the Divine Illuminator. Here, too, the message embodied by angelic forms is intended not for the individual alone but for the whole community. But by far the most compelling message appears, not in the unfolding stages of the trope portrayed in Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, but in the configuration of the Pilgrim's entire voyage as a migration from inferno to Paradiso, in which the reader participates through reading.

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NOTES


3. See Augustine's amplification of Genesis 1:20 (Divit stian Deus: "Producit aves repteili animae viventis, et volatiles super terram sub firmamento caeli"). In Confessions 13: The words of your messengers have soared like winged things above the earth beneath the firmament of your book, for this was the authority given to them and beneath it they were to take wing wherever their journey lay. There is no word, no accent of theirs that does not make itself heard, till their utterance fills every hand, till their message reaches the ends of the world. And this is because you, O Lord, have blessed their work and multiplied it." Augustine Confessiones, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 329.


5. Benvenuto da Imola's gloss may be cited as an example. "Et hoc faciebat a simili, si come uglii sarti di riparia, id est, che surrevrent in riparia, in qua nornam techemi, quasi congrutulando a lor posura, id est, simil lententes de eorum papulis inventa, fanno di se o uella scita e tena; nam si aliquando factum de se nam simul in ordine omodum litterarum alphabetti ut dictos Lucanus; si aliquando factum de se coronum et nota quod comparantem est proprius de nihilus." For this gloss and the others referred to in the text, see La Divina Commedia, ed. C. Clagi et al., 3 vols. (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1939), vol. 3, Paradiso, pp. 422-23.


8. "Many indications of high intelligence are given by cranes. They will fly to a great distance and high up in the air, to command an extensive view; they see clouds, and signs of bad weather then fly down again and remain still. They, furthermore, have a leader in their flight, and patrols that scream on the confines of the flock so as to be heard by all. When they settle down, the main body goes to sleep with their heads under their wing, standing first on one leg and then on the other, while their leader, with his head uncovered, keeps a sharp lookout, and when he sees anything of importance signals it with a cry." Aristotle Historia animantium, trans. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, The Works of Aristotle, ed. J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919), vol. 4, bk. 9, p. 10.


14. "Gruae quippe illos significare possunt, qui in coenobii communitate vi- ventes, unius tamen ductum sequi non spement, vigillias execeunt, et pro invicem solliciti nocturnos canturn in psalmis edere non sequantur. Unde dicitur: Gruae sequatur et litterarum ordines volat. —("Certainly cranes may signify those who, living together in a monastery, do not follow a single leader. At night they practice vigilance and do not become sluggish in the singing of psalms. From whence it is said that cranes follow a single leader and fly in a lettered order.") (PL 111.244).

15. "Lapis, est Christus: res, mentis affectus. Sic enim aliqua pendulus incertis, sic mens suis affectus quis pedibus ad opus tendit. Sit quisque ad custodiam sui vel fratrum volant, ipsum in pece, id est Christum in mente portant. —("Stone is Christ: that which is in the mind of men. . . ."

16. Subsequent references will be cited directly in the text.


18. "Marchalled again in squadrons and the stern discipline of rank, they are hidden to renew the march, each in his former place and under the same leader as before. Already the first dust is rising from the earth, and arms areashed from the trees. Just as do flocks of screaming birds, the Pharao's son, winging their way across the sea from Ptolemais Helles, whether the fierce winter drove them: they fly, a shadow upon the sea and land, and their cry follows them, filling the pathless heaven. Soon will it be their delight to breathe the north wind and the rain, soon to swim on the swollen rivers, and to spend the summer days on naxus Helmos." —St. Theobald 2.8.7-14.


22. Bellini notes that the very terms specifically pertain to birds (Vocabolario universale della lingua Italiano, ed. Bernardo Bellini et al. (Mantua: Editori Fratelli
Negrelli, 1853). Occurrences of auguria in Du Cange and in the Mittelalterliches Wörterbuch (Munich: C. H. Becksche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1959) indicate that augury was firmly associated with birds in medieval Latin.


