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## Pagan Gods as Figures of Speech: Dante's Use of Servius in the *Vita Nova*

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### ABSTRACT

The article sets out to show the ideological significance of the quotations from Vergil, Lucan, Horace, Homer, and Ovid found in *Vita Nova* 16 [XXV], the celebrated passage where Dante cites these poets as examples of personification in classical literature. In the quotations from Vergil's *Aeneid*, Aeolus and Juno speak to each other, and Apollo speaks to the Trojans. In his framing of the quotations, Dante appears implicitly to regard pagan deities like Aeolus, Juno, and Apollo as inanimate things, raising the question as to why the author of the *Vita Nova* understood pagan gods in terms of poetic tropes. Focusing on the Vergilian quotations, this essay argues that Servius's commentary to the *Aeneid* represents one of the major sources that might have led Dante to construe pagan deities as rhetorical personifications.

### KEYWORDS

Dante; *Vita Nova*; Servius; personification; pagan gods; Vergilian commentary

One of the most promising strands of Dante Studies – as noted by Giorgio Padoan a few decades ago – consists in attempting to pinpoint the exegetical filters through which Dante read and interpreted Vergil's *Aeneid* over the course of his intellectual career.<sup>1</sup> Scholars share the conviction that the peculiar way in which Dante viewed the author of the *Aeneid* must have determined not only his choice of Vergil as guide in the *Commedia*, but also the main structural features of the *Commedia* itself. Conspicuous traces of engagement with Vergil's text are found in the works of Dante's exile: *De vulgari eloquentia*, *Convivio*, *Monarchia*, and the epistles, alongside the *Commedia*. This kind of assessment should, however, also include the *Vita Nova*, since it is difficult to overestimate the fact that the first reference to Vergil in Dante's *oeuvre* is located at the very centre of the youthful *libello*, in paragraph 16 [xxv].<sup>2</sup> The lines from the *Aeneid* are embedded in a celebrated passage on poetics characterised by a range of highly problematic questions. In order to cast light on the exegetical assumptions that arise from the Vergilian quotations in the *Vita Nova*, it is thus indispensable to produce an accurate interpretation of their theoretical context.

After the revolutionary move to place vernacular *rimatori* on the same level as classical poets, in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv] Dante affirms that the former are authorised to use the rhetorical device of personification because of the precedent established by the latter.<sup>3</sup> As Dante points out, classical

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<sup>1</sup>See Giorgio Padoan, 'Il limbo dantesco', in his *Il pio Enea, l'empio Ulisse. Tradizione classica e intendimento medievale in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1977), pp. 103–24 (p. 105, note 29bis): 'Non mi stancherò mai di ripeterlo: perché oggi la via nuova che si apre agli studi danteschi passa necessariamente attraverso la ricostruzione di come Dante abbia letto ed inteso l'*Eneide*. È un lavoro ancora tutto da fare: ma è foriero di frutti cospicui, e condurrà ad un profondo rivolgimento esegetico e ad una reinterpretazione totale del poema sacro'.

<sup>2</sup>All references to the *Vita Nova* in this article adopt the division into paragraphs and the title proposed by Gorni in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, ed. by Guglielmo Gorni (Turin: Einaudi, 1996). I indicate the corresponding paragraph in Barbi's edition in square brackets.

<sup>3</sup>For the innovative, almost daring attribution by Dante of the Latinism *poeta* to vernacular poets, see Kevin Brownlee, 'Why the Angels Speak Italian: Dante as Vernacular Poeta in *Par. xxv*', *Poetics Today*, 5 (1984), 597–610 (pp. 602–03); Mirko Tavoni, 'Il

poets both feigned to talk to inanimate things and had inanimate things talk to one another in their works. Moreover, they did not have recourse to personification only with regard to inanimate things, but also to non-existent things and even accidents, having them speak as though they were human:

Dunque, se noi vedemo che li poete hanno parlato a le cose inanimate, sì come se avessero senso e ragione, e fattele parlare insieme; e non solamente cose vere, ma cose non vere, cioè che detto hanno, di cose le quali non sono, che parlano, e detto che molti accidenti parlano, sì come se fossero sustanzie e uomini. (VN 16. 8 [xxv. 8])<sup>4</sup>

In light of this sophisticated description of classical rhetorical practices, the reader of the *Vita Nova* might be somewhat disorientated by the examples of personification provided by Dante immediately afterwards. The first two quotations illustrating the use of personification by classical poets are taken from the *Aeneid*. With the first, Dante refers to the dialogue between Aeolus and Juno in the first book of Vergil's poem, where the enraged goddess asks the keeper of the winds to release a storm against the Trojans:

Che li poete abbiano così parlato come detto è, appare per Virgilio; lo quale dice che Iuno, cioè una dea nemica de li Troiani, parloe ad Eolo, signore de li venti, quivi nel primo de lo Eneida: *Eole, nanque tibi, e che questo signore le rispuose, quivi: Tuus, o regina, quid optes explorare labor; michi iussa capessere fas est.* (VN 16. 9 [xxv. 9])

Immediately following, the second citation from Vergil evokes the words addressed by Apollo to the Trojans in *Aeneid* III: 'Per questo medesimo poeta [Vergil] parla la cosa che non è animata [Apollo] a le cose animate [the Trojans], nel terzo de lo Eneida, quivi: *Dardanidae duri*' (Ibid.). Since Dante has previously explained that classical poets characteristically attributed the power of speech to things that in fact do not possess it, the verbs describing the acts of speech deployed for introducing the quotations from the *Aeneid* ('[Juno] parloe', '[Aeolus] rispuose', 'parla [Apollo]') confirm that Dante considers Juno, Aeolus, and Apollo to be mere figures of speech.

Yet, one may legitimately ask, how could the author of the *Vita Nova* understand pagan gods in terms of poetic tropes? The question is also pertinent with regard to some of the other quotations presented in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv]. This kind of difficulty may well not be raised by the example from Lucan, as it is quite unlikely that Dante perceived *Roma* predominantly as a goddess of the ancient Roman religion rather than in terms of the concrete city: 'Per Lucano parla la cosa animata [the poet] a la cosa inanimata [Rome], quivi: *Multum, Roma, tamen debes civilibus armis*' (VN 16. 9 [xxv. 9]). Nonetheless, the question as to why Dante interpreted the gods of ancient religion in terms of poetic personifications is certainly relevant to the last two quotations found in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv]. The Muse invoked in the quotation from Horace's *Ars poetica* (itself a translation into Latin of the first line of the *Odyssey*) is construed by Dante as a personification of the author's poetic knowledge:

Per Orazio parla l'uomo a la scienza medesima sì come ad altra persona; e non solamente sono parole d'Orazio, ma dicele quasi recitando lo modo del buono Omero, quivi ne la sua Poetria: *Dic mihi, Musa, virum.* (VN 16. 9 [xxv. 9])

The last classical example of personification put forward in this passage of the *Vita Nova* is the second verse of Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*, containing the words of protest addressed by *Amor* to the poet himself: 'Per Ovidio parla Amore, sì come se fosse persona umana, ne lo principio de lo libro ch'ha nome Libro di Remedio d'Amore, quivi: *Bella michi, video, bella parantur, ait*' (Ibid.). It is noteworthy that Dante interprets *Amor* in terms of a rhetorical device, although in fact Ovid, in the response which takes up the next 76 lines of the *Remedia Amoris*, does not overtly address the

Nome di Poeta in Dante', in *Studi offerti a Luigi Blasucci dai colleghi e dagli allievi pisani*, ed. by Lucio Lugnani, Marco Santagata, and Alfredo Stussi (Pisa: Maria Pacini Fazzi, 1996), pp. 545–77.

<sup>4</sup>The *Vita Nova* is quoted throughout from Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, ed. by Domenico De Robertis (Milan–Naples: Ricciardi, 1980), where the text follows Barbi's edition.

abstract idea of concupiscence but instead directly names the pagan god of Love, Cupid, and refers both to his mother, Venus ('tua [. . .] mater', l. 5) and to his father, Mars ('Martis', l. 6).<sup>5</sup> In short, the author of the *Vita Nova* apparently refuses to recognise any real consistency in pagan deities like the Muses and Cupid; a circumstance even more surprising when it comes to two major gods of the pagan pantheon like Juno and Apollo. It thus seems legitimate to raise the question of why Dante seems to take the rhetorical artificiality of pagan deities entirely for granted.

In the sections that follow, I will address these problems and difficulties, outlining the existing views of commentators and offering a set of alternative hypotheses to those currently prevalent in Dante Studies. The first part of this essay offers a close analysis of the quotations from the classical poets contained in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv]. New evidence will then be presented for the view that – notwithstanding Dante's typically syncretic approach – Servius's commentary to the *Aeneid* probably represented a major source for the interpretation of Vergil's lines quoted in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv].

### Pagan Gods as Inanimate Things

It is plausible that Dante's particular intellectual attitude towards pagan gods derives from the specificity of his medieval cultural environment. As a first step in the investigation, we can turn to the modern commentaries on the *Vita Nova*, since commentaries all seek to explain a literary text in the light of its specific cultural context. This commentary tradition proves to offer two possible reasons why, in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv], Dante could have treated the pagan gods evoked by ancient poets as rhetorical personifications; neither of which, in my view, provides a thoroughly satisfactory solution. The first explanation is also the most natural and apparently self-evident: as a Christian poet, Dante did not believe in the existence of pagan deities. This interpretation seems to be supported by the letter of the *Vita Nova* itself, in particular by the passage in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv] where Dante affirms that classical poets attributed the power of speech not only to inanimate things but also to non-existent things ('cose non vere [. . .] le quali non sono', VN 16. 8 [xxv. 8]), including for instance accidental properties ('molti accidenti').<sup>6</sup> According to this hypothesis, the gods alluded to by Vergil, Horace, Homer, and Ovid were deemed, by Dante the Christian poet, to be nothing but personifications of non-existent things.

And yet this explanation is contradicted by the fact that, in introducing the quotation from the third book of the *Aeneid* involving Apollo, Dante refers to this pagan god not as a non-existent, but as an inanimate thing. Apollo is defined as 'la cosa che non è animata' (VN 16. 9 [xxv. 9]),<sup>7</sup> namely something which – according to scholastic categories – is a real substance, albeit not a living

<sup>5</sup>I quote the *Remedia Amoris* from Ovid, *Remedia Amoris* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010).

<sup>6</sup>See *La Vita Nuova di Dante*, ed. by Michele Scherillo (Milan: Hoepli, 1911), p. 181. In his commentary, Scherillo considers Juno non-existent while supposing Aeolus to be inanimate: 'Giunone, persona non vera [. . .] parla con Eolo, ch'è cosa inanimata'. The same position is taken by Tommaso Casini in *La Vita Nuova di Dante Alighieri*, ed. by Tommaso Casini (Florence: Sansoni, 1885), p. 140: 'La prima delle citazioni virgilliane si riferisce alle parole che Giunone cioè cosa che non è disse ad Eolo cosa inanimata'; and by Stefano Carrai in *Il primo libro di Dante. Un'idea della 'Vita nova'*, ed. by Stefano Carrai (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009), p. 124: 'detto, come le parole precedenti, da Giunone a Eolo, cioè da persona non vera a cosa inanimata (il vento)'. The edition of Casini's commentary to the *Vita Nova* by Luigi Pietrobono adopts instead the reading of both Juno and Aeolus as inanimate things (the interpretation I also embrace in this study): 'La prima delle citazioni virgilliane si riferisce alle parole che Giunone, cosa inanimata, una pura personificazione dell'aria, disse ad Eolo, personificazione della forza dei venti': Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, ed. by Luigi Pietrobono and Tommaso Casini, 3rd edn (Florence: Sansoni, 1946), p. 92; Juno and Aeolus are also construed as inanimate things by Domenico De Robertis: Dante Alighieri, *Il libro della Vita Nuova*, ed. by Domenico De Robertis (Milan–Naples: Ricciardi, 1980), p. 176. Both Juno and Aeolus are non-existent according to Gorni, p. 153: 'sono dunque cose non vere'; of the same opinion as Gorni on this point is Donato Pirovano in *Vita Nuova. Rime*, ed. by Donato Pirovano and Marco Grimaldi (Rome: Salerno, 2015), p. 213.

<sup>7</sup>The thorny exegetical difficulties posed by the classical quotations in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv] are exemplified by an observation found in Casini's commentary. Drawing on Carducci, he detects a contradiction in Dante's description of Apollo as an inanimate instead of a non-existent thing: 'E si osservi col Card. che Febo sarebbe, secondo i termini danteschi, cosa che non è, come Giunone, e invece è detto cosa inanimata' (Casini, p. 141). Instead, Apollo is implicitly considered as an inanimate thing in Pietrobono and Casini, p. 93: 'parla Febo, personificazione del sole, ai Troiani'; Carrai also interprets Apollo as the sun (*Il primo libro di Dante*, p. 124). Scherillo had attempted to solve the apparent incongruity of Apollo being defined as 'cosa inanimata' instead of 'cosa non vera' by referring to the episode in Vergil's text where the Trojans hear nothing but a voice coming from

substance like an animal or a human being. Applying a principle of consistent exegesis, it seems appropriate to extend this understanding of Apollo to Juno and Aeolus in the first quotation by Vergil (this conclusion is also supported by evidence from another perspective that will be discussed below). Like Apollo, in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv] Juno and Aeolus are conceived not as non-existent or accidental, but as inanimate things.

This interpretation allows us to appreciate better the symmetry informing the concise anthology of classical examples of personifications presented by Dante. The first quotation from Vergil is meant to be an example of an inanimate thing (Juno) speaking to another inanimate thing (Aeolus). The second quotation from Vergil sets out an example of an inanimate thing (Apollo) speaking to animate things (the Trojans). The quotation from Lucan complements the second example, as we have an animate thing (the poet) speaking to an inanimate thing (Rome).

With the quotations from Horace and Ovid we move from the realm of the inanimate to that of the non-existent, i.e., to accidental things. In expounding the words from Horace's *Ars poetica*, Dante seems to imply that the Muse is the personification of an accidental property (the poetic ability) of a substance (the poet himself): 'Per Orazio parla l'uomo a la scienza medesima' (VN 16. 9 [xxv. 9]). Even if Dante is not explicit about the nature of the quotation from Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*, it seems plausible to interpret *Amore* as a personification of a non-existent, i.e., accidental thing: the carnal desire affecting human beings. If these deductions are correct, in the last two quotations we have examples, respectively, of an animate thing (the poet) speaking to a non-existent thing (poetic science), and of a non-existent thing (Love itself) speaking to an animate thing (the poet).

The quotations from the classical authors in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv] thus appear to be organised in a strategic and symmetrically calculated way. In line with the order established in the introduction to the brief *compilatio* of *auctoritates* found in *Vita Nova* 16. 8 [xxv. 8], where Dante refers first to inanimate things and secondly to non-existent, i.e., accidental things, the quotations are divided into two groups. The former gathers three types of personification involving inanimate things (inanimate speaking to inanimate; inanimate speaking to animate; animate speaking to inanimate), while the latter groups together two types of personification involving non-existent, i.e., accidental things (that which is animate speaking to a non-existent thing; a non-existent thing speaking to an animate thing).<sup>8</sup> In short, according to the terminology deployed by Dante in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv], one can claim the non-existence (i.e., accidentality) solely of the Muse and of Love, since Juno, Aeolus, Apollo, and Rome are patently meant to be personifications of inanimate things.

Even though they quote the text of the *Vita Nova* itself with regard to the 'cose non vere', modern commentators seem to suggest that Dante simply did not believe in the reality of pagan deities on the grounds of his Christian faith alone. To support this argument, some of them refer to a famous line from the *Commedia*: 'nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi' (*Inf.* I, 72).<sup>9</sup> With these words, Vergil, introducing himself to Dante, explains how he lived during the time of paganism, that is, before the incarnation of Christ. According to several commentators, this line provides evidence of the fact

the *cella* of the temple: 'Parla Febo [...]; che qui Dante considera come *cosa che non è animata*, dacchè in realtà del Dio non si sente se non la voce misteriosa di dietro la cortina del tempio' (Scherillo, p. 182).

<sup>8</sup>Gorni pinpoints a different structure in the set of *auctoritates* cited in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv] (see Gorni, pp. 152–53). Not distinguishing between personifications of inanimate things and those of non-existent things, he divides the quotations into three groups: inanimate things speaking to inanimate things (Juno speaking to Aeolus); inanimate things speaking to animate things (Apollo speaking to the Trojans); and animate things speaking to inanimate things (the examples from Lucan, Horace, and Ovid). But, even setting aside the essential differentiation that needs to be made between the concepts of inanimate and accidental, I wonder how the example from the *Remedia Amoris* can be supposed to fit into the third category put forward by Gorni (animate things speaking to inanimate things), given that, in the quotation from Ovid, Love – an inanimate thing in Gorni's terminology – is depicted in the act of speaking to the poet and not the other way around. A further categorisation is proposed without explanation by Marco Berisso, 'Per una definizione di prosopopea: Dante, *Convivio* III, ix, 2', *Lingua e stile*, 26 (1991), 121–32 (p. 123): 'le citazioni si dispongono secondo una casistica il più esaustiva possibile (inesistente parla ad inesistente, inanimato ad animato, animato ad inanimato, animato ad inesistente, inesistente ad animato)'.

<sup>9</sup>See for example Scherillo, p. 181; Gorni, p. 153; Pirovano, p. 213. Here and throughout, I cite the *Commedia* from Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica Vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–1967).

that Dante understood Juno and Aeolus as personifications of non-existent things. However, analysis of this verse of the *Commedia* shows, on the contrary, that medieval philosophers and poets were disposed to attribute a higher grade of existence to pagan gods than we tend to suppose.

In effect, as noted by many scholars, as well as by nearly all commentaries to the *Commedia*,<sup>10</sup> the definition of pagan deities as ‘dèi falsi e bugiardi’ represents the vernacular rendering of a typical formula by Augustine, ‘falsi et fallaces’, which occurs repeatedly in the *De Civitate Dei* (see for example I. 29: ‘falsos ac fallaces deos’).<sup>11</sup> In this respect, it is worth noting that, in his *magnum opus*, Augustine does not assert the unreality of pagan gods. In fact, assuming a more radical apologetic stance, he instead maintains that the deities worshipped by the pagans were evil demons akin to those mentioned in the Bible.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Augustine proposed that the pagan gods were characterised by a marked – albeit malicious – subjectivity (see for example *De Civitate Dei* VII. xxxiii). Such an interpretation of pagan gods was widely accepted and diffused in the Middle Ages, appearing in widespread and influential encyclopaedic works such as Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* (VIII. xi).

Alluding to the Augustinian formula ‘falsi et fallaces’ in *Inf.* I, 72, Dante most probably shared the belief that pagan gods were evil spiritual beings. If one considers this aspect, one cannot use the Augustinian expression ‘dèi falsi e bugiardi’ to demonstrate that Dante deemed Juno, Aeolus, and Apollo to be non-existent. In sum, the first solution indicated by scholars to the problem of Dante’s interpretation of pagan deities as figures of speech – consisting in declaring them unreal according to the letter of both the *Vita Nova* and the *Inferno* – seems ultimately to be untenable.

## Fulgentius and Macrobius

Given the fact that – on Augustine’s trail – pagan deities were considered substantial evil spirits throughout the Middle Ages, the question as to why Dante understood Juno, Aeolus, Apollo, the Muses, and Cupid as mere rhetorical personifications appears even more perplexing. Useful elements for the problem’s solution can be identified within the framework of the second explanatory strategy adopted by commentaries to the *Vita Nova*.

According to this second hypothesis, which draws on an exegetical tradition supposedly founded by Fulgentius in the mid-sixth century AD,<sup>13</sup> Dante interpreted pagan gods in terms of natural elements.<sup>14</sup> Following this interpretation, Juno would correspond to the air, Aeolus to the wind, and

<sup>10</sup>See for example Carlo Calcaterra, ‘Sant’Agostino nelle opere di Dante e del Petrarca’, *Rivista di Filosofia neo-scolastica*, spec. supp. 23 (1931), 422–99 (p. 440); Pietro Chioccioni, *L’Agostinismo nella Divina Commedia* (Florence: Olschki, 1952), p. 44; Robert Hollander, ‘Dante’s Reluctant Allegiance to St. Augustine in the *Commedia*’, *L’Alighieri*, 32 (2008), 5–16 (p. 12). The presence in *Inf.* I, 72 of an allusion to the Augustinian definition of pagan deities is pointed out in nearly every commentary since Benvenuto da Imola, who first referred to Augustine’s doctrine of the demonic nature of pagan gods in the glosses to this line.

<sup>11</sup>I quote *De Civitate Dei* from Saint Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. by George E. McCracken (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); translated in this edition as ‘the falsified and falsifying gods’. The cases in which the pagan gods are described separately as false or wicked deities in the *De Civitate Dei* are quite numerous (see for example *City of God* II. xviii, xxv, xxix, IV. i, vii, xx, xxxiii, xxxiv, v. xii, *Preface* to VI, vii, xxi).

<sup>12</sup>On Augustine’s demonology see at least Frederick Van Fleteren, ‘Demons (*daemones*)’, in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Allan D. Fitzgerald and John C. Cavadini (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 266–68; Frederick Van Fleteren, ‘Devil (*diabolus*)’, in *Augustine through the Ages*, pp. 268–69; and Irena Backus, ‘Demons’, in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, ed. by Karla Pollman and Willemien Otten, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), II, 867–70 (p. 868). See also Sabine MacCormack, *The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 161 and 174.

<sup>13</sup>On the date of Fulgentius, see Gregory Hays, ‘The Date and Identity of the Mythographer Fulgentius’, *The Journal of Medieval Latin*, 13 (2003), 163–252. For the influence on Dante of exegetical practices going back to Fulgentius, see at least Ubaldo Pizzani, ‘Fulgencio, Fabio Planciade’, in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, 6 vols (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1971), III, 71–72; Sebastiano Italia, *Dante e l’Esegesi virgilliana. Tra Servio, Fulgencio e Bernardo Silvestre* (Acireale–Rome: Bonanno, 2012), pp. 67–79 and 93–103; Saverio Bellomo, ‘“Or sè tu quel Virgilio?”: ma quale Virgilio?’, *L’Alighieri*, 47 (2016), 5–18 (pp. 9–10).

<sup>14</sup>See Pietrobono and Casini, p. 92; Gianfranco Contini, *Letteratura italiana delle origini* (Florence: Sansoni, 1970), p. 325, the first to refer to Fulgentius; De Robertis, p. 176; see also Antonio D’Andrea, ‘L’allegoria dei Poeti. Nota a *Convivio* II. I’, in *Dante e le Forme dell’Allegoresi*, ed. by Gian Carlo Alessio and Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo, 1987), pp. 71–78 (p. 75); Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, ed. by Marcello Cicuto and Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan: Rizzoli, 1984), p. 198; Gorni, p. 153; Pirovano, p. 213.

Apollo to the sun. These interpretations of pagan deities are actually not found in Fulgentius's commentary to the *Aeneid* (*Expositio virgilianae continentiae*), but rather in his *Mythologiarum Libri Tres*, a sort of handbook containing various explanations of mythological narratives. In fact, working on the general assumption that Vergil's poem allegorically describes the different stages of human life, Fulgentius in his *Expositio* interprets the tempest unleashed by Juno and Aeolus against the Trojans as an allegory of the perils of birth. In this sense, while Juno is construed as the goddess of childbirth ('Nam ut evidentiis hoc intellegas, a Iunone, quae dea partus est, hoc naufragium generatur'),<sup>15</sup> Aeolus, on the basis of a supposed Greek etymology, is interpreted as a destructive force inherent in the material world. No interpretation of Apollo is found in the section of Fulgentius's *Expositio* dealing with *Aeneid* III (the source for Dante's third example of personification in the *Vita Nova*). However, in the part devoted to Book VI, Apollo is expounded in terms of the knowledge reached by human beings at adulthood. In short, Fulgentius's commentary to Vergil's *Aeneid* does not offer any interpretation of the pagan deities evoked by Dante (Juno, Aeolus, and Apollo) in terms of natural elements.

As mentioned above, however, this exegetical strategy is instead adopted in Fulgentius's *Mythologiae*, where one may find the interpretation of both Juno as the air and Apollo as the sun. The former is touched on in the third *Mythologia* of the first book, entitled *De Iove et Iunone*: 'secundam Iunonem quasi aerem, unde et Era Grece dicitur';<sup>16</sup> the latter in the *Fabula Apollinis*, the twelfth of the first book: 'Apollinem solem dici voluerunt'.<sup>17</sup> In his *Commentary on the 'Dream of Scipio'*, Macrobius (fourth to fifth century AD) also presents an interpretation of Juno as the air (I. xvii. 15).<sup>18</sup> The explanation of Juno as the air is also adopted in two passages of Macrobius's *Saturnalia* (I. xv. 20 and I. xvii. 54). In the *Saturnalia*, moreover, Macrobius often refers to the natural-scientific interpretation of Apollo as the sun.<sup>19</sup>

The interpretation of Juno, Aeolus, and Apollo as natural elements fits perfectly into the structural scheme of the Dantean list of quotations from classical authors set out above. In fact, Dante seems to construe the pagan deities evoked in the verses by Vergil as inanimate things. Yet I consider it unlikely that the author of the *Vita Nova* drew the notion of pagan gods as natural elements exclusively from Macrobius, or from Fulgentius's *Mythologiae* or the allegorical tradition descending from it, i.e., that represented by the three Vatican Mythographers. This is because the question raised by *Vita nova* 16 [xxv] concerns, not why Dante thought of the pagan gods as personifications – as generally supposed by all the *Vita Nova* commentators –, but rather how it was that Dante thought that Vergil, Lucan, Horace, and Ovid themselves construed pagan deities in terms of mere figures of speech.

<sup>15</sup> I cite the *Expositio* from Fabii Planciadis Fulgentii, *Opera*, ed. by Rudolf Helm (reprint, Stuttgart: Teubner, 1970), pp. 83–107 (p. 91). Translation taken from Fulgentius, *Expositio Virgilianae Continentiae secundum Philosophos Moralis*, in *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, ed. and trans. by Leslie George Whitbread (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971), pp. 103–53 (p. 125): 'To let you understand this more clearly, the shipwreck is engineered by Juno, who is the goddess of birth'. For the allegorical shift in the interpretation of Vergil brought about by Fulgentius's *Expositio*, see Harrison Cadwallader Coffin, 'Allegorical Interpretation of Vergil with Special Reference to Fulgentius', *The Classical Weekly*, 15.5 (1921), 33–35. On Fulgentius, see also Ferruccio Bertini, 'Fulgenzio', in *Enciclopedia virgiliana*, 6 vols (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1985), II, pp. 603–05.

<sup>16</sup> I cite the *Mythologiae* from Fulgentius, *Opera*, pp. 3–80 (p. 18). Translation taken from Fulgentius, *Mitologiarum Libri Tres*, in *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, pp. 13–102 (p. 50): 'Second is Juno, for air, whence she is called Hera in Greek'.

<sup>17</sup> Fulgentius, *Mythologiae*, p. 23. 'They chose Apollo for the name of the sun', Fulgentius, *Mitologiarum Libri*, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> A copy of the *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* was probably present in the library of Santa Croce during the last years of the thirteenth century: see Giuseppina Brunetti and Sonia Gentili, 'Una Biblioteca nella Firenze di Dante: i manoscritti di Santa Croce', in *Testimoni del vero. Su alcuni Libri in biblioteche d'autore*, ed. by Emilio Russo (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), pp. 21–55 (pp. 36–38). For the circulation of Macrobius's *Commentarii* in Italy up to the age of Dante see Federico Rossi, 'Circolazione e ricezione di Macrobio nell'età di Dante: dai *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* alla *Commedia*', *Studi danteschi*, 82 (2017), 167–246; see also Albrecht Hüttig, *Macrobius im Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zur Rezeptionsgeschichte der 'Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis'* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., *Saturnalia* I. xvii. 19, 22, 30, 56, xviii. 7–8, 19, xxi. 13, xxiii. 13. It seems that only Books II and VII of the *Saturnalia* enjoyed a relatively wide circulation in Tuscany until the third decade of the fourteenth century: see Federico Rossi, "'Poema sacro" tra Dante e Macrobio: una verifica sulla tradizione italiana dei *Saturnalia*', *L'Alighieri*, 49 (2017), 29–51 (pp. 34–42).

In affirming that he was making recourse to personification on the grounds that the classical authors did the same, Dante thus indirectly assumes that classical poets were well aware of using personifications in their poems. If the classical authors applied the figure of personification by having pagan gods speaking *as if* they were animate, they must necessarily have already thought of those pagan deities in terms of inanimate or non-existent things. In other words, Vergil must have believed that Juno, Aeolus, and Apollo were nothing but natural elements, in order for him to be consciously using a personification.

This line of reasoning is notably supported by the passage in *Vita nova* 16 [xxv] in which Dante rebukes some unnamed vernacular poets for being incapable of explaining their own figures of speech, as opposed to the classical authors indicated as *auctoritates*: ‘E acciò che non ne pigli alcuna baldanza persona grossa, dico che *né li poete parlavano così senza ragione, né quelli che rimano deono parlare così non avendo alcuno ragionamento in loro di quello che dicono*’ (VN 16. 10 [xxv. 10]: emphasis mine). Dante thus argues that the classical poets would have been able to illustrate not just the textual justification but also the philosophical meaning of their rhetorical practices: Vergil, if requested, would have been able to explain that the Juno, Aeolus, and Apollo were mere personifications in his poetry.

It may seem risky to infer such momentous conclusions about a medieval text solely from logical argument. In fact, one could object that medieval interpreters were accustomed to performing exegetical acrobatics, tending, without inhibition, to project their own worldview and their own cultural categories onto the texts they interpreted. Yet I think that this cannot be the case with respect to the metaliterary digression of the *Vita Nova*. If Dante were attributing his own cultural paradigm to the classical poets he cites, the whole of paragraph 16 [xxv] would be a glaring tautology. In fact, Dante in that case would be indicating the texts of classical authors as models for vernacular poets after having surreptitiously attributed to the former the same cultural categories as the latter. Such a logical failure would be unforgivable in a context in which Dante is attempting to show, through syllogistically structured arguments, that vernacular poets should be able to underpin their poetry with profoundly logical and philosophical understanding. Although Dante’s conception of Antiquity may arguably have been less differentiated than that of later humanists, it is equally implausible that he lacked any consciousness of the differences between Antiquity and his own time, especially in light of the fact that paragraph 16 [xxv] in its entirety seems to be firmly built on the – at least supposed – awareness of such dissimilarities.

Nevertheless, one may justifiably ask how Dante could be convinced that Vergil, Lucan, Horace, and Ovid considered the gods of their religion to be nothing but natural elements or even accidental properties of things. This is a significant question, entailing the problem of how Dante thought about the religious beliefs of ancient poets. Might he have believed that they denied the existence of pagan deities, being somehow Christians *ante litteram*? Before considering such an extreme and somewhat implausible assumption, one should in my view seek to discover whether there were any cultural sources that might have supported Dante in developing this sort of conviction.

Both Macrobius’s works and Fulgentius’s *Mythologiae* are, in my opinion, unsuitable for such consideration. In fact, contrary to what has been affirmed by commentators of the *Vita Nova* since Contini, the *Mythologiae* are not an original and groundbreaking work, but rather a syncretistic collection of older mythological interpretations.<sup>20</sup> It seems, for instance, emblematic of their anthological nature that, after having interpreted Juno as the air in the second book of his *Mythologiae*, Fulgentius should expound the same goddess as the deity of the active life and of wealth as well as of childbirth. What is more, as he himself writes in his *Expositio* to Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Fulgentius was a Christian mythographer and, as such, he is quite unlikely to have been viewed by Dante as a leading authority on the religiosity of classical poets (even though Fulgentius’s Vergil professes to be a pagan in chapter 24 of the *Expositio*, rejecting Christian interpretation of his epic). Finally, limiting the discourse to Vergil, neither the *Mythologiae* nor Macrobius would have offered

<sup>20</sup>On the syncretic nature of Fulgentius’s *Mythologiae*, see Bertini, p. 603.

Dante any support for attributing the generic interpretation of Juno, Aeolus, and Apollo as natural elements directly to the author of the *Aeneid*.

### Servius and Bernardus Silvestris

Instead, such support could have been provided by the commentary tradition to Vergil's poem, in as much as each commentary implicitly recognises the root of its own interpretation in the deliberate intention of the author himself. A commentary, in short, automatically claims to reveal – at least to some degree – the *intentio auctoris* underlying the literary work on which it comments.

In light of these considerations, it seems possible that Dante found the interpretation of Juno and Apollo as natural elements in the most authoritative commentary to Vergil's *Aeneid* – that by the late fourth- and early fifth-century grammarian, Servius. Servius expounds Juno as the air in notes to three different lines of the first book: line 47 ('*physici Iovem aetherem, id est ignem volunt intellegi, Iunonem vero aërem, et quoniam tenuitate haec elementa paria sunt, dixerunt esse germana. Sed quoniam Iuno, hoc est aër subiectus est igni, id est Iovi, iure superposito elemento mariti traditum nomen est*');<sup>21</sup> line 71 ('*non sine ratione Iuno nymphas dicitur sua potestate retinere; ipsa est enim aër, de quo nubes creantur*');<sup>22</sup> and line 78 ('*rediit ad physicam rationem. Nam motus aëris, id est Iunonis, ventos creat, quibus Aeolus praeest*').<sup>23</sup>

In considering a possible influence of Servius on Dante, it seems worth noting that the Vergilian lines 71 and 78 from *Aeneid* I – two of those on which Servius expounds Juno as the air – are quite close to the lines, also from the *Aeneid*'s first book, directly cited by Dante in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv], namely the opening words of Juno's address to Aeolus at line 65, and those of Aeolus' response to Juno at 76–77.<sup>24</sup> The interpretation of Apollo as the sun is presented in Servius's commentary to the third book of the *Aeneid*: in the glosses to line 73 ('*post diem, quem sol efficit, que est Apollo*'),<sup>25</sup> as well as to line 93 ('*ipse [Apollo] est enim et Sol et Liber pater*').<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, in this case too, the interpretation of the pagan god as a natural element is found in a note to a line (*Aeneid* III. 93) that is very close to that cited by Dante (*Aeneid* III. 94–96). The same explanation of Apollo as the sun then returns in the commentary to lines 78 ('*idem enim est Apollo, qui Liber pater, qui Sol*') and 79 ('*Phoebus, id est Sol*') of the sixth book.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Maurus Servius Honoratus, *Commentarius in Virgilio Aeneidos libros*, ed. by Georg Thilo and Hermann Hagen, 2 vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1881–1884), I. 32 (emphasis mine). 'Natural philosophers interpret Jupiter as the ether or the fire, while construing Juno as the air, and since those elements are equal with respect to thinness, they said that Jupiter and Juno were brother and sister. But as Juno (i.e., air) is subject to fire (i.e., Jupiter), the name of husband was properly attributed to the superimposed element' (all translations from this work are my own). For the notes in which Servius interprets pagan gods in terms of natural forces, thereby having recourse to the 'physical allegorism', see Julian Ward Jones Jr., 'Allegorical Interpretation in Servius', *The Classical Journal*, 5 (1961), 219–20. In relation to Dante, I only take into consideration the shorter vulgate text of Servius' commentary, without the additions published by P. Daniel in 1600, which were little known during the Middle Ages: see Guglielmo Gorni, 'Circe nel canto di Ulisse ("Inferno" xxvi)', in his *Guido Cavalcanti. Dante e il suo primo amico* (Rome: Aracne, 2009), pp. 107–25 (p. 115); Giuseppe Ramires, 'Il testo delle aggiunte danieline nel Servio Ambrosiano di Petrarca', *Studi Petrarqueschi*, 15 (2002), 25–49. For the possible influence of Servius's commentary on the *Commedia*, see Giuseppe Ramires, 'Commento di Servio al libro VI dell'Eneide: Citazioni filosofiche e Memoria di Dante', *Bollettino di italianistica*, 2 (2010), 20–34, and for previous secondary literature on Servius' possible influence on the *Commedia*, see p. 21 note 4. For Servius, see also Giorgio Brugnoli, 'Servio', in *Enciclopedia virgilliana*, IV, pp. 805–13. For the reception of Servius's commentary through the centuries, see *Servius et sa réception de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, ed. by Bruno Méniel, Monique Bouquet, and Giuseppe Ramires (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011).

<sup>22</sup>Servius, *Commentarius in Aeneidos*, I. 40 (emphasis mine): 'Not without reason Juno is said to exert her power over the nymphs, since she is the air, of which the clouds are made up'.

<sup>23</sup>Servius, *Commentarius in Aeneidos*, I. 43 (emphasis mine): 'Here the poet reverts to the physical way of explanation. In fact, the movement of the air, i.e., Juno, creates the winds, which are under the control of Aeolus'.

<sup>24</sup>The interpretation of Juno as the air also emerges in Servius' glosses to other passages of the *Aeneid*: IV. 122, 166, VII. 311, VIII. 454, XII. 139, as well as Servius' note to *Georgics* II. 325. The linkage between the quotations from the *Aeneid* in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv] and the commentary tradition to Vergil's poem with particular reference to Servius' glosses to *Aeneid* I. 65–76 and I. 664 is touched upon by Zygmunt G. Barański, 'Sulla formazione intellettuale di Dante: alcuni problemi di definizione', *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, 90 (2015), 31–54 (p. 46).

<sup>25</sup>Servius, *Commentarius in Aeneidos*, I. 352: 'after the day, which is brought about by the sun, i.e., Apollo'.

<sup>26</sup>Servius, *Commentarius in Aeneidos*, I. 358: 'In fact, he [Apollo] is both the Sun and Liber the father'.

<sup>27</sup>Servius, *Commentarius in Aeneidos*, I. 18: 'In fact, Apollo is both the Sun and Liber'; 'Phoebus, i.e., the Sun'.

On the other hand, the interpretation of Aeolus provided by Servius seems to derive from a different exegetical strategy. Following a euhemeristic approach, Servius explains that Aeolus had been the king of the Aeolian Islands, and that he was later fictitiously depicted by the poets as the god of the winds (commentary to *Aeneid* I. 52). Interestingly, in this case Servius seems to assume a sort of deliberate mystification on the part of the poets and in particular of Vergil in relation to the real nature of pagan deities.

Returning to Juno, a 'naturalistic' interpretation is mentioned in another major medieval commentary to Vergil's *Aeneid*, that by the twelfth-century Platonising philosopher Bernardus Silvestris. In fact, in the section of the commentary dedicated to Book I of the *Aeneid*, Juno is illustrated as the goddess of birth, and is also interpreted as the air.<sup>28</sup> Picking up the exegetical pattern of the ages of human life already introduced by Fulgentius, Bernardus also interprets the storm raised by Juno and Aeolus against the Trojans as the human being's birth. And, following Fulgentius once more, Bernardus explains Aeolus in terms of a destructive principle, pointing to the derivation of his name from *eonolus*.

However, Bernardus also superimposes onto the framework of Fulgentius's *Expositio* elements drawn both from Fulgentius's *Mythologiae* and Servius's commentary, as well as from Macrobius.<sup>29</sup> In the commentary to the first book, Bernardus explains that Apollo is sometimes interpreted as the sun, sometimes as divine wisdom, sometimes as human wisdom. However, in the section of commentary dedicated to the passage from the third book of the *Aeneid* that is quoted by Dante, Bernardus expounds Apollo as wisdom rather than the sun, following Fulgentius's *Expositio*. Besides the allegorical interpretation, in the commentary to the sixth book Bernardus also puts forward a sort of euhemeristic interpretation of Apollo. In fact, before interpreting him as wisdom, he explains that Apollo was actually a great and celebrated man, who had invented a new type of medicine: musical medicine. Ultimately, despite some 'naturalistic' and euhemeristic elements, Bernardus Silvestris's commentary exhibits a predominantly Platonising and allegorical emphasis, quite evidently inherited from Fulgentius's *Expositio*.

Interpreting Juno, Aeolus, and Apollo as inanimate things in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv], Dante seems instead to build on a purely 'naturalistic' approach to expounding Vergil, closer to Servius's exegetical strategy. In particular, Dante's definition of Apollo as an inanimate thing, ruling out the typically Platonising interpretation of Apollo himself as wisdom, seems to point to a different strand in the interpretive tradition from that represented by Fulgentius and Bernardus Silvestris. Though undeniable traces of the Platonising exegetical tradition of the *Aeneid* have been detected in both the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and the *Convivio*,<sup>30</sup> it seems nonetheless reasonable to suppose, on these grounds, that Servius's commentary was the major source affecting Dante's conception of Vergil's religiosity in the *Vita Nova*.

The commentary by Servius must also have appeared more authoritative to Dante on the question of Vergil's paganism because – unlike both Fulgentius and Bernardus – Servius was

<sup>28</sup>For an assessment of Bernardus Silvestris's work, see at least Brian Stock, *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century: A Study of Bernard Silvester* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) and Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). See also Peter Dronke, 'Bernardo Silvestre', in *Enciclopedia virgilliana*, I, pp. 497–500.

<sup>29</sup>See Pierre Courcelle, 'Les Pères de l'Église devant les Enfers virgiliens', *Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age*, 22 (1955), 5–74; Peter Dronke, 'Integumenta Virgili', in *Lectures médiévales de Virgile. Actes du colloque de Rome (25–28 octobre 1982)* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1985), pp. 313–29 (pp. 325–26); Giorgio Padoan, 'Tradizione e fortuna del commento all'*Eneide* di Bernardo Silvestre', *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica*, 3 (1960), 227–40, (pp. 237–38); J. Reginald O' Donnell, 'The Sources and Meaning of Bernard Silvester's Commentary on the *Aeneid*', *Medieval Studies*, 24 (1962), 233–49 (p. 237); Dronke, 'Bernardo Silvestre', p. 499; Juan Miguel Valero Moreno, 'La *Expositio Virgilliana* de Fulgencio: Poética y hermenéutica', *Revista de poética medieval*, 15 (2005), 112–92 (pp. 131–32). See also Whitbread's introduction to Fulgentius's *Expositio* in *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, pp. 105–18 (pp. 112–14) and Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England. Figuring the 'Aeneid' from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 94.

<sup>30</sup>See Giorgio Padoan, 'Bernardo Silvestre da Tours', in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, I, 607–08. On the possible influence of Bernardus's commentary on Dante's *Commedia*, see David Thompson, 'Dante and Bernard Silvestris', *Viator*, 1 (1970), 201–06; Italia, pp. 79–92 and pp. 103–81; Bellomo, pp. 13–14; Luca Marozzi, '*Inferno* I. Accessus alla *Commedia*', *Le tre corone*, 4 (2017), 47–71 (p. 59).

a pagan himself. Finally, the evidence regarding the availability and the circulation of texts in Florence at the time of the *libello*'s composition (probably 1293–1296, as recently restated by Stefano Carrai),<sup>31</sup> also encourages us to regard Servius' influence on *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv] as more plausible and direct than that potentially exerted by Fulgentius and Bernardus Silvestris.<sup>32</sup> In fact, a manuscript of Servius's commentary to the *Aeneid* was probably studied in the monastery of Santa Croce during the same years in which, according to the most reliable interpretation of Dante's testimony in the *Convivio*, the author of the *Vita Nova* was attending the 'scuole delli religiosi' and the 'disputazioni delli filosofanti' in Florence (*Cvo.* iv. 12).<sup>33</sup>

To conclude, in light of the quotations from the *Aeneid* in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv], Servius appears to constitute the principal exegetical filter through which Dante interpreted Vergil. This hypothesis is supported by two main arguments. Firstly, the point of the classical quotations in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv], as we have seen, is not that Dante was interpreting pagan gods as non-existent or inanimate, but that Dante believed that Vergil himself considered the figures of Juno, Aeolus, and Apollo in his poetry as rhetorical personifications. This kind of conviction could not be drawn from Fulgentius's *Mythologiae* or from Macrobius's *Commentary on the 'Dream of Scipio'* and *Saturnalia*, as these eclectic works do not directly attribute the naturalistic mode of interpreting pagan gods to Vergil himself. It is more probable, in my opinion, that Dante inferred this Vergilian poetic intention from commentaries to the *Aeneid*, such as those by Servius and Bernardus Silvestris.

Secondly, Servius's commentary was not only the most authoritative, the most widespread in medieval Europe, and the most accessible in Florence during the 1290s, but it also presents greater affinity with Dante's approach to Vergil in the *Vita Nova* than that by Bernardus Silvestris. In fact,

<sup>31</sup> See Stefano Carrai, 'Puntualizzazioni sulla datazione della *Vita Nova*', *L'Alighieri*, 52 (2018), 109–15.

<sup>32</sup> In effect, as underlined by Christopher Baswell, the material evidence of the manuscript tradition also shows that Servius's commentary was much more widespread throughout the Middle Ages than Bernardus Silvestris's 'allegorising' one (see Baswell, p. 49). On the manuscript tradition of Servius's commentary, see Charles E. Murgia, *Prolegomena to Servius 5: The Manuscripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). Fulgentius's *Expositio* also seems to have enjoyed a considerable circulation (see Baswell, p. 97, with reference to Whitbread's *Introduction to Fulgentius, Expositio*, in *Fulgentius the Mythographer* p. 105). For the influence of Fulgentius's *Mythologies* during the Middle Ages, see again Whitbread's *Introduction to Fulgentius, Mitologiarum Libri*, in *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, pp. 15–37 (pp. 24–26). In light of the evidence emerging from the manuscript tradition, I cannot agree with Sebastiano Italia's hypothesis that, at the beginning of his poetic career, Dante was acquainted solely with Bernardus Silvestris's commentary, discovering Servius only later on, at the time of the fourth book of the *Convivio*. Following De Robertis, Italia argues that the interpretation of the pagan gods as inanimate things derives from the allegorical exegetical strand of Fulgentius and Bernardus Silvestris (Italia, p. 185). Giorgio Inglese also assumes that Dante might have come into contact with Servius only shortly before the conception of the *Commedia*, cultivating a Platonising poetics of the *integumentum* before that time; see Giorgio Inglese, 'Storia e Comedia: Enea', in his *L'intelletto e l'amore. Studi sulla letteratura italiana del Due e Trecento* (Milan: La Nuova Italia, 2000), pp. 123–64 (pp. 146 and 148–49, note 53). However, as I have attempted to show above, the explanation of pagan gods as natural elements is actually absent from Fulgentius's commentary, appearing only as a secondary interpretation in that by Bernardus Silvestris. In short, on the grounds of the data presently available on manuscript circulation of the commentaries to the *Aeneid*, and on the availability of such commentaries in the libraries of the Florentine convents during the 1290s, as well as building on the close textual analysis of *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv], I would argue that at the time of the *Vita Nova*, Dante must have had some direct knowledge of Vergil's poem and of Servius's commentary.

<sup>33</sup> I cite the *Convivio* from Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, ed. by Gianfranco Fioravanti and Claudio Giunta (Milan: Mondadori, 2014). For the manuscript of Servius's commentary in Santa Croce see Charles Till Davis, 'The Early Collection of Books of S. Croce in Florence', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 107 (1963), 399–414 (p. 41); Murgia, pp. 90–97; and especially Brunetti and Gentili, pp. 39–44. For Dante's education during his Florentine years and his ties with the Studia of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, see also Gabriella Pomaro, 'Censimento dei manoscritti della biblioteca di S. Maria Novella', in *Santa Maria Novella. Un convento nella città. Studi e fonti*, 2 vols (Pistoia, 1980), II, pp. 325–70; Charles Till Davis, 'Scuola. La scuola al tempo di Dante', in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, V, pp. 106–08; Charles Till Davis, 'The Florentine Studia and Dante's Library', in *The 'Divine Comedy' and the Encyclopaedia of Arts and Sciences: Acta of the International Dante Symposium, 13–16 November 1983, Hunter College, New York*, ed. by Giuseppe C. Di Scipio and Aldo D. Scaglione (New York: John Benjamins Publishing, 1988), pp. 339–66; Raffaella Zanni, 'Una ricognizione per la biblioteca di Dante in margine ad alcuni contributi recenti', *Critica del testo*, 17.2 (2014), 161–204; Sonia Gentili and Sylvain Piron, 'La Bibliothèque de Santa Croce', in *Frontières des savoirs en Italie à l'époque des premières universités (XIII<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. by Joël Chandelier and Aurélien Robert (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2015), pp. 481–507; Sonia Gentili, 'Lecture dantesche anteriori all'esilio: filosofia e teologia', in *Dante fra il settecentocinquantesimo della nascita (2015) e il settecentenario della morte (2021)*, ed. by Enrico Malato and Andrea Mazzucchi (Rome: Salerno, 2016), pp. 303–25; Anna Pegoretti, "'Nelle scuole delli religiosi': materiali per Santa Croce nell'età di Dante', *L'Alighieri*, 50 (2017), 5–55; Lorenzo Dell'Oso, 'Per la formazione intellettuale di Dante. I cataloghi librari, le tracce testuali, il *Trattatello* di Boccaccio', *Le Tre Corone*, 4 (2017), 129–61.

as in the case of the *Vita Nova*'s quotations from the *Aeneid*, in Servius's commentary there is a predominant tendency to construe pagan gods as inanimate natural elements, while Bernardus Silvestris puts forward a preponderantly Platonising exegetical mode, according to which Juno and Apollo constitute, rather, personifications of abstract ideas. We should not of course neglect how, in considering Aeolus as the personification of the winds, Dante deviates from the euhemeristic explanation offered by Servius. However, on this particular point it can be noted, firstly, that in interpreting Aeolus as an inanimate thing Dante diverges not only from Servius, but also from Fulgentius and Bernardus Silvestris.<sup>34</sup> Without ruling out the possibility that Dante might have found the equation of Aeolus with the winds in other medieval reservoirs of exegetical tradition, his partial deviation from Servius's approach probably arises from his attempt to systematise the interpretation of pagan gods in Vergil's *Aeneid*, in line with the thoroughly syllogistic mode of *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv]. What is more, this minimum divergence from Servius confirms Dante's typically syncretic way of dealing with sources.<sup>35</sup> It is always therefore advisable for scholars not to search for a single, exclusive, and absolute model of Dante's thought, but rather to attempt to detect *one* of the models that Dante considered to have anticipated his own original way of thinking. In the case of the quotation from Vergil in *Vita Nova* 16 [xxv] the most influential of these models can be identified – as I have argued – in Servius.

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<sup>34</sup>See Inglese, pp. 146–47.

<sup>35</sup>For Dante's syncretism see, e.g., Simon Gilson, 'Sincretismo e scolastica in Dante', in *Dante – per Emilio Pasquini*, special issue of *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, ed. Alfredo Cottignoli and others (Pisa–Roma: Fabrizio Serra, 2015), pp. 317–40.