Languages of Desire in Botticelli and Dante: Paradiso 21

Rebecca Bowen

University of Oxford

Abstract. This essay explores the multifaceted language of desire in Dante’s Paradiso through a specific lens: Sandro Botticelli’s visualization of the contemplative souls in canto 21 as a crowd of winged infants. Exploring the connotations of the visual language evoked by these figures and the figural histories with which they interact, this essay considers the ways in which Botticelli’s artistic choice validates certain lexical strands in Dante’s poem, particularly those which convey an affective and eroticized charge. Interweaving secular resonance and Christian symbolism, Botticelli’s use of winged infants is ultimately seen to present a flexible visual language that reflects the semantic range of Dante’s text, offering a metaphor for its enduringly complex, and often ambiguous, engagement with desire.

The role of desire in Dante’s Commedia is vast, running the gamut from infernally punished sin to heavenly sanctioned reward.1 Identifying the semantic implications of the terms in which Dante evokes and describes desire, let alone its ethical ramifications, is often a hermeneutical puzzle. This exercise is rendered all the more complex by the fact that the same terms are frequently employed for infernal lust (‘Amor ch’a nullo amato amar perdona,’ Inf. 5.103) and divine love (‘l’amor che move il sole e le altre stelle,’ Par. 33.145).2 This semantic range poses a particular challenge to visual mediation, as it invites the artist to settle on a reading of the text that may or may not reflect the nuances of the original. This process is further complicated by the fact that visual representations of desire also lean towards semiotic multiplicity, often requiring the viewer to establish their own interpretation of the figural systems at play in order to settle on a meaning.3 This is particularly the case for the figure of love

1 The literature is equally vast, for a start see the essays in Desire in Dante and the Middle Ages, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Tristan Kay, Elena Lombardi and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Legenda, 2012).
personified, whose modern ubiquity in the shape of the classical Cupid belies a historical ambiguity — in the European Middle Ages, Cupid could represent a spectrum of desires from demonic lust to Christ-like love.4

This essay explores the interpretative possibilities of one such potentially ambiguous visual mediation of desire: Sandro Botticelli’s choice to illustrate the blessed souls in Paradiso 21 as a flock of winged infants.5 This image raises a series of questions about Botticelli’s interpretation of Dante’s text and the flexibility of such infant figures at the time of Botticelli’s drawing. To a modern viewer, winged infants immediately recall the familiar putti: angels whose fleshy forms sprout from altarpieces and church ceilings across the world. As this essay will show, this commonplace understanding does not hold true in a historical context. Indeed, until the sixteenth century, angels were most commonly depicted as fully-grown adults, as we see them in Botticelli’s illustrations of Paradiso 28 and 29.6 Examining the connotations of winged infants at the time of Botticelli’s composition (and the figural histories with which they interacted), this essay explores the ways in which Botticelli’s illustration validates an affective, even eroticized, charge in Dante’s text, offering an enduring meditation on the complex, often ambiguous, role of desire in the Paradiso more generally.

Executed almost two centuries after the Commedia was written, Sandro Botticelli’s pen and ink illustrations were designed to accompany each canto of the poem on the same sheets of velum that displayed the text.7 Although the poem was never transcribed onto the original drawings, several of Botticelli’s illustrations were used as the basis for the engravings included in the 1481 Florentine edition of the text.8 The remaining designs for the Commedia survive

---


6 In Botticelli’s illustrations to other canti, the blessed souls are represented as adults (Paradiso 3, 4) or flames (Paradiso 6–8, 23–26). The only other illustration with winged infants is Paradiso 30, discussed below.

7 The dating of Botticelli’s illustrations is still imprecise, but their emergence in the 1480s is strongly suggested by their use as designs for the woodcuts in Nicolò di Lorenzo’s 1481 printed edition of the Commedia. See Hein-Thomas Schulze Altcappenberg, “‘Per essere persona sofistica’: Botticelli’s Drawings for the Divine Comedy’, in Sandro Botticelli: The Drawings for Dante’s Divine Comedy, ed. by Hein-Thomas Schulze Altcappenberg (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2000), pp. 13–35.

8 This much lauded publication included the commentary of the celebrated humanist Cristoforo Landino, a scholar whose deep engagement with the Medici household links him to Botticelli. For speculation on Botticelli’s knowledge of Landino’s commentary, see Angela Dressen, ‘From Dante to Landino: Botticelli’s Calumny of Apelles and its Sources’, Mitteilungen Des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz, 59 (2017) 324–39.
in their original manifestations as pen and ink drawings with silverpoint detail, now divided between the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin and the Biblioteca Vaticana in Rome.

The intricate interaction between the *canti* and the illustrations betrays a detailed study of the text on the part of the artist, a focus echoed in Vasari’s allusive comment that Botticelli ‘comentò una parte di Dante’⁹ In the case of the illustration to *Paradiso* 21, the complexity of the narrative and figural detail offers rich insight into Botticelli’s reading of the text and the fifteenth-century context in which that reading took place. Unlike in any of his earlier illustrations to *Paradiso*, in canto 21 Botticelli presents the blessed souls as a flock of winged infants (fig. 1). This detail is striking because it appears to have little to do with the text.

In canto 21, as in many other points in *Paradiso*, Dante describes the blessed as ‘tanti splendor’ (‘so many sparkling lights’, *Par.* 21.32), a visual prompt that Botticelli took up in seven other illustrations (in *Paradiso* 6–8 and 23–26) where — in line with Dante’s own use of the terms *splendor*, *faville* and *lumi* — the souls are depicted as symmetrical flames. Diversifying his use of the language of light, Dante compares the souls in *Paradiso* 21 to a flock of jackdaws, or crows, an avian simile that presents a potential launch pad for Botticelli’s flighty infants:

Beginning with the top left-hand section of Botticelli’s image, the viewer is treated to a visual experience that mirrors the description in the text relatively closely: a ladder, extending up out of the frame and beyond our sight, is flocked with bird-like figures wheeling around it. The flight of Botticelli’s winged infants clearly draws on Dante’s avian imagery, although his anthropomorphized interpretation of the pole (common, crow-like birds) does not respect the text to the letter. By turning Dante’s pole into fleshy boys, Botticelli disrupts the correspondence between his image and the most evident allegorical intent of Dante’s simile since, as centuries of commentators have pointed out, Dante’s specific selection of birds (pole) can be related to the identification of the souls in this canto as Christian contemplatives. Such plain birds were thought to invoke humility, or the solitary nature of a life dedicated to religious thought. This point of reference is relatively far removed from Botticelli’s kinetic infants, whose figural interactions suggest a level of spontaneity and play that does not precisely reflect the circling movements of the birds described in Dante’s text, identified by critics as the specific stages of contemplation discussed by various religious authorities. Why Botticelli should have chosen winged infants to capture a tone of beatitude and play, rather than following the specific depictions of contemplation embedded in Dante’s text, is not immediately clear.

10 ‘I saw a ladder, standing so / high my sight could not surmount it. / I saw, too, by the rungs descending down, / so many sparkling lights, that I thought every spark / appearing in the sky must be shining there. / And just, as is their nature, / jack-daws together, at the break of day, / move their frigid wings to warm them; / some fly off without returning, / others fly back to where they began, / and others wheeling round, remain at home; / this very movement appeared to me / in that sparkling throng which moved together, / as they jumped off from certain rungs.’


A potentially angelic status can be claimed for Botticelli’s winged infants when they are considered in light of the image’s central motif: the ladder that represents the contemplative life. This ladder is still present in both the text and the image of the next canto, *Paradiso* 22, where Dante encounters the contemplative Saint Benedict, who cites the ladder’s biblical origins when he notes that it ‘apparve d’angeli si carca’ (‘appeared laden with angels,’ *Par.* 22.72). As Heather Webb has shown, Botticelli often leans on details from adjacent *canti* to construct figural meaning in his illustrations to *Paradiso*, making the identification of the infants in *Paradiso* 21 with the term ‘angeli’, from *Paradiso* 22, a distinct possibility.

Nonetheless, the physical discrepancy between the infant-figures of *Paradiso* 21 and the depictions of angels as adults (armed with the attributes of the church militant) in *Paradiso* 28 and 29 suggests that Botticelli did not intend these infants to be understood simply as *angeli*, a categorization which Dante himself does not assign to the souls in this canto and which is, moreover, presented as a doctrinal matter governed by religious texts in Dante’s discussion of the hierarchy of angelic forms in *canti* 28 and 29. The translation of this nomenclature into a note from the artist’s hand in the margin of Botticelli’s illustration to *Paradiso* 28 suggests that the artist took this structure seriously, perhaps responding to Dante’s claim that the order was the result of a divine revelation (*Par.* 28.136–39).

Botticelli’s employment of winged infants thus displays a figural flexibility that is mapped onto the biblical model of Jacob’s ladder (‘di angeli si carca,’ *Par.* 22.72), but remains distinct from it, by not entering into a discussion of angelic types. In this way, Botticelli’s figures are free to respond to multiple elements in the text. In fact, the composition of Botticelli’s illustrations in the 1490s places his infant-angels at a very interesting, if indeterminate, period of their figural history. The depiction of infants was on the rise in fifteenth-century religious art, however the apotheosis of the infant-putti ascends to the status of ubiquity in altarpieces such as Titian’s *Assumption of the Virgin* (1515–16), in the *Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari* in Venice. Before the turn of the century, such figures remained largely classicizing, as we find them in the work of Donatello where they are employed as visual citations in the decorative borders of larger artworks, a practice which then became commonplace.

Winged infants also appear as eroticizing features in late fifteenth-century

---

13 This is a vernacularization of the biblical passage: ‘angeli quoque Dei ascendentes et descendentes per eam’ (‘with angels ascending and descending by it’), *Genesis* 28:12.
humanist compositions, such as Mantegna’s paintings for the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este and his earlier, equally secular, frescoes in the Camera Degli Sposi of the Ducal Palace in Mantua.\textsuperscript{17}

These potentially secularizing, if not actively classicizing, connotations of winged infants in fifteenth-century visual culture invite us to explore the relationship between Botticelli’s image and Dante’s text from a different angle.\textsuperscript{18} At the start of the canto, for example, Beatrice draws on the classical myth of Semele to warn Dante about the potency of her smile, cautioning him that if he were to behold it at this point in his spiritual journey he would be utterly destroyed. This secular reference to an erotic tale places Dante in the role of Jove’s mortal, female lover. It also casts the Christological power of Beatrice in decisively pagan garb, while simultaneously conveying the Christianized message of the canto: that attempting to overreach the bounds of mortal contemplation is an impossible and potentially sinful act.\textsuperscript{19}

The tension between the upward trajectory of the narrative and the limitations of Dante’s capacity at this point in the text is manifested in Botticelli’s image through the intricate interactions of the central figures.\textsuperscript{20} Beatrice’s raised left arm guides the gaze up to the top of the plane, where Dante’s eyes seem to follow, even as her right hand forms a countermovement with his raised arm, directing away from the ladder. These movements are inscribed in Beatrice’s pose, as she turns half towards the ladder and half back to Dante, the swirling hem of her garment contrasting with the stillness of Dante’s robe. A ‘hypothetical’ Beatrice, in the shadowy lines of silverpoint, ascends the ladder above them, gazing back at the figures below: a premonition of the journey they will take, perhaps, or a manifestation of her warning that Dante is not ready to fully behold her beauty on a higher plane.\textsuperscript{21}

This interplay between movement and stasis is also visible in Botticelli’s winged infants, many of whom are depicted in half-finished graphite, experimenting with poses that seem to be brought to fruition in the twisting limbs of their inked brothers. The playfulness of these compositions reflects the symbolic syncretism of the scene, embodying the classicizing tone of the

\textsuperscript{17} Stephen Campbell, The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{18} The debate around the language of desire in Dante’s Paradiso is vast. For two indicative (and opposing) views, see Regina Psaki, ‘Love for Beatrice: Transcending Contradiction in the Paradiso’; and Lino Pertile, ‘Does the Stilnovo Go to Heaven?’, both in Dante for the New Millennium, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini and Wayne Storey (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 115–30 and pp. 104–14.


\textsuperscript{20} Webb, ‘Botticelli’s Illustrations’, refers to this dynamic elsewhere in the Paradiso illustrations as the: ‘asymmetries between Dante’s limited capacity to see and to understand and Beatrice’s divinely participatory capacity,’ 203.

\textsuperscript{21} ‘Ché la bellezza mia, che per le scale / de l’eterno palazzo più s’accende, / com’ hai veduto’ (‘since my beauty burns brighter with each step to the eternal palace, as you have seen’), Par. 21.7–8.
opening reference to the myth of Semele, while also enacting a sense of joy in the depiction of beatitude that validates the spiritual tone of the text, even as it draws on an ambiguously secular visual lexicon. Several terms present throughout the text of the canto feed into this atmosphere, suggesting that Botticelli’s imagery can be related to the discourse of desire unfolding in the poem. First, and most notably, is the use of the keyword amor/amore.

Identifying Peter Damian’s presence before he speaks, Dante notes: “Io veggio ben l’amor che tu m’accenne” (‘I see clearly the love that you show me,’ Par. 21.45). This lexicon is echoed and intensified by Peter Damian who explains to Dante that the love perceived in him is indicative of the divine love suffused throughout paradise, employing a notion of burning that is frequently related to the experience of beatitude, but that is also an indelible attribute of earthly lust: “nè più amor mi fece esser più presta; / chè più e tanto amor quinci su ferve, / si come il fiammeggiar ti manifesta” (‘nor did more love make me faster; because more and just as much love burns above, as the flaming here displays to you.’ Par. 21.67–69). In his response to Peter Damian, Dante acknowledges libero amore (‘free love,’ Par. 21.74) as the root of the blessed souls’ ability to act in accordance with divine will, and culminates the use of that lexicon in this canto by directly referring to Peter Damian’s soul as love, framing his speech as that of amor: ‘poi rispouse l’amor che v’era dentro’ (‘the love that was within responded to me,’ Par. 21.82).

The presence of the Christian signifier caritas (‘l’alta carità [...] sorteggia qui si come tu osserve,’ Par. 21.70; 72) roots these exchanges in the Christian context of the canto, however the semantic range of amor does not altogether lose its earthly referents, as the presence of more overtly erotic language reminds us. For example, before his conversation with Peter Damian, Dante’s desire to question the Saint is encouraged by Beatrice who tells the pilgrim to resolve his ‘hot desire’: ‘solvi il tuo caldo disio’ (Par. 21.51). The eroticism of this statement is channelled into the religious context of the setting but not cancelled out by it. Returning to Botticelli’s image with an awareness of this amorous, if not at times vaguely erotic, undertone, the infant figures take on a different cast, turning from specific manifestations of blessed souls into more flexible visual ciphers, capable of occupying the classical name of amores (loves, or even Cupids) and playing out multiple referents. The hairsbreadth of distance between Dante’s raised right hand and the foot of the infant above him, for example, presents a tantalizing proximity that increases the suggestive symbolism of the winged figures who, in this context, could represent Dante’s own caldo disio — as hot as Semele’s scorching by her divine lover — as well as general joy of beatitude and contemplation.

The kinetic exuberance of the winged infants can clearly be related to the emotional charge Dante invests in the blessed in this canto, as he refers to Peter Damian as ‘nascosta / dentro alla tua letizia’ (‘hidden within your happiness,’ Par. 21.55–56), a quality echoed in Damian’s self-characterization of ‘l’allegrezza ond’io fiammeggiò’ (‘the joy with which I flame,’ Par. 21.88) and dramatized in
the image of the spirit spinning like a millstone (81). An impetus for the youth of the figures might also be located in the text as Dante frequently draws on notions of infancy to imbue his depictions of paradise with an affective charge. Such language is present at the start of canto 22 when Dante, describing his fright at a cry set up by the spirits at the end of Peter Damian’s speech, depicts himself as a child turning to a maternal Beatrice: ‘come parvol che ricorre / sempre colà dove più si confida’ (Par. 22.2–3). Notably, such language is also a prominent feature in the only other canto that Botticelli illustrated with winged infants: Dante’s entrance into the final heaven, the Empyrean, in Paradiso 30.

Describing the heaven as a river of light, Dante depicts the souls enlivening it as boisterous and inebriated, diving in and out of the waves: ‘Di tal fiumana uscian faville vive, / e d’ogni parte si mettien ne’ fiori, / [...] Poi, come inebriate dalli odori, / riprofondavan sé nel miro gurge; / e s’une intrava, un’altra n’uscia fori’ (Par. 30.64–65; 66–69). Botticelli returns to the visual language of the winged infant to render these ‘faville vive’, updating the figures from Paradiso 21 with flame-like sparks and depicting them as playfully immersed in flowering vegetation, baby bottoms emerging from open-petaled stems. While these figures represent the souls described in Dante’s text, they also display an element of the symbolic flexibility seen in the illustration to Paradiso 21, reflecting a broader notion of paradisiacal desire and the joy of beatitude. Importantly, Dante depicts his own desire to immerse himself in this river light through the language of infancy, once more rendering himself a child: ‘non è fantin che sì subito rua / col volto verso il latte, se si svegli / molto tardato dall’usanza sua / come fec’io’ (Par. 30.82–85). Whether or not Botticelli’s infant figures respond directly to the affective drive of Dante’s language of infancy, such visual mediation brings that linguistic field to the surface of the text, embodying its emotional undertone in the literal infancy of the winged figures.

The infant figures of Botticelli’s illustration can thus be seen to respond to multiple aspects of the complex poetic fabric of Dante’s poem. Constructed from a kaleidoscope of cultural impulses ranging from classical mythology to doctrinal discussion, the presence of an affective lexicon in the discourse of desire in Dante’s Paradiso is reflected and validated in Botticelli’s choice of infant figures in his illustrations to cantos 21 and 30. The cultural ambiguity

22 On the potency of infant imagery in the Commedia, see Gary Cestaro, Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), pp. 135–66.
23 ‘Like a child who runs back, always, to the one he trusts the most.’
24 ‘From this river issued forth living flames who dove on every side into the flowers [...] then, as if drunk from the scent, they dove back into the stream, and if one of them dove in another sprang out’.
25 ‘No baby sooner rushes with their mouth turned towards the milk, if they wake up much later than they’re used to, than did I’.
26 On the role of this affective charge within the eschatological system of the Commedia, see Manuele Grangolati and Francesca Southerden, ‘From Paradox to Exclusivity: Dante and Petrarch’s Lyrical Eschatologies’, in Petrarch and Boccaccio: The Unity of Knowledge in the Pre-Modern World, ed. by Igor Candido (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 129–52.
of the winged infant in the late fifteenth century, not quite an angel but also more than a classicizing citation, presents the artist with a unique figural language through which to reflect and respond to the lexical range of Dante’s text and its enduringly complex engagement with desire.