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THREE ESSAYS ON DANTE'S SOTERIOLOGY

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For my parents

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Three Essays on Dante's Soteriology is a theological and literary examination of three key aspects of Dante's understanding of salvation. The first essay investigates the soteriological scheme of the *Vita Nuova*, its relation to the poetry that preceded it, and the ambiguous theological significance of Beatrice that obtains in the *libello*. The second essay demonstrates that the *Commedia*'s presentation of free will implies an understanding of salvation that leaves little room for the function of healing grace (*gratia sanans*). I argue that this theological peculiarity helped spur Dante to rethink the place of the human individual within the Christian afterlife. My third essay examines the ways in which the *Paradiso* accomplishes that rethinking: i.e., the ways in which the third canticle works to accommodate individuality within its conception of the Christian heaven. Though distinct, the three essays that constitute this study are linked by common thematic and methodological concerns. Thematically, the essays are united by an interest in the role and persistence of the category of the human individual within Dante's soteriological understanding. Methodologically, the essays are united by an interest in the ways in which literature can accomplish first-order theological work.

A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

All Italian quotations from the *Vita Nuova* are taken from Michele Barbi's *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Dante* (Firenze: Bemporad, 1932); the English translations are those of Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1995). For the *Commedia* I have used Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi's revision (Milano: Mondadori, 1991) to Giorgio Petrocchi's *La Commedia secondo l'Antica Vulgata* (Milano, Mondadori, 1966-7). English translations of the *Commedia* are those of Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970-5). Latin quotations from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* are from the Leonine edition. English translations of the *Summa Theologica* are those of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province in the second and revised 1920 edition of *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Reprint, Westminster: Christian Classics, 1984).

INTRODUCTION

The subject of the three essays that compose this dissertation is Dante's soteriology. Strictly speaking, soteriology is a branch of theology, the subdiscipline dedicated to salvation. Since Christianity is a religion that counts salvation as its explicit aim and purpose, however, soteriology has always stood as something like the center and circumference of the other theological subfields. Just as medieval theologians argued that the other sciences had to look to theology for their ultimate significance, so soteriology has always been able to demand an accounting from the other branches of Christian theology, such that the purpose and validity of any theological deduction or speculation would ultimately be judged by its implications for God's salvation of humanity.

The central premise of this dissertation is that the concepts, rhetoric, and metaphors of salvation hold a similar pride of place in Dante's works. Though I will argue that Dante's interest in salvation is not always an interest in a specifically Christian salvation, the three essays that follow are concerned to investigate the ways in which the language and concepts of salvation inform Dante's theological and poetic visions.

By and large my interest in Dante's treatment of salvation is historical. This is to say that the domain of my research is intellectual history and that I will not be attempting any constructive theological or philosophical arguments about soteriology.[1] To my mind

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[1] See, for an example of the latter type of work, Christine O'Connell Baur, *Dante's Hermeneutics of Salvation: Passages to Freedom in the Divine Comedy* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2007), which puts the *Commedia* in conversation with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

there are at least three compelling reasons why Dante's treatment of the subject is worthy of examination.

The first is comparison. Their persistence across the breadth of Dante's *opera* makes the concepts and rhetoric of salvation an illuminating perspective from which to compare the *Vita Nuova* to the *Commedia*. Through the course of the dissertation I shall argue that Dante employs those concepts and that rhetoric for different purposes in the two works, but I shall also argue that a line of continuity may be drawn between the soteriological visions of the two works in at least one respect: the importance of the individual as the subject of salvation.

The second reason is that Dante's treatment of salvation is a particularly good index of his most pressing ethical, political, and religious concerns. His sustained and serious engagement with the problem of salvation throughout his life makes it a useful lens through which to examine some of the fundamental themes that gave life, structure, and meaning to his works. Indeed, in something of the manner that Scholastic theologians would use angelology or political philosophers in later centuries would use utopian narratives, I would argue that Dante used the schematic of salvation as a means of thinking through and representing the limit-cases of human experience. In the *Vita Nuova*, as I shall argue in my first chapter, this experience was essentially erotic, while in the *Commedia* Dante sought to encompass all the facets of human experience. In both cases, I shall argue, the distinctive characteristic of Dante's soteriological imagination was its emphasis on human individuality.

The third and most important reason for treating the subject of salvation is that it is precisely in the development of Dante's own soteriological vision that, when measured

against the theological context of his time, his own theological distinctiveness becomes most apparent. The importance of Dante's soteriology as a subject of study can therefore be seen from several directions, and therefore it is my hope that my thematic examinations of Dante's treatment of soteriology--i.e. my elucidation of what the poet says *about* salvation--will be useful both to *dantisti* and to historians of theology who are seeking a better understanding of Dante's works and their theological relevance.

One consequence of Dante's deep and lifelong engagement with the idea of salvation is that a complete discussion of the theme impossible to accomplish in the course of a dissertation or a monograph. In a very real sense, to achieve a complete understanding of Dante's treatment of salvation is to achieve a complete understanding of the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*. It is for that reason that I neither seek nor claim to provide a total consideration of the theme, and it is for this reason, I suspect, that previous scholarship has treated the subject under more limited and manageable aspects.[2] Since the arguments of the three essays that constitute the body of this dissertation are substantially distinct, I shall reserve my discussions of relevant prior literature to each essay.

No one much doubts Dante's audacity in any number of respects, and yet when it comes to his handling of the fundamental Christian themes scholars have tended to agree with John Took that his "theological programme is...obedient to the dogmatic and

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[2] Exceptions to this rule of course exist, the most important of which are probably the twin pillars of Charles S. Singleton's *Essay on the Vita Nuova* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1949) and *Dante Studies: Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958).

liturgical influences decisive for its historical coming about."[3] There is much to be said for this view, and though my first chapter makes the case that Dante's *Vita Nuova* is not so securely orthodox as critics have assumed, my general purpose in this dissertation is not to make Dante out to be some kind of theological rebel or heretic. At the same time, I believe that Dante's theological "obedience" can be and often is overstated (though not, I hasten to add, by Took). This kind of overstatement likely has roots in the confessional allegiances of many of the most significant Dante critics of the last century. But more recently it seems traceable to the strong historicist bent that still dominates Dante scholarship, which has led critics to spend far more time looking for the ways in which Dante is similar to his theological contemporaries than to the ways in which he might be different or distinct. The value of the former critical mode cannot be doubted, but it is the working assumption of this dissertation that at least some of the latter kind is useful too. Toward that end, I have chosen to focus on aspects of Dante's soteriology that show some resistance to or conceptual distance from the treatments and theories of salvation that dominated his day.

In the first chapter I describe the soteriological scheme of the *Vita Nuova*, with a particular focus on its presentation of Beatrice as the young poet's miraculous, momentous, and unique savior. I argue that that Dante's engagement with the soteriological conceit is, in effect, a metaphor for his extraordinary experience of Beatrice, and this metaphor is developed in a way that sets him apart both from his poetic peers and predecessors and from the standards of a rigorous orthodoxy. Two

[3] John Took, "Dante's Incarnationalism: An Essay in Theological Wisdom," Italian Studies 61 (2006): 3-17.

consequences follow from this argument. The first is my claim that Beatrice's religious status is not so easily assimilable to the framework of Christian piety as critics have tended to assume. I suggest, in fact, that it is a mistake to see the soteriological structure and rhetoric of the *Vita Nuova* as indicative of any serious Christian concern on Dante's part, and that his use of Christian rhetoric to describe his beloved can therefore, from a rigorist perspective, at the very least be seen as a flirtation with idolatry. The second consequence, which will not become fully apparent until the third chapter, is my claim that the extended soteriological metaphor of the *Vita Nuova* will be transformed in the *Commedia* into a properly theological consideration of individual salvation. In other words, I argue that the way Dante thinks about his salvation at the hands of Beatrice in the *libello* is one of the sources for his later belief in the persistence of individual differences in the afterlife.

In the second chapter I argue that the *Commedia*'s treatment of free will betrays a significant ambivalence about the workings of sanctifying grace, an ambivalence that sets Dante somewhat at odds with the theological consensus of his day. Specifically, I propose that Dante's strong defense of free will leaves little room for the operation of what medieval theologians called healing grace (*gratia sanans*). One implication of this exclusion is that Dante had a more optimistic view of the moral capacity of humanity after the Fall than his theological contemporaries. Perhaps a more important implication, however, is that the establishment of a strict correlation between moral action and soteriological consequence that contributed to a necessary rethinking of the way in which human individuality was compatible with eternal salvation.

My third chapter examines the theological challenge posed by Dante's reconsideration of individual salvation in the context of the *Paradiso*. I argue that Dante's insistence on the durability of individual differences in heaven creates a properly theological problem for him, a problem that puts the poet at the forefront of soteriological speculation in his time: namely, how to establish the durable presence of diversity in heaven while still maintaining an allegiance to a broadly Neoplatonic scheme that sees the diminishment of difference as a necessary part of the process of redemption. I argue further that Dante addresses this problem not through typically theological means but through the resources of his poetry, and I conclude that Dante's treatment of the problem of individual salvation is a good example of the way in which Dante can be said to "do theology" by means of poetry.

The major argument of each of my three chapters does not strictly depend upon the conclusions of the others, and yet all three are oriented toward a single aspect of Dante's soteriological imagination: namely, his conviction that salvation is a fundamentally individualized phenomenon. This conviction is both related to and distinct from the perennial question of Dante's humanism.[4] It is historically accurate to say (and philosophically reasonable to expect) that attention to the individual person emerged out of a cultural matrix that was beginning to appreciate a new place for a distinctly human sphere. At the same time, the kind of individuality to which I draw attention in this study requires a further conceptual development beyond humanism. The fundamental claim of the medieval and Renaissance humanists was that humanity stands distinct from (and

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[4] See pp. 124-5 in chapter 2, below, for a further discussion of Dante's humanism.

usually in a mediating position between) both God and the rest of Creation by virtue of its unique composition of body and intellect. As Kenelm Foster and other scholars have shown, Dante was an early exponent of this view. Meanwhile the kind of individuality that developed as a soteriological issue for Dante was the result of differences not among types of beings but among people. In other words, the central problem that he had to work out was not how human beings might have a mode of salvation distinct from the angels or the animals; his problem was how they might be saved in ways distinct from one another. As I argue in chapter 3, Dante's conception of a heaven populated by individuals who retain much of their earthly identities and personalities put him at the forefront of soteriological speculation in his time. What I've called the thematic effort of this dissertation, when taken as a whole, is to track both the origins and the implications of this relatively novel conception.

In the course of their thematic investigation of Dante's soteriology, the following chapters also press a methodological concern, one that tracks one of the most durable critical debates about Dante's work (and especially the *Commedia*): namely, the relationship between theology and poetry. That Dante's work establishes and maintains a necessary and important relationship between the two has never been in question. (Dante's son Pietro famously wrote that father took his name because "he gave himself to several things: namely, first to theology, then to poetry.")[5] And yet while it would be

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[5] "Prout nominatus erat auctor *Dantes*, ita *dabat*, sive *dedit* se ad diversa; scilicet primo ad theologiam, secundo ad poetica." Pietro Alighieri, *Petri Allegherii super Dantis ipsius genitoris Comoediam Commentarium, nunc primum in lucem editum...,* ed. Vincenzo Nannucci, (Florence: G. Piatti, 1845), note to *Purgatorio* 30.55, accessed at the Dartmouth Dante Project at http://dante.dartmouth.edu/.

possible to trace a broad seven-hundred-year-old consensus as to the importance of this relationship, it is impossible, over that time, to trace any consensus as to the nature of that relationship.[6] Benedetto Croce's *poesia/struttura* distinction, Erich Auerbach's exposition of the medieval *figura*, Charles Singleton and Robert Hollander's attention to the "allegory of the theologians," John Freccero's brief for a formalist criticism, and Teodolinda Barolini's program of "detheologization" may all be characterized as critical efforts aimed at explaining and elucidating the complicated relationship.[7]

The difficulty in relating the *Commedia*'s poetry and its theology reflects a more general problem that has been present in the Western intellectual tradition at least since Socrates sought to distinguish rhetoric from philosophy. That problem is how to understand the philosophical or theological claims of art, or, to put it more simply, how to describe the relation of art to thought. In general it seems fair to say that the Western

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[6] Cf. Robert Hollander: "We may all agree...on the fact that Dante's poetry is a Christian poetry. What we have been unable to agree on is the nature of the poetic which produced the Commedia." (Robert Hollander, "Dante 'Theologus-Poeta,'" *Dante Studies*, no. 94 [1976], 91)

[7] See Benedetto Croce, *La Poesia Di Dante* (Bari: Laterza, 1921), Erich Auerbach, "'Figura,'" in *Scenes From the Drama of European Literature* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984); John Freccero, "The Significance of Terza Rima," in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion,* ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986); and Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1992). For other significant reflections on the theme, see Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, *Lettura del Paradiso Dantesco* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1963); Giovanni Fallani, *L'esperienza Teologica di Dante* (Lecce: Milella, 1976); Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante's Paradiso and the Limitations of Modern Criticism: A Study of Style and Poetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978); Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton UP, 1987); Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988); Giorgio Agamben, "Corn," in *The End of the Poem* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999); and Zygmunt G. Barański, *Dante e i Segni: Saggi Per Una Storia Intellettuale di Dante Alighieri* (Napoli: Liguori, 2000).

intellectual tradition has maintained a permanently cocked eyebrow with respect to the philosophical and theological claims of art, allowing that while metaphorical, figural, or symbolic forms of language are useful--in that they have the power to delight, instruct, persuade, and illustrate--the truthfulness of those forms can only be judged when translated (or paraphrased or reduced) to abstract philosophical language. It is for this reason, I'd argue, that when Thomas Aquinas considers the appearance of metaphors and the possible equivocation of senses in the Bible, he is quick to reassure his readers that "nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward clearly by the Scripture in the literal sense"[8] Likewise, Hegel will allow that "absolute spirit appears in the forms of art, religion, and philosophy," but he goes on to say that

> Pure thinking of philosophy...cannot remain satisfied with this aesthetic polytheism of imagination. It is driven beyond the aesthetic sphere and must realize its value as well as its limitation. The absolute spirit cannot fully explicate itself in the indefinite plurality of shapes.[9]

Thus while philosophers and theologians have allowed that art could make abstract philosophical claims more convincing, more attractive, or more concrete, they have generally denied that art could do philosophy or theology as well as--let alone better than—the a-rhetorical formulations of philosophers or theologians themselves.

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[8] "nihil sub spirituali sensu continetur fidei necessarium, quod Scriptura per litteralem sensum alicubi manifeste non tradat" (*Summa Theologica* Ia q. 1 a. 10).

[9] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* trans. Gustav Emil Müller (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), §§453, 458.

Opposition to this general philosophical presumption coalesced in the twentieth century, as artists, critics, and students of myth and religion protested the notion that the philosophical or theological significance of a piece of art or myth was to be measured by the number of systematizable propositional statements that could be extracted from it. As E.R. Curtius took pains to remind us, this kind of opposition, while a minority view, had a long history: the idea that poetry had a primary conceptual--as opposed to a secondary illustrative or representational--power was also popular among the Italian Humanists, who invoked and expanded on the ancient Greek tradition of the *poeta theologus*.[10] Thus Petrarch would tell his brother Gherardo, "I might almost say that theology is a poetry which proceeds from God" and Boccaccio would write, "Bene appare, non solamente la poesia essere teologia, ma ancora la teologia essere poesia."[11]

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[10] E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 219.

[11] Both are quoted in Ibid., 226. Recently Denys Turner has suggested that even Thomas Aquinas held a view of metaphor that was not so far different from Boccaccio's and Petrarch's, though Curtius would certainly disagree:

> Thomas's economy and lucidity accompanies, and probably derives from, a fundamental confidence in the theological worth of ordinary speech, a trust that our ordinary ways of talking about creation are fundamentally in order as ways of talking about God, needing only to be subordinated to a governing apophaticism, expressed as a second-order epistemological principle: that all theological affirmation is both necessary and deficient. We must say of God anything true of what he has created, because there is no special "hyperessential" meaning available to the theologian, and because we know that whatever we say is in any case inadequate. There is, therefore, for Thomas, only ordinary speech to do theology in. (Denys Turner, "How to Do Things with Words: Poetry As Sacrament in Dante's *Commedia,"* in *Dante's Commedia: Theology As Poetry* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2010), 297.)

Dante's own position in this debate is difficult to make out for several reasons, but there's no question that he was deeply concerned about the relationship between his own poetry and philosophical and theological concerns. As Curtius, and Robert Hollander after him, have argued, Dante was writing at a time in which not only the philosophical and theological significance of poetry, but even the legitimacy of poetry as such was strenuously contested (especially by the Dominican Order). The basic stumbling block, as Hollander notes, was the fact, which was accepted by poetry's attackers and defenders, that "at the first remove, a poet is a liar."[12] The problem facing poetry's defenders was thus not an easy one to answer: "If one agreed that the poet was literally a liar, why should anyone honor the poet's claims for the eventual truth of his poem?"[13]

What we can say is that Dante's own self-criticism drew heavily, for both its terms and its concepts, on the philosophical and theological traditions that were available to him. One need not agree with Croce's stark claims about the mundane quality of Dante's prose works to agree that he was a far more interesting poet than expositor.[14] To take just one example among many, I would note that Dante's whole autoexegetical attitude in the *Vita Nuova* is determined by the distinction between an outside (i.e. obvious or apparent) meaning and an inside (i.e. secret or hidden) meaning. Thus in *Vita Nuova* 25 he will warn that "quelli che rimano [non] deono parlare...non avendo alcuno ragionamento in

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[12] Hollander, p. 284 in new version.

[13] Ibid. p. 285 in new version

[14] Croce wrote of the "sopravalutazione...o il fraintendimento della particolare importanza di Dante filosofo e politico," arguing that the *Monarchia* is "piuttosto opera di pubblicistica che di scienza politica" and the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* "né contiene nulla di rivoluzionario e nemmeno di rilevante per la filosofia del linguaggio" (Croce, *La Poesia di Dante,* 14).

loro di quello che dicono, però che grande vergogna sarebbe a colui che rimasse cose sotto vesta di igura o di colore rettorico, e poscia, domandato, non sapesse denudare le sue parole da cotale vesta, in guisa che avessero verace intendimento."[15] The explicit purpose of much of Dante's critical prose was to "denude" (or unfold or open) the inner meaning of the outer expression.[16]

Such a distinction is, of course, founded on exactly the kind of anti-metaphorical prejudice that I identified earlier. But there is also evidence that Dante took the opposing view. In his reading of chapters 3 and 4 of Book III of the *Convivio*, for example, Giorgio Agamben argues that "Dante defines the poetic event not by a convergence but rather by a divergence between intellect and language. This divergence gives rise to a double 'ineffableness' (*ineffabilitade*), in which the intellect cannot grasp ('end') what language says and in which language does not 'completely follow' what the intellect comprehends"[17]

More important, Dante's own poetry resists the neat division, along with the philosophical prejudice it incorporates, that his criticism sometimes promotes. Consider a famous tercet from *Paradiso* 1:

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[15] "vernacular poets should [not] write...without having any reasons in mind for what they write; for a great shame would befall those who put things under the veil of a figure or rhetorical color and then, when asked, could not unveil their words in a way that would show their true reasoning."

[16] Sometimes, however, as in *Vita Nuova* 14, Dante will claim that a particular relationship to Love, not criticism, is necessary to unlock his meaning: "E questo dubbio è impossibile a solvere a chi non fosse in simile grado fedele d'Amore; e a color che vi sono è manifesto ciò che solverebbe le dubitose parole."

[17] Giorgio Agamben, "Corn," 38.

> Transumanar significar *per verba*
> non si poria; però l'essemplo basti
> a cui esperïenza grazia serba. (ll. 70-72)

The passage is something other and more than an example of the ancient ineffability trope. It tells us that we must let *l'essemplo* (of Glaucus, the fisherman who became a god after eating charmed sea-grass) stand in for what cannot be signified *per verba* (i.e., *transumanar*, or "passing beyond the human"). In so doing it grants the allusion to Glaucus a primary signifying power that needs no foundation (and in fact, cannot find one) in any "literal" meaning.

In his essay on the relation of poetry and philosophy, Curtius insisted that Dante's arguments for the legitimacy of poetry, and the legitimacy of poetry as theology, were essentially different from those later theories of the Humanists. He writes, "Dante had found a solution for the quarrel between poetry and philosophy which was exercising men's minds about 1300, but it was not transferable."[18] One major difference, he notes, is that the later Humanists were not debating philosophers; they directed their arguments at "monkish rigorists," those who "stand on the line that leads from Peter Damian to Savanarola." Meanwhile Dante's arguments were directed at the Aristotelian prejudices of the Scholastics. "Scholasticism," Curtius writes, "had come out of twelfth-century dialectics. It maintains the latter's opposition to the *auctores*, rhetoric, and poetry. It

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[18] This is an argument Ernesto Grassi, for one, disputes. Grassi sees Dante as the proximate source of the Humanist poeta-theologus tradition. As will be clear, I take Curtius's side in this. See Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric As Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition*, trans. John Michael Krois and Azizeh Azodi (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2001).

eliminates the philosophical justification of poetry from Aristotelianism."[19] For Curtius, then, the difference between Dante and the Humanists is this: Dante did not want to bring theology down to the level of poetry, as Boccacio and Petrarch did. To the contrary, he wanted to push the poetry up to Scholastic theology's level--and beyond.[20]

In broad and abstract terms, this position is the methodological starting point for my project. I take as a premise that Dante's poetry is not merely illustrating or dramatizing theological truths but actually trying to work them out by means of the poetic resources he has at hand.[21] What this means specifically and in practice is that I largely eschew the predominant mode by which critics have described the poem's theology. Rather than working to describe Dante's dependence on this or that theological *auctor* or school of thought, I seek to show some of the ways in which Dante uses his poetry to carve out a distinctive, and in some senses novel, theology of salvation. It is for this reason that I take as a useful methodological spur Robin Kirkpatrick's claim that "if Dante is a theologian, then his contribution lies less in any definition of doctrinal nicety than in the *form* of what he says--in his ability to make us reflect upon and appreciate the linguistic

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[19] Curtius, *European Literature,* 224.

[20] Hollander concurs, arguing that Dante took seriously the Dominicans' claim for the epistemological priority of philosophy and theology but also rejected that claim. Hollander, "Dante 'Theologus-Poeta,'" 118.

[21] For more on this question see Kirkpatrick, *Dante's Paradiso and the Limitations of Modern Criticism;* Patrick Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), Thomas, Hyde, *The Poetic Theology of Love: Cupid in Renaissance Literature* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1986)., and Piero Boitani, "The Poetry and Poetics of the Creation," in *Dante's Commedia: Theology As Poetry* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2010).

and narrative action of a Christian performance."[22] Critics have long been willing to consider the possibility that Dante's poetry exceeded, in its artistic reach, the limits set by his own critical practice, such that no one feels much need to limit her interpretation of the poem to the explicit hermeneutical terms set by the poet. The fundamental methodological argument of this study is that the same excess may be found in Dante's theological accomplishments, and that therefore a similar boldness in interpreting those accomplishments is needed.

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[22] Robin Kirkpatrick, "Polemics of Praise: Theology as Text, Narrative, and Rhetoric in Dante's Commedia," in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, 25.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SOTERIOLOGY OF THE VITA NUOVA

At the start of the *Vita Nuova,* Dante tells us that his intention for the *libello* is to transcribe the *sentenzia* ("meaning") of the words that he finds written in the book of his memory. The subject of that book--or at least that part of the book of memory that begins with the rubric "*Incipit vita nova*"--is the story of his experience of Beatrice's life and death. The *Vita Nuova,* then, is his attempt to understand the meaning of that experience.

We only have to wait for the second chapter to meet the fundamental metaphor that will structure the poet's understanding of Beatrice throughout the *libello*. When the nine-year-old Dante first lays eyes on his coeval Beatrice, the young girl "apparve vestita di nobilissimo colore, umile e onesto, sanguigno, cinta e ornata a la guisa che al a sua giovanissima etade si convenia."[1] At the sight of her, Dante hears three internal spirits speak to him, one of whom announces, "Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra."[2] As we shall see, what first appears as a hyperbolic metaphor (the appearance of a beloved girl described

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[1] "appeared humbly and properly dressed in a most noble color, crimson, girded and adorned in the manner that befitted her so youthful age."

[2] "Now has appeared your beatitude." The statement echoes a line from Guido Cavalcanti's *ballata* "Veggio negli occhi de la donna mia" in which a star appears to the poet and says of an image of his beloved, "La salute tua è apparita." It also stands as an implicit answer to the question of Galatians 4:15, "Quae ergo fuit beatitudo vestra?" which itself appears prominently in Augustine's *De Doctrina Cristiana* 4.20.44, where it is presented as an example of the rhetorical high style. The modern critical edition of the Latin vulgate gives the question as "Ubi est ergo beatitudo vestra," but most ancient commentators quote the passage as I have it above. See also Robert Klein, "Spirito Peregrino," in *Form and Meaning: Essays on the Renaissance and Modern Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1979).

as a hierophany) becomes so theologically freighted over the course of the *Vita Nuova* that it will come to seem more fact than metaphor. Indeed, we don't have to wait long for the freighting to begin; already in the same chapter Dante calls Beatrice an "angiola giovanissima" and quotes Homer to say "Ella non parea figliuola d'uomo mortale, ma di deo."[3]

The proliferation of these religious tropes--along with Beatrice's transformation into a more properly divine figure in the *Commedia*--has inspired a line of scholarly commentary on a question that stands as one of the central interpretative cruxes of the *Vita Nuova:* how are we supposed to understand the supranatural status of Beatrice? Other questions follow quickly on this one: exactly what kind of salvation does the Dante of the *Vita Nuova* seek? Is it a metaphorical salvation? If so, where does the metaphor lie, i.e., is salvation a metaphor for romantic love, is romantic love a metaphor for Christian salvation, or are love and salvation in some way identical? There is no question that the soteriological tropes that Dante deploys in the *Vita Nuova* have to be read within the context of the poetry that preceded it. It was among the Sicilian School poets, after all, that rhetorical conceits such as the famous *donna-angelo* simile first flourished. But one of the arguments of this chapter is that the *Vita Nuova's* presentation of Beatrice as Dante's savior exceeds even the religiously-charged rhetoric of his fellow Stilnovists.

The more general task of this chapter is to investigate Dante's use of salvation as a description of his experience of Beatrice. As I noted in the introduction, the reason that this investigation is included in this dissertation is my conviction that the salvific

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[3] "She seemed no child of mortal man, but of god."

experience described and glossed in the *Vita Nuova* is an important precedent for the understanding of salvation developed in the *Commedia*. I begin by arguing that Dante's attempt to understand the meaning of Beatrice led him to literalize a series of soteriological tropes that had constituted a key rhetorical convention of his poetic peers and predecessors. From there I argue that Dante's presentation of Beatrice as savior is characterized by three qualities: it is miraculous, momentous, and unique. I end the chapter considering a question that--although it diverges somewhat from the line that connects this chapter to the rest of the dissertation--is one that nevertheless cannot be avoided in a discussion of the *Vita Nuova*'s soteriology: what is the religious status of Beatrice? Here I suggest that the resemblance of Beatrice to Christ is not as comfortably orthodox as most critics would have us believe.

1.1. Poetic Precedents

Dante composed the *Vita Nuova* in conscious dialogue with his poetic milieu, and so in order to see what is novel and distinctive about his use of soteriological tropes, it is useful, first, to examine what might be common and conventional about them.[4] To that end it is

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[4] Michelangelo Picone, for example, calls the *Vita Nuova* "una summa dell'amore cortese," while Marco Santagata argues that poems like "Donne ch'avete intelleto d'amore" and "Amore e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa" "intendono mostrare ai lettori il retroterra culturale da cui la nuova 'matera' si origine. È evidente, infatti, che essi sottolineano il legame fra la nuova poesia e la concezione poetica e amorosa collocabile sotto il nome di Guinizelli." See Michelangelo Picone, *Vita Nuova e Tradizione Romanza* (Padova: Liviana, 1979), 137, and Marco Santagata, *Amate e Amanti: Figure della Lirica Amorosa fra Dante e Petrarca* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999), 35.

worth briefly reviewing some of the themes and concerns that recurred among the troubadours, Sicilian School poets, and Stilnovists.

By the thirteenth century there was a well-established tradition of courtly love poetry in Europe that blurred the boundaries between erotic and religious love. Peter Dronke cites, for example, the "astonishing" way that "Deus amet puellam," a lyric found in a tenth-century theological manuscript, uses religious language to describe a human beloved: "The *puella* is one of the blessed already on earth, she has sovereignty on earth as if she were a heavenly body come down, a terrestrial moon, her radiance is as if divine."[5] Or consider the religious allusion in a song from the Monastery of St. Emmeram: "Virgo Flora, / tam decora, / tam venusta facie, / suo risu, / suo visu / me beavit hodie."[6] Likewise, in a poem like "Lanquan il jorn son lonc en may," the twelfth-century troubadour Jaufre Rudel suggests that he would have done well to have made himself like a pilgrim to his distant beloved, a conceit that leads Michelangelo Picone to comment:

> la *peregrinatio*, ben lungi dall'essere aggiunta, imposta dall'esterno, riceve la sua giustificazione profonda dall'ideologia stessa della *fin'amor,* all'interno della quale la *Domina* è veramente l'equivalente di Dio alla cui ricerca il pellegrino muove i suoi passi. Nel mondo cortese la funzionalità e l'essenza della Donna si manifestano identiche alla funzionalità e essenza di Dio nell'universo della vita cristiana.[7]

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[5] Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 266-7.

[6] "Virgin Flora, / so adorned / such a lovely sight, / your smile, / your appearance / blesses me today." Cited in Ibid., 287.

[7] "Far from being added or imposed from outside, the pilgrimage [conceit] receives its profound justification from the very ideology of *fin'amor*, within which the *Domina* is truly the equivalent of the god in search of whom the pilgrim goes walking. The role and essence of the Beloved within the world of courtly love is shown to be identical to the role

Medieval love poets were also fond of comparing their beloveds to angels; as Marco Santagata notes, "il *topos* della donna angelo...lascia nella tradizione romanza tracce persino sovrabbondanti."[8] Meanwhile poets like Guittone d'Arezzo would push the religious language even further, going so far even as to compare his beloved to God:

> Voi me' Deo sete, e mea vita e mea morte
> ché, s'eo so 'n terra o 'n mare
> in periglioso fare,
> voi chiamo com'altri fa Deo;[9]

Comparisons like Guittone's were hardly rare; as Dronke notes, "twelfth-century Latin love-lyrics are full of images of a lady who is radiant and hedged with divinity, worshipped by a lover who is subject to her."[10] But as Aurelio Roncaglia argues, while a number of religious conceits (such as the notion that the beloved is an angel, a heavenly creation, or the direct work of God) were commonplaces of courtly love lyrics, "è evidente

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and essence of God within the universe of Christian life" (Picone, *Vita Nuova e Tradizione Romanza*, 158). For more on the ambiguity and conflation of erotic and religious registers in Rudel see Larry S. Crist, "Dieu ou ma Dame: The Polysemic Object of Love in Jaufré Rudel's Lanquan Li Jorn," *Marche Romane*, no. 29 (1979): 61-75.

[8] Santagata quotes examples of the *donna angelicata* trope from Chiaro Davanzati ("Non me ne maraviglio, donna fina"), Maestro Rinuccino, ("Donzella gaia e saggia e canoscente"), Monte Andrea ("Chi ben riguarda, donna, vostre altezze" and "Come il sol sengnoreggia ongni splendore"), and Lapo Gianni ("Dolc'è 'l pensier che mi notrica 'l core") (Santagata, *Amate e Amanti*, 16-18). There is a similar catalogue in Aurelio Roncaglia, "Precedenti e Significato dello 'Stil Novo' Dantesco," in *Dante e Bologna nei Tempi di Dante* (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1967), 21.

[9] "You are my God, and my life and my death, / so that, if I am in trouble / on land or at sea / I will call on you like others call on God." Cited in Ibid., 21, which offers similar examples in Rinaldo d'Aquino and Peire Vidal.

[10] Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric,* 286.

che tutte quelle espressioni altro non sono che delle iperboli convenzionali per lodare la bellezza e le altre virtù della donna, e non implicano alcuna tendenza a spiritualizzare l'amore in senso metafisico-religioso."[11]

The predominance of religious rhetoric among the poets of courtly love is indisputable, but less settled is to what extent medieval poets and readers would have seen the use of religious concepts and language to describe the experience of love as blasphemous or idolatrous. Classic theorists of courtly love like C.S. Lewis had argued that medieval love poetry was essentially idolatrous.[12] Dronke, however, disagrees, arguing

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[11] "it is clear that all these expressions are nothing other than conventional hyperboles to praise the beauty and other virtues of the lady, and do not imply any tendency to spiritualize love in metaphysical or religious sense" (Roncaglia, "Precedenti e Significato," 20, 16.). Dronke disagrees on this point, arguing that "the greatest preoccupation of many of the love-poets" was "the relation between human and divine love": "The problem, taken metaphysically, is not only how the poet's beloved can have something divine about her, how earthly love can foreshadow or be an image of heavenly love. It is to envisage a genuine simultaneous fulfillment of both. And a solution lay here, in these abstruse speculations. There was only one way in which the two loves could be one and still be themselves—a unity-in-diversity such as this unity of active and possible intellect. There need be no separation of lover and beloved: they can be united in the divine union" (Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*, 75). I would endorse this as a statement of the problem confronted by the Stilnovo, and particularly by Dante, but Roncaglia has the more convincing argument about the poets that precede Guido Guinizelli.

[12] "[T]he love religion often begins as a parody of the real religion. This does not mean that it may not soon become something more serious than a parody, nor even that it may not, as in Dante, find a *modus vivendi*, with Christianity and produce a noble fusion of sexual and religious experience. But it does mean that we must be prepared for a certain ambiguity in all those poems where the attitude of the lover to his lady or to Love looks at first sight most like the attitude of the worshipper to the Blessed Virgin or to God. The distance between the 'lord of terrible aspect' in the *Vita Nuova* and the god of lovers in the Council of Remiremont is a measure of the tradition's width and complexity. Dante is as serious as a man can be; the French poet is not serious at all. We must be prepared to find other authors dotted about in every sort of intermediate position between these two extremes. And this is not all. The variations are not only between jest and earnest; for the

that for the most audacious of the poets of courtly love—Rudel, for example, or Arnault Daniel—"human and divine love are not in conflict with each other but on the contrary can become identified. If the beloved reflects divine perfections in the world, she can be a *mediatrix* or *figura* of them to her lover, and he can reach them in so far as he comes nearer to her through love service."[13] As we shall see, questions about the possible idolatry and blasphemy of comparisons like Vidal's are not an invention of modern criticism. Charles Singleton notes that the conflict between troubadour love and Christian love arose because "within troubadour ideology there is no place for an object of love higher than the lady; whereas in the Christian, not only can there be no object of love higher than God but all other loves must show subordination to love of Him. The trouble was that the troubadour could always forget to acknowledge that subordination."[14]

This tension is captured neatly in a sonnet by Giacomo da Lentini, the most prominent of the Sicilian love poets:

> Io m'ag[g]io posto in core a Dio servire,
> com'io potesse gire in paradiso,
> al santo loco ch'ag[g]io audito dire
> u' si mantien sollazzo, gioco e riso.
> Sanza mia donna non vi voria gire,
> quella c'ha blonda testa e claro viso,
> ché sanza lei non poteria gaudare,
> estando da la mia donna diviso.

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love religion can become more serious without becoming reconciled to the real religion. Where it is not a parody of the Church it may be, in a sense, her rival--a temporary escape, a truancy from the ardours of a religion that was believed into the delights of a religion that was merely imagined" (C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 20).

[13] Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*, 4-5.

[14] Charles S. Singleton, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1949), 63.

> Ma no lo dico a tale intendimento,
> perch'io pec[c]ato ci volesse fare;
> se non veder lo suo bel portamento
> e lo bel viso e 'l morbido sguardare:
> ch'lo mi teria in gran consolamento,
> veg[g]endo la mia donna in ghiora stare.[15]

The poem's thematic development unfolds through a dialectical progression that maps precisely onto the sonnet's formal divisions. Lentini uses the two halves of the octave to set out thesis and antithesis; the synthesis follows after the *volta*. In the first quatrain, the poet announces his desire to serve God so that he may enjoy paradise. In the second quatrain, the poet qualifies this desire, fearing that notwithstanding this desire, he "would not be able to delight" in paradise if he were separated from his beloved. The sestet provides the playful resolution: to avoid both idolatry and despair, he will hope to see his beloved in heaven with him, so that there he will be able to look upon her "beautiful comportment / and pretty face and soft glance." Thus Lentini's problem is solved: if his happiness cannot be assured without the permanence of paradise ("u' si mantien sollazzo, gioco e riso") and the presence of his lady ("ché sanza lei non poteria gaudare") then he will simply have to hope for both.

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[15] "I have proposed in my heart to serve God, that I might go to paradise, to the holy place of which I have heard said that there are maintained pleasure, play, and laughter. Without my lady I do not wish to go, the one who has a blond head and a clear face, since without her I could not take pleasure, being from my lady divided. But I do not say this with such an intention, that I would want to commit a sin; but rather because I would want to see her beautiful comportment and her beautiful face and her sweet glance: for it would keep me in great consolation, to see my lady be in glory." Translation by Teodolinda Barolini in "Dante and the Lyric Past," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 15.

What's notable about Lentini's sonnet is not that it uses religious language in the service of erotic hyperbole--as we've seen, such use is entirely conventional--but that it acknowledges (in ll. 9-10) a religious objection to this use: "I do not say this with such an intention, that I would want to commit a sin." To acknowledge is not to take seriously, of course, and "Io m'ag[g]io posto" supplies all the reason anyone could want to endorse Michael Camille's suggestion that "we should not underestimate such capacity for toying, even subversive play, on the part of medieval artists."[16] And yet it seems important to note that that however successfully the poem succeeds in resolving the troubadour conflict in rhetorical terms, the concluding sestet (and therefore the poem) fails on a rigorist religious reading.[17] In fact the couplet that alludes to the poet's possible sin has the

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[16]Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art Cambridge New Art History and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 313.

[17]Note that in calling this tension between the love of God and the love of woman "the troubadour's conflict," I do not mean to imply that it held for all troubadours. In a poem like Rudel's "Lanquan li jorn," the ambiguity of erotic and religious registers works to cancel any necessary choice between them. (It's worth noting, however, that Roy Rosenstein has argued that in Rudel's "Qan lo rius de la fontana," "Two visions of love, profane and sacred, are contrasted....The troubadour encourages his companion-in-arms and fellow pilgrim to undertake a double journey, tracing not only the Way of the Cross toward the Holy Land but also the passage beyond his family and his feudal concerns, toward the spiritual ecstasy of the interior Jerusalem." See Roy Rosenstein, "New Perspectives on Distant Love: Jaufre Rudel, Uc Bru, and Sarrazina," *Modern Philology* 87, no. 3 (1990): 225-238.)

Nor is it the case that troubadours who did distinguish between love of God and love of woman always represented this distinction as a conflict. Laura-Emanuela Kuzmenko has shown how in Arnault Daniel, for example, God "agit d'une manière protectrice" of the poet's love: "Dieu omniscient et omnipotent pardonne les péchés et en même temps Arnaut lui attribue le consentement aux péchés....Dieu complice est un allié essentiel non seulement parce qu'il est d'accord avec les amants mais parce qu'il leur accorde sa confiance en leurs actions" (Laura-Emanuela Kuzmenko, *La Sémantique de la Perception dans la Poésie d'Arnaut Daniel* (2005), accessed online at http://www.etudes-francaises.net/dossiers/kuzmenko/).

paradoxical effect of raising the stakes of the religious language: the moment of concern staged in those lines makes it less easy to write off the religious language as innocent hyperbole. From a purely religious perspective, the poet's biggest error is idolatry: in place of the *visio Dei* that constituted the central activity of beatitude for medieval Christians, Lentini has substituted a *visio amantis*. In the micro-soteriology of the sonnet, God is useful only for his heaven, which offers the poet an eternal opportunity to gaze upon the "blond head and a clear face" of his beloved. What Teodolinda Barolini sees as an "unresolved tension between the poet-lover's allegiance to the lady and his allegiance to God" is therefore resolved almost entirely in favor of the lady.[18]

The poets of the Stilnovo, who were more inclined to plumb the philosophical and religious resources of their poetry, recognized that Lentini's resolution of the troubadour's conflict was not much of a solution at all. This recognition is most evident in the poem sometimes described as the Stilnovist manifesto, Guido Guinizelli's "Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore." Guinizelli's poem, "il documento più importante sulla genesi e natura d'amore prima dell'intervento dantesco," is a novel and complex philosophical and phenomenological exploration of the nature of love conducted within the conceptual framework of Neoplatonic light metaphysics.[19] Roncaglia describes its central innovation as "l'equazione del rapporto psicologico fra cor gentile e amore al rapporto filosofico più generale fra potenza ed atto," an equation that is developed over

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[18] Barolini, "Dante and the Lyric Past," 14-15.

[19] "the most important document about the genesis and nature of love before Dante's intervention" (Santagata, *Amate e Amanti,* 57). For more on the light metaphysics in the poem, see Maria Luisa Ardizzone, "Guido Guinizzelli's 'Al Cor Gentil': A Notary in Search of Written Laws," *Modern Philology* 94, no. 4 (1997).

the course of the poem's first five stanzas.[20] This equation, he argues, not only marks the absolute originality of Guinizelli but also supplies the ideological foundation of the Stilnovo.[21]

For my purposes, however, the most relevant part of the poem is the one that is perhaps least interesting in literary historical terms. In the *congedo*, the sixth and final stanza of "Al cor gentil," Guinizelli breaks the impersonal and abstract frame of the poem and shifts abruptly into a first-person hypothetical mini-narrative:

> Donna, Deo mi dirà: "Che presomisti?"
> siando l'alma mia a Lui davanti.
> "Lo ciel passasti e 'nfin a Me venisti
> e desti in vano amor Me per semblanti:
> ch'a Me conven le laude
> e a la reina del regname degno, per cui cessa onne fraude".
> Dir Li porò: "Tenne d'angel sembianza
> che fosse del Tuo regno;
> non me fu fallo, s'eo li posi amanza".[22]

Here the poet imagines being reproved by God in heaven. The fourth line contains the most serious and specific charge: "desti in vano amor Me per sembianti." (In the fifth stanza, Guinizelli had said that "la bella donna...'n gli occhi splende / del suo gentil

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[20] "the equation of the psychological relation between the noble heart and love and the more general philosophical relation between potency and act." For a different view of the relation between Guido and the troubadour tradition, see Alberto Del Monte, "'Dolce Stil Novo,'" *Filologia Romanza* 3 (1956): 254-64.

[21] Roncaglia, "Precedenti e Significato," 16-17.

[22] "Lady, God will ask me, when my soul / stands before Him, 'What presumption! / You crossed heaven and reached Me at last, / only to take me as a metaphor [lit, 'semblance'] for vain love, / when it's I who deserve the praise, / I and the Queen of this realm, / through whom all evil is ended.' / And I will be able to say to Him: 'She seemed / an angel from your kingdom, / so I did not err in loving her'" (my translation).

talento" just as "splende 'n la 'ntelligenzïa del cielo / Dio criator")[23] The "presumption" alluded to in the stanza's first line is therefore a uniquely poetic sin, namely, Guinizelli's use of God as the vehicle ("sembianza") for a metaphor, rather than--as would be theologically proper--the tenor. The comparison is idolatrous not only because it affords the *bella donna* as much dignity as God but because it violates the Augustinian hermeneutical principle that creatures are supposed to lead the mind to the Creator, rather than the other way around.[24]

Of course, God does not get the final word in "Al cor gentil." When pressed to explain himself, the poet wittily defends himself with a counter-charge: if he erred it was only because God gave his lady the appearance of an angel of heaven. Notably, as Barolini mentions, Guinizelli invokes the word *sembianza* in his defense, thereby recalling the indictment's *sembianti* and "throwing the blame back on the original writer, God, who in his book of the universe made ladies so like angels."[25] "The net result of the poem," Barolini writes, "is to take the possibility of similitude between the lady and the divine much more seriously than it had been taken heretofore, to take her 'angelic' qualities out of the realm of amorous hyperbole and into the realm of bona fide theological

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[23] "the beautiful lady...shines in the eyes of her worthy lover"; "God the creator shines in the intelligences [i.e. angels] of heaven."

[24] Cf. Augustine's distinction between charity (*charitas*) and lust (*cupiditas*) in the *De Doctrina Christiana* 3.10.16: "I mean by charity that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and one's neighbor in subordination to God; by lust I mean that affection of the mind which aims at enjoying one's self and one's neighbor and other corporeal things without reference to God" (Augustine, "Christian Doctrine," in *City of God, Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff and trans. J.F. Shaw, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series. [New York: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890]).

[25] Barolini, "Dante and the Lyric Past," 20.

speculation."[26] Roncaglia specifies the nature of that similarity, arguing that Guido's achievement is to supply an "interpretazione della metafora tradizionale donna-angelo alla luce dell'angelologia teorizzata dai filosofi con l'equazione tra angelo e intelligenza. Come le intelligenze angeliche, la donna ha una funzione attualizzatrice: essa traduce in atto, cioè in amore, la potenza del cor gentile."[27]

Barolini and Roncaglia are surely correct about the significance of the poetico-philosophical achievement of "Al cor gentil," but I think we should admit that the *congedo* is a somewhat odd ending to a poem otherwise dedicated to the development of a new theory of love. It is strange that Guinizelli would conclude the poem with an episode that destabilizes the very analogy—between the angels' and the lady's actualizing powers—that the rest of the poem is trying to secure. Critics have tried to relate the miniature drama of the last stanza to the philosophical work accomplished by the other five, but these attempts remain unconvincing. For example, Picone sees in the final episode evidence of "il limite cognitivo della poesia Guinizelliana: la potenza inesauribile di amore, che si dimostra momentaneamente in grado di infrangere le limitazioni spazio-temporali dell'uomo, viene fermata nel tratto finale della sua ascesa verso l'eterno da una sua utilizzazione soltanto metaforica."[28] But while this seems like a perfectly plausible way to

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[26] Ibid., 21.

[27] "interpretation of the traditional *donna-angelo* metaphor in the light of the angelology theorized by the philosophers, with their identity between angel and intelligence. Just like angelic intelligences, the lady has an actualizing function: she brings into act, i.e., in love, the potency of the noble heart" (Roncaglia, "Precedenti e Significato," 23).

[28] "the cognitive limit of Guinizelli's poetry: the inexhaustible power of love, which for a moment seems ready to break through the spatiotemporal limitations of humanity, is

describe Guinizelli's poem from the perspective of the *Vita Nuova*—which is, to be fair, Picone's intent—it doesn't capture the spirit of the *congedo*. The point of the sixth stanza isn't to solemnly endorse a banner of piety beneath which a love poet must kneel; the point is precisely the opposite: to deny the force of such a demand.[29]

Regardless of Guinizelli's reasons for ending "Al cor gentil" the way he did, the *congedo* stands for us as a useful indicator of how religious rhetoric was understood within love poetry at the start of the Stilnovo. It points not only to the commonality of such rhetoric but also to the commonality of complaints against such rhetoric. Guinizelli's imagined repartee with God suggests that the rigorist protest voiced in the first line of the final stanza would have been familiar to his audience. And his willingness to tweak the rigorist complaint at the very least suggests that it was not something he felt he had to seriously address. The charge of idolatry, it seems, was not one he worried over.

What's more, the insouciance of the *congedo* confirms that despite the poem's philosophical depth and its reliance on certain theological concepts (such as the identity between angels and active intelligences), the type of love he is describing is something

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stopped in the final part of its ascent to the eternal by its purely metaphorical utilization." (Picone, *Vita Nuova e Tradizione Romanza*, 60-1).

[29] Cf. Bruno Nardi: "Nato da un bisogno di contemplazione estetica, il desiderio amoroso dell'anima nobile è pianamente appagato nell'obbedire al gentil talento di donna bella..Nè in un tal sentimento, sorto dalla catarsi della passione sensuale, il poeta trova alcunche di peccaminoso di cui abbia a pentirsi come cristiana" (Bruno Nardi, "Filosofia dell'amore nei Rimatori Italiani del Duecento e in Dante," in *Dante e la Cultura Medievale*, 20). Singleton argues that Guido "has refused at the end to take sides. The very point, the conceit, of his poem, is to present the conflict without solution" (Singleton, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*, 70). I agree that Guinizelli doesn't solve the troubadour's conflict, but it's hard to see how the poet's flip response to God can be counted as not taking sides in the conflict.

other than the kind that obtains within the moral-religious world of Christianity.[30] For Guinizelli, as for the poets before him, "l'angelicazione o divinizzazione della donna...è una semplice metafora, senza significato spirituale religioso: e rischia anzi d'apparire irriverente alla riflessione degli spiriti più sinceramente religiosi, proprio perché sovrappone all'immagine profana della donna immagini tratte dal mondo sacro della religione."[31] As Ronald Martinez argues, "*Precisely because* of its facetious, evasive rejoinder to the divine accusation...Guinizelli's canzone may be said to establish the idolatrous confusion of the lady with angels (or *a fortiori* with the Virgin) as the birthright of the stilnovo."[32]

The deployment of specifically soteriological language in love poetry did not begin with the Stilnovo: the idea of the lady-savior likely emerged in the medieval context as a conflation and development of two traditions: on the one hand that aspect of the courtly love tradition that Joseph Bédier called "le culte d'un objet excellent" and, on the other hand, the Christian tradition of devotion to the Virgin Mary and other saints.[33] And yet it

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[30] Roncaglia: "l'amore cantato dal Guinizelli non è spiritualizzato in senso religioso" (Roncaglia, "Precedenti e Significato," 25).

[31] Ibid., 22.

[32] Ronald L. Martinez, "Guido Cavalcanti's 'Una Figura della Donna mia' and the Specter of Idolatry Haunting the Stilnovo," *Exemplaria* 15 (2003): 297-324. My emphasis.

[33] C.S. Lewis argues that "there is no evidence that the quasi-religious tone of medieval love poetry has been transferred from the worship of the Blessed Virgin: it is just as likely—it is even more likely—that the colouring of certain hymns to the Virgin has been borrowed from the love poetry" (Lewis, *The Allegory of Love,* 8). But Ronald Martinez counters that "the entire literary phenomenon known as the Stilnovo depends fundamentally on the close imitation, in the description of the lady, of religious texts describing wonder-working images of saints, inclusive of the Madonna herself," and supplies evidence for the claim in "Guido Cavalcanti's 'Una Figura della Donna mia,'" 310. What's more, as Roncaglia notes, this conflation "non ha nulla di nuovo né di

was the poets of the Stilnovo who pushed the metaphorics of salvation well beyond what had come before them. I have already noted how Guinizelli transformed the conventional comparison between the beloved and an angel into a metaphor of potentially serious philosophical profundity. What had been a hyperbolic simile to suggest physical beauty became a metaphor for the lady's ability to draw the act of love from the potency of the noble heart. As Barolini argues, this transformation acquires soteriological resonance in poems like "Io vogl' del ver la mia donna laudare," in which "Guinizelli's theologically ennobled lady possesses literally beatific effects."[34]

It will be Dante, of course, who takes Guinizelli's suggestion most seriously, building on it a theory of erotic-poetic-religious salvation that goes well beyond anything imagined by his peers.[35] For the other stilnovists, however, the most common form of soteriological allusion was a pun or play on the words *saluto* and *salute*.[36] Both forms have

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sorprendente. Il cristianesimo è la religione dell'amore e uno stesso vocabolo designa l'amore religioso e l'amore profano. Si può contrapporre l'amore mundi all'amore Dei.... Ma la contrapposizione riguarda il diverso oggetto, non l'intrinsica natura della forza spirituale che ad esso si volge. Questa medesimezza di natura, questa identità di vocabolo, permettono in qualsiasi momento la trasposizione metaforica d'immagini dal linguaggio religioso al linguaggio profano, il richiamo etico dall'esperienza profana all'esperienza religiosa" (Roncaglia, "Precedenti e Significato," 22).

[34] Barolini, "Dante and the Lyric Past," 23.

[35] Roncaglia writes, "Quella che in Guinizelli era stata soltanto un'ardita comparazione, ardita sino a sfiorare l'irriverenza nei conforti della divinità...diviene per Dante l'intuizione di una verità superiore ed essentiale... Così egli [i.e., Dante] supera quell'insoddisfazione, quell'inquietudine, che il Guinizelli non riusciva, tormentandosene, a superare, e che il Cavalcanti, con irritata maliconia, teorizzava pessimisticamente insuperabile" (Roncaglia, "Precedenti E Significato," 25-6).

[36] Alessandro Niccoli attributes the Stilnovists' discovery of the pun to Guinizelli: "[F]u sopratutto il modello del Guinizelli a suggerire a Dante e, contemporaneamente o dopo di lui, agli stilnovisti, l'attribuzione al vocabolo dell'ambivalenza già ricordata." See "Salute"

their etymological root in the Latin *salus*, and the loose orthography of the day meant that either of them could signify "greeting," "health," or "salvation."

In "Io vogl' del ver," for example, Guinizelli compares his beloved to flowers, the heavens, a green river, the air, and then says:

> Passa per via adorna, e sì gentile
> ch'abassa orgoglio a cui dona salute,
> e fa 'l de nostra fé se non la crede." (ll.9-11)[37]

The setting established in the ninth line makes it clear that the primary sense of the tenth line's *salute* is "greeting." And yet the eleventh line, in which the beloved suddenly takes on the role of an agent of conversion (and, I'd note, supplies another example of bringing potency to act) demands that we hear a secondary soteriological denotation as well. Casting down the pride of the lover is a conventional effect of the beloved in courtly poetry, but Guinizelli's *donna* is capable of something more. She gives faith to the faithless, and not just any faith but "nostra fé": that is, the Christian faith.

The *saluto/e* pun returns in Lapo Gianni's "Dolc' è il pensier che mi notrica 'l core." The poem opens on a Guinizellian note, as the poet asserts that the thought of the beloved has made his soul "gentil":

> Dolc' è il pensier che mi notrica 'l core
> d'una giovane donna ch'e' disia,

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in Umberto Bosco, ed., *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970), 1089.

[37] "She walks along the path adorned and so noble that she casts down the pride of anyone she greets, and brings to our faith him who does not believe."

per cui si fe' gentil l'anima mia
poi che sposata la congiunse Amore.[38]

He continues in classic Stilnovist fashion, deploying the *donna-angelo* simile in the seventh line and suggesting that the most accurate metaphor for her might be to call her the sister of Love:

Io non posso leggeramente trare
il novo essemplo ched ella simiglia,
quest' angela che par di ciel venuta;
d'Amor sorella mi sembl' al parlare,
ed ogni su' atterello è meraviglia.[39]

The tenth line brings us to the pun:

Beata l'alma che questa saluta![40]

Just as in the first case, there's no question here about the primary significance of *saluta:* unlike the substantives *saluto/e,* the verb *salutare,* like its Latin etymon, is univocal and refers only to the action of greeting. (Though it lacks a syllable, *salva,* the third-person singular of *salvare,* is the verb the poet would most likely use to signify the action of salvation.) But the *Beata* that opens the line works with the earlier *donna-angelo* simile to

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[38] "Sweet is the thought that nourishes my heart of a young lady whom it wants, and by whom my soul is made noble, since Love is joined with her, his bride."
[39] "I cannot easily draw the new image that she compares to, this angel who seems to have come from heaven; a sister of Love she seems to me, and every little thing she does is magic."
[40] "Blessed be the soul whom she greets!"

suggest a soteriological depth to *saluta*. The soul greeted by Lapo's lover is *beata*, blissful, but it is also blessed—in other words, it is saved.

1.2. The *Vita Nuova* as Soteriological Narrative

In the last section I sketched some of the ways in which the Stilnovists and their predecessors used religious and specifically soteriological rhetoric in their poetry. Now I turn to the *Vita Nuova* itself. As I noted at the start, the *Vita Nuova* is structured as a soteriological narrative: it is the story of Dante's salvation by Beatrice. This does not mean, of course, that it is a work *about* soteriology. If it is anything, the *Vita Nuova* is a book about love—about the nature of love in general and about Dante's love for Beatrice in particular. As Bruno Nardi says, "[Dante's] primo problema fu quello di comprendere il prepotente sentimento che s'era svegliato nel suo cuore, osservandone in se stesso i movimenti; fu il problema dell'amore."[41] On the one hand it is an extension (and in many respects the culmination) of Dante's earlier lyric exploration of the nature of love and the ideal qualities of the lover and the beloved. Seen in this light, the *Vita Nuova* may be read in the line of Stilnovist works—Guinizelli's "Amor e il cor gentil," Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega"—that sought to answer the question that was formulated in stark terms by Guido Orlandi: "È vita questo amore o vero è morte?"[42] On the other hand the *Vita Nuova* can

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[41] "Dante's first problem was that of understanding the prepotent feeling that had awoken in his heart, [the problem of] observing the movements of that feeling; it was the problem of love" (Nardi, "Filosofia dell'amore," 36).

[42] "Is love life, or is it, indeed, death?"

and should be read as Dante's attempt to come to terms with the specific—Dante would say unique—significance of his love for Beatrice.

Dante found an answer to the former question (on the general nature of love) with the help of a moral-aesthetic theory that has its origins in Guinizelli's "Al cor gentil." His two major statements on the nature of love come in the sonnet "Amore e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa" (*Vita Nuova* 20) and the philosophical prose gloss to "Io mi senti' svegliar dentro a lo core" (*Vita Nuova* 25). But Dante's understanding the general nature of love only went so far in helping him to come to grips with the specific experience of his love for Beatrice. This latter effort is the real concern of his book, and it involved not only an interpretation of his relationship with Beatrice but also Dante's self-fashioning as a poet, one who would be able "di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna."[43]

The premise of my reading of the *Vita Nuova* is that its many references to salvation come not as a question but as an answer. Though the narrative of the *libello* is very much a soteriological narrative—it is the story of a young man seeking his salvation from the woman in whom he finds his beatitude—that narrative is already an answer to a prior question, a question that is nowhere explicit in the book but which is nevertheless present on every page: *who is this Beatrice?*[44] I insist on the priority of this question because in talking about the soteriology of the *Vita Nuova* there's a risk of implying that salvation itself (whether Christian salvation or some other kind) was the central focus of

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[43] *Vita Nuova* 42. "to say of her what had never been said of any other woman"

[44] As J.A. Scott says, "We should remember that its author did not claim to have written a treatise on mysticism, but a 'fervent and impassioned' work" ("Notes on Religion and the *Vita Nuova*," *Italian Studies* 20, no. 1 [1965]).

Dante's concern.[45] I want to avoid this implication because I believe it to be a misreading, a confusion of means and ends. On my reading, Dante found the rhetoric and concepts of soteriology useful as a means to interpret the significance of Beatrice; he didn't come to Beatrice as a way to secure his own Christian salvation. I expect that this is all fairly obvious to anyone who has read the *Vita Nuova*, but I am making a fuss about such an apparently uncontroversial point because it bears on a pair of questions about the *Vita Nuova* that *are* controversial: namely, how and to what extent is the soteriology of the *Vita Nuova* compatible with Christian soteriology?

These questions are controversial because their answers depend crucially on one of the oldest interpretive cruxes of the *Vita Nuova*, which is the question of how one should understand the figure of Beatrice. While the terms of the debate have shifted over the course of decades and centuries—no one now, for instance, still speaks of "realist" versus "allegorical" interpretations of Beatrice—the question, I submit, is not settled even today.[46] I shall say more about this debate in the last section chapter, but since our global

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[45] Here I follow Robert Pogue Harrison, who argues that "in the final analysis, were Beatrice not first and foremost a woman there would be not apparent reason for Dante to insist upon her so-called miraculous status....The accretion of poetic and mystical hyperboles around the figure of Beatrice becomes possible only later, for it is Dante's vision or perceptions of her which initiates the poetic enterprise in the first place....To begin with a phenomenology of vision—of the 'marvelous vision'—means to interrogate above all the nature of Beatrice's presence" (*The Body of Beatrice* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988], 19).

[46] In the following paragraphs in the main text, I suggest some interpretative approaches that have helped me to clarify my own, but a much more comprehensive overview of the diversity of readings may be found in Michelangelo Picone, "La *Vita Nuova* fra Autobiografia e Tipologia," in *Dante e le Forme dell'Allegoresi*, ed. Gian Carlo Alessio and Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo, 1987), 59-61.

interpretation of Beatrice affects how we interpret the local manifestations of her salvific aspects, I will here briefly sketch a few possibilities.

At one level, the debate over Beatrice's religious significance is a debate about whether she can be understood within the Christian paradigm at all. Most critics today follow the massively influential interpretation of Charles Singleton, who argued that "what is perhaps the controlling metaphor of the whole construction" of the *libello* is "a certain resemblance of Beatrice to Christ."[47] As I discuss below, there is much evidence for this position, such as the analogy that Dante proposes in Chapter 24, which explicitly compares Beatrice's friend (and Cavalcanti's lady) Giovanna to John the Baptist and all but explicitly compares Beatrice to Christ. But a certain skepticism on this point—not a skepticism *in toto*, but a skepticism as to whether Dante really escapes the charge of idolatry that a rigorist Christian reader might level at the *Vita Nuova*—still has spokespeople. Robert Pogue Harrison is one:

Picone first divides the field between critics who locate the *Vita Nuova*'s center of gravity in autobiography and those who find it in allegory. The former group he divides among those who read the *Vita Nuova* as a documentary and psychological record (e.g. Giorgio Petrocchi, *Vita di Dante* (Bari, 1983)); those who read it as a Christian or spiritual autobiography (e.g. Roncaglia); and those who read it as a *Bildungsroman* on the model of Cicero's *Laelius* (e.g. Domenico De Robertis, *Il Libro della "Vita Nuova"* [Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 1961]). The latter group he divides into readings, like Singleton's, that Picone calls "mystical"—"in quanto viene da essa instaurato un rapporto analogico fra il 'libro de la memoria' dell'io e il 'libro della natura' di Dio"; "hagiographical"—in that the representation of Beatrice "si svolge secondo il *pattern* narrativo e ideologico delle *vitae sanctorum"* (e.g. Vittore Branca, "Poetica del Rinnovamento e Linguaggio Agiografico nella 'Vita Nuova,'" in *Studi in Onore di Italo Siciliano* [Firenze: Olschki, 1966], 123-148); and a third kind of reading that "ha cercato di precisare l'ambito filosofico dentro il quale si articola nel Medioevo la correlazione fra mondo e sovra mondo, approfondendo il concetto di *analogia entis*" (e.g. the prefatory essay of Dante Alighieri and Francesco Mazzoni, *Vita Nuova* [Alpignano: A. Tallone, 1965]).

[47] Singleton, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*, 22.

> For a book composed in the thirteenth century, the *Vita Nuova* is at bottom shocking, even blasphemous, in the way it glorifies a mortal woman named Beatrice. The daring of Dante's liberal use of the language of sacrality with reference to Beatrice does not abash us sufficiently, since we take it for granted now, but the fact is that such a work, in its historical context, approaches the limits of sacrilege.... Dante's glorification of Beatrice in the prose goes beyond the bounds of mere idealization. It asks us to take seriously the suggestion that she was no ordinary woman, that she was the singular incarnation of transcendence, and that she was nothing less than Dante's spiritual salvation itself.[48]

Santagata is another. He allows that Beatrice is similar to Christ insofar as she is a "portatore di un messaggio universale di salvezza," who "per propria singolare forza virtuosa genera amore negli animi a prescindere dalla loro nobiltà."[49] But he also insists that "il contenuto d[el] miracolo [di Beatrice] (creare amore dal nulla) presuppone un orizzonte che non è quello cristiano, ma che si identifica con l'ideologia amorosa condivida dagli stilnovisti.... Beatrice cioè compie un miracolo 'laico,' che niente ha a che vedere con angeli e sante."[50]

A second level of the debate over Beatrice's significance—and especially her religious significance—is reserved for those who accept the compatibility of the *Vita*

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[48] Robert Pogue Harrison, "Approaching the *Vita Nuova*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 35-6. This essay gives a condensed and introductory version of some of the arguments found in *The Body of Beatrice*, which explicitly takes for its target the "absolute hegemony" of the Singletonian paradigm.

[49] "bearer of a universal message of salvation"; "through a singular virtuous force generates love in souls without reference to their nobility." Santagata, *Amate e Amanti*, 50, 47.

[50] "the content of Beatrice's miracle (creating love out of nothing) presupposes a horizon that is not Christian, but which is identified with the erotic ideology shared among the stilnovists.... Beatrice, that is, performs a 'lay' miracle, which has nothing to do with angels or saints." Ibid., 47.

Nuova with some version of orthodox Christianity. Since accepting this compatibility requires one find an interpretative link—be it allegorical, analogical, or more broadly metaphorical—between Beatrice and the agent of Christian salvation in general (Christ), the debate at this level concerns the precise form of that interpretative link. Some critics (like Erich Auerbach and Dronke) see Beatrice as a *figura* of Christ, while others (like Singleton and Scott) see the connection between Beatrice and Christ as an analogy of salvific action, while still others (like Branca) read the *Vita Nuova* as a *legenda sanctae Beatrix*.[51]

The need to reckon the *Vita Nuova's* relationship to Christianity is generated not only by the cultural context in which the *libello* was written but also by the text itself, which at several key moments juxtaposes Beatrice's saving activity with Christ's. I shall discuss some of these in further detail below, but here it seems useful to mention two.[52] The first is a scene in chapter 5 that has Beatrice seated "in parte ove s'udiano parole de

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[51] See Erich Auerbach, "'Figura,'" in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Manchester UP, 1984), Dronke, Singleton, Scott, and Branca. Note that Scott, while in the main endorsing Singleton's analogy of salvific action, has serious reservations about how far that analogy can be stretched. As I discuss in the final section of this chapter, he argues (as does Harrison) that some of Dante's use of religious rhetoric approaches blasphemy.

[52] Others include the echo of Luke 24:13-35 in chapter 9, when Dante encounters the god Amore in the form of a pilgrim on the road out of Florence; the quotations from the Book of Lamentations in the sonnet "O voi che per la via" (chapter 7) and the opening of chapter 28; and the famous digression on the number 9 that follows Beatrice's death (in chapter 28), which concludes that "ella era uno nove, cioè uno miracolo, la cui radice, cioè del miracolo, è solamente la mirabile Trinitade." For a thorough consideration of Dante's allusions to the Book of Lamentations, see Ronald L. Martinez, "Mourning Beatrice: The Rhetoric of Threnody in the 'Vita Nuova,'" *MLN* 113, no. 1 (1998).

la regina de la gloria."[53] Dante is seated nearby, and in order not to be caught staring at Beatrice, he deflects his gaze onto a "gentile donna di molto piacevole aspetto."[54] The subterfuge works so well that other people begin to gossip about Dante's love for the "screen lady," a success, he says, that inspires him to continue the deception in rhyme.[55] The second episode is the arrival, in chapter 40, of a group of pilgrims to Florence who are on their way to Rome to see "quella imagine benedetta la quale Iesu Criso lasciò a noi per essemplo de la sua bellissima figura." Dante decides that they must not have heard the news of Beatrice's death, otherwise they would "in alcuna vista parrebbero turbati." Imagining himself in something of the role of the Ancient Mariner, Dante considers stopping them to pass along the sad news, which he's sure would make them weep.[56]

At the end of this chapter, I shall present an argument that endorses the critical consensus that scenes like these are meant to reinforce some kind of allegorical (in a broad sense) relation between Beatrice and Christ, although I will demur from that

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[53] "in a place where one heard words about the queen of glory"

[54] "noble woman of very pleasing appearance."

[55] Taken as an autobiographical record, this story has always seemed fishy to me. Justin Steinberg has very sensibly argued that Dante's poems to other women (including "Violetta," "Lisetta," and an unnamed "pargoletta") "posed an awkward problem for Dante...as they constructed [his] autobiographical person[a] in the *Commedia*." He suggests that the narrative of the *donna gentile* toward the end of the *Vita Nuova* is an example of the way in which Dante uses "narrative to reinterpret lyric poems addressed to other women as a means for integrating them into a coherent literary autobiography" (Justin Steinberg, "Dante Estravagante, Petrarch Disperso, and the Spectre of the Other Woman," in *Petrarch & Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, ed. Zygmunt G. Baranski and Theodore J. Cachey (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2009), 269-70). I would suggest that the narrative of the *donna schermo* is another such example.

[56] As Martinez notes, this episode may be considered a reflection of the "the generic Ciceronian definition of the *locus conquestionis* as transmitted in Threni commentary, for example, Hugh's: 'Est autem conquestio, ut dicit Tullius, oratio auditorium misericordiam captans'" (Martinez, "Mourning Beatrice," 8).

consensus about the direction in which that relation should be read. What's important to note here, however, is that within the world described by the story—what medieval readers would have called the literal level of the text—it is not the Christian religion that draws Dante *actor*'s attention. Beatrice may be listening to a sermon about Mary, but Dante is interested only in how best to disguise his love for his beloved. Likewise, the thought that it might be religiously inappropriate to distract the pilgrims with news of Beatrice's death never enters the story. This pattern repeats itself throughout the *Vita Nuova*. The world of the *libello* is explicitly a Christian world, but even those moments that pull Dante's story closest to Christianity—"Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore," the Giovanna episode in chapter 24, and the final vision of Beatrice in glory—resolutely keep the narrative focus (again, at the literal level of the text) on Beatrice.

The hermeneutical gap between the literal significance of Beatrice's salvific actions and their allegorical Christian significations suggests that it would be wise to follow the example of medieval Biblical glossators and begin with an understanding of the literal level of the text. In modern terms, this means postponing any questions about the relation of the *Vita Nuova*'s soteriology to Christianity and instead examining how Beatrice acts as a savior within the immediate world of the text. When we do this, I argue, we can see that at a basic level the *Vita Nuova* is a love story whose operating premise is that the love a young man has for his beloved is a kind of salvation. We see this especially in the prose of the *Vita Nuova*, which, in Harrison's words, "asks us to take seriously the suggestion that [Beatrice] was no ordinary woman, that she was nothing less

than Dante's spiritual salvation itself."[57] In the following section, I examine the shape of this salvation and propose that it can be well described as miraculous, momentous, and unique. I will not claim that these adjectives provide an exhaustive account of Beatrice's salvific qualities, which would necessarily include an account of her Christ-like qualities, but I shall save this latter aspect for the final section of this chapter.

1.3. The Shape of Salvation

As I've noted, the premise that love constitutes a kind of salvation has its origins in the poetic rhetoric of the *stilnovo* and the lyric tradition that preceded it. But Dante's attempt to understand the meaning of Beatrice led him to take this rhetoric seriously in a way undreamed of by his peers and predecessors.[58] The *Vita Nuova* contains nothing like the witty play of Guinizelli's "Al cor gentil" or the winking amphibology of Cavalcanti's "Una figura della mia donna."[59] Instead, the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova* is a figure of real redemptive power, a figure with miraculous powers whose appearance was ordained by the universe (and even the Trinity) and whose favor was Dante's only hope for salvation.

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[57] Harrison, "Approaching the Vita Nuova," 47.

[58] Santagata: "La decisione di costruire un libro che assumesse come qualificante il motivo della natura angelica e miracolosa della protagonista rappresentava per Dante una sfida, non esente da una certa baldanza giovanile, lanciata all'intera tradizione lirica. Dante sapeva che quel motivo era stato modulato e rimodulato di testo in testo fino a saturarne tutte le possibili valenze innovative" (Santagata, *Amate e Amanti*, 28-9).

[59] For a persuasive argument about the amphibology of Cavalcanti's poem, see Martinez.

What Thomas Hyde, speaking broadly of the development of poetic theology, has usefully named "a process of rhetorical escalation" shows itself most directly in Beatrice's miraculous powers.[60] We have already seen how, starting with Guinizelli, the Stilnovists played on the semantic ambiguity of *saluto/e* to align the denotations "greeting" and "salvation" by way of a pun. In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante takes this pun to a new level—more precisely, he stops taking the pun as a pun at all, and starts treating it as an identity. Thus it happens that at a crucial moment in the *Vita Nuova*'s plot (chapter 10), when Beatrice denies her greeting to him for the first time, Dante describes her "dolcissimo salutare" as that "ne lo quale stava tutta la mia beatitudine."[61] As if to prove that this is not mere hyperbole, he interrupts the narrative to insert a digression on the effects of the "mirabile salute." The first of these effects is a sudden "fiamma di caritade" that arises within him at the expectation of Beatrice's greeting, which causes Dante to pardon anyone who has offended him.[62] The second effect is the destruction of all of Dante's sensitive spirits (i.e. the spirits responsible for collecting sensible impressions and carrying them to the

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[60] Thomas Hyde, *The Poetic Theology of Love: Cupid in Renaissance Literature* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1986), 36. I can imagine that a critic like Santagata might quarrel with this claim. He argues that "benché [la *Vita Nuova*] trasmetta costantemente la sensazione che intorno a Beatrice aleggi un'aura sovrannaturale, contiene poche menzioni espicite della sua natura angelica o miracolosa," and that "i dati più interessanti mi sembrano essere: da un lato, la rarità di 'angelo,' il termine che tradizionalmente definiva la soprannatrualità della donna; dall'altro, la relative copiosità delle attestazioni di 'miracolo,' che è invece quasi sconosciuto alla lirica profana" (Santagata, *Amate e Amanti*, 15, 16). But here I think the philological approach deployed by Santagata, while useful in many ways, leads him slightly astray. I would argue that it is precisely the "aura sovrannaturale" (and not the precise words used to describe it) that Dante finds in the tradition and fortifies in the *Vita Nuova*. That said, Santagata's is an important commentary on Beatrice's miraculous status in the *Vita Nuova*. See Ibid., 13-61.

[61] "sweetest greeting"; "in which lay all of my beatitude."

[62] "flame of charity"

phantasy) and the replacement of his spirits of sight by a spirit of love, which causes his eyes to tremble. The third effect of Beatrice's greeting is to render Dante's body a "cosa grave inanimata," as Love, with his "intollerabile beatitudine," overtook his body.[63] After citing this catalogue, Dante reiterates "che appare manifestamente che ne le sue salute abitava la mia beatitudine" (*Vita Nuova* 11), thereby securing the triple connection between Beatrice's greeting, its miraculous effects, and Dante's salvation.[64]

One could reasonably ask whether it is fair to call these effects miraculous, since they might just as well be explained by the medical-psychological theories of love that Dante was familiar with. Santagata, for example, argues that "il paragrafo XXI è il solo luogo del libro nel quale Beatrice venga presentata come essere miracoloso in quanto ha la capacità di fare miracoli."[65] (In chapter 21, Dante describes Beatrice as "mirabilemente operando" to bring love forth "là ove non è in potenzia.")[66] But the miraculous quality of the three effects of Beatrice's greeting is made plain in *Vita Nuova* 14. There Dante tells of visiting a place "ove molte donne erano adunate."[67] He doesn't know that Beatrice is present, but suddenly "uno mirabile tremor" overtakes him and causes him to lean against a wall. This deadening of the body is the third of the effects described in chapter 10. It is followed by the second effect: "Allora fuoro sì distrutti li miei spiriti...che non ne rimasero in vita più che li spiriti del viso; e ancora questi rimasero fuori de li loro

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[63] "heavy, inanimate thing"; "intolerable beatitude."
[64] "it plainly appears that in her greetings lay my beatitude."
[65] "chapter 21 is the only place in the book in which Beatrice is presented as miraculous on account of her ability to work miracles." Ibid., 46.
[66] "working miraculously"; "where it is not in potency"
[67] "where many ladies were gathered."

istrumenti, peró che Amore volea stare nel loro nobilissimo luogo per vedere la mirabile donna."[68] The miraculous nature of Beatrice's powers is therefore indicated not only by the reference to the miraculous tremor but also by the fact that her presence can affect Dante even when he is not aware of it.

That Dante makes a digression specifically to discuss the effects of Beatrice's greeting, and that he returns to dramatize those effects a few chapters later, suggests the importance of the *saluto* within the salvation narrative that is the *Vita Nuova*. This importance can be interpreted in several registers. Within the world of the text, as we've just seen, Beatrice's greeting operates as the instrument of miraculous effects. The greeting also, of course, admits other interpretations, be they analytically simple (the *saluto* as a confirmation of Beatrice's reciprocal feelings for Dante), straightforward (the *saluto* as a metonym for Beatrice's presence), or complex (the *saluto* as a kind of transcendental signifier). But perhaps the most important point, soteriologically speaking, about Beatrice's greeting is that until chapter 18 it constitutes, as Dante says in chapter 3, "tutti li termini de la beatitudine."[69] Thus, Dante has not only taken the pun on *saluto* out of the realm of wordplay and brought it into the metaphysically charged world of the *Vita Nuova,* he has gone so far as to make it the goal of the first part of his quest for salvation.

This quest takes a famous and crucial turn in chapter 18, when Dante decides, after thinking about Beatrice's earlier refusal, that he will no longer put his hope in her

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[68] "At that moment my spirits were so destroyed...that no spirits remained alive but those of sight; and even these were bereft of their own organs, because Love wanted to stand in their most noble place in order to behold the admirable lady."

[69] "all the ends of beatitude."

greeting. In response to a group of ladies who have asked him to what end he loves Beatrice, he says:

> Madonne, lo fine del mio amore fue già lo saluto di questa donna, forse di cui voi intendete, e in quello dimorava la beatitudine, ché era fine di tutti li miei desiderii. Ma poi che le piacque di negarlo a me, lo mio segnore Amore, la sua merzede, ha posto tutto la mia beatitudine in quello che non mi puote venire meno."[70]

When the the ladies ask what "quello che non...puote venire meno" might mean, Dante answers: "In quelle parole che lodano la donna mia."[71] No longer will Dante look to Beatrice's greeting for salvation, he says; now he will find his beatitude in praising Beatrice.

This episode obviously marks an important shift in the *Vita Nuova*'s soteriology, and I will examine the ramifications of this shift when I consider Beatrice as Dante's unique savior. What I wish to emphasize here, however, is that Dante's decision to seek his beatitude in poetry rather than in Beatrice's greeting does not signal any change in Beatrice's miraculous status. This is evident already in "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore," the *canzone* that follows the episode and stands as the first and most durable statement of Dante's new poetry of praise. In lines 31-42, the poem tells us:

> Dico, qual vuol gentil donna parere

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[70] "Ladies, the end of my love was indeed the greeting of this lady, of whom you are perhaps thinking, and in that greeting lay my beatitude, for it was the end of all my desires. But because it pleased her to deny it to me, my Lord Love, in his mercy, has placed all my beatitude in that which cannot fail me."

[71] "In those words that praise my lady."

vada con lei, che quando va per via,
gitta nei cor villani Amore un gelo,
per onne lor pensero agghiaccia e pere;
e qual soffrisse di starla a vedere
diverria nobil cosa, o si morria.
E quando trova alcun che degno sia
di veder lei, quei prova sua vertute,
ché li avvien, ciò che li dona, in salute,
e sì l'umilia, ch'ogni offesa oblia.
Ancor l'ha Dio per maggior grazia dato
che non pò mal finir chi l'ha parlato.[72]

As in *Vita Nuova* 11, here too we find a catalogue of Beatrice's miraculous effects.[73] For my purposes, what's most significant about this catalogue is the emphasis it puts on the salvific power of Beatrice's presence *even after* Dante has decided to seek his salvation in poems of praise.[74]

This same emphasis recurs in *Vita Nuova* 21 and 26. In the former chapter, as I've noted, Dante describes how, "working miraculously," Beatrice awakens love "non

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[72] "I say, let who wishes to appear a gentle lady / go with her, for when she goes along the way, / into villainous hearts Love casts a chill, / whereby all their thoughts freeze and perish; / and who migght suffer to stay and behold her / would change into a noble thing, or die. / And when she finds someone worthy / to behold her, he experiences her power, / for what she gives him turns into salvation, / and so humbles him that he forgets every offense. / God has given her an even greater grace: that one cannot end in evil who has spoken to her."

[73] Though these aren't explicitly qualified as miraculous in the lines I've quoted, the poem has already told us, in lines 16-18, that an angel sees in Beatrice a "maraviglia ne l'atto che procede / d'un'anima che 'nfin qua su risplende." Likewise, line 46 describes her as a "cosa nova," for which Durling and Martinez supply this gloss: "God's purpose, the end of his creation of Beatrice, then, is some miracle, some *novo*." See Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's Rime Petrose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 64.

[74] The connection to the greeting is preserved by way of the *saluto/e* pun in line 39; as Gorni notes, this recalls line 10 of Guinizelli's "Io vogl' del ver": "ch'abassa orgoglio a cui dona salute." (Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, ed. Guglielmo Gorni, 99.)

solamente...là ove dorme, ma là ove non è in potenzia."[75] We recognize immediately that within the world of the *Vita Nuova* this statement represents an expansion of Beatrice's powers: in the sonnet "Amore e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa" (*Vita Nuova* 20) Dante had insisted—using the same metaphor of sleep—that Nature creates "Amor per sire e 'l cor per sua magione, / dentro la qual dormendo si risposa."[76] Meanwhile the prose of *Vita Nuova* 21 is more radical for its suggestion that Beatrice can inspire love even in the absence of the noble heart: "vennemi voluntade di voler dire...come non solamente si sveglia [Amore] là ove dorme, ma là ove non è in potenzia, ella, mirabilmente operando lo fa venire."[77] It is for this reason, Dante suggests, that she can be described as a "novo miracolo" in the sonnet that follows.[78] Once again, however, we find that these miraculous effects are not only connected to Beatrice's presence but to her greeting: "cui

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[75] "not only...where [Love] sleeps, but where he is not in potency."

[76] "Love as lord and the heart as his mansion, / in which, sleeping, he rests." "Amore e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa" is, of course, a response to Guinizelli's "Al cor gentil," whose philosophical-metaphorical scheme (with the lady drawing the act of love from the potency of the noble heart) it echoes faithfully. Gorni calls the sonnet nothing but "un'abile sintesi di luoghi comuni." Ibid.

[77] "I felt a desire to say...not only how [Love] awakens where he sleeps, but how she, where he is not in potentiality, works miraculously and brings him forward." De Robertis calls the relation between these adjacent prose sections (and the poems attached to them) contradictory, while Santagata argues, "più che di contraddizione parlerei di evoluzione e di superamento." See De Robertis, *Il Libro della "Vita Nuova,"* 138, and Santagata, *Amate e Amanti*, 43.

[78] Note that the prose gloss's radicalizing of Guinizelli's proposition does not explicitly show up in the sonnet, "Ne li occhi porta la mia donna Amore." It is possible to read a connection between the two by way of the poem's opening quatrain, which describe how Beatrice "fa gentil ciò ch'ella mira" and how "ov'ella passa, ogn'om ver lei si gira, / e cui saluta fa tremar lo core," but we need the prose to keep from reading "ogn'om" as another species of hyperbole. I'll have more to say about this line below.

saluta fa tremar lo core."[79] I don't want to belabor the point, and so I will simply note that in *Vita Nuova* 26, the "mirabile cose [che] da [Beatrice] procedeano virtuosamente" are also linked to her greeting: "E quando ella fosse presso d'alcuno, tanta onestade giungea nel cuore del quello, che non ardi di levare lie occhi, né di rispondere a lo suo saluto."[80]

A second characteristic of Beatrice's soteriological aspect is its momentous quality. By momentous I mean that within the *Vita Nuova* Dante presents Beatrice's salvific role as one that has been organized and ordained by the universe and by God. He produces so many kinds of evidence of this ordination—biological, numerological, oneiric, theological, literary-historical, Biblical—that we are forced to consider what is at stake in such a comprehensive insistence. The answer, I argue, is that all of this evidence constitutes another effort on Dante's part to break out of the merely rhetorical hyperbole of his predecessors. Demonstrating that Beatrice's appearance is the result of a coordinated set of terrestrial, celestial, and divine causes is a key means for Dante to prove that his claims to Beatrice's salvific power are not mere projections of his love but objectively grounded statements about the facts of the world.[81]

The second chapter of the *Vita Nuova* marks the first appearance of Beatrice in the *libello* and is remarkable for the range of references it adduces to prove the momentous quality of her appearance on earth. Before the name of the "gloriosa donna de la mia mente" is even mentioned, we are treated to an astronomical reckoning of the

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[79] "Ne li occhi porta la mia donna Amore," line 4.

[80] "miraculous things that proceeded efficaciously from [Beatrice]" (my translation); "And when she was near anyone, such honesty came into one's heart that one ventured neither to raise the eyes nor to respond to her greeting."

[81] This argument echoes some of the claims in Klein, "Spirito Peregrino," 83-5.

time between Dante's birth and Beatrice's appearance that, as one critic notes, "segnala...quel registro biblico che accompagnerà sempre la registrazione degli eventi nel libello."[82] When Dante sees the nine-year-old Beatrice for the first time, his own body testifies to her soteriological significance. Three bodily spirits each make a separate Latin declaration at the sight of her. The vital spirit, which resides in the heart, declares Beatrice to be a God: "Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi." The animal spirit, which resides in the brain and is the "instrument of the outward senses, of imagination and memory," tells Dante's spirits of sight that Beatrice is their salvation: "Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra."[83] The natural spirit, which resides in the liver, warns, "Heu miser, quia frequenter impeditus ero deinceps!" As several critics have noted, the three spirits have complex origins in medieval intellectual history, though Dante seems to have relied most directly on contemporary medical theories.[84] But for my argument the more important fact about these passages is the way the spirits attribute divine ("ecce deus") and even specifically soteriological ("Apparuit...beatitudo vestra") qualities to Beatrice. (It's worth mentioning, too, that the medical theories Dante drew on were associated with Neoplatonic doctrines of purification and ascension, i.e. salvation.)[85] After the account of the speaking spirits, Dante's announcement of Beatrice's extraordinary

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[82] "glorious lady of my mind"; "signals...that Biblical register that will always accompany the marking of events in the *libello*." Carlo Vecce, ""Ella Era uno Nove, Cioè uno Miracolo" (V.N. XXIX, 3): Il Numero di Beatrice," in *La Gloriosa Donna de la Mente: A Commentary on the Vita Nuova*, ed. Vincent Moleta (Firenze/Perth: Olschki Editore / Department of Italian, The U of Western Australia), 165.

[83] Klein, "Spirito Peregrino," 72.

[84] See Ibid. and Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture,* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 90-101.

[85] See Klein, "Spirito Peregrino," 82-4, and Agamben, *Stanzas*, 96.

nature moves through yet two more allusive fields. First he recalls the Stilnovist-troubadour tradition of the *donna-angelo* in calling Beatrice an "angiola giovanissima," and then he summons a quotation of Homer to once again suggests Beatrice's divine nature: "Ella non parea figliuola d'uomo mortale, ma di deo."[86]

Similar efforts to demonstrate the momentous quality of Beatrice's appearance recur throughout the *Vita Nuova*, but two further examples are worthy of note. The first is, once again, the canzone "Donne ch'avete." I have already discussed the poem's assertion of Beatrice's miraculous nature, but what is also important to recall is the way the canzone links that nature to the special place Beatrice holds in the cosmos. Thus Beatrice is, famously, "disiata in sommo cielo" (l. 29)—so much so that an angel, "ciascun santo," and all of heaven beg God to bring her up from earth (ll. 15-21).[87] She is "la speranza de' beati" (l. 28) and when any man looks at her, "fra se stesso giura / che Dio ne 'ntenda di far cosa nova" (ll. 45-6)[88] She is not one beauty among many, or even the most beautiful; rather, she is "quanto de ben pò far natura" (l. 49). Lines like these put Beatrice at the center of the relationship between Dante and the rest of the universe and God.[89]

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[86] Dante didn't read Homer, of course, but Gorni cites Marigo's suggestion that he got the quotation from Albertus Magnus's *De intellectu et intelligibili* III.9. (Gorni, ed., *Vita Nova*, 12).

[87] "desired in highest heaven"

[88] "the hope of the blessed"; "within himself swears / that God intends to make of her something new"

[89] Even though I disagree with Durling and Martinez about the extent to which Neoplatonism informs the structure of the *Vita Nuova*, I think they are basically correct to argue that "the function claimed for Beatrice in 'Donne ch'avete' (and in the *Vita nuova* as a whole) derives from the Christian Neoplatonic conception of man as the

Perhaps the most systematic demonstration of the momentous quality of Beatrice's appearance comes in chapter 29. Here, in a discussion that follows the death of Beatrice, Dante sets out to explain her relation to the number nine, an explanation that has three parts. First Dante shows that Beatrice's death was associated with the number nine in each of three calendars, Arabian, Syrian, and Christian. Then, to interpret this conjunction, Dante suggests that "questo numero fue amico di lei" because of an extraordinary celestial occurrence, namely, that "ne la sua generazione tutte e nove li mobili cieli perfettissimamente s'aveano insieme."[90] Finally, without dismissing the astronomical option, Dante proposes that "più sottilmente pensando, e secondo la infallibile veritade," one should understand that, speaking "per similitudine," "questo numero fue ella medesima."[91] Explaining further, he avers that what it means for Beatrice to *be* a nine is that she was "uno miracolo, la cui radice, cioè del miracolo, è solamente la mirabile Trinitade," since the root of nine is three, and three is the number of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."[92] This digression is little loved for its literary qualities by critics of

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midpoint of creation, the summing up of the rest of creation, and at the midpoint between heaven and earth, partaking of both and for that reason uniquely capable of mediating between them, of reconciling them" (Durling and Martinez, *Time and the Crystal*, 66). My disagreement with their invocation of Neoplatonism is that it requires us to imagine that Beatrice will at some point yield the stage to God, which is something that never happens within the world presented by the *Vita Nuova*. (Though of course this is exactly what happens in the *Commedia*.)

[90] "this number was a friend to her"; "at her conception all nine moving heavens were in the most perfect relationship to one another."

[91] "if we consider more subtly and according to infallible truth"; "by similitude"; "this number was she herself."

[92] "a miracle, whose root—that is, of the miracle—is solely the wondrous Trinity."

the *Vita Nuova*, but its rhetorical function seems plain enough: to establish beyond question that Beatrice's life and death are events of cosmic, even divine, significance.[93]

As I've suggested, Dante's continual insistence on the momentous quality of Beatrice's soteriological aspect serves to establish and reinforce the objective nature of her miraculous presence. We can speculate that Dante meant this insistence as a direct rebuttal of Cavalcanti's phantasmatic interpretation of love, in which, as Harrison argues, the beloved "remains an evanescent and bewitching simulacrum that leads to distraction as the lover's earthly appetites are aroused and his mind loses the calm necessary for its pure contemplation of the universals."[94] But the more important point is a simpler one: Beatrice's momentous quality establishes her as the point of contact between Dante and the macroscopic forces—biological, celestial, and divine—that rule the universe.

The third quality of Beatrice's soteriological aspect is her status as Dante's unique savior. To speak of uniqueness, however, requires immediate clarification. Is Beatrice Dante's unique savior in the sense that she alone is capable of saving him? Or is she his

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[93] Gorni argues, for example, that the digression on the number nine is the example "di più comune notorietà" of the manner in which the *libello*'s tonal and stylistic registers are not always well integrated (Guglielmo Gorni, *Lettera, Nome, Numero: L'ordine delle Cose in Dante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990), 74). Santagata, who notes the same stylistic gap, makes a persuasive case that "Dante era consapevole di non avere elaborato un nuovo e diverso linguaggio poetico della sacralità, di essere ancora chiuso, da questo punto di vista, dentro il perimetro delle raffiguarzioni tradizionali. La fuoruscita dal linguaggio poetico e l'adozione di una lingua 'seconda,' quella dei numeri e delle associazioni analogiche che essa consente, era la soluzione perché la rilettura dei testi poetici attuata nel romanzo potesse contemporare la persistenza della tradizione con l'impianto etico-teologico che la rinnovava. Tale soluzione, tuttavia, non era priva di inconvenienti:... In altre parole, le analogie numeriche assicuravano un fondamento teologico alla metafora, man non erano in grado di transformare la metafora della donna angelo nel racconto di come l'angelicità opera nella vicenda del libro" (Santagata, *Amate e Amanti*, 29).

[94] Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, 88.

unique savior in the sense that she saves him alone? To answer the former question in the affirmative seems both indisputably true and uncontroversial, and so I shall not spend time arguing the point.[95] But to answer the latter question in the affirmative—which I shall do with qualifications—is not at all uncontroversial. Most critics have followed Singleton's suggestion that the *Vita Nuova* narrates a development in Dante's understanding of love, a development that begins in the privacy of a troubadour-style romance and ends in the publicity of Christian *caritas*. Singleton argues that

> love of Beatrice is something too large to be contained within the ideology of troubadour love. Love of Beatrice reaches far beyond the powers of a God of Love. That was not clear at first. But that is the way of revelation. One after another, however, the glosses of the Book of Memory disclose that Beatrice is a miracle, that love of her is a love whose other name is charity, being also love of God. For it is charity that bursts the narrow confines of troubadour love. It is the presence of charity, hidden in the beginning, which demands at a midpoint on the way of progression from love to charity that the God of Love be abolished.[96]

Against this view, and despite the fact that Beatrice's miraculous effects extend well beyond Dante, I shall make a qualified argument that he remains the sole subject of Beatrice's salvific activity.

The substance of my argument is not that Singleton and critics that follow him are incorrect to note an expansion of the audience for Beatrice's miraculous effects. That this

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[95] For evidence of this point one need look no further than the episode (in *Vita Nuova* 35-39) of the *donna pietosa*, in which, in his sorrow, Dante temporarily falls for another woman. For more on this episode, see Enrico Fenzi, "'Costanzia de la Ragione' e 'Malvagio Desiderio' (VN, XXXIX, 2): Dante e la Donna Pietosa" in *La Gloriosa Donna de la Mente*.

[96] Singleton, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*, 75. In the last sentence, Singleton is referring to the fact that the God of Love does not appear after *Vita Nuova* 25.

expansion occurs has been well demonstrated by several critics. [97] My argument is rather that Dante recognizes a wider audience for the miraculous and salvific effects of Beatrice's presence only after he has identified a different means of salvation for himself: namely, the poetry of praise. It is in this sense, I propose, that Dante establishes the relative uniqueness of his claim to salvation through Beatrice.[98]

"Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" is the first and most important result of Dante's decision to find his beatitude in "quello che non...puote venire meno": "quelle parole che lodano la donna mia." But it is also crucial to remember that the *canzone* is the first time in the *Vita Nuova* that Dante allows that Beatrice might have some sort of miraculous effect on someone other than himself. As I noted earlier, lines 37-40 of that *canzone* announce that Beatrice's salvific effects are available to "alcun che degno sia / di veder lei":

E quando trova alcun che degno sia

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[97] Santagata, for instance, argues that while "la teoria dell'identità di amore e cor gentile ha come corollario la restrizione e la selezione del pubblico: il primo trittico della lode, da XIX a XXI, coerente con quell'impostazione, rivolge il discorso solo alle donne," "la rottura dell'equivalenza [that takes place in 'Ne li occhi porta'] ha come effetto principale di non porre limiti al pubblico: come l'amore può essere rivolto a chiunque e chiunque può amare, così la poesia può rivolgersi a un pubblico indifferenziato. (Santagata, *Amate e Amanti*, 60), while Steinberg argues, "In 'Voi che portate' and 'Se' tu colui'...the double occurrence of 'nostra donna'; both by Dante in his initial address..and by the ladies in their response...unites them in the common disinterested concern for the troubled Beatrice. Dante's love for Beatrice is thus instrumental for integrating him into a female community." Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy* (U of Notre Dame P, 2007), 88.

[98] By "relative uniqueness" I do not mean to commit a solecism or invoke a paradox but to distinguish this from an absolutely unique claim that would not allow Beatrice to save anyone but Dante.

> di veder lei, quei prova sua vertute,
> ché li avvien, ciò che li dona, in salute,
> e sì l'umilia, ch'ogni offesa oblia.[99]

These effects are extended through a special grace of God, which ensures that "non pò mal finir chi l'ha parlato" (l. 42). As we have also seen, in chapter 21 Dante drops the restriction on Beatrice's powers and announces that they are effective even where Love "non è in potenzia": now "ogn'om ver lei si gira," "cui saluta fa tremar lo core," and "ogne pensero umile / nasce nel core a chi parlar la sente."[100] This generalized conception of the miraculous powers of Beatrice's presence is developed in chapter 26, where Dante tells us that

> questa gentilissima donna...venne in tanta grazia de le genti, che quando passava per via, le persone correano per vedere lei; onde mirabile letizia me ne giungea. E quando ella fosse presso d'alcuno, tanta onestade guingea nel cuore di quallo, che non ardia di levare li occhi, né di rispondere a lo suo saluto.... Diceano molti, poi che passata era: "Questa non è femmina, anzi è uno de li bellissimi angeli del cielo." E altri diceano: "Questa è una maraviglia; che benedetto sia lo Segnore, che sì mirabilemente sae adoperare!"[101]

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[99] Note that Gorni corrects Barbi's reading of line 39 as: "ché li avèn ciò, che li dona salute" (Gorni, ed., *Vita Nova*, 99). Either way, the reference to salvation is clear.

[100] "everyone toward her turns"; "whoever she greets trembles at heart"; "every humble thought is born in the heart of whoever hears her speak."

[101] "This most gentle lady...came into such favor among the people that when she passed along the way, people ran to see her, for which a great joy came over me. And when she was near anyone, such honesty came into one's heart that one ventured neither to raise the eyes nor to respond to her greeting.... Many said, after she had passed: "She is no earthly woman, but one of the most beautiful angels of heaven." And others said: "She is a marvel; blessed be the Lord, who so marvelously can work!"

Passages like these make clear that Beatrice's presence is potentially miraculous and salvific for everyone. And yet it is important to recall that by the time this broadened scope of her powers is revealed in "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore," Dante himself has already pledged himself to a different soteriological scheme. The change occurs thanks to the mercy of the god Love, who has engineered the shift because Beatrice recently denied her greeting to the poet, an incident that itself was prompted by what she took to be Dante's affections for the screen lady in *Vita Nuova* 10. Dante's explanation for Beatrice's denial makes perfect narrative sense, but it's difficult to explain the magnitude of the effect that denial had on him—a total reorientation of his happiness as a man and a poet—without recourse to later events in the book. (Recourse, I hasten to add, that Dante himself would encourage us to take.) Specifically, I think we need to see Dante's shock at Beatrice's denial as a foreshadow of his recognition (in chapter 23) that Beatrice and he must someday die—a recognition that is, of course, itself a foreshadow of Beatrice's actual death (in chapter 28). The relationship of these three events—the denial of Beatrice's greeting, the intimation of mortality, and Beatrice's death—needs no subtle theorizing: if we take her greeting as a metonymy for Beatrice's physical, earthly presence, then the withholding of that greeting stands as the first sign of the fallibility of that presence. Beatrice may be—is—a miracle, but she is not immortal. With that in mind, the shift that takes place in chapter 18 (and its implications for the *Vita Nuova*'s soteriology) becomes easier to understand. The unreliability of Beatrice's greeting shows Dante that the salvation he had heretofore imagined for himself is also fallible. (That fallibility is the central issue for Dante is made clear when he announces his new form of beatitude as "quello che non mi puote venire meno.") If one accepts the Augustinian conviction that a

fallible beatitude is no beatitude at all, and Dante surely does, then a a new kind of salvation had to be found.

The best description of the precise form of beatitude implied by Dante's allegiance to the "parole che lodano la donna mia" is the one offered by Giorgio Agamben in *Stanzas*. Invoking medieval phsyiological and philosophical notions about the interplay of *pneuma* (spirits), the phantasy (the mind's imaginative faculty), and the process of signification, Agamben describes Dante's new kind of love poetry as producing a "pneumatic circle within which the poetic sign, as it arises from the spirit of the heart, can immediately adhere both to the dictation of that 'spiritual motion' that is love, and to its object, the phantasm represented in the phantastic spirits." He goes on to say that "the pneumatic link, uniting phantasm, word, and desire, opens a space in which the poetic sign appears as the sole enclosure offered to the fulfillment of love and erotic desire in their roles as the foundations and meaning of poetry." And he concludes by arguing that "the inclusion of the phantasm and desire in language is the essential condition in order that the poetry can be conceived as *joi d'amor* (joy of love, love's joy). Poetry is then properly *joi d'amor* because it is the *stantia* (chamber) in which the beatitude of love is celebrated."[102]

The great advantage of this new kind of beatitude is that it successfully skirts the fallibility of the old kind. Under the old model, Beatrice's physical presence was the

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[102] Agamben, *Stanzas,* 128. Agamben explicitly links this view of the *joi d'amor* to Dante's description of the poetry of praise in chapter 18 of the *Vita nuova* and to the famous terzina in *Purgatorio* 24 in which Dante describes his poetic practice to Bonagiunta: "I' mi son un che, quando / Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo / ch'e' ditta dentro vo significando" (24.52-54). While I think it is very much operative in the second half of the *Vita Nuova,* I am less inclined to agree with Agamben's reading as applied to the *Commedia*.

condition and cause of Dante's salvation. In the new scheme this is no longer the case: now the phantasm, the mental image of Beatrice retained in the memory, conspires with desire and poetry to produce a kind of beatitude to which Beatrice herself is extrinsic. As Agamben notes, the "pneumatic circle" he describes is essentially narcissistic, but (contrary to the original myth of Narcissus) it is a successful kind of narcissism, for it allows the "appropriation of what could otherwise not be appropriated or enjoyed."[103] The "parole che lodano la donna mia" therefore not only provide Dante with a form of salvation that can survive Beatrice's death, they also secure his privileged, relatively unique claim to her salvific activity.

As we'll see in chapter 3, this claim to uniqueness is important not because it represents an innovation in love poetry—despite the persistence of adultery as a theme in the medieval love lyric, most poets were not especially keen to imagine that whatever supernatural powers their ladies possessed were available to anyone besides themselves. It is important, rather, because the idea of an individual "customized" savior *does* present a new possibility to Christian soteriology, a possibility whose full and radical implications will have to wait for the *Commedia* to be developed.

1.4. Is the *Vita Nuova* Idolatrous?

Having established the momentous, miraculous, and relatively unique qualities of Beatrice's salvific activity in the *Vita Nuova,* it now remains to re-open the question of her

[103] Ibid., 129.

relation to Christianity, or, to put a finer point on it, whether and to what extent the *Vita Nuova* ought to be read as idolatrous. This is a question has attended—some might say plagued—the book's reception at least since the sixteenth century, and it persists for the basic reason that Dante forces it upon us. As responsible readers, we simply cannot read something like chapter 24, with its explicit comparison between Giovanna and John the Baptist and its implicit comparison between Beatrice and Jesus, without wondering about the religious significance of those comparisons. There are several hermeneutical options that are, at least at first, open to us: we may decide that the comparisons are perfectly orthodox; we may decide that they are perfectly blasphemous; we may decide that, religiously speaking, there is a divide between Dante's intention and his execution of that intention; or we may decide that words like "orthodoxy" and "blasphemy" are not useful to our efforts. But one thing that we cannot do is to decide that there is *no* religious significance to moments like the analogies in chapter 24.[104] For what is true of the analogies is true of the work as a whole and in parts: whatever literary effect they produce is inextricable from their religious significance. To put it in concrete terms: you cannot understand, in the full sense of the term, what it means to compare Beatrice to Jesus if you write the comparison down to hyperbole. As a signifier, the unnamed Jesus

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[104] To be clear, I'm not trying to invent straw men here: I have not encountered and would not expect to encounter a serious critic who would say that there's no religious significance to the Giovanna/John and Beatrice/Jesus comparisons. My point is that if we agree that such a position is untenable, then we should also find untenable any critical position that would throw up its hands in the face of the *Vita Nuova's* religious resonances and say, "Well, it's in there somewhere." In various forms, I think this latter position *can* be found within the scholarship, though, as I'm about to discuss, it's much in the minority when measured against a similarly problematic position, one that reasons from an a priori stance of critical certainty, i.e. "Dante *must* be orthodox, therefore the *Vita Nuova* must be orthodox."

in Dante's comparison is much more than a mere intensifer, a way of saying, for example, that Beatrice was "really great." Whatever else he may be doing with that comparison, at the very least Dante is telling us that if we want to understand his experience of Beatrice (which, again, is the *prima materia* of the *Vita Nuova*) then we must be willing to think in terms of the Apostles' relationship to Jesus.

Of course, as anyone who is familiar with scholarship on the *Vita Nuova* will recognize, neglecting the religious significance of the work happens much less frequently than another, opposed problem. That problem, to which Robert Pogue Harrison drew attention, is the tendency of many critics to read the *Vita Nuova* on terms established by the *Commedia*, a process, he jokes, that might be called the "divine commodification of the text":

> The text is geometrized, prodigalized, and theologized, and the enfant terrible is called to order with a sleight of hand. It is finally quite amazing to see how docile and manageable the the work becomes in the hands of the essayists and to witness the theoretical confidence with which they deal with it.[105]

For my purposes, the primary unhappy result of this divine commodification is that the *Vita Nuova*'s Christian compatibility is taken as a given, so much so that it is seen as a principle that one can use to prioritize certain readings and exclude others. Like Harrison I think this attitude does too much violence to the basic instability of the *Vita Nuova*, an instability that ramifies through the various religious allusions and resonances of the text.

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[105] Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, 5.

There is evidence for Harrison's claim in the fact that the first printed edition of the *Vita Nuova* (published in Florence in 1576) changed some of the book's key soteriological terms in an effort to make them less troubling. Words like *gloriosa, beatitudine, and salute* were replaced by the less theologically charged *graziosa, felicità,* and *quiete*. What's more, the reference to John and Giovanna in chapter 24 was omitted altogether, and the last sentence, which is supposed to read

> E poi piaccia a Colui, che e Sire della cortesia, che la mia anima se ne possa gire a vedere la gloria della sua donna, cioe di quella benedetta Beatrice, la quale gloriosamente mira nella faccia di Colui, qui est per omnia saecula benedictus. Amen.

was changed to:

> E poi piaccia a Colui, che e Sire della cortesia, che la mia anima se ne possa gire a vedere la gloria di Colui, qui est per omnia saecula benedictus."[106]

The change removes any reference to Beatrice, transforming the *visio amantis* that ends the *Vita Nuova* into a theologically traditional *visio Dei*.

Though by no means the first book to suggest such a thing, Charles Singleton's influential *Essay on the Vita Nuova* was perhaps more responsible than any other for promoting the idea that the *Vita Nuova* can be made to resemble, even if by Procrustean

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[106] Paget Toynbee traces the first identification of these changed passages to Witte, in his 1876 Leipzig edition of the *Vita Nuova*. A more thorough consideration of these changes was undertaken by Michele Barbi in his critical edition of 1907. See Toynbee, "The Inquisition and the 'Editio Princeps' of the 'Vita Nuova,' *Modern Language Revew* 3, No. 3 (April 1908) pp. 228-231.

means, a Christian narrative of salvation.[107] He writes that Dante "found a way to go beyond the conflict of love of woman with love of God, bringing to the thesis and the antithesis of the one and the other that synthesis which managed to reject neither the one nor the other but to keep both in a single suspension—in a single theory of love. The *Vita Nuova* is that theory. It is theory in a first sense of the word: a beholding of how certain things may be."[108] As I've noted, for Singleton the resolution of thesis and antithesis is made possible by "a certain resemblance of Beatrice to Christ...a resemblance of analogy...not allegory."[109] This analogical resemblance is not, he insists, a resemblance of persons but of actions: "the action in which Beatrice has the role which her name itself implies (a bringer of beatitude) is like the action in which Christ has such a role. Both are actions leading to *salute,* to the beatitude of Heaven."[110]

The dominance of this Christian reading makes it something of a surprise to find Singleton citing the changes to the *editio princeps* in the foreword of his book. His explanation of these changes is that "the sixteenth century could no longer see the world as the thirteenth had seen it; consequently, it could take for sacrilege what was only an analogy." He agrees with Emile Mâle's dictum that "from the second half of the sixteenth century medieval art became an enigma.... The Council of Trent marks the end of the old

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[107] As Harrison notes, Singleton read the *Vita Nuova* as "a phylomorphic microcosm of the great macrocosmic *Commedia,*" a fact that almost certainly led him to try and impose a narrative model on the earlier book that really only served the latter (*The Body of Beatrice*, 3).

[108] Singleton, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*, 74.

[109] Ibid., 22.

[110] Ibid., 112.

artistic tradition."[111] Therefore, he continues, the mistake of the 1576 edition's author was "to fail to see that, as the *Vita Nuova* had used it, the word [*salute*] declares not an identity but an analogy: an analogy which, understood in its proper medieval terms, is no sacrilege at all."[112] But J.A. Scott was the first to point out that Singleton's historicist claim violates the canons of critical common sense.[113] A much more likely explanation for the emendations of the 1576 edition is that rather than taking "for sacrilege what was only analogy," the Counter-Reformation censors recognized the analogy but decided that it was itself a form of sacrilege.[114] After all, we've already seen proof—in the form of the troubadour's conflict and Stilnovist reflections like Guinizelli's "Al cor gentil"—that the thirteenth century was as ready as the sixteenth to see potential theological trouble in religious and quasi-religious poetic rhetoric.

In particulars like these, Singleton is easy to argue with. And, as one might expect, scholars have been arguing about them since the book's publication in 1949.[115] But

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[111] Ibid., 4, citing Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1972) vii.

[112] Ibid., 4.

[113] Scott, "Notes on Religion and the *Vita Nuova*," 22.

[114] In addition to this we might also note that Singleton's use of Mâle is misleading in the extreme. It's true that Mâle describes the forgetting of certain aspects of medieval art by later centuries, but the aspects he is talking about were not basic axioms of Christian soteriology, which the 16th century knew quite well how to handle with appropriate subtlety. (That was the century of the Reformation, after all.) Mâle was talking, rather, about the symbolic codes that governed medieval iconography—the fact, for instance, that the eight sides of a traditional baptismal font were supposed to symbolize the new life in Christ, or that "representations of God the Father, God the Son, the angels and the apostles should have the feet bare, while there would be real impropriety in representing the Virgin and the saints with bare feet" (Mâle, *Religious Art*, 14, 2).

[115] Harrison provides the most thorough critique that I've come across—attacking, for example, Singleton's imprecise numerologies—in his *Body of Beatrice*, pp. 4-13. But even

however serious their criticism of this or that local feature of the book, most critics share Singleton's fundamental assumption that the *Vita Nuova* ought not be seen as theologically controversial. Thus even a stringent early critic of Singleton's like J.E. Shaw takes the orthodoxy of the *Vita Nuova* as a given; his disagreement with Singleton concerns the mode of that orthodoxy, not the fact of it. He argues, for example that Singleton misses the fact that

> the death of Beatrice itself would destroy any conflict between love for her and duty to God. Special devotion to a saint in Heaven has always been compatible with orthodox religion, and although Dante's love for Beatrice has a definitely religious quality, there is no mention of love for God anywhere in the *Vita Nuova,* not even at the end. The sonnet *Oltre la spera* is about Beatrice alone, and the last chapter, which mentions God appropriately and reverently, mentions him only as allowing the poet's soul to go to look upon the glory of his lady who is enjoying the beatific vision as does every other inhabitant of Heaven."[116]

Likewise, Rocco Montano, who recognized that Singleton's assumption that "Dante's Christian attitude consists in a love directed not to an earthly creature alone but to God through woman" was untenable, and who argues that "Dante's Christianity seems to be substantially free from the delusions of courtly love and the many pitfalls of Neo-Platonism" still finds the answer to the soteriological mystery of the book in the suggestion that Beatrice is a saint.[117]

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sympathetic early reviews of Singleton's book took issue with several of his local readings. See, e.g. Erich Auerbach's review in *Comparative Literature* 2, no. 4 (Autumn, 1950).

[116] J. E. Shaw, "Review of *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*," *Modern Language Notes* 65, no. 4 (1950), 262-264.

[117] Rocco Montano, "Review of Charles S. Singleton, *Essay on the Vita Nuova*," *Modern Philology* 57, no. 3 (1960), 199.

The best evidence for reading the *Vita Nuova* as neatly compatible within the framework of Christian soteriology is that any traces the troubadour's conflict are completely absent from the book. Dante simply does not seem to recognize the conflict between the love of God and the love of the beloved that makes such a prominent appearance in Lentini and Guinizelli. Consider, for example, a scene I mentioned earlier, in which Dante tells how he came to acquire his "screen lady" to shield his love for Beatrice:

> Uno giorno avvenne che questa gentilissima sedea in parte ove s'udiano parole de la regina de la gloria, ed io era in luogo dal quale vedea la mia beatitudine; e nel mezzo di lei e di me per la retta linea sedea una gentile donna di molto piacevole aspetto, la quale mi mirava spesse volte, maravigliandosi del mio sguardare, che parea che sopra lei terminasse. (*Vita Nuova* 5)

With nearly geometric precision, the scene stages the old conflict between love of God and love of woman. While Beatrice attends to Mary, the queen of glory, Dante's attention is given wholly to Beatrice.[118] The contrast is reinforced by the different means through which Beatrice and Dante practice their respective devotions: Beatrice hears words

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[118] Picone argues that the screen lady "alluderà...alla congenita difficoltà dell'io a percepire sensibilmente e a comprendere intellettualmente la realtà beatifica della Donna. L'intervento della donna-schermo serve proprio ad abituare progressivamente la vista interna e esterna dell'*actor* alla contemplazione di una bellezza via via più alta" (Picone, "La *Vita Nuova* fra Autobiografia e Tipologia," 95-6.). As subtle and appealing as this Neoplatonic interpretation of the episode may be, however, I think it does too much violence to the actual scene described by Dante to be accepted. Even a critic like P.J. Klemp, who is wholly persuaded by Singleton's argument for the *Vita Nuova*'s orthodoxy, acknowledges that "although Dante's line of vision in the church scene could potentially extend through two loves (the screen-lady and Beatrice) and arrive at the highest love present (the Madonna), it does not" (P. J. Klemp, "The Women in the Middle: Layers of Love in Dante's Vita Nuova," *Italica* 61, no. 3 [1984]: 185-194).

about Mary, which is appropriate for a religion, Christianity, that has always favored *fides ex auditu*. Dante's devotion, on the other hand, so faithful to its Stilnovist origins, is resolutely visual. If Dante were going to choose any moment to worry over the conflict of the two kinds of love, this would surely be it. All the pieces are in place—Dante even goes so far as to refer to Beatrice as "la mia beatitudine" in the same sentence that he discusses Mary, "la regina de la gloria"—and yet it doesn't happen. The troubadour's conflict is the dog that doesn't bark.

A similar opportunity arises after Beatrice's death. After failing to compose a *canzone* on the subject, Dante writes

> Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populo! Facta est quasi vidua domina gentium. Io ero nel proponimento ancora di questa canzone, e compiuta n'avea questa soprascritta stanzia, quando lo segnore de la giustizia chiamoe questa gentilissima a gloriare sotto la insegna di quella regina benedetta virgo Maria, lo cui fue in grandissima reverenzia ne le parole di questa Beatrice beata. (*Vita Nuova* 28)[119]

Once again we see that the adoption of conventional Christian elegy with a highly intellectualized rhetoric of profane love causes no problems for Dante.[120] Nor does it

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[119] "How lonely lies the city once full of people! Once a lady among the nations, she is made like a widow. I was preparing again for this canzone, and had finished the above stanza, when the Lord of justice called that most gentle one to glory under the sign of the blessed queen virgin Mary, whom the blessed Beatrice held in the greatest reverence in her speech" (*Vita Nuova* 28). For more on the significance of the Book of Lamentations (Threni) for the *Vita Nuova,* see Martinez, "Lament and Lamentations." Following Singleton, Martinez argues that Beatrice's relationship to Christ is one of "proportional analogy."

[120] In arguing this point, I don't mean to suggest that this is the fullest meaning we can draw from these passages. Martinez, for example, extrapolates from this episode to argue that "Dante's practice in the *Vita Nuova* may be understood as designed precisely to

seem to him at all problematic to suggest, as we have seen, that because of Beatrice's affiliation with the number nine (the square of the number three, the number of the Trinity) it is fair to say of her that she was "a miracle, whose root is solely the wondrous Trinity" (*Vita Nuova* 29). Reading these passages with the prior examples of Lentini and Guinizelli in mind, I think we have to count it as significant that Dante never once stops to question the appropriateness of his theological language.

What does this mean for our attempt to characterize the religious significance of Beatrice? First and foremost it means that at the time of the composition of the *Vita Nuova* Dante himself likely saw no essential conflict between his love for Beatrice and the demands of Christian piety. The love of Beatrice and the love of God can—Dante seems to assume—coexist compatibly within the same metaphysical and moral universe; the relationship between them is complementary, not competitive. As Martinez notes, Dante seems "clearly bent on aligning his erotic investment in Beatrice with a reasonable adherence to orthodox faith."[121] And yet we're also left with the fact, as Scott argues, that the *Vita Nuova* contains plenty of "proof that Dante was capable of using a religious

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clarify the relation of Beatrice and the Virgin by keeping Beatrice officially subordinate, literally 'sotto la insegna' ['under the banner'] of the Virgin" (Martinez, "Guido Cavalcanti's 'Una Figura Della Donna Mia'" 306). I agree that this passage from *Vita Nuova* 28 should be read as the kind of clarification effort that Martinez describes, and the scene from *Vita Nuova* 5 should probably be interpreted similarly. But I think Martinez overstates the extent to which Dante consistently works to subordinate Beatrice to Mary. Where, we might ask, does Mary fit into the famous Giovanna:John::Beatrice:Christ analogy of *Vita Nuova* 24? Or where does she fit in the final vision of the *libello,* which has Beatrice gazing eternally on Christ? That the text gives us no way to answer these questions suggests that Harrison is correct to argue that the *Vita Nuova* is far less consistent in its handling of religious themes than most critics assume.

[121] Ibid., 323.

theme as a mere ornament and of coming dangerously close to blasphemy...something that is inconceivable in the religious world of the *Divine Comedy*."[122]

The best way to make sense of both of these facts is to revisit the claim I proposed at the start of this chapter: that the *Vita Nuova* is, first and foremost, Dante's attempt to make sense of the meaning of Beatrice, not a mystical handbook.[123] As a corollary, I'd argue that Dante's experience of Beatrice was such that the only way he saw fit to understand and describe it was by comparison with Christian salvation. Thus my key point of disagreement with the Singletonian thesis is not whether there is "a certain resemblance of Beatrice to Christ"—as I've said, such a resemblance is undeniable—but what purpose that resemblance serves. Contrary to Singleton, I'd argue that when Dante invokes the concepts and rhetoric of Christianity, it is not because he sees Beatrice as the most effective or efficient means of Christian salvation. Rather, he invokes those concepts and that rhetoric because he believes that they are the only way to adequately represent

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[122] Scott, "Notes on Religion and the *Vita Nuova,*" 24. I do not want to stretch Scott's comments too far out of context, and so I should note that he accepts, to a much greater extent than Harrison, the Singletonian reading of Beatrice. In the essay I cite here he argues, however, that not every religious reference in the *Vita Nuova* can be explained by that reading.

[123] Scott: "Readers have all too often come to [the *Vita Nuova*] from the *Comedy* and judged it by standards only applicable to Dante's last work. We should remember that its author did not claim to have written a treatise on mysticism, but a 'fervent and impassioned' work" (Ibid., 25). I agree, and for this reason I dissent from, e.g., Picone's claim that "la *Vita Nuova* ci si presenta davanti come l'attenta trascrizione di un complesso messaggio avente come referente una realta fattuale di cui è protagonista l'io alla ricerca della Verita profonda dell'esistenza" (Michelangelo Picone, "La 'Vita Nuova' e La Tradizione Poetica," *Dante Studies*, no. 95 [1977]: 135-147). The primary concern of both Dante *actor* and *auctor* is Beatrice; it is only after her connection to "la Verita profonda dell'esistenza" is revealed that the latter becomes important.

the meaning of Beatrice. As Scott argues, in the *Vita Nuova* "we find religion turned to the greater glory of Beatrice, not of God."[124]

For this reason, I'd argue, critics should be more willing to contemplate the possible idolatry of the *Vita Nuova*. To call for a reconsideration of the *Vita Nuova*'s idolatry doesn't mean that one has to place herself in the Grand Inquisitor's chair and decide firmly and forever whether the work fits within the canons of Christian orthodoxy. Rather, the point of reconsidering the question of the *Vita Nuova*'s idolatry would rather be to reopen certain interpretative avenues that are foreclosed as soon as the *libello*'s orthodoxy is assumed and taken as a point of departure. In their different ways, both Scott and Harrison have showed how cramping such an assumption can be.[125] And in this chapter I have argued that the soteriological aspects of the *Vita Nuova* are best understood not as an allegory or analogy for Christian salvation but as a means for Dante to represent the meaning of Beatrice in his life.

Of course the matter of idolatry, especially when it comes to complex artifacts like the *Vita Nuova,* is notoriously fraught. Michael Camille has demonstrated how fluid and complex the boundary between the sacred and the profane in the Middle Ages could be. As he argues, "There is a danger in separating the sacred and the profane as if these were two clearly distinct realms.... Spiritual and sexual longing use the same modes of expression, so that it is sometimes difficult to know whether the beloved is a 'fair Alisoun'

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[124] Scott, "Notes on Religion and the *Vita Nuova*," 18.

[125] We might also add Martinez to this list, who more cautiously argues that "the issue [of idolatry] haunts the *Vita Nuova*, where Dante makes clear gestures intended to clarify the relation of Beatrice to the Virgin" ("Guido Cavalcanti's 'Una Figura della Donna mia,'" 320).

or the Virgin Mary."[126] In Dante, to be sure, we find none of the irreverence and play that Camille insists was abundant in the Middle Ages; as Martinez notes, "What was for Guinizelli an occasion for a droll facetiousness, and for the (at least) skeptical Cavalcanti an irreverent joke [in "Una figura della donna mia"], was for Dante a much more serious matter."[127] But seriousness of purpose was no proof against the charge of idolatry. We can be quite sure that Boniface VIII was serious in ordering that statues of himself be erected and revered, and yet this did not stop Philip the Fair's lawyer Guillaume de Plaisan from accusing him of idolatry.[128]

The key question in the case of the *Vita Nuova* is the same question that Guinizelli confronted in "Al cor gentil": whether Beatrice is ultimately meant to stand for herself or for something else. (Camille notes that one of the main lines that divided licit from illicit images in the Middle Ages was whether they were understood to refer to earthly or heavenly realities: "The images of the saints are only signs, 'spectacles' and 'merours' of the spiritual realities they stand for.")[129] The critical consensus answers this question in the affirmative, and in at least two ways. One dimension of Beatrice's referentiality, which we might call the vertical dimension, sees her bearing some relationship to higher

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[126] Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 311. Roncaglia makes a similar case: "Si può contrapporre l'amore mundi all'amore Dei....Ma la contrapposizione riguarda il diverso oggetto, non l'intrinsica natura della forza spirituale che ad esso si volge. Questa medesimezza di natura, questa identità di vocabolo, permettono in qualsiasi momento la trasposizione metaforica d'immagini dal linguaggio religioso al linguaggio profano, il richiamo etico dall'esperienza profana all'esperienza religiosa" (Roncaglia, "Precedenti e Significato," 22).

[127] Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 313; Martinez, "Guido Cavalcanti's 'Una Figura della Donna mia,'" 323.

[128] Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 278.

[129] Ibid., 295.

spiritual realities within the frame of the work. This dimension draws its support from key moments in the text like "Donne ch'avete" and the final chapter, where Beatrice may be read as a kind of spiritual relay between Dante and the *visio Dei*. Another dimension is the figural, or horizontal dimension, which sees Beatrice signifying Christ or some other spiritual truth via an intertextual connection. The problem with such interpretations is not only that they are often mutually incompatible—such that now Beatrice is a figure of Christ (*Vita Nuova* 24), now a subordinate of Mary (*Vita Nuova* 5), now a mediator between Dante and Christ (*Vita Nuova* 42)—but that they do not take adequate heed of the *Vita Nuova*'s insistence that Beatrice is the subject of her own revelation. The religious allusions and rhetoric help Dante describe that revelation—and they even go some way toward bringing that revelation into productive relation with the world of Christianity—but they do not fundamentally alter its content. In suggesting this I do not mean to imply that we should read the *Vita Nuova* as an act of outright blasphemy and sacrilege. My argument, rather, is that we should concede that the religious rhetoric of the *Vita Nuova* remains indeterminate, amphibological, and that therefore we can no longer take the work's orthodoxy as a critical premise or criterion.

The heavily allegorizing reading of the *Vita Nuova* that Dante supplies in the *Convivio* suggests that his soteriological interpretation of the living Beatrice did not survive long after the composition of the *libello*.[130] In the next two chapters, however, and especially in the third, I shall argue that the way Dante came to think of Beatrice in the

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[130] It also suggests, to my mind, that Dante recognized—either on his own or, more likely, through the reception of the works—how religiously troubling the *Vita Nuova* could be. But since I am not aware of any evidence to support this view I mention it only as a speculative aside.

Vita Nuova had profound effects on the way he approached the much more orthodox soteriology of the *Commedia*.

CHAPTER TWO: FREE WILL AND SAVING GRACE IN THE *COMMEDIA*

Of the many differences between the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*, among the most important is a complete renovation—we could even call it a reversal—of the manner in which the two works treat the theme of salvation. As I argued in the last chapter, in the *libello* Dante uses salvation as the vehicle of a metaphor whose tenor is his experience of Beatrice. In the *Commedia*, by contrast, Christian salvation becomes the central focus of Dante's theological concern, the tenor of a metaphor whose vehicle is the pilgrim's otherwordly journey. Beatrice does, of course, retain pride of place throughout much of the *Commedia*'s narrative: it is not until *Paradiso* 31 that the pilgrim discovers that St. Bernard, and not Beatrice, will guide him along the final stretch toward the vision of God. But precisely through this transition we learn with the pilgrim that Beatrice is no longer, as she was in the *Vita Nuova*, a woman in whom "tutti li termini de la beatitudine" may be found:

> credea veder Beatrice e vidi un sene
> vestito con le genti glorïose.
> ...
> E "Ov' è ella?" sùbito diss' io.
> Ond' elli: "A terminar lo tuo disiro
> mosse Beatrice me del loco mio." (*Paradiso* 31.58-9; 64-6)[1]

[1] "I thought to see Beatrice, and I saw an elder, clad like the folk in glory.... And, "Where is she?" I said at once; whereon he, 'To terminate your desire Beatrice urged me from my place.'"

Christian salvation is so integral to the *Commedia* that to produce an exhaustive account of the poem's soteriology would be an undertaking worthy of an entire scholarly career.[2] Not only would such an account require a detailed examination of Dante's

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[2] The classic account of justification and salvation in Dante is Charles S. Singleton, *Dante Studies: Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958), the argument of which was extended and revised by John Freccero in "The Prologue Scene" and "The Firm Foot on a Journey Without a Guide," both of which latter may be found in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986). A similar, but not identical, understanding of justification in the *Commedia* appears in Bruno Panvini, "La Concezione Tomistica della Grazia nella Divina Commedia," *Letture Classensi* 17 (1988): 69-85.

All of these accounts, however, suffer from the same crucial doctrinal misunderstanding identified by Antonio C. Mastrobuono, in his needlessly hostile but theologically accurate *Dante's Journey of Sanctification* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990). Singleton had argued that "the whole area of Virgil's guidance in the *Comedy* is that of *preparatio ad gratiam"* (46) and that the pilgrim only receives sanctifying grace once Beatrice arrives. (He even goes so far as to say that "Beatrice...is Sanctifying Grace." (68)) But as Mastrobuono correctly argues, "justification is an effect of sanctifying grace" (12) and therefore "the whole area of Virgil's guidance in the *Comedy* is...an effect of sanctifying grace." What's more: "One important aspect of justification is constituted by a reestablished harmony whereby Dante's reason is made obedient to God (order of part to whole), and his lower powers are made obedient to his reason (order of part to part).... This certain rectitude of order in the interior disposition of man is the 'good of nature,' or the 'natural inclination to virtue' that was corrupted by original sin in the sense that it was diminished, although not destroyed" (27). Mastrobuono argues that the pilgrim's ascent up Mount Purgatory sees him progressively removing his stains of sin and satisfying the conditions for meritorious good works. As J.A. Scott notes, Mastrobuono's "clarification is no mere theological nicety. It affects our whole understanding of the cause behind Dante's supernatural journey." (J.A. Scott, *Understanding Dante* [U of Notre Dame P, 2004], 188).

A distinct but related line of inquiry concerns the question of whether the worthy pagans, and particularly Virgil, have any chance of salvation within the world of the *Commedia*. See Kenelm Foster, "The Two Dantes," in *The Two Dantes, and Other Studies* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1977); Giorgio Padoan, "Il Limbo Dantesco," in *Il Pio Enea, l'Empio Ulisse* (Ravenna: Longo, 1977); Mowbray Allan, "Does Dante Hope for Virgil's Salvation?" *MLN* 104, no. 1 (1989): 193-205; Michelangelo Picone, "La 'Viva Speranza' di Dante e il Problema della Salvezza dei Pagani Virtuosi. Una Lettura di Paradiso 20," *Quaderni d'italianistica* 10, no. 1-2 (1989), 251; Teodolinda Barolini, "Q: Does Dante Hope for Vergil's Salvation? A: Why Do We Care? For the Very Reason We Should

treatment of conversion, justification, and beatitude; it would also require sustained attention to Dante's understanding of Creation, the Incarnation, Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and metaphysics. In order, then, to limit my investigation to a reasonable scope, I have chosen to focus the efforts of the next two chapters on two subjects that reveal especially distinctive aspects of Dante's thinking about salvation. In this chapter I discuss the soteriological ramifications of Dante's treatment of free will, and in the next chapter I discuss a metaphysical tension that structures the Paradiso's presentation of heaven.

In *Paradiso* 5, Beatrice tells the pilgrim that free will is "lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando, e a la sua bontate / più conformato, e quel ch'e' più apprezza."[3] Dante is explicit in both the *Commedia* and the *Monarchia* that free will is the fundamental axiom of all human ethics and politics, and the passage from *Paradiso* 5 supplies confirmation—as if any were needed—that the existence of free will is central to Dante's understanding of human existence on earth. Yet the passage also confirms that free will has a religious, and even a soteriological, aspect, for it is the gift that allows humanity to most nearly approximate the infinite freedom of the divine goodness, which makes it the gift most pleasing to God. The broad task of this chapter is to examine some soteriological ramifications of the *Commedia*'s treatment of free will. Specifically, I argue

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Not Ask the Question," *MLN* 105, no. 1 (1990), 138-144; Mowbray Allan, "Two Dantes: Christian Versus Humanist?" *MLN* 107, no. 1 (1992), 18-35; Mowbray Allan, "Much Virtue in 'Ma': Paradiso XIX, 106, and St. Thomas's 'Sed Contra,'" *Dante Studies* (1993), 195-211; and Zygmunt G. Barański, "I Segni della Salvezza: *Paradiso* XIX," in *Dante e i Segni: Saggi per una Storia Intellettuale di Dante Alighieri* (Napoli: Liguori, 2000).

[3] "the greatest gift which God in His bounty bestowed in creating, and the most conformed to His own goodness and that which He most prizes."

that soteriological concerns shape Dante's understanding of free will and that close attention to the theme reveals an understated but discernible ambivalence about the workings of sanctifying grace.

The main current of theological opinion in the medieval Latin Church taught that grace was necessary, compelling, and gratuitous.[4] The necessity of grace meant, at minimum, that a person could not be justified or do anything that was valuable in the eyes of God without divine assistance.[5] The compelling nature of grace meant that it was irresistible.[6] The gratuity of grace meant that it could not be earned or deserved. In the

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[4] This current owed everything to Augustine: "The high regard in which Augustine was held during the theological renaissance of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries ensured that the framework of the medieval discussion of justification was essentially Augustinian.... The development of the doctrine of justification may be considered primarily as the systematization, clarification and conceptual elaboration of Aug's framework of justification" (Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification. I. The Beginnings to the Reformation* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986], 38).

[5] Thomas Aquinas discusses the necessity of grace generally in Question 109 first part of the second part of the *Summa Theologica*. His most concise statement on the subject comes in article 2, when he argues that "in the state of perfect nature man needs a gratuitous strength superadded to natural strength for one reason, viz. in order to do and wish supernatural good; but for two reasons, in the state of corrupt nature, viz. in order to be healed, and furthermore in order to carry out works of supernatural virtue, which are meritorious. Beyond this, in both states man needs the Divine help, that he may be moved to act well."

[6] Aquinas argued that grace was irresistible because every time that God bestowed his grace, he also moved the recipient's free will to accept that grace. Cf. *Summa Theologica* IaIIae q.112 a.2: "But if we speak of grace as it signifies a help from God to move us to good, no preparation is required on man's part, that, as it were, anticipates the Divine help, but rather, every preparation in man must be by the help of God moving the soul to good. And thus even the good movement of the free-will, whereby anyone is prepared for receiving the gift of grace is an act of the free-will moved by God" ["Sed si loquamur de gratia secundum quod significat auxilium Dei moventis ad bonum, sic nulla praeparatio requiritur ex parte hominis quasi praeveniens divinum auxilium, sed potius quaecumque praeparatio in homine esse potest, est ex auxilio Dei moventis animam ad bonum. Et

Commedia Dante never contests any of these three qualities explicitly, and nothing he says about grace suggests any heterodox intention. And yet, as I will argue in this chapter, his arguments about free will suggest reservations about the necessity of certain aspects of grace.

Specifically, Dante's ambivalence about grace shows itself in his estimation of human moral action. I shall argue that the *Commedia* proposes a conception of postlapsarian free will that is substantially more robust and integral than many other medieval accounts, which, following Augustine, tended to emphasize the captivity and weakness of human free will after the fall. In his important three-part essay "The Two Dantes," Kenelm Foster argues that the presence of the virtuous pagans in Dante's Limbo raise a theological question: "Is [healing grace] necessary for the entire avoidance of personal 'mortal sin', that is, sin that incurs damnation? To this question the more usual answer in the Church, since St. Augustine, has been that grace in this sense is necessary, and that was the view taken by Aquinas; but...it can only be rather doubtfully ascribed to Dante."[7] In a similar fashion, I shall argue that Dante's explicit discussions of free will downplay the need for grace to heal the postlapsarian free will.

I wish to be clear from the outset that arguing for a certain ambivalence in the *Commedia*'s treatment of grace is not a covert or qualified way of arguing that the poem rejects the need for grace in the salvation of individual sinners. To borrow the terms common to his theologian peers, Dante consistently asserts that sanctifying grace (*gratia*

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secundum hoc, ipse bonus motus liberi arbitrii quo quis praeparatur ad donum gratiae suscipiendum, est actus liberi arbitrii moti a Deo"].

[7] Foster, "The Two Dantes," 172.

gratum faciens) is necessary for the work of justification, which is the proximate cause of salvation. As the Eagle in the heaven of Jupiter will tell the pilgrim, this necessity means that any movement toward God presupposes a grace that allows and encourages that movement:

> La prima volontà, ch'è da sé buona,
> da sé, ch'è sommo ben, mai non si mosse.
> Cotanto è giusto quanto a lei consuona:
> nullo creato bene a sé la tira,
> ma essa, radïando, lui cagiona. (*Paradiso* 19.86-90)[8]

Dante is equally clear that the quality of beatitude experienced by the blessed owes, at the very least, to both grace and merit, and sometimes to grace alone. In *Paradiso* 14, Solomon tells the pilgrim that the magnitude of the vision of God enjoyed by the souls in heaven is determined by both grace and moral worth (*valore*):

> Quanto fia lunga la festa
> di paradiso, tanto il nostro amore
> si raggerà dintorno cotal vesta.
> La sua chiarezza séguita l'ardore;
> l'ardore la visïone, e quella è tanta,
> quant' ha di grazia sovra suo valore. (14.37-42)[9]

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[8] "The primal Will, which of Itself is good, has never moved from Itself, which is the supreme Good. All is just that accords with It; no created good draws It to itself, but It, raying forth, is the cause of it."

[9] "As long as the feast of Paradise shall be, so long shall our love radiate around us such a garment. Its brightness follows our ardor, the ardor our vision, and that is in the measure which each has of grace beyond his merit." Cf. *Paradiso* 28.109-114, where the pilgrim learns that the angels are ranked according to their merit, "che grazia partorisce e buona voglia."

Meanwhile in *Paradiso* 32, St. Bernard will explain that the souls of innocent baptized children are ranked in the eternal rose solely on the basis of the grace that they receive from God:

> Lo rege per cui questo regno pausa
> in tanto amore e in tanto diletto,
> che nulla volontà è di più ausa,
> le menti tutte nel suo lieto aspetto
> creando, a suo piacer di grazia dota
> diversamente; e qui basti l'effetto. (32.61-6)[10]

The methodological and thematic starting point of my argument is Foster's two-part claim that although "in the *Comedy* the soul's journey to its last end is represented, with the utmost clarity and in a variety of ways, as a thing altogether impossible without supernatural assistance both intellectual and moral," there is nevertheless "a deep strain in Dante—in the way he visualises the situation of man on earth—which...never wholly conformed to the new pattern imposed by that shift towards other-worldliness and the surrender of autonomy." Foster convincingly argues that this deep strain in the *Commedia* is explicit in the fourth book of the *Convivio* and in the *Monarchia*, but he also insists that the ambivalence shows up in the figure of Virgil in the *Commedia*.[11] Virgil's

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[10] "The King, through whom this realm reposes in such great love and in such great delight that no will dares for more, creating all the minds in His glad sight, at His own pleasure endows with grace diversely—and here let the fact suffice." For more on this passage, see Patrick Boyde, *Human Vices and Human Worth in Dante's Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 206-8.

[11] "The *Monarchia* is marked by a confidence in man's ability to organise his life on earth, for purely human and temporal ends, very similar to what we find in *Convivio* IV; it only

failure to be saved proves that Dante saw at least one aspect of grace (*gratia elevans*) as imperative for salvation. And yet, says Foster, the suggestion of Virgil's excellence suggests that healing grace (*gratia sanans*) is not necessary for moral perfection, contrary to the teaching of Aquinas and other theologians of Dante's era. Foster argues that Virgil represents "a 'nature' whose contact with God (through grace) is minimal, but whose intrinsic excellence, on its own level and for the duration of life on earth, can, in principle be complete."[12] He concludes:

> Dante shows a marked tendency, through the *Convivio* and the *Monarchia* and even in the *Comedy*, to reduce to a minimum the conceivable contacts between human nature and divine grace....And perhaps it reveals an important defect, from the Christian point of view, in this great Christian's thinking about man: an over-readiness to conceive of moral virtue in isolation from Charity, "the first and greatest commandment."[13]

Arguing in a similar mode, John Took proposes that Dante's "theological programme is as amply conceived as it is profoundly meditated, as secure in its leading emphases as it is obedient to the dogmatic and liturgical influences decisive for its historical coming about," and yet at the same time, "to live with the *Commedia* and to ponder it in the round, in the height and depth of its substance as a prophetic utterance, is quickly to become aware of its particular brand of courage, of its willingness to rethink the theological issue from the

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spells out what Dante thought this meant in political terms" (Foster, "The Two Dantes," 160-1).

[12] Ibid., 248-9.

[13] Ibid., 253.

bottom up."[14] What Foster had seen as "an important defect, from the Christian point of view" Took identifies as a "particular brand of courage":

> Dante, endlessly anxious in the *Paradiso* to stress the atemporality of Beatrice's function as a means of elevating grace (exemplary in this respect is the "È Bëatrice quella che sì scorge / di bene in meglio, sì subitamente / che l'atto suo per tempo non si sporge" of *Paradiso* 10.37–39), seems...committed, implicitly at least, to the notion of grace as a principle of entitative renewal—to the idea, in short, of created grace. But if in point of dogmatic propriety this indeed is his view, his instinct is quite otherwise, for by instinct he is inclined to see grace as a principle, not so much of transformation, as of capacitation, as that whereby the individual is quickened in respect of what he already is as a free determinant.[15]

As a matter of methodology, Took's counterposing of Dante's "instinct" to his "dogmatic propriety"—like Foster's identification of a "deep strain" that does not conform to the poem's "new pattern"—interests me enormously.[16] One way to describe what I attempt in the next two chapters is a teasing out of Dante's instinct on a series of soteriological issues by means of, as Took would have it, "pondering it in the round." Sometimes I will argue that Dante's instinct does stand over and against his dogmatic propriety, and that we

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[14] John Took, "Dante's Incarnationalism: An Essay in Theological Wisdom," *Italian Studies* 61 (2006), 3-17.

[15] Ibid., 11-2.

[16] Claims that the *Commedia* is not univocal are not unique to Foster and Took, of course. Enzo Noè Girardi argues that "l'opera letteraria, nella misura in cui è ispirata dalla bellezza e significa asemanticamente la bellezza, non è affatto riducibile a un solo significato, è intrinsicamente polisemica" (Enzo Noè Girardi, "Al Centro del Purgatorio: Il Tema del Libero Arbitrio," in *Il Pensiero Filosofico e Teologico di Dante Alighieri*, ed. Alessandro Ghisalberti [Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2001], 25). See also, for two thoroughly developed arguments about the polyvocality of the *Commedia*, Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987) and Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992).

should recognize in the poem a sublimated contradiction. But here at the start I want to be clear that I don't think the poem is all tension all the time; in fact, I think Took is generally correct that "Dante's was an essentially gentle companionship with his auctores, a contented acquiescence in their accumulated wisdom."[17] And yet I'd equally insist that the manifestations of Dante's instinct need not and should not be subordinated to Dante's more obvious, clear, or proper doctrinal statements.

2.1. Latin Christianity and the Problem of Free Will

The problem of free will was important in Latin Christian discussions about salvation because of the implication of free will in the doctrine of justification, which describes how humans may become righteous in the eyes of God. As McGrath has argued, justification was the primary soteriological metaphor of the western church; to say that someone is justified is to say that they are saved, and vice versa:[18]

> In the Christian doctrine of justification, we are concerned with the turning of the godless man against his godlessness; with his transformation from man without God to man with God, for God and before God; with his transition from *homo*

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[17] Took, "Dante's Incarnationalism," 16. It should be clear that here both Took and I are referring to Dante's theological *auctores*. I could not endorse a similarly pacific view of Dante's relationship to his poetic predecessors.

[18] "The history of the doctrine of justification has its sphere within the western church alone. The Orthodox emphasis upon the economic condescension of the Son leading to man's participation in the divine being is generally expressed in the concept of deification rather than justification." (McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 3.) That a person was justified at some point in this life (at the moment of baptism, say) was, of course, no guarantee that he would die justified.

> *peccator* to *homo iustus*. The doctrine defines the conditions under which man's broken relationship with God may be restored, and the nature of that transition itself. Without the recognition of the necessity, the possibility, and the actuality of such a transition, there can be no community of faith—and it is in this sense that the *articulus iustificationis* is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.[19]

As in so many other areas of theology, it was Augustine who established the framework for all subsequent debates and discussions about the relation of free will to the process of justification. His argument with the British monk Pelagius and the bishop Julian of Eclanum led him propose a set of distinctions to explain the status of free will after the Fall of Adam and Eve.[20] In his post-396 writings, Augustine argued that human free will (*liberum arbitrium*) was not destroyed in the Fall, but it was enslaved (i.e., made a *liberum arbitrium captivatum*). Therefore while humans were free to choose among alternatives, they could not be said to have real freedom (*libertas*), since they could not do good works in the eyes of God.[21] To the distinction between *liberum arbitrium* and *libertas*

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[19] Ibid., 1-2.

[20] McGrath is careful to note that what we think of as Augustine's characteristic view of free will—"that it is compromised by sin, and incapable of leading to man's justification unless it is first liberated by grace"—emerged in 395, in response to Simplicianus, several years earlier than his argument with Pelagius and Julian (Ibid., 25). Augustine confronted an argument from the other direction as well. As Bernard Lonergan notes, "The *De gratia et libero arbitrio*...was written because the prototypes of exaggerated Augustinianism, certain monks at Hadrumentum, so extolled the grace of God as to deny human liberty" (Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan I [Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000], 6-7).

[21] See, e.g., *De Natura et Gratia* 65: "But whenever it was that he lost this liberty, an inseparable capacity of nature undoubtedly remains...he has the power to choose through free will" ["Ubicumque autem istam perdiderit libertatem, certe inseparabilis est possibilitas illa naturae, habet posse per naturale subsidium, habet velle per liberum arbitrium"]. Also see Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Burns & Oates, 1980), 78-9.

Augustine added another: between the operative and cooperative aspects of grace. This latter distinction helped define the precise interaction of grace and free will in the process of justification. As Augustine writes in *On Grace and Free Will*, "He operates without us so that we may will [the good], and when we will, he cooperates with us so that we may act. However, without him operating so that we can will, and without him cooperating once we do will, we can do no works of good piety."[22]

The medieval debates about free will that followed in the wake of Augustine largely took place within the ambit of what Bernard McGinn has described as two interrelated complexes of questions. What McGinn calls the abstract complex "deals with the reconciliation of divine foreknowledge and predestination with the contingency of human actions," while the concrete complex is "concerned with the relation of man's freedom of choice in the various states of history to sin and grace."[23] These two complexes structured a conceptual space that was broad enough to accommodate a variety of theological positions, many of them mutually contradictory.[24] But this space was not

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[22] "Ut...velimus, sine nobis operatur, cum autem volumus, et sic volumus ut faciamus, nobiscum cooperatur: tamen sine illo vel operante ut velimus, vel cooperante cum volumus, ad bona pietatis opera nihil valemus" (Augustine, *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*). See also Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 201-205 and McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 27-8.

[23] Bernard McGinn, "Introduction," in *Bernard of Clairvaux, Treatises III*, Cistercian Fathers (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 6-7.

[24] Giovanni Fallani makes a similar case: "[C]'è ancora un largo spazio dove la disputa è possibile, dove gli angoli visuali sono molteplici e i teologi provenienti da varie scuole tentano di penetrare nel mistero con propositi, opinioni, idee che costituiscono le sentenze ancora *sub judice* e che non formano la dottrina della Chiesa, la quale assicura invece all'individuo che ci sono due certezze, il dominio di Dio sull'uomo e il libero arbitrio, distinte e non separate da un abisso, ma teologicamente congiunte dalla superiore certezza che *Deus charitas est*" (*L'Esperienza Teologica di Dante* (Lecce: Milella, 1976), 97)

infinite: its outer limits were defined by the orthodox principles that were the product of Augustine's debate with the Pelagians.

A theologian working within the abstract predestination complex therefore had to position his doctrines somewhere between two impermissible extremes. On the one hand, he could not argue that God's foreknowledge and/or providence implied determinism. On the other hand, he had to be careful not to suggest any limitation to God's omniscience and omnipotence. Medieval attempts to mediate these positions could be—and often were—incredibly abstruse, but there was a real point to all the hair-splitting: to find some middle ground between the two extremes was to preserve the integrity of certain Christian key ideas and ideals. Thus to suggest that predestination and/or providence implied determinism would not only obviate human free will, which most theologians—including, as we shall see, Dante—recognized as a pillar of human dignity, it would also render unjust God's eternal punishments and rewards for human action. Contrariwise, to limit God's omniscience or omnipotence in an effort to preserve some sphere of free human action would abrogate God's absolute sovereignty.

In a similar fashion, a theologian working on questions in the concrete sin-grace complex had to reconcile what, in extreme form, could be contradictory doctrines. The first was the principle of moral responsibility, which maintained that a person could be guilty of a sin only if a blameworthy moral decision was the result of a free choice between alternatives.[25] The second was the doctrine of original sin, which held that

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[25] It was out of allegiance to this principle that Pelagius launched his attack on Augustine: "Augustine's account of the origin of the Pelagian controversy relates how Pelagius was outraged by the much-cited prayer from his *Confessions*, 'Give what you command, and

humans were born in sin and incapable of escaping that corrupted state without the assistance of grace.[26] To remain within the limits of orthodoxy, a theologian trying to effect such a reconciliation had to avoid overemphasizing either doctrine. A theologian who trumpeted the moral autonomy of the will might downplay or neglect the residual effects of original sin, which flirted with Pelagianism.[27] On the other hand, to insist on the pervasive corrupting influence of original sin meant either to risk closing off all paths to blessedness, or to break the link between human ethics and the soteriological system of God's just reward and punishments.[28] From Pelagius's 5th-century provocation of Augustine until Martin Luther preached his revolutionary "simul iustus et peccator"

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command what you will.' To Pelagius, these words suggested that man was merely a puppet wholly determined by divine grace, thereby encouraging moral quietism of the worst order. For Pelagius, moral responsibility presupposed freedom of the will: 'I ought, therefore I can'" (McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 71).

Earlier in his theological career, Aquinas had held to a similar logic. In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, he argues that "since free choice or flight from good or evil pertains to the nature of free will, it cannot be that there should be withdrawn from man the faculty of fleeing sin, but only that it should be diminished, that is, in such a way that that sin which before a person could avoid with ease he afterwards avoids with difficulty" (*Super II Sententiarum*, d. 28 q. 1 a. 2, quoted in Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 358). Later, of course, he would change this view to fit with the Augustinian doctrine; Lonergan identifies the beginning of this change in the *De Veritate*.

[26] Cf. *Summa Theologica* IaIIae q. 85 a. 1 and IaIIae q. 109 aa. 2, 7 and 8.

[27] This was the position not only of the Pelagians but also the whole of the pre-Augustinian Christian tradition (McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 20.).

[28] In addition to the monks at Hadrumentum, whom I mentioned earlier, we can cite Anselm's testimony that "Once there were proud men who placed the whole efficacy of the virtues in freedom alone; in our times there are many who utterly despair of the existence of freedom" (Anselm, *Tractatus de Concordia Praescientiae et Praedestinationis nec non Gratiae cum Libero Arbitrio*, c. 11, quoted in Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 78.). On the link between ethics and divine justice, cf. McGrath: "The bridge between the moral and the meritorious, between the human and the divine estimation of an act, lies in the justification of the ungodly" (*Iustitia Dei*, 33).

doctrine, all the orthodox arguments about justification in the Western Church could be found in the conceptual space between these two extremes.

A key task for anyone treating the subject of free will, whether through the abstract or concrete complex, was to determine what one meant in speaking of free will. As McGinn notes, medieval thinkers were nearly uniform in considering "lack of coercion as the essence of freedom," but they were not at all agreed on how that definition applied to the will.[29] For Boethius, free will was a necessary component of reason: "any being that can use its reason by nature, has a power of judgment by which it can without further aid decide each point, and so distinguish between objects to be desired and objects to be shunned."[30] For Augustine, as I've noted, the freedom that humanity lost in the Fall was not the freedom of choice: it was the power to avoid sin, or, as he famously put it, posse non peccare. Anselm argued from final causes that free will was the faculty that allowed a person to uphold righteousness for the sake of righteousness. Bernard distinguished between three freedoms, each of which was proper to a particular state: freedom from coercion was the *liberum arbitrium* shared by every rational creature; freedom from sin

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[29] McGinn, "Introduction," 8. Note, however, that in later works like *De Malo*, Aquinas argues that it is heretical to say that necessary but noncoerced acts of will are free (i.e. by virtue of the lack of coercion) (Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 95). For more on the medieval background of Dante's treatment of free will, see Bruno Nardi, "Il Libero Arbitrio e la Storiella dell'Asino di Buridano," in *Nel Mondo di Dante* (Roma: Edizioni di "Storia e Letteratura", 1944) and Sofia Vanni Rovigni, "Arbitrio," in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, ed. Umberto Bosco (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970), 346-7.

[30] Book 5, Prose 2. Boethius, "The Consolation of Philosophy," in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. W.V. Cooper (New York: Random House, 1943), 103.

was the *liberum consilium* shared by people in a state of grace; and freedom from sorrow was the *liberum complacitum* shared by the blessed in heaven.[31]

These disagreements about the definition of free will often resulted from differing conceptions of human psychology, and many attempts to define free will came down to arguments about its specific relation to the will and the intellect.[32] But the differences also owed much to the soteriological ramifications of the question, since free will was understood by theologians as the reason that human actions could and should be considered relevant to salvation. It was, after all, Adam and Eve's exercise of free will—their disobedience to God—that had expelled them and their progeny from their state of original blessedness. The way that a particular theologian understood the postlapsarian human condition—for example, the extent to which he believed human effort to be an effective complement to divine grace in the process of redemption—was therefore directly related to the way he conceived of free will.

The debates over how badly free will had been damaged by the Fall were not nearly as fierce in Dante's day as it had been, say, in the 5th century, or as it would be in the 16th. To a significant extent, the theologians of the High Middle Ages—Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure—agreed broadly that the Fall

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[31] McGinn, "Introduction," 10, citing *De sententiis divinae paginae*, a compendium produced at the Cathedral of Laon.

[32] Vanni Rovigni summarizes Odon Lottin, *La Theorie du Libre Arbitre depuis Saint S. Anselme jusqu'a Saint S. Thomas D'aquin* (Louvain: Du Mont-César, 1929) on the question thus: "Bonaventura non ritiene che il libero a[rbitrio] sia una speciale facoltà, come aveva pensato Alberto Magno nel *Commento alle Sentenze*...ma una *facilitas*, cioè un *habitus* che nasce dall'unione di ragione e volontà, ma che risiede principalmente nella volontà (II 25 6). S. Tommaso nega che il libero a[rbitrio] sia un *habitus*, lo identifica con la volontà stessa e afferma che è la *vis electiva*" ("Arbitrio," 347).

had significantly corrupted the human capacity to do good but had not destroyed it altogether.[33] This corruption of human nature meant that human free will was limited in two crucial respects. The first concerned the ability to choose wisely and to act on those choices: the Fall caused disorder in the human mind, such that the lower faculties no longer acted in concert with reason and reason no longer acted with God as an external principle of deliberation. The second respect was more directly soteriological: even if a

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[33] The fifth canon of the Council of Carthage (428) taught that human free will was impotent without the assistance of grace, and said too that grace was necessary for man to fulfill the commandments of the law. The Second Council of Orange (529), which endorsed the Augustinian doctrine of justification, went even further and said that grace was necessary for the *initium fidei*—the beginning of faith—and for subsequent increases in faith. (Canon 5: "If anyone says that not only the increase of faith but also its beginning and the very desire for faith, by which we believe in Him who justifies the ungodly and comes to the regeneration of holy baptism-if anyone says that this belongs to us by nature and not by a gift of grace, that is, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit amending our will and turning it from unbelief to faith and from godlessness to godliness, it is proof that he is opposed to the teaching of the Apostles" ["Si quis, sicut augmentum, ita etiam initium fidei ipsumque credulitatis affectum, quo in eum credimus, qui iustificat impium, et ad (re)generationem sacri baptismatis pervenimus, non per gratiae donum, id est per inspirationem Spiritus Sancti corrigentem voluntatem nostram ab infidelitate ad fidem, ab impietate ad pietatem, sed naturaliter nobis inesse dicit, apostolicis dogmatibus adversarius approbatur"].) The council also declared that free will exists after the Fall, but in a diminished state. (Canon 13: "The freedom of will that was destroyed in the first man can be restored only by the grace of baptism, for what is lost can be returned only by the one who was able to give it" ["Arbitrium voluntatis in primo homine infirmatum, nisi per gratiam baptismi non potest reparari; 'quod amissum, nisi a quo potuit dari, non potest reddi"].)

The canons of the council were unknown from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries, which meant that medieval theologians had to reconstruct its conclusions; further confusion was caused by the misattribution of some of Pelagius's works to Jerome. Nevertheless, as McGrath argues, "despite these circumstances, the twelfth century witnessed considerable agreement on the issues of grace and free will. The profession of faith, composed by Leo IX in 1053, contained a clear statement of the relationship between the two: grace precedes and follows man, yet in such a manner that it does not compromise his free will." (McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 73-5.).

person could hypothetically accomplish a substantially good act, she could not do the kind of good works that were meritorious in the eyes of God.

As I've noted, Augustine argued that among the things humanity lost in the Fall was the freedom not to sin: in the postlapsarian state (and prior to the infusion of grace) a person *non posse non peccare*.[34] In his mature works, Aquinas would concur: "In the state of corrupt nature man needs grace to heal his nature in order that he may entirely abstain from sin....[I]t cannot be that he remains for a long time without mortal sin."[35] This inability not to sin was understood to be the consequence of a corrupted will, which was so diminished and disordered that an ungraced person could not even accomplish properly human goods—namely, those that were consonant with the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.[36] This corruption was in turn the result of

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[34] For Augustine's views on the postlapsarian state of humanity, see A. Solignac, "La Condition de l'homme Pécheur d'après Saint Augustin," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 78 (1956), 359-387; Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (Random House, 1960); John M. Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 20, no. 2 (1969), 420-447; and Gerald Bonner, "Augustine and Modern Research on Pelagianism," in *Augustine and Modern Research on Pelagianism. The Saint Augustine Lecture 1971* (Villanova: Villanova UP, 1972).

[35] *Summa Theologica* IaIIae q. 109 a. 8. Note that in their early commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Sentences,* both Albert and Thomas had rejected the Augustinian claim that postlapsarian humanity *non posse non peccare* "both in the name of the supernatural and in the name of a coherent idea of freedom," but they endorsed the formula in later works (Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 19.).

[36] Aquinas argued that in his prelapsarian state "man by his natural endowments could wish and do the good proportionate to his nature" ["in statu naturae integrae, quantum ad sufficientiam operativae virtutis, poterat homo per sua naturalia velle et operari bonum suae naturae proportionatum"]—namely, he could do the kind of works consonant with the cardinal virtues but not worthy of merit (*Summa Theologica* IaIIae q. 109 a. 2). But he insists that even before the Fall, humanity required grace to do works consonant with the theological virtues, i.e. the kind of works that would be meritorious in the eyes of God. Aquinas did allow that a human in a state of sin could choose to do certain limited

man's separation from God, since even the ungraced free will needs God as (qua external referent) as the principle of deliberation.[37] The ultimate soteriological consequence of the separation caused by original sin was the inability of a person—whether of her own free will or even in cooperation with God—to accept sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace was understood to act alone to heal the free will and move it to accept God's initiative: "In him who has the use of reason, God's motion to justice does not take place without a movement of the free-will; but He so infuses the gift of justifying grace that at the same time He moves the free-will to accept the gift of grace, in such as are capable of being moved thus."[38]

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goods, e.g. "to toil in the fields, to drink, to eat, or to have friends." (*Summa Theologica* IaIIae q. 109 a. 5.)

[37] Cf. *Summa Theologica* IaIIae q. 109 a. 2 ad 1: "Man is master of his acts and of his willing or not willing, because of his deliberate reason, which can be bent to one side or another. And although he is master of his deliberating or not deliberating, yet this can only be by a previous deliberation; and since it cannot go on to infinity, we must come at length to this, that man's free-will is moved by an extrinsic principle, which is above the human mind, to wit by God.... Hence the mind of man still unweakened is not so much master of its act that it does not need to be moved by God; and much more the free-will of man weakened by sin, whereby it is hindered from good by the corruption of the nature" ["Homo est dominus suorum actuum, et volendi et non volendi, propter deliberationem rationis, quae potest flecti ad unam partem vel ad aliam. Sed quod deliberet vel non deliberet, si huius etiam sit dominus, oportet quod hoc sit per deliberationem praecedentem. Et cum hoc non procedat in infinitum, oportet quod finaliter deveniatur ad hoc quod liberum arbitrium hominis moveatur ab aliquo exteriori principio quod est supra mentem humanam, scilicet a Deo.... Unde mens hominis etiam sani non ita habet dominium sui actus quin indigeat moveri a Deo. Et multo magis liberum arbitrium hominis infirmi post peccatum, quod impeditur a bono per corruptionem naturae"].

[38] *Summa Theologica* IaIIae q.113 a.3. In making this argument in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas is repudiating the view he held in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, which McGrath describes thus: "The essential difference...is that whilst in both he asserted the need for premotion for the *motus mentis* of justification, the early opinion that the 'inferior mover' causing the premotion was man himself was rejected in favour of the later opinion that the 'inferior mover' was God himself. Man's preparation for justification

For most medieval theologians, humanity's inability to do good works that were worthy of merit in the eyes of God was not the result of the Fall. Even in its prelapsarian condition humanity needed supernatural assistance to do meritorious works. There was a simple reason for this: the theologians considered it impossible that a person could make a just claim on God. Therefore the presupposition of medieval theologies of merit was that God freely deigned to reward certain good works with the prize of eternal life.[39] Thus, as Augustine argued, merit must always be understood fundamentally as *gratis pro gratia:* "God does not, for any merits of our own, but from His own divine compassion, prolong our existence to everlasting life."[40] Aquinas, too, held that "in the state of perfect

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is thus understood to be a divine work, so that no preparation is required for man's justification which God himself does not provide. The preparation for grace in man is the work of God as the prime mover and of the free will as the passive entity which is itself moved" (*Iustitia Dei*, 82).

Note too that Aquinas does not only distinguish between the operative aspects of sanctifying grace (which do not involve the cooperation of the will, and therefore are not worthy of merit) and the cooperative aspects (which do involve the cooperation of the will, and therefore are worthy of merit). He also distinguishes between grace understood as a motion of the mind toward good and grace understood as a habitual gift. As a result, one can speak of four aspects of sanctifying grace, each of which is (a) either operative or cooperative and (b) understood as either a motion of the mind or a habitual gift. The healing of the soul (including the free will) is accomplished by the operative grace understood as a habitual gift. The movement of the free will toward the good is initiated by operative grace understood as a motion of the mind. See *Summa Theologica* IaIIae q.111 a.2.

[39] McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 114.

[40] "Non pro meritis nostris deum nos ad aeternam uitam, sed pro sua miseratione perducere." Augustine, *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*, ch. 21. Translated as "On Grace and Free Will" in *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series 5 (1956), 452.

nature man needs a gratuitous strength superadded to natural strength for one reason, viz. in order to do and wish supernatural good."[41]

As a consequence, medieval theologians agreed that sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) was necessary both to heal the damage that the Fall did to free will and to assist a person in doing meritorious works.[42] The healing of the will came about in the instant of justification and occurred without any human cooperation. The accomplishment of meritorious works came about after justification and required the cooperation of the free will. In this chapter, I argue that Dante underemphasizes (without rejecting) the need for sanctifying grace in the former aspect.

2.2. Free Will and the Fall: *Paradiso* 7

Given Dante's obsession with the laws, mechanics, and logistics of eternal justice, it is not surprising that one central axis of his interest in free will is soteriological.[43] At times,

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[41] *Summa Theologica* IaIIae q. 109. a. 2.

[42] The broad consensus I refer to here does not, of course, mean that there were not differing opinions about grace between and among medieval theologians. Some of the key questions of dispute included: whether it was possible for a person to merit the beginning of justification *de congruo* (i.e., because it was fitting that she do so and not because such justification was justly earned), whether Adam was given sanctifying grace at the instant of his creation, and whether and how a human disposition toward justification was necessary. See McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 158-63.

[43] There is a substantial body of scholarly commentary on Dante's understanding of free will, but by and large it touches only incidentally on the soteriological ramifications of that understanding. Some useful accounts that do treat the subject of salvation include Nardi, "Il Libero Arbitrio"; Giovanni Roatta, *Libero Arbitrio, Grazia, Predestinazione: Fondamento Dottrinale Unitario della Divina Commedia* (Alba: Pia Societá San Paolo, 1947); Vanni

Dante's interest in free will seems to touch on the theme of salvation only tangentially; other times free will seems matter to him precisely because it implicates human moral action in the drama of eternal salvation.

What's surprising is that Dante's treatment of free will avoids the main lines of the major debates outlined above; he only skirts the edges of the two major complexes that McGinn describes. As I shall argue, Dante's exploration of free will doesn't quite neglect the themes of predestination and original sin, but it comes at them at such an oblique angle that it takes some concentrated looking to see the connection.[44] Also surprising, when we approach the subject from the perspective of medieval theological debates, is the extent of Dante's concern about astrological determinism. I shall argue that this concern can, to a large extent, be explained in terms of his soteriological concerns: that is, Dante sees the refutation of astrological determinism as a key step in his defense of God's system of eternal punishments and rewards. There is nothing strange or unique about this argument in itself—Aquinas treated the question of astrological influence in the

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Rovigni, "Arbitrio"; Mastrobuono, *Dante's Journey of Sanctification*; Patrick Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 193-214; and Antonietta Bufano, "Applicazione della Dottrina del Libero Arbitrio nella Commedia," in *Miscellanea di Studi Danteschi: In Memoria di Silvio Pasquazi* (Napoli: Federico & Ardia, 1993). Other accounts include Girardi, "Al Centro del Purgatorio"; Panvini, "La Concezione Tomistica"; and Diane Enrica Biunno, "The Pilgrim's Journey Home: Grace, Free Will, and Predestination in the *Commedia*" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2009).

[44] The question of predestination arises directly in *Paradiso* 19.40-111 and 20.112-138 and bears tangentially on the question of merit, which is of course related to the problematic of free will. But there the discussion is concerned far less with free will as such than it is with the conditions of the original justifying infusion of sanctifying grace and the quality and extent of God's mercy.

Summa Theologica—but it does seem somewhat odd in light of Dante's relative silence about grace in his discussions of free will.[45]

In other respects, however, Dante was thoroughly in step with his time. McGrath has argued that the medieval "emphasis which is...laid upon the moral or legal character of God inevitably [led] to increased interest in the precise nature of iustitia Dei, and the question of how *iustitia Dei* and *iustitia hominis* are correlated."[46] The *Commedia* presents a direct answer to this latter question in *Paradiso* 7, in a lesson by Beatrice that explains why God chose to achieve human redemption through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the course of her explanation, Beatrice details three dignities that prelapsarian human nature shared with every other creature that was directly created by God (e.g., the angels):

> Ciò che da lei sanza mezzo distilla
> non ha poi fine, perché non si move
> la sua imprenta quand' ella sigilla.
> Ciò che da essa sanza mezzo piove
> libero è tutto, perché non soggiace
> a la virtute de le cose nove.
> Più l'è conforme, e però più le piace;
> ché l'ardor santo ch'ogne cosa raggia,
> ne la più somigliante è più vivace. (7.67-75)[47]

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[45] Aquinas treats the question of celestial influence in *Summa Theologica,* Ia q. 155 aa. 3-6 and IaIIae q. 9 a. 5.

[46] McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 39.

[47] "That which immediately derives from it [i.e. the divine goodness] thereafter has no end, because when It seals, Its imprint may never be removed. That which rains down from it immediately is wholly free, because it is not subject to the power of the new things. It is the most conformed to it and therefore pleases It the most; for the Holy Ardor, which irradiates everything, is most living in what is most like Itself."

The first dignity is immortality, the second is freedom, the third is likeness to God. The loss of even one of these specific dignities implies the loss of human dignity in general, Beatrice says: "Di tutte queste dote s'avvantaggia / l'umana creatura, e s'una manca, / di sua nobiltà convien che caggia" (ll. 76-78).[48] It is sin alone that could cause such a loss of *nobiltà* (l. 79), and when human nature sinned in the persons of Adam and Eve, "da queste dignitadi, / come di Paradiso, fu remota" (ll. 85-87).[49] As we might expect, Beatrice goes on to argue that the restoration of the three dignities is impossible for humanity to accomplish on its own; such a restoration was made possible only by the redemptive mediation of Jesus Christ.

This account of the Fall offers what might look like just the kind of connection between original sin and free will that we saw in the sin-grace complex described by McGinn. After all, Beatrice very clearly says that one of the three dignities lost in the Fall is the freedom that was given humanity on account of its ontological proximity to God. But as lines 68-69 tell us, this is a specific freedom, one that renders human and other noble natures "non soggiace / a la virtute de le cose nove." Commentators agree that the "new things" to which Beatrice refers are the heavens in particular and nature in general, and that the freedom she describes is therefore a freedom from the determining influences of the created universe—and especially the heavens.[50]

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[48] "With all these gifts the human creature is advantaged, and if one fails, it needs must fall from its nobility."

[49] "[it] was removed from these dignities, even as from Paradise."

[50] See, e.g., Charles S. Singleton, *Paradiso: Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 139-40; Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, ed. Natalino Sapegno (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1957),

The freedom that Dante describes—freedom from the influence of the heavens—is therefore superficially quite different from the freedom not to sin (*posse non peccare*) that medieval theologians argued was lost in the Fall. Among the effects of original sin presented by Beatrice we find no explicit reference to the corruption of the free will. Nor is there any mention of the need for sanctifying grace to restore that free will to its natural prelapsarian condition:

> Solo il peccato è quel che la disfranca
> e falla dissimìle al sommo bene,
> per che del lume suo poco s'imbianca;
> e in sua dignità mai non rivene,
> se non rïempie, dove colpa vòta,
> contra mal dilletar con giuste pene. (79-84)[51]

To argue that Beatrice scants the corrupting effects of sin or the need for sanctifying grace is not to say that she ignores grace entirely. In the account that follows the above passage, Beatrice deploys the Anselmian argument that since humanity was unable to make amends for its sin by its own power, human redemption required that God "per sua cortesia dimesso avesse" the "giuste pene" incurred by the Fall. And here God's "cortesia" has to be understood, as Chiavacci Leonardi suggests, as an "atto gratuito," i.e. a grace.[52] Likewise, Beatrice says that the effect of Christ's redemption was

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92; Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Paradiso,* ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1994), 199.

[51] "Sin alone is that which disfranchises it and makes it unlike the Supreme God, so that it is little illumined by Its light; and to its dignity it never returns unless, where fault has emptied, it fill up with just penalties against evil delight."

[52] Ibid., 201.

"riparar l'omo a sua intera vita" (l. 104)—i.e. to restore to humanity the possibility of regaining the three dignities (immortality, freedom from the heavens, and likeness to God) with which it had been created. Given the mention of restoration we might be tempted to align this restoration with the healing aspect of sanctifying grace that medieval theologians sometimes knew as *gratia sanans*. But here we should be careful. The kind of grace involved in God's redemption of human nature was not the individualized sanctifying grace of justification, but rather the Incarnation, which can be understood as a grace only insofar as it is seen as the free expression of God's will to save humanity.[53] Healing grace, as one aspect of sanctifying grace, is a habitual and accidental form of the soul. The implications of this distinction are less obscure than the terminology might suggest. Simply put, the Incarnation is a gift given by God to humanity that results in the generic possibility of salvation. Healing grace, meanwhile, causes an ontological

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[53] Cf. *Summa Theologica* III q.2 a.10: "We must say that if grace be understood as the will of God gratuitously doing something or reputing anything as well-pleasing or acceptable to Him, the union of Incarnation took place by grace, even as the union of the saints with God by knowledge and love. But if grace be taken as the free gift of God, then the fact that the human nature is united to the Divine Person may be called a grace, inasmuch as it took place without being preceded by any merits—but not as though there were an habitual grace, by means of which the union took place." ["Sic igitur dicendum est quod, si gratia accipiatur ipsa Dei voluntas gratis aliquid faciens, vel gratum seu acceptum aliquem habens, unio incarnationis facta est per gratiam, sicut et unio sanctorum ad Deum per cognitionem et amorem. Si vero gratia dicatur ipsum gratuitum Dei donum, sic ipsum quod est humanam naturam esse unitam personae divinae, potest dici quaedam gratia, inquantum nullis praecedentibus meritis hoc est factum, non autem ita quod sit aliqua gratia habitualis qua mediante talis unio fiat."]

See also Singleton, who notes accurately that for medieval theologians, "the justice that we gain through Christ is, like original justice, a gift of God; but unlike the justice first given to man, this justice through Christ is never natural, is never a gift to human nature.... It is always a gift to persons only" (*Journey to Beatrice*, 233).

change in the soul and is one aspect of the justifying gift given by God to an individual person.

An even more significant aspect of Beatrice's account of the Fall and Redemption is that it makes no mention of the diminishment or restoration of human free will. As we've seen, in Beatrice's account what is lost in the Fall are the three dignities of immortality, freedom from heavenly influence, and likeness to God. By contrast, a theologian like Aquinas would argue that the Fall produced an ontological change in the soul such that "the free-will of man weakened by sin...is hindered from good by the corruption of the nature."[54]

Dante's omission does not mean that evidence of the healing effects of sanctifying grace cannot be found in the *Commedia*. When Virgil "crowns and miters" the pilgrim at the end of *Purgatorio* 27, for example, he declares, "Libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio" (l. 140), which is exactly the kind of effect we would expect healing grace to have.[55] But *Paradiso* 7's neglect of what for most theologians was one of the most important consequences of the fall does supply further evidence for the "deep strain" that Kenelm

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[54] *Summa Theologica,* IaIIae q. 109 a. 2 ad 1.

[55] This passage in particular is further proof that Mastrobuono's attack on Charles Singleton is, however intemperate in tone, essentially correct in its grasp of the relevant theology. The reason why Virgil's pronouncement on the restored state of Dante's soul must wait until the top of Mt. Purgatory is that Dante is not completely healed until there are no more stains to be removed, which indicates that Dante's will is healed: "By the time Virgil crowns Dante with the words 'Free, upright, and healed is your will'...a process of purification has already taken place on the mountain of Purgatory inasmuch as the pilgrim's soul was cleansed of the stains of sin as the 'P''s were erased from his forehead. This means that, by now, Dante's will has been healed in a perfect manner for, as St. Thomas says [in *Summa Theologica,* IaIIae q. 87 a. 6 ad 3], 'When the stain is removed, the wound of sin is healed as regards the will'" (*Dante' s Journey of Sanctification*, 108-9).

Foster identified in Dante's thought, a strain that did not reckon as particularly dire the ontological damage caused by Adam and Eve's sin. Foster based his argument on an examination of the adults in Limbo, and particularly Virgil, but what he says about that episode might be applied to the account of postlapsarian human nature given in *Paradiso* 7:

> We now find ourselves contemplating a 'nature' whose contact (through grace) is minimal, but whose intrinsic excellence, on its own level and for the duration of life on earth, can, in principle be complete. And this completeness in human excellence, if achieved, would be self-achieved. Grace as sanans, as healing the wound of sin, would not, in principle be needed. Not so grace as elevans, as 'divinizing': the necessity, in the Comedy of this sort of grace is manifest, for the soul after death.[56]

There is, then, a significant difference between *Paradiso* 7's treatment of the connection of original sin and free will and the treatment of those theologians working within the conceptual space of the sin-grace complex that I discussed earlier. Where the central problem for most theologians was the extent to which the Fall corrupted the free will's ability to do good, in *Paradiso* 7 Dante worries mainly about whether the Fall has made human free will susceptible to the influence of the heavens, which he has elsewhere called the "government of the world."[57]

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[56] Foster, "The Two Dantes," 249. J.A. Scott argues that "the *Comedy* as a whole demonstrates quite clearly that its author was a faithful upholder of the essentials of Christian dogma as interpreted in his times," but like Foster he allows that "in [his] Christianized version of Vergil's Elysian Fields, Dante may appear to come dangerously close to the Pelagian heresy, which asserted that worthy pagans had been saved through their own efforts" (*Understanding Dante*, 209).

[57] *Convivio* 2.4.13.

Here we might wonder, however, whether Dante's concern about celestial influence is somehow implicitly connected to a deeper worry about the state of postlapsarian free will. After all, when Aquinas argues against the necessity of astrological influence, his argument directly implicates free will: even in the state of corrupt nature, Aquinas says, the free will that is the inalienable possession of rational creatures means that the will is never necessarily subject to the lower passions. Heavenly bodies can only act on other bodies, and therefore celestial influences can never be said to necessarily cause human actions.[58] And yet once this necessity is excluded, Aquinas allows that heavenly bodies can have an effect on people who are not wise enough to resist their influences:

> The majority of men follow their passions, which are movements of the sensitive appetite, in which movements of the heavenly bodies can cooperate: but few are wise enough to resist these passions. Consequently astrologers are able to foretell the truth in the majority of cases, especially in a general way. But not in particular cases; for nothing prevents man resisting his passions by his free-will.[59]

What causes "the majority of men [to] follow their passions" instead of their reason is, we know from elsewhere in the Summa, the disorder of the mind that was the product of the Fall. A person whose mind was not corrupted—i.e. whose will was properly subject to her reason—would be, in a phrase of Ptolemy's quoted by Aquinas, "stronger than the stars." In Dante's terms, she would be "non soggiace / a la virtute de le cose nove." It is therefore at least theoretically possible to read an implied statement about postlapsarian

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[58] *Summa Theologica* Ia q. 115. a. 5.
[59] *Summa Theologica* Ia q. 115. a. 5. ad 3

free will into Dante's account of the Fall. But to go any further with the question we need to turn to *Purgatorio* 16, which stands as the locus classicus of Dante's thoughts about the relationship of free will and heavenly influence.

2.3. Free Will and the Influence of the Heavens: *Purgatorio* 16

Purgatorio 16 finds Dante on the terrace of wrath, where he meets the courtier Marco Lombardo. In response to the pilgrim's question about whether the origins of worldly corruption can be traced to the influence of the heavens, Marco launches a vigorous defense of human moral agency. Marco's argument doesn't begin in earnest until line 67, but the canto's central subject is already foreshadowed in the opening lines, which narrate the penance inflicted on the terrace of wrath. The poet describes a bank of smoke so dense and irritating to the eyes that one must walk "as if blind" (16.10). To assure us of the smoke's opacity, the poet offers a double comparison:

> Buio d'inferno e di notte privata
> d'ogne pianeto, sotto pover cielo,
> quant' esser può di nuvol tenebrata,
> non fece al viso mio sì grosso velo... (16.1-4)[60]

The night "deprived of every planet" offers itself at first as a particularly impressive description of a cloudy night. But, as we discover by the end of the canto, it also presents

[60] "The darkness of Hell, and of a night deprived of every planet, under a poor sky, when it is crowded with clouds, did not make such a thick veil to my sight..."

a rough visual analogue for the scene to come. The smoke that obscures the pilgrim's view of the planets is, within the fiction of the poem, a divinely authored objective correlative for anger. But for us, who look in on the poetic fiction from outside, the smoke comes to stand also as a symbol for the Dante's confusion about the influence of the heavens.

Dante gives voice to his puzzlement in lines 58-63, finding himself pressed to speech, he says, after Marco's description of the world as a place where "quel valore amai / al quale ha or ciascun disteso l'arco" (16.47-8):[61]

> Lo mondo è ben così tutto diserto
> d'ogne virtute, come tu mi sone,
> e di malizia gravido e coverto;
> ma priego che m'addite la cagione,
> sì ch'i' la veggia e ch'i' la mosti altrui;
> ché nel cielo uno, e un qua giù la pone.[62]

The question, in short, is whether the heavens can be held responsible for the evil of the world.

Marco sighs and groans at the question, and offers one of the great retorts in the whole of the *Commedia*: "Frate, / lo mondo è cieco, e tu vien ben da lui" (16.65-6).[63] He brushes aside the fact of his own blindness (a literal effect of the smoky fog and an

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[61] "I loved that worth toward which everyone now has unstrung his bow." In justifying his question, Dante also alludes to Guido del Duca's denunciation of the state of the world in *Purgatorio* 14.

[62] "The world is surely as barren of every virtue as you say, pregnant with malice and covered with it; but I beg you to point out the cause, so that I may see and show it to others; for some place it in the heavens and others down here."

[63] "Brother, the world is blind, and you surely come from it."

allegorical representation of anger) to accuse Dante and the world from which he visits of a more serious blindness, one that has its roots in the erroneous idea that the heavens have an irresistible influence on earthly life:

> Voi che vivete ogne cagion recate
> pur suso al cielo, pur come se tutto
> movesse seco di necessitate. (16.67-9)[64]

As Marco will presently explain, this terzina describes two errors. The first is the belief that everything on earth has its cause in the heavens. The second is the belief that heavenly influence acts with the force of necessity. Taken together, these two beliefs constitute a kind of astrological fatalism that was inimical to Church dogma and also—according to Marco, but also, of course, to Dante the poet—a widespread worldview in his day.

In the next terzina, Marco lays out a theological *reductio ad absurdum* that demonstrates the errors of such fatalism:

> Se così fosse, in voi fora distrutto
> libero arbitrio, e non fora giustizia
> per ben letizia, e per male aver lutto. (16.70-72)[65]

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[64] "You who are alive still refer every cause up to the heavens, just as if they moved everything with them by necessity."

[65] "If that were so, free choice would be destroyed in you, and it would not be justice to have joy for good and mourning for evil."

In other words, Marco argues that to treat life on earth as if it were implacably directed by the heavens would not only abrogate the freedom of the will, it would also render unjust God's reward and punishment of human actions.[66] This is the heart of the poet's brief for free will, and is crucial for any appreciation of his soteriological concern. In discussing free will thus far, I have tended to use the terms of *Paradiso* 7, which describe it as a special dignity afforded human nature by God. That Dante and the theological tradition on which he relied saw free will as a great gift is undeniable; we need only remember Beatrice's description of it in *Paradiso* 5.19 as "lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando." But such a perspective can be misleading if it suggests that the central issue for the poet in the question of free will was the defense of a particular form of human dignity.[67]

Indeed, *Purgatorio* 16.70-2 is important precisely because shows that the real question at the heart of Dante's concern was the role of human moral agency in God's soteriological scheme. The argument of these lines is not difficult to understand, and the legal principle at its core is not difficult to extract: a punishment or reward is just insofar as it refers to a choice between real alternatives. The argument proceeds backward from

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[66] This does not mean, of course, that the heavens have no role to play in the moral life. As Alison Cornish has argued, "the astronomical passages of the *Commedia,* virtually without exception, confront the reader with a choice between interpretative options that are morally weighted. Familiar constellations do not dictate our actions, but rather serve, as Dante says, to 'remind people of what they ought to do'" (Alison Cornish, *Reading Dante's Stars* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 10, quoting *Purgatorio* 30.1-7).

[67] For an opposing view, see Girardi, who has argued that "il motivo dominante della *Commedia*" is to provide a poetic representation of the idea that "la dignità dell'uomo consiste nella libertà, e che senza libertà la vita non è degna di essere vissuta" ("Al Centro del Purgatorio" 27).

there: God is just by definition, and therefore so also are his punishments and rewards, and therefore we know that humans have the power to make decisions (i.e., free will) in a world that presents alternatives (i.e., a world of contingency, not necessity).

Marco's argument would hardly have been surprising to Dante's readers, since versions of it can be found throughout the philosophical and theological literature on free will.[68] Aquinas, for example, opens his discussion of free will saying that "Man has free will; otherwise counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards, and punishments would be in vain."[69] Likewise an extended version of Marco's *reductio* can be found in book 5 of Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy*. Once a person believes that free will is an illusion, Philosophy argues,

> in vain are rewards or punishments set before good or bad, for there is no free or voluntary action of the mind to deserve them; and what we just now determined was most fair, will prove to be most unfair of all, namely to punish the dishonest or reward the honest, since their own will does not put them in the way of honesty or dishonesty, but the unfailing necessity of development constrains them. Wherefore neither virtues nor vices are anything, but there is rather an indiscriminate confusion of all deserts. And nothing could be more vicious than this; since the whole order of all comes from Providence, and nothing is left to human intention, it follows that our crimes, as well as our good deeds, must all be held due to the author of all good. Hence it is unreasonable to hope or pray against

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[68] Note, however, that this does not mean that appreciation of the subjective nature of sin/crime was universal. As Francesco Forlenza argues, "Nel Medioevo la pratica penale non sempre venne rettamente a distinguere l'elemento soggettivo del reato dalla nuda materialità del fatto, e conferi spesso a quest' ultimo elemento, sopratutto nei più gravi reati, una straordinaria importanza" (Francesco Forlenza, *Il Diritto Penale nella Divina Commedia: Le Radici del Sorvegliare e Punire nell'Occidente* [Rome: Armando, 2003], 20).

[69] *Summa Theologica* Ia q. 83 a. 1.

> aught. For what could any man hope for or pray against, in an undeviating chain links together all that we can desire?[70]

That Marco's argument is not novel with Dante takes away nothing from its significance to the *Commedia*, however. Marco's brief for free will stands as the key linkage in the ethical-soteriological framework of the poem, precisely because it provides Dante with a conceptual and narrative mechanism for presenting the eternal consequences of ethical action.[71] The *Letter to Can Grande* says as much when it describes the allegorical sense of the work: "subiectum est homo prout merendo et demerendo per arbitrii libertatem iustitie premiandi et puniendi obnoxius est."[72] In fact, the establishment of free will as the guarantor of moral imputability is so important to Dante that he returns to it again, just a

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[70] ["Frustra enim bonis malisque praemia poenaeue proponuntur, quae nullus meruit liber ac uoluntarius motus animorum. Idque omnium uidebitur iniquissimum quod nunc aequissimum iudicatur, uel puniri improbos uel remunerari probos, quos ad alterutrum non propria mittit uoluntas sed futuri cogit certa necessitas. Nec uitia igitur nec uirtutes quicquam fuerint, sed omnium meritorum potius mixta atque indiscreta confusio; quoque nihil sceleratius excogitari potest, cum ex prouidentia rerum omnis ordo ducatur nihilque consiliis liceat humanis, fit ut uitia quoque nostra ad bonorum omnium referantur auctorem. Igitur nec sperandi aliquid nec deprecandi ulla ratio est; quid enim uel speret quisque uel etiam deprecetur quando optanda omnia series indeflexa conectit?"] Translation from Boethius, "The Consolation of Philosophy," 107.

[71] Erich Auerbach saw the establishment of this connection as Christianity's key revision to ancient eudaemonism: "it was the Christian's duty to do atonement and suffer trials by taking destiny upon himself.... The drama of earthly life took on a painful, immoderate, and utterly un-classical intensity, because it is at once a wrestling with evil and the foundation of God's judgment to come" (Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961], 14).

[72] *Ep.* 13.8. I am inclined to believe the *Letter*'s authenticity, but in citing it here the only implication I would stand firmly behind is that the summary quoted accurately represents the didactic character of the *Commedia*.

few cantos later. In *Purgatorio* 18, Virgil explains to Dante once more that free will is the foundation of ethics:

> innata v'è la virtù che consiglia,
> e de l'assenso de' tener la soglia.
> Quest' è 'l principio là onde si piglia
> ragion di meritare in voi, secondo
> che buoni e rei amori accoglie e viglia.
> Color che ragionando andaro al fondo,
> s'accorser d'esta innata libertate;
> però moralità lasciaro al mondo. (18.62-9)[73]

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[73] "There is innate in you the faculty that counsels and that ought to hold the threshold of assent. This is the principle wherefrom is derived the reason of desert in you, according as it garners and winnows good and evil loves. They who in their reasoning went to the root of the matter took note of this innate liberty, and accordingly bequeathed ethics to the world."

"La virtù che consiglia" is the intellectual component of free will, what Dante calls *iudicium* in the *Monarchia* and what Aquinas calls *consilium* in Question 83 of the first part of the *Summa Theologica,* both of which I discuss below. Chiavacci Leonardi argues that what Virgil describes here is the "giudizio deliberante...cioè il libero arbitrio, e non la ragione, come i più intendono" and, further, that "la *virtù che consiglia* è dunque quel 'libero giudizio' che Dante definisce nella *Monarchia"* (Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Purgatorio,* ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi [Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1994], 531, 544). But here "i più" have the right side of the question, regardless whether one believes, with Nardi, that the *Commedia*'s presentation of free will is basically assimilable to the *Monarchia*'s, or, as I will argue below, that the *Commedia*'s presentation of free will is distinct from the *Monarchia*'s.

If one takes Nardi's side, then it makes no sense to distinguish, as Chiavacci Leonardi does, between free will and reason, since "la libertà consiste...per Dante, nel potere che ha la ragione, non prevenuta dall'appetito, di suggerire alla volontà quello che è da fare" (Nardi, "Il Libero Arbitrio," 295). On the other hand, if I am correct that the *Commedia*'s version of free will hews more closely to Aquinas's description of free will in the *Summa Theologica* than it does to the *Monarchia*'s, which is also Chiavacci Leonardi's reading, then we can accept her statement that "libero arbitrio...presuppone la ragione, ma non s'identifica con essa, in quanto comporta una scelta operative che è propria della volontà." Here, however, her mistake is to equate the *virtù che consiglia* of line 62 with the whole of the free will. The best evidence that the *virtù che consiglia* describes only the intellectual component of the free will—and not the free will *in toto*—is Dante's word choice, which reproduces the *consilium* that Aquinas says is the intellectual component of choice in *Summa Theologica* Ia q. 83. a. 3. Chiavacci Leonardi knows and even quotes a

Dante's double treatment of this theme at the center of the *Commedia* is good evidence for Attilio Mellone's suggestion that "il problema della radice dei meriti e dei meriti è il centro ideologico di tutto il sacro poema."[74] By the time of the *Commedia* there was a long tradition of Christian theologians, starting with Augustine, who had argued that the captivity or diminishment of free will after the Fall took nothing away from the justice of God's system of eternal rewards and punishments.[75] As Marco's argument makes plain, however, Dante believed that the divine system of salvation and damnation

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passage from the latter—"consilium, per quod diiudicatur quid sit alteri preferendum"—but she leaves out the preceding sentence, which specificially describes the *consilium* as intellectual: "ex parte quidem cognitivae, requiritur consilium."

For more on this *terzina*, see Attilio Mellone, "*Purgatorio* Canto XVIII," in *Saggi e Letture Dantesche* (Angri: Gaia, 2005), 327, who shares Nardi's view.

[74] Ibid., 330.

[75] In the *De Malo,* for instance, Aquinas argues that unbaptized children who die before reaching the age of reason—and who cannot, therefore, be held morally accountable for their behavior—will be punished with the deprivation of the Beatific Vision because the taint of Adam's sin remains in their own bodies: "The souls of these children...are not punished...on account of Adam's sin as if the sin were theirs, but they are punished for the stain of original sin, which they incur from the union to a body which is descended from the first parent" ["Animae huius pueri...non punitur...propter peccatum Ade secundum quod fuit peccatum eius, sed punitur pro infectione originalis culpe, quam incurrit ex unione ad corpus quod a primo parente tradiucitur"] (*De Malo* 5.1 ad 2, my trans.). Cf. *Summa Theologica* IaIIae q. 89 a. 6: "Before a man comes to the age of discretion, the lack of years hinders the use of reason and excuses him from mortal sin, wherefore, much more does it excuse him from venial sin" ["antequam ad annos discretionis perveniat, defectus aetatis, prohibens usum rationis, excusat eum a peccato mortali, unde multo magis excusat eum a peccato veniali"].

would be deficient in justice without the supposition of a fully capable faculty of free will.[76]

Marco turns his argument for free will back to the question of celestial influence in lines 73-81:

> Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia;
> non dico tutti, ma, posto ch'i' 'l dica,
> lume v'è dato a bene e a malizia,
> e libero voler; che, se fatica
> ne la prime battaglie col ciel dura,
> poi vince tutto, e ben si notrica.
> A maggior forza e a miglior natura
> liberi soggiacete; e quella cria
> la mente in voi, che 'l ciel non ha in sua cura.[77]

It is important to note here that nowhere in his argument does Marco deny that the heavens can have a malicious influence on human affairs. He concedes (through his silence on the question) the pilgrim's assertion that those human actions can be of a malicious character; thus the pilgrim's original question, thus the "ciel dura" of line 77. This stands in marked contrast to the way heavenly influence is represented in Dante's minor works and elsewhere in the *Commedia*. As we saw in the last chapter, when Dante cites the action of the heavens in the *Vita Nuova*, the valence of the citation is always

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[76] Once again, I want to be clear that I'm not arguing that Dante was making a Pelagian claim that salvation could be earned (either directly or through the "reward" of sanctifying grace) on the strength of the free will's moral choices alone. My argument here is that he neglects the need for one aspect of *gratia sanans* by positing a more or less undiminished faculty of free will in postlapsarian humanity.

[77] "The heavens begin your motions; I do not say all of them, but, supposing I say it, a light is given you to know good and evil, and free will, which, if it lasts out the labor of its first battles with the heavens, afterwards overcomes all things, if nourished well."

positive; he invokes the heavens to vouch for the momentous quality of Beatrice's presence. In the *Monarchia*, Dante argues that the heavens were God's perfect instrument, his optimum organum, and that any defect in their product must therefore be attributable to the material they worked.[78]

What's more, the implied assertion of negative influence in *Purgatorio* 16 is very different from what we find in the *Paradiso*. At the end of *Paradiso* 8, Charles Martel reminds Dante that the angelic intelligences that work as blacksmiths to the tools of heaven "non son manchi," and further that the product of their labor is "arti" not "ruine" (ll. 106-111).[79] From this premise he goes on to argue that whatever deficiencies are found

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[78] As Richard Kay puts it, in the *Monarchia* Dante's "fundamental premise is that the heavens are God's 'instruments' for producing goodness on earth. Goodness originates as an idea in the divine mind, which uses the heaven as 'the organ of the divine art' to impose form on matter" (Richard Kay, *Dante's Christian Astrology* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994), 2). In support of this see *Monarchia* 2.2, where Dante writes: "And just as, when the craftsman is perfect and his instrument is in excellent order, if a flaw occurs in the work of art it is to be imputed exclusively to the material; in the same way, since God attains the highest perfection and his instrument (i.e. the heavens) cannot fall short of the perfection appropriate to it (as is clear from those things philosophy teaches about the heavens), our conclusion is this: whatever flaws there are in earthly things are flaws due to the material of which they are constituted, and are no part of the intention of God the creator and the heavens." ["Et quemadmodum, perfecto existente artifice atque optime organo se habente, si contingat peccatum in forma artis, materie tantum imputandum est, sic, cum Deus ultimum perfectionis actingat et instrumentum eius, quod celum est, nullum debite perfectionis patiatur defectum, ut ex hiis patet que de celo phylosophamur, restat quod quicquid in rebus inferioribus est peccatum, ex parte materie subiacentis peccatum sit et preter intentionem Dei naturantis et celi"]. See Patrick Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 132-143 for more on this passage.

[79] This positive perspective on celestial power might appear to conflict with the one we saw in *Paradiso* 7, in which freedom *from* celestial influence is understood as one of the pillars of human dignity. But it would be a mistake to read *Paradiso* 7 as implying a negative view of celestial influence. What's at stake there is a question of ontological proximity: God uses the heavens as an instrument to orchestrate goodness among his

on earth are the result not of malicious celestial influence but of humanity's inability to properly recognize the perfect order that God has prescribed for it:

> Sempre natura, se fortuna trova
> discorde a sé, com ogne altra semente
> fuor di sua regïon, fa mala prova.
> E se 'l mondo là giù ponesse mente
> al fondamento che natura pone,
> seguendo lui, avria buona la gente.
> Ma voi torcete a la religione
> tal che fia nato a cignersi la spada
> e fate re di tal ch'è da sermone;
> onde la traccia vostra è fuor di strada. (ll. 139-148)[80]

This positive rendering of heaven's action is qualified somewhat in *Paradiso* 13, when Aquinas tells the pilgrim that Nature transmits the splendor of God's idea "sempre scema, / similemente operando a l'artista / ch'a l'abito de l'arte ha man che trema" (ll. 73-8).[81] But it remains the case that *Purgatorio* 16 is the only place in the *Commedia* that asserts—albeit implicitly—the negative influence of the heavens.

The *Commedia* gives us no easy way to explain the discrepancies among these passages. But I think it's worth holding on to the inconsistency as illustrative of a

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insensible and irrational creatures, while he grants rational creatures a special dignity: namely, unmediated access to himself.

[80] "Ever does Nature, if she find fortune discordant with herself, like any kind of seed out of its proper region, come to ill result. And if the world there below would give heed to the foundation which Nature lays, and followed it, it would have its people good. But you wrest to religion one born to gird on the sword, and you make a kind of one that is fit for sermons; so your track is off the road."

[81] "always defectively, working like the artist who in the practice of his art has a hand that trembles." In the lines that follow, Aquinas tells Dante that this defective process was circumvented in the creation of Adam and (the human nature of) Jesus.

fundamental dilemma, one that medieval theologians sought endlessly to resolve. One horn of this dilemma was a defense of God's sovereignty, power, and perfection: thus *Paradiso* 8's characterization of the heavens as a perfect instrument of God's benevolent will. The other horn of the dilemma was a recognition of actually existing disorder coupled with a defense of human moral agency: thus Marco's insistence that people can resist malicious heavenly influences.[82]

In *Purgatorio* 16.73-4, Marco is careful to specify that the heavens do not initiate all human actions ("Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia; / non dico tutti") thereby rebutting the first of the two errors mentioned earlier. But the second half of line 74 ("ma, posto ch'i' 'l dica") allows that first error to stand by hypothesis for the sake of an a fortiori argument designed to counter the second error: Marco tells the pilgrim that even if the heavens were able to provide the impetus for every human action, they did not have the power to complete those actions, and therefore the heavens cannot said to necessarily influence human action. For standing between impetus and execution, thwarting the case for necessity, is a "lume...a bene e a malizia, / e libero voler" (ll. 75-6). This characterization calls to mind Dante's discussion and definition of free will in the *Monarchia:*

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[82] Having said this, I admit that the discrepancies aren't a strictly necessary consequence of the two horns of the dilemma presented here. The *reductio* of *Purgatorio* 70-2, the philosophical heart of Marco's whole speech, would still work—and the contradiction would be avoided—had Marco absolved the heavens of ill influence, as Dante does in the *Monarchia*. In other words, the hard-line assertion of moral responsibility does not depend on malicious external influences. That does not, however, change the fact that Marco makes no such absolution; nor does it change the fact that the possibility of malicious heavenly influence is what powers the *a fortiori* case I discuss in the next paragraph.

> it must be borne in mind that the first principle of our freedom is free will, which many people talk about but few understand. For they go so far as to say that free will [liberum arbitrium] is free judgment [*liberum iudicium*] in matters of volition [*de voluntate*]. And what they say is true, but they are very far from understanding what the words mean.... And therefore I say that judgment is the link between perception and appetition: for first a thing is perceived, then it is judged to be good or evil, and finally the person who judges pursues or shuns it. Now if judgment controls desire completely and is in no way pre-empted by it, it is free; but if judgment is in any way at all pre-empted and thus controlled by desire, it cannot be free, because it does not act under its own power, but is dragged along in the power of something else. And from this it is clear why the lower animals cannot have free will, because their judgments are always pre-empted by desire. And from this it is also clear that non-material beings [*substantie intellecutuales*], whose wills are unchangeable, as well as human souls who leave this world of ours in a state of grace, do not lose free will on account of the fact that their wills are unchangeable; in fact they retain it in its most perfect and true form.[83]

I am generally wary of using Dante's minor works as skeleton keys to explain the *Commedia*, but the above passage from the *Monarchia* is a useful point of reference for my inquiry because it presents in an explicit and radical form what I have identified as

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[83] *Monarchia* I.12.2-5: "Propter quod sciendum quod principium primum nostre libertatis est libertas arbitrii, quam multi habent in ore, in intellectu vero pauci. Veniunt nanque usque ad hoc: ut dicant liberum arbitrium esse liberum de voluntate iudicium. Et verum dicunt; sed importatum per verba longe est ab eis....Et ideo dico quod iudicium medium est apprehensionis et appetitus: nam primo res apprehenditur, deinde apprehensa bona vel mala iudicatur, et ultimo iudicans prosequitur sive fugit. Si ergo iudicium moveat omnino appetitum et nulla modo preveniatur ab eo, liberum est; si vero ab appetitu quocunque modo preveniente iudicium moveatur, liberum esse non potest, quia non a se, sed ab alio captivum trahitur. Et hinc est quod bruta iudicium habere non possunt, quia eorum iudicia semper ab appetitu preveniuntur. Et hinc etiam patere potest quod substantie intellecutuales, quarum sunt inmutabiles voluntates, necnon anime separate bene hinc abeuntes, libertatem arbitrii ob inmutabilitatem voluntatis non amictunt, sed perfectissime atque potissme hoc retinent."

the deep strain in the *Commedia*'s treatment of free will.[84] The passage is remarkable for Dante's assertion that the freedom of free will is defined by the intellect's independence from the appetites: "if judgment [*iudicium*] is in any way at all pre-empted and thus controlled [*quocunque modo preveniente...moveatur*] by desire, it cannot be free." This assertion is remarkable because, when read against the background of the medieval discussion on the Fall, it implies one of two things. The first possibility is that Dante accepted that the Fall caused some ontological disorder between the will and the reason, and therefore, *per definitionem*, did not believe in the existence of free will in postlasparian ungraced humanity. But this possibility can be rejected out of hand, since a few lines before the passage in question, Dante tells us that "humanum genus potissime liberum optime se habet."[85] Therefore we must accept the second possible implication of the passage, which is that, as far as the *Monarchia* is concerned, the Fall did not cause any significant damage to human free will, and that therefore *gratia sanans* was not necessary to heal the disordered mind. As Foster notes after citing a passage later in the *Monarchia*, the premise of the treatise is that:

> the whole business of man's achieving 'perfection' in this world, as a being endowed with reason and nevertheless mortal...is presented as something to be carried out by means entirely intrinsic to human nature itself. The only factors directly involved are all contained in man's *propria virtus* (sustained, of course, by

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[84] This wariness has a host of causes ranging from the temperamental to the defensibly philosophical, but the most relevant reason to cite here is that, as he himself acknowledges, Dante's works present differing, and sometimes contradictory, positions on a number of matters. That the *Monarchia* presents one understanding of free will is therefore no proof that a similar understanding informs the *Commedia*, or vice versa.

[85] *Monarchia,* 1.12.1.

> God as creator). Nor does the bringing of Original Sin into the argument represent any significant alteration, in the Monarchia, of the man-centred outlook which has been noted in the *Convivio*. 'Gratia sanans' is as absent from the one treatise as from the other, at least so far as man's achievement of natural 'virtue' is concerned, the aim of his life as terminated by death, 'prout corruptibilits est.'... So far as man qua mortal is concerned, the Fall is left unconnected with any grace coming from Christ: its ill effects must find their remedy within the state.[86]

The *Monarchia* is not the *Purgatorio*, however, and it would be a mistake to assume that the understanding of free will is identical in both works. A key difference between the two discussions of free will is Marco's claim that humanity's freedom from celestial influence is guaranteed not only by practical reason—what Marco calls the "lume...a bene e a malizia" and what the *Monarchia* calls "free judgment" (*liberum iudicium*)[87]—but also by the will's freedom to choose which course of action to take (*libero voler*).[88] Bruno Nardi argues that Dante's discussions of in both the *Commedia* and the Monarchia diverge from

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[86] Foster, "The Two Dantes," 242-3.

[87] The light metaphor was, of course, commonly applied to reason. One might reasonably wonder, however, whether Dante's *lume* refers to *synderesis*, the mental faculty that unerringly apprehends the first principles of moral action, since *synderesis* was often referred to as a *scintilla conscientiae* ("spark of conscience"). But for both Bonaventure and Aquinas *synderesis* inclines to good only; therefore we must conclude that Dante is here referring more broadly to practical reason. Cf. *Summa Theologica* Ia q. 79 a. 12 *sed contra* and Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences*. Book II, d. 39. *Synderesis* will return in my discussion of *Purgatorio* 18, below. See, on the history of synderesis, Robert A. Greene, "Instinct of Nature: Natural Law, Synderesis, and the Moral Sense," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 2 (1997), 173-198.

[88] Marco's speech reproduces a common medieval distinction between *liberum arbitrium*, which describes the free exercise of the rational will—i.e. the actual act of making a choice [*electio*]—and *libera voluntas*, which refers to the appetitive faculty to the whole. Aquinas offers gives a pithy summary of the distinction between *arbitrium* and *voluntas* in *Summa Theologica* Ia q. 83 a.4: "As the intellect [*intellectus*] is to reason [*rationem*], so is the will [*voluntas*] to the power of choice [*vim electivam*], which is free-will [*liberum arbitrium*]."

the common theological understanding that placed the free will in the faculty of will.[89] Instead, he argues, Dante's treatments owe much to the intellectualist definitions of free will offered by Averroist theologians like Giovanni di Landun:

> Per Dante, come per gli averroisti, il libero arbitrio è il libero giudizio della ragione, non prevenuta dall'appetito, intorno all'operare. 'De voluntate,' nella definizione di Boezio ricordata da Dante, non significa dunque che il giudizio sia dato dalla volontà, ma dalla ragione intorno alla volontà, cioè intorno all'operare....Nel concetto di Boezio come in quello di Dante, la libertà propria di ogni creatura intelligente, consiste nel potere di giudicare quello che è da farsi secondo le leggi della ragione. Libero è l'uomo non ne' suoi appetiti, ma 'ne la sua propria potestate, che è la ragione,' poichè per essa partecipa della divina libertà della Sapienza come insegna Aristotile in un passo della *Metafisica*, più volte ricordato da Dante"[90]

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[89] He points out that in the passage quoted from the *Monarchia* above, Dante borrows Boethius's definition of *liberum arbitrium* as the "liberum de voluntate iudicium," and notes, "in generale, quella 'definizione' del libero arbitrio...non incontrò molto nel gusto dei teologi.... Senza impugnarla apertamente, i più di essi le preferiscono altre definizioni; o se accade loro di fermarvi l'attenzione, lo fanno per tirarla nel loro senso" (Nardi, "Il Libero Arbitrio," 286). He insists, in fact, that Dante intended the passage from the *Monarchia* to stand as a rebuke to the voluntarist understanding proffered by many medieval theologians, and even to the views of Aquinas, who had also argued that "[il] giudizio della ragione è la radice della nostra libertà." For Dante, Nardi argues, Aquinas's views would have counted as too deferential to the will, since they held that the will responsible for both choosing the subject of deliberation and for deciding whether or not to accept the counsel of reason (291). See also Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher,* 178, and Boyde, *Perception and Passion*, 207-8.

[90] "For Dante, as for the Averroists, free will is the free judgment of the intellect, which is not anticipated by the appetite, about what is to be done. 'De voluntate,' in the definition of Boethius that Dante recalls, does not, therefore, mean that the judgment is given by the will, but by the reason about the will, that is, about what is to be done....In Boethius's understanding as Dante's, the freedom of every rational creature consists in the power of judging what to do according to the laws of reason. Man is not free in his appetites, but [is free] 'in the power proper to him, which is reason,] because in this he participates in the divine freedom of Wisdom, as Aristotle teaches in a passage from the *Metaphysics* cited often by Dante" (Nardi, "Il Libero Arbitrio," 302).

But while Nardi's is an accurate representation of Dante's views in the *Monarchia*, it leaves us no way to account for the "libero voler" of *Purgatorio* 16.76. In this passage Dante is clearly marking out two successive moments in the exercise of free will: one that judges the alternatives and one that chooses based on the judgment.[91] Thus the description of free will that Marco offers has more in common with Aquinas's definition of free will—which involves the action of both the intellect and the will—than it does with the intellectualist definition supplied in the *Monarchia*.[92]

The difference between the *Monarchia* and the *Commedia* represented by the "libero voler" of *Purgatorio* 16.76 is important evidence for Dante's changing understanding of free will. This difference has the effect, in the *Commedia*, of tempering the remarkably intellectualist nature of the *Monarchia*'s definition. And that effect in turn would seem to make more room for the healing effects of *gratia sanans* than the

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[91] As Chiavacci Leonardi says, "si segue qui la distinzione tradizionale fra l'intelletto, che giudica, e la volontà, che sceglie" (*Purgatorio*, 476).

[92] This is also the view of Vanni Rovigni. Aquinas describes the cooperation of intellect and will in the exercise of free will in *Summa Theologica* Ia q. 83 a. 3: "Therefore we must consider the nature of free-will, by considering the nature of choice. Now two things concur in choice: one on the part of the cognitive power, the other on the part of the appetitive power. On the part of the cognitive power, counsel is required, by which we judge one thing to be preferred to another: and on the part of the appetitive power, it is required that the appetite should accept the judgment of counsel." ["Et ideo naturam liberi arbitrii ex electione considerare oportet. Ad electionem autem concurrit aliquid ex parte cognitivae virtutis, et aliquid ex parte appetitivae, ex parte quidem cognitivae, requiritur consilium, per quod diiudicatur quid sit alteri praeferendum; ex parte autem appetitivae, requiritur quod appetendo acceptetur id quod per consilium diiudicatur."]

On my reading, the "libero voler" of line 76 is glossed precisely by Aquinas's "ex parte...appetitivae, requiritur quod appetendo acceptetur id quod per consilium diiudicatur."] That the will has the final say in any choice is the reason Aquinas calls free will an appetitive, rather than a cognitive power.

Monarchia allows, since one of the effects of that aspect of sanctifying grace is to rectify precisely the order of mental operations implicated in free will.[93]

And yet even while Marco's account of free will resembles Aquinas's more than the *Monarchia*'s, it still presents a significantly more optimistic view of free will than we find in the *Summa Theologica*. Although Marco says that at first the will may need to struggle to resist celestial influence ("se fatica / ne le prime battaglie col ciel dura") eventually "vince tutto, se ben si notrica" (ll. 76-7).[94] Aquinas, by contrast, allows for no such final victory in this life; he argues that even graced humans cannot avoid venial sins because a disorder of the will remains:

> In the state of corrupt nature man needs grace to heal his nature in order that he may entirely abstain from sin. And in the present life this healing is wrought in the mind—the carnal appetite being not yet restored.... And in this state man can abstain from all mortal sin, which takes its stand in his reason...but man cannot abstain from all venial sin on account of the corruption of his lower appetite of sensuality.[95]

In lines 79-81, Marco explains to the pilgrim that humans, while free, are subject to a "greater power and a better nature":

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[93] As I noted earlier, in Aquinas's account a mind in the ungraced corrupt state of nature does not properly subordinate the appetites to the counsel of reason. A person whose free will has been healed by sanctifying grace, meanwhile, does follow the dictates of reason's *consilium*.

[94] "if it endure fatigue in its first battles with the heavens"; "if it is well nurtured, it conquers completely"

[95] *Summa Theologica,* IaIIae q. 109. a. 8

> A maggior forza e a miglior natura
> liberi soggiacete; e quella cria
> la mente in voi, che' l ciel non ha in sua cura.[96]

This greater force and better nature is, of course, God, who directly creates each person's rational soul ("la mente"). And the soul is the part of a human being that—for all the reasons Marco has just explained—the heavens do not keep in their care.

This terzina has an obvious and important relationship to the passage from *Paradiso* 7 that we discussed earlier. (Recall that the rational soul's freedom from determination by the heavens is the second of the three dignities that Beatrice describes to Dante in that later canto: "Ciò che da essa sanza mezzo piove / libero è tutto, perché non soggiace / a la virtute de le cose nove.") But what should we make of the fact that Beatrice also says that after Adam and Eve sinned, human nature "da queste dignitadi, / come di *Paradiso*, fu remota" (*Paradiso* 7.85-87)? This would seem to fly in the face of Marco's argument, which is a defense of the very freedom that Beatrice, in *Paradiso* 7, says humans no longer have. This apparent contradiction, however, is only apparent. As I've noted, Marco makes it clear that free will ("libero arbitrio") is not some kind of magical ability superadded to human psychology; it is simply the cooperation of practical

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[96] "You lie subject, in your freedom, to a greater power, and to a better nature, and that creates the mind in you which the heavens have not in there charge." Chiavacci Leonardi captures the predominant modern theological view of the relationship between human free will and divine omnipotence when she notes, "In quel *liberi soggiacete* è racchiuso e sottolineato il paradosso cristiano, per cui l'uomo è libero di accetare la sua dipendenza da Dio" (*Purgatorio*, 477).

But it is worth noting that for Aquinas, at least, this was not a paradox. He argues that "it does not of necessity belong to liberty that what is free should be the first cause of itself" and that "just as by moving natural causes [God] does not prevent their acts being natural, so by moving voluntary causes He does not deprive their actions of being voluntary." (*Summa Theologica* Ia q. 83 a. 1 ad 3.)

reason ("lume...a bene e a malizia") and the uncoerced faculty of judgment ("libero voler"). Therefore the condition of human free will (i.e. whether it is integral or wounded) is exclusively determined by the condition of the practical reason and the judgment (i.e., the will).

What this means is that, just as we saw in *Paradiso* 7, it is possible to read humanity's ability to resist the influence of the heavens as a proxy indicator for the extent of the damage wrought to human psychology by the Fall. In the prelapsarian state (as in heaven and the earthly paradise) the exercise and cooperation of reason and will are unhindered by the disorder of sin, and so a person's free will can act to its full potential—he will have no trouble in resisting ill influence from the heavens. In the postlapsarian state of sin, meanwhile, human reason and will are sufficiently wounded that resisting the heavens is the effort and battle that Marco describes in *Purgatorio* 16.76-7.

Thus Marco's neglect of the need for healing grace does not mean that his account of free will is incompatible with the hypothesis of such a need. The account of free will in *Purgatorio* 16 allows us, as *Paradiso* 7 did, to propose by way of a series of complicated and hypothetical deductions that the need for *gratia sanans* to heal the postlapsarian mind is not excluded by their respective accounts of free will. As I've demonstrated, Dante's understanding of the effects of celestial influence implicitly suggests some recognition of the damage done to the postlasparian free will.

And yet—and this is the nub of my argument—the non-exclusion of a hypothetical possibility is something quite other than a full-throated endorsement. I think it has to count as significant that Dante nowhere mentions the need for sanctifying grace to heal the disorder of the mind caused by the Fall. I've suggested at least one way in which

Marco's account is more optimistic about the postlapsarian status of free will than Aquinas's, in that it suggests that the free will can, in this life, conquer all its wayward impulses. But even if we decide that Dante's lack of reference to *gratia sanans* marks a difference more of emphasis than of theology, we still must, I'd suggest, accept this as evidence that Foster's thesis should be extended. For not only in the *Convivio*, *Monarchia*, and in the Limbo of Inferno do we find evidence that "so far as man qua mortal is concerned, the Fall is left unconnected with any grace coming from Christ."[97] As I've demonstrated, we can also find traces of that deep conviction in Marco's treatment of free will.[98]

2.4. Concluding Speculations

Dante's divergence from mainstream theological opinion on the question of healing grace begs for some explanation, even though any reasons offered can only ever be speculative. And yet I believe we can adduce a number of factors that likely combined to cause Dante

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[97] Foster, "The Two Dantes," 242-3.

[98] I cannot resist noting my suspicion that this deep strain is also indicated by Singleton's misapprehension of the role of sanctifying grace in the *Commedia*. Singleton writes, "To attain to justice must mean to come to a justice which is discernible by the natural light of reason and without benefit of the light of sanctifying grace; or shall we not say, discernible before the light of grace is had, for when Virgil dismisses Dante, Beatrice has not yet come, though she is expected" (Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice*, 252). Also: "To move with Virgil means to move 'within the proportion of man's nature,' as Thomas Aquinas liked to express it. To journey with Virgil is to journey by that natural light which may not extend beyond such confines" (Ibid., 269). Mastrobuono discusses this passage on pp. 47ff. and accurately argues that Singleton is mistaken about when sanctifying grace enters Dante's life. But it seems reasonable to suggest that Singleton's misreading is encouraged by the emphasis on the capacity of ungraced human powers that I've noted.

to downplay the need for healing grace. For one thing, the *Commedia* is, as the *Letter to Can Grande* argues, a work whose fundamental didactic purpose is to aid the salvation of humanity through moral reform: "finis totius et partis est removere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis."[99] As we've seen, the *Letter* also explains how free will supplies an important conceptual connection between ethics and soteriology.[100] It was not uncommon for moral reform movements in the Middle Ages to shade toward the Pelagian in their estimation of the power of free will; and it seems plausible that Dante's moralism led him in a similar direction.[101]

Surely a second contributing factor is the humanistic slant of the sources Dante depended on in formulating his ethical ideas. Foster argues that Dante's humanism—"the basic...belief that man should aim at and can achieve a certain excellence, in thought and action, compatible with his nature"—owes much to his reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* which gave him a markedly unchristian confidence in humanity's postapsarian moral capacities.[102] He adds that "what had emerged here and there in the West was the conception of a humanist ethic based more or less exclusively on the 'natural order'—of

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[99] "the end of the whole and of the parts [of the poem] is to remove people living in this life from a state of misery and to lead them to a state of happiness" (*Ep.* 13.16.).

[100] Cf. *Ep.* 13.8.

[101] Recall that even Pelagius's account of the power of free will came about in the context of a call for strict moral reform. Pelagius believed that Augustine's insistence on the need for a grace amounted to a kind of fatalism; he wanted Christians to take responsibility for their moral actions. Cf. McGrath: "Augustine's account of the origin of the Pelagian controversy relates how Pelagius was outraged by the much-cited prayer from his Confessions, 'Give what you command, and command what you will.' To Pelagius, these words suggested that man was merely a puppet wholly determined by divine grace, thereby encouraging moral quietism of the worst order. For Pelagius, moral responsibility presupposed freedom of the will: I ought, therefore I can" (*Iustitia Dei*, 71).

[102] Foster, "The Two Dantes," 245, 216-9.

an area of human activity that would be self-contained and autonomous; virtually independent of grace whether *elevans* or *sanans*. It was against just such a conception that the Augustinian Petrarch was later fiercely to react; but in the meantime it had deeply affected the Aristotelian Dante."[103] In a related vein, Nardi argues that Dante's views on free will were strongly influenced not only by Aristotle and Boethius but also by Averroists like Giovanni di Landun, who held that free will consisted "radically and principally" in the intellectual faculty.[104]

I end this chapter with the suggestion of a third factor that likely contributed to Dante's views on free will. I propose that Dante's relative neglect of healing grace helped him solve a problem that at first glance appears to be theological but in fact shows itself to be fundamentally a problem of narrative. The theological problem that Dante's theory of free will helps solve is the one addressed by *Purgatorio* 16.70-2: namely, how to draw a tight conceptual connection between human ethics and soteriology. For Dante, an understanding of free will that downplays the need for healing grace in a certain sense guarantees the justice of God's system of rewards and punishments: in his view it is only because humans have a free choice between alternatives that they can be worthy of God's praise or blame.[105] Therefore, Dante's vigorous defenses of free will are also always briefs for the legitimacy of divine justice.

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[103] Ibid., 245.
[104] Nardi, "Il Libero Arbitrio," 292-5.
[105] "In a certain sense" should not be taken as a merely rhetorical affect, for the claim that I make here only makes sense if we look at the Dantean/Christian ethical-soteriological-metaphysical system from the outside. Within the system it would be ludicrous to suggest

But of course, as every freshman who reads the *Commedia* is quick to point out, "divine justice" in the poem is also always the poet's justice as well. The narrative problem that Dante faced was not how to defend the absolute justice of God in general. Like a a *summa*, the *Commedia* claims to be about the universe as it actually exists, and so Dante could lean on theological demonstrations or the revealed axioms of Biblical passages like Psalm 9:8 as proof of his general claims about God's justice.

Instead, Dante's narrative challenge was how to defend the specific application of divine justice to the characters of the *Commedia*. It was not unusual for medieval theologians to advise about the goodness or badness of particular decisions, but they were always wary of speaking with too much certainty about the soteriological effects of specific actions.[106] By contrast, the truth-claims of the *Commedia* promise divine sanction

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that God's justice depends on anything other than God. For another point of reference on this question see the discussion of "vïolenza" in *Paradiso* 4.

[106] Medieval theologians recognized the sin of presumption as an inordinate hope in either one's own capabilities apart from God or in God's willingness to grant pardon without repentance or glory without merits. Cf. *Summa Theologica,* IIaIIae q. 21 a. 1. But in Book II, ch. 33 of *On the Predestination of the Saints*, Augustine had argued that "those whom He predestinated, them He also called....To which calling there is no man that can be said by men with any certainty of affirmation to belong, until he has departed from this world." To counter the Reformation's insistence on the subjective certainty of faith, the Council of Trent would formalize this error in chapter xii of session 6: "No one, moreover, so long as he is in this mortal life, ought so far to presume as regards the secret mystery of divine predestination, as to determine for certain that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate; as if it were true, that he that is justified, either cannot sin any more, or, if he do sin, that he ought to promise himself an assured repentance; for except by special revelation, it cannot be known whom God hath chosen unto Himself." *The canons and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent,* trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), pp. 39-40. Of course it should be noted that exceptions to this doctrine were allowed even in the post-Reformation period for special revelations, which is surely what Dante could, would, and does claim as the basis for the *Commedia*.

for Dante's decisions about whom to include in his afterlife and where.[107] Thus the narrative difficulty is how to convince his readers that his soteriological judgments are just: in effect, he had to convince his readers of the justice of his own sense of justice. It is in this respect that Dante's emphasis on the integrity of postlapsarian free will comes to play a narrative (and not merely a theological) function in the *Commedia*.

We can think of this as a fundamentally narrative problem because theologically speaking, there were many ways that Dante might have reconciled ethics and soteriology, and not all of them require minimizing the role of healing grace. If he had wanted, Dante could have chosen to emphasize the gratuitous aspect of grace, which might have meant playing down the connection between ethical cause and soteriological effect.[108] For the most part—and, as I've argued in this chapter, especially in his conception of free will—Dante chose the opposite tack: he underemphasized the healing aspect of sanctifying grace so as to draw a tight connection between the moral actions of the *Commedia*'s characters and their eternal fates.[109] What this decision offered the poet that its alternatives did not is a solution to the narrative problem I have been discussing: by

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[107] This, despite the warning of the Eagle in *Paradiso* 20.133-138, which has to count as one of the great ironic passages of the poem: "E voi, mortali, tenetevi stretti / a giudicar: ché noi, che Dio vedemo, / non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti; / ed ènne dolce così fatto scemo, / perché il ben nostro in questo ben s'affina, che quel che vole Iddio, e noi volemo." ["And you mortals, keep yourselves restrained in judging; for we, who see God, know not get all the elect. And to us such defect is sweet, because our good in this good is refined, that what God wills we also will."]

[109] Exceptions to this tendency in the Commedia of course exist, the most explicit and notable of which is probably the discourse of the heavenly eagle in *Paradiso* 19, which ends with the dramatic claim, "Quali / son le mie note a te, che non le 'ntendi, / tal è il giudicio etterno a voi mortali" (19.97-9).

establishing a clear connection between ethics and soteriology for the vast majority of particular cases in the *Commedia*, Dante reinforced his own general authority to speak on behalf of divine justice.

None of this is to suggest that Dante formulated his distinctive understanding of healing grace merely to meet the narrative challenge posed by his poem's truth claims. After all, we know from the *Convivio* that Dante had endorsed a similar view before starting work on the *Commedia*. My claim here is rather that just as Dante's didactic intent and his dependence on proto-humanist sources likely influenced his understanding of humanity's postlapsarian moral capacity, so too is it plausible that the narrative demands of the poem encouraged his commitment to this particular theological position. As I shall discuss in the Conclusion, this mutually reinforcing relationship is entirely characteristic of the relationship that the *Commedia* establishes between poetry and theology.

CHAPTER THREE: THE *PARADISO*'S POETICS OF SALVATION

Early in the *Paradiso*, before the pilgrim has even arrived in the Heaven of the Moon, he learns from Beatrice that "le cose tutte quante / hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma / che l'universo a Dio fa simigliante" (1.103-5).[1] These lines stand as something like a metaphysical thesis statement for the third canticle. For most contemporary critics, the notion presented in the *terzina*—that the order of things is the conceptual link that allows an adequation between creation in all its multiplicity and God in his eternal unity—is the poem's answer to the basic metaphysical problem that the poem seeks to solve.[2] Just a few lines further on, Beatrice uses a nautical metaphor to describe the specific soteriological ramification of this problem, namely, the extent to which individuality is compatible with the general scheme of Christian salvation:

> ...sono accline
> tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
> più al principio loro e men vicine;
> onde si muovono a diversi porti
> per lo gran mar de l'essere, e ciascuna

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[1] "All things have order among themselves, and this is the form that makes the universe like God."

[2] Chiavacci Leonardi, for example, says that Beatrice's answer "dà la ragione e il significato dell'argomento stesso della cantica" (Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Paradiso,* ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi [Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1994], 32). Singleton calls it "the first striking example of the new perspective of the *Paradiso*, in which, time and again, a total view of the cosmos and its providential order is set forth" (Charles S. Singleton, *Paradiso: Commentary* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991], 23).

con istinto a lei dato che la porti. (1.109-114)[3]

As these lines make plain, Dante sees the process of redemption as one in which unity ("lo gran mar de l'essere") and diversity ("tutte nature...si muovono a diversi porti") are reconciled without disturbance.

The identification of Neoplatonic themes and metaphorics in the *Commedia* has led some scholars to identify a certain bias toward unity in Dante's vision of heaven.[4] But critics have long recognized that multiplicity, difference, and individuality play an important part in Dante's soteriological understanding.[5] One of the several accomplishments of Teodolinda Barolini's important and brilliant book *The Undivine*

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[3] "All natures are inclined by different lots, nearer and less near unto their principle; wherefore they move to different ports over the great sea of being, each with an instinct given it to bear it on."

[4] Patrick Boyde, for instance, argues, "Dante shared the almost mystical reverence for the One which seems such a constant feature of Neoplatonic sensibility and thought.... It is therefore not altogether surprising to discover that he was affected by the concomitant unease and suspicion in the presence of multiplicity, which is equally characteristic of Neoplatonism through the ages. Consciously he remained deeply committed to the biblical view that Creation was 'very good'; but subconsciously he seems to have entertained misgivings about the goodness of a universe which could not be perfect because it was neither 'simple' nor 'one'" (Patrick Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983], 219).

[5] Erich Auerbach argued, in a passage I shall return to below, that "the idea (whatever its basis may be) that individual destiny is not meaningless, but is necessarily tragic and significant, and that the whole world context is revealed in it" was "first discernible in Dante" (Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961], 177). Likewise Bruno Nardi argued that "nel concetto...dantesco della beatitudine eterna, v'è la preoccupazione costante di mantenere intatta la personalità individuale di ogni spirito creato" (Bruno Nardi, "'Sì come Rota ch'Igualmente È Mossa,'" in *Nel Mondo di Dante* [Roma: Edizioni di "Storia e Letteratura", 1944], 348). And still today we can read in Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi's edition of the *Commedia* of "quella essenziale diversità delle persone...che per tutto il poema è insistentemente dichiarata" (Chiavacci Leonardi, *Paradiso*, 102).

Comedy was to demonstrate that the *Paradiso*'s reconciliation of multiplicity and unity was not, as even this latter group of critics tended to assume, a *fait accompli* but rather a work in progress. She argued that

> there is in [Dante's] makeup an enormous dedication to the cause of difference and pluralism: to the individual, the specific, the many. Dante's view of the universe requires the many...both as philosopher and as poet...Dante is acutely conscious of the role of difference as the sine qua non of a Christian paradise as well as of this Christian poem.[6]

As she notes, however, this dedication runs up hard against an equal commitment to "God's unity, the undifferentiated glory of the all-mover whose light is simultaneously all-embracing."[7] The result, Barolini argues, is a "paradox and tension deriving from Dante's double allegiance: his desire to synthesize Aristotelian sympathy for difference with the Neoplatonic One," and it is that paradox and tension between two metaphysical schemata that requires the poetic resources of the *Paradiso* to resolve, as she puts it, "a narrative strategy...that works to create a text that encompasses the illusion of the one and the many as coexistent and simultaneous."[8]

The central effort of this chapter is to describe some key soteriological ramifications of the general metaphysical "paradox and tension" that Barolini identifies. At the root of the *Paradiso,* I argue, is a soteriological problem born of Dante's commitment to the eternal durability of human individuality, which commitment is so

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[6] Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 173.
[7] Ibid., 174.
[8] Ibid., 173-174.

radical and destabilizing that it creates a logically incommensurable gap at the heart of the *Paradiso*. One the one side of this gap lies a Neoplatonically inflected scheme of salvation that sees the process of redemption as a simplifying process, a steady diminishment of differences that leads from the Many to the One. Otto Gierke captured the spirit of this scheme well:

> the Constitutive Principle of the Universe is in the first Place Unity. God, the absolutely One, is before and above all the World's Plurality, and is the one source and one goal of every Being.... Everywhere the One comes before the Many. All Manyness has its origin in Oneness (*omnis multitudo derivatur ab uno*) and to Oneness it returns (*ad unum redicitur*). Therefore all Order consists in the subordination of Plurality to Unity *(ordinatio ad unum*).... Unity is the root of All, and therefore of all social existence.[9]

On the other side of the gap lies a soteriological model that conceives multiplicity and difference as not only possible but necessary for the process of redemption. In this model, the end of days will see all things reconciled not in the indistinct unity of God but in an eternal benevolent community of saints. As Paola Nasti argues, this is precisely the kind of vision Dante would have found in Bonaventure:

> For Bonaventure, if the resurrected Church is an expression of the Trinity, it follows that, just as in the Godhead the "plurality of really distinct persons is necessary" for the flow of charity to happen, so too, the plurality of the Church is necessary for the Church Triumphant to love as God love himself. The resurrected soul could not come to fruition in isolation: mothers, fathers, sons, and

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[9] Otto Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 9, quoted in Claire E. Honess, *From Florence to the Heavenly City: The Poetry of Citizenship in Dante* (London: Legenda, 2006), 37-8.

> daughters are necessary for that joy to be complete. Perfect charity is a communicative, social virtue.[10]

I argue further that in addressing this soteriological problem, Dante turns to the literary resources of his poetry, not to logic. Toward this end, I make use of the hermeneutical approach advocated by Barolini, which she names "detheologization," a needlessly confusing term for a useful and necessary critical program.[11] Taking as her target the kind of "narrative credulity" that encourages critics to treat the world described by the *Paradiso* as more real than the poem itself, Barolini argues that

> the *Commedia* makes narrative believers of us all. By this I mean that we accept the possible world (as logicians call it) that Dante has invented; we do not question its premises or assumptions except on its own terms. We read the *Commedia* as Fundamentalists read the Bible, as though it were true, and the fact that we do this is not connected to our religious beliefs, for on a narrative level, we believe the

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[10] Paola Nasti, "Caritas and Ecclesiology in Dante's Heaven of the Sun," in *Dante' s Commedia: Theology as Poetry* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2010), 234, quoting Peter D. Fehlner, *The Role of Charity in the Ecclesiology of St. Bonaventure* (Rome: Editrice Miscellanea Franciscana, 1965), 159.

[11] Several reviewers objected to Barolini's confusing nomenclature at the time of her book's publication. But calling the kind of criticism she protests "theological" is not without a point, since it treats the *Commedia* in the same way that Christian theologians read the Bible. Origen laid out this approach clearly in the beginning of *De Principiis*. After noting that Church teaching says little about the nature of the angels and does not address the question of whether the sun, moon, and stars are living beings, he writes:

> Everyone therefore who is desirous of constructing out of the foregoing a connected body of doctrine must use points like these as elementary and foundation principles.... Thus by clear and cogent arguments he will discover the truth about each particular point and so will produce...a single body of doctrine, with the aid of such illustrations and declarations as he shall find in the holy scriptures and of such conclusions as he shall ascertain to follow logically from them when rightly understood (Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. George W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 6).

> *Commedia* without knowing that we do so. The history of the *Commedia*'s reception offers a sustained demonstration of our narrative credulity, our readerly incapacity to suspend our suspension of disbelief in front of the poet-creator's masterful deployment of what are essentially techniques of verisimilitude.[12]

The credulity that Barolini identifies shows itself not only in critical efforts that can seem naive or beside the point to a modern critic, such as Galileo's attempt to determine the exact circumference of Dante's hell. As she demonstrates, it persists even in sophisticated modern critics like Leo Spitzer and John Freccero. To read Dante "theologically," in Barolini's sense, is to accept uncritically the poem's "directives and its premises, its 'theology.'" In short, it is "to read as the poet directs us to read."[13]

The problem with reading how the poet directs us to read is not only that it keeps us from seeing how the poem works, but that it also encourages us to neglect the most theologically interesting and novel aspects of the canticle.[14] Though she does not argue it explicitly, I take as a principle not far from the spirit of Barolini's method that the *Commedia*—and particularly the *Paradiso*—is doing its most interesting theological work at precisely those moments when it insists there is no work to be done. To take the poem at its word, the preservation of individuality and diversity within the eternal compass of the

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[12] Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 16.

[13] Ibid., 17. Barolini's argument for detheologization would seem to have its roots in John Freccero's suggestion that "the apparent coherence of Dante's belief is at least in part a projection of the coherence of his poem" (260). To avoid confusion, I use "theologized" rather than "theological" when speaking of the mode of reading criticized by Barolini and "detheologized" to refer to her preferred reading strategy.

[14] I should say here that I do not contest—and nor, I expect, would Barolini—the real fruits that theologized reading strategies have produced. To argue against them would be to dismiss a whole range of helpful historicist readings, a dismissal that interests me not at all. But as I discuss here and below, the danger in so exclusive a manner of reading is the neglect (conscious or otherwise) of other important aspects of the text.

one God is not a problem because it is simply a fact of the universe that the poem describes. But when we read the poem against the grain, as it were, we find it working hard to disguise and pacify its relatively novel soteriological vision.

Barolini's *Undivine Comedy* has had an important and lasting influence on the way I read the *Commedia,* and my reading strategy here is explicitly modeled on hers. What's more, readers familiar with *The Undivine Comedy* will know that the latter chapters of the book specifically treat the general metaphysical subject of unity and multiplicity in the *Paradiso*, and so might justly wonder what more needs to be said. Therefore it seems worthwhile to state up front ways in which this chapter diverges from Barolini's account.

A deep respect for Barolini's work leads me to prefer to think of this chapter as an extension and development of her work rather than a correction or critique, but there is nevertheless one significant respect in which I disagree with the argument she presents there, and it is this disagreement that serves as my point of departure and divergence. Barolini's reading of the *Paradiso* depends in large part on the claim that the *Paradiso*'s thematic concern with multiplicity is grounded ultimately in a formal problem. She argues that Dante's basic poetic challenge, the one that inspired him to make the problem of difference a central theme of the *Paradiso*, was how "to represent as one, undifferentiatedly, figures who appear in time, in narrative sequence, separately."[15] She

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[15] Ibid., 196. Here, too, we can see Freccero's influence. He had also argued that the major challenge Dante faced in writing the third canticle was representational. "In the last part of the poem, the pilgrim's vision is transformed until it no longer has need of any representational media whatever in its communication with the absolute. The technical problem involved in finding a stylistic correspondence to this transformation reaches insoluble proportions by the poem's ending, for it demands straining the representational value of poetry to the ultimate, approaching silence as its limit" (John Freccero, "An

writes that "Formally, the root problem of paradise is the problem of time, of the temporality of narrative" and announces as her central questions, "What happens when the world unfolded in narrative is supposed to be a world outside of time? What happens if the author of such a world is fully aware of the temporality of language and takes steps to counter it? What are the steps an author can take to counter what is finally not counterable?"[16]

I would argue, however, that Barolini's thesis, which serves as a premise of her reading, misunderstands the kind of representation that occurs in the *Paradiso*, and that "the temporality of narrative" is not the pressing poetic problem that she makes it out to be. For the essentially arbitrary relation between *verba* and *res*, which was as important for medieval philosophers and poets as the signifier/signified distinction is for modern linguists, does not mean that "if language is a function of time, then language is a differential medium, unable to express simultaneity."[17] Representation in language is not like representation in painting; that human language cannot *be* simultaneous does not imply that it cannot *express* simultaneity. By definition the form of a representational

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Introduction to the Paradiso," in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1986), 210-1).

[16] Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 166-7.

[17] Ibid., 167. Barolini here courts a bit of confusion by referring to language as a differential medium. When people speak of the differential nature of language after Saussure, they usually mean that the differences between linguistic signs are what allow those signs to acquire meaning. They might also be referring to the arbitrary difference that structures each sign, i.e. the difference that divides signifier and signified.

But the kind of difference that Barolini refers to is the kind of difference that pertains to time, and hence, ultimately, to numbers. Thus she quotes Dante quoting Aristotle in *Convivio* 4.2: "lo tempo, secondo che dice Aristotile nel quarto de la *Fisica*, è 'numero di movimento, secondo prima e poi'; e 'numero di movimento celestiale,' lo quale dispone le cose di qua giù diversamente a ricevere alcuna informazione."

painting must be in some ways similar to what the painting represents.[18] But the same is not true of a poem: just as black typeface can be used to describe a white cat, an irreducibly temporal sentence can tell us that "Jack stubbed his toe when the clock struck three" or that God exists "in sua etternità di tempo fore" (*Paradiso* 29.16).[19] It is for this reason that Aquinas could argue:

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[18] I use the example of painting to demonstrate the point, since there is not usually (except in the cases of onomatopoeia or visual, sound, or concrete poetry) a strict correspondence between the sensible forms of language and what they express or represent. But of course even representational paintings are not limited in every respect by the qualities of their medium: they can easily represent three dimensions, motion, etc.

[19] "In His eternity beyond time." In making her argument, Barolini recalls that the temporality of language was famously a problem for Augustine, but she fails to account for the fact that Augustine's conundrum about time and language was caused by the consideration of *divine* language: Augustine wanted to understand how it can be true that God speaks, as for example when the Bible says that God spoke his Word before the universe was created. If language is necessarily temporal, and God is eternal, then it would seem that the only way for God to speak would be to compromise his eternity and enter time. As Barolini notes, however, Augustine solves the dilemma by proposing that God's eternal Word is spoken in a different way then when a voice from the clouds announced, "This is my beloved Son": "For your Word is not speech in which each part comes to an end when it has been spoken, giving place to the next, so that finally the whole may be uttered. In your Word all is uttered at one and the same time, yet eternally. If it were not so, your Word would be subject to time and change, and therefore would be neither truly eternal nor truly immortal" (*Confessions* 11.7).

One might wonder, however about *Confessions* 9.10, where Augustine considers total silence—of the human tongue and mind—a prerequisite for the "audition" of Eternal Wisdom. But here too we have to remember that Augustine longs for total silence as a prerequisite to participation in God's own eternity. Thus I would suggest that Peter Hawkins is mistaken to argue that "in this literary tour de force, remarkable in even so practiced a Ciceronian as Augustine, we are confronted by nothing less than a massive self-contradiction: a periodic sentence of 183 intricately woven words, whose express purpose is to dissolve language into the silence it repeatedly invokes" (Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 221). There is nothing contradictory about using words to express a desire for silence, no more than there is anything contradictory about using words to express a desire for a three-dimensional object or anything else that words themselves are not. Like Barolini on the *Paradiso,* Hawkins does not account for the fact that Augustine's

> although God is absolutely simple, it is not futile for our intellect to form enunciations concerning God in His simplicity by means of composition and division. For although, as we have said, our intellect arrives at the knowledge of God through diverse conceptions, it yet understands that what corresponds to all of them is absolutely one. For the intellect does not attribute its mode of understanding to the things that it understands; for example, it does not attribute immateriality to a stone even though it knows the stone immaterially. It therefore sets forth the unity of a thing by a composition of words, which is a mark of identity, when it says, God is good or goodness. The result is that if there is some diversity in the composition, it is referred to the intellect, whereas the unity is referred to the thing understood by the intellect. On the same basis, our intellect sometimes forms an enunciation about God with a certain mark of diversity in it, through the use of a preposition, as when we say, there is goodness in God. Here, too, there is indicated a certain diversity, which belongs to the intellect, and a certain unity, which must be referred to the reality.[20]

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description of the vision at Ostia is, and only ever claims to be, a *record* of a mystical encounter with God, and not the encounter itself.

One might further wonder if the problem of temporality arises in considering the souls who speak to the pilgrim in heaven, since theirs is speech that takes place in what is supposed to an eternal and simultaneous heaven. After all, as we shall see further below, in a certain sense one can imagine the whole of Heaven (including all the angels and the saints) as existing in the eternal, simultaneous, and indistinct mind of God. But as I shall argue in this chapter, while this indistinct heaven may have a kind of ontological priority within the fiction of the poem, it simply *is not* the heaven visited by the pilgrim or described by the poet. This latter heaven is one that is full of real—which is to say really experienced by the pilgrim—distinctions, of time, language, color, sound, etc. Therefore one key argument that I will return to throughout this chapter is that it is simply not true, as Barolini claims, that "not only does [Dante] want to represent separate existences simultaneously...he wants to represent them as not separate" (172). To the extent that the indistinct heaven can be said to have any reality within the world of the *Commedia*, it exists outside the pilgrim's experience and therefore is *never* something represented by the actually existing poet in the actually existing poem we are reading. A truly detheologized reading of the third canticle shows that the ontological division between the indistinct heaven and the heaven full of distinctions described by the poet is a division that is native to and inherent in the world of the poem: both are products of the same fiction, and neither one is more real than the other. As I shall spend this chapter arguing, it is crucial to remember—as Barolini is usually very good at reminding us—that *Paradiso*'s internal ontological division is something wholly other than the ontological gap that exists between the world of the poem and the text of the *Commedia*.

[20] "Intellectus noster de Deo simplici non in vanum enuntiationes format componendo et dividendo, quamvis Deus omnino sit simplex. Quamvis namque intellectus noster in Dei

There is an irony here, for in conflating what spoken and written language is (irreducibly temporal and nonsimultaneous) with what it is able to express (time, simultaneity, and eternity), Barolini reproduces in a minor key the "habit of conflating the *Commedia*'s form with its content" that she has dedicated her book to correcting.

If we accept my argument about the non-problematic nature of the temporality of language *qua* medium, one might still protest that Barolini's argument could claim some force if redirected to the demands of Dante's narrative more broadly. Indeed, at times Barolini makes something like this claim when she says that

> the poet requires a way to stretch the third canticle through time, to distend it.... [I]n the *Paradiso*, the representation of a non-material realm, [the narrative format of the first two canticles] conflicts with basic conceptual presuppositions: this is the realm of unity, of souls all united with God, no longer differentiated by space and time. And yet, without the temporal/spatial/narrative continuum to which text and voyage subscribe in the first two canticles, the poet is...at a representational loss. If Dante is to compose with regard to his last imaginary world thirty-three cantos of narrative verse and not a mystical haiku, then that world must be supplied with some form of structural difference analogous to the circles and terraces that punctuate its two imaginary predecessors.[21]

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cognitionem per diversas conceptiones deveniat, ut dictum est, intelligit tamen id quod omnibus eis respondet omnino unum esse: non enim intellectus modum quo intelligit rebus attribuit intellectis; sicut nec lapidi immaterialitatem, quamvis eum immaterialiter cognoscat. Et ideo rei unitatem proponit per compositionem verbalem, quae est identitatis nota, cum dicit, Deus est bonus vel bonitas: ita quod si qua diversitas in compositione est, ad intellectum referatur, unitas vero ad rem intellectam. Et ex hac ratione quandoque intellectus noster enuntiationem de Deo format cum aliqua diversitatis nota, praepositionem interponendo, ut cum dicitur, bonitas est in Deo: quia et hic designatur aliqua diversitas, quae competit intellectui, et aliqua unitas, quam oportet ad rem referre" (*Summa Contra Gentiles,* I.36).

[21] Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 188.

Certainly there's nothing to quarrel with in the suggestion that the multiplicity of the celestial heavens offers a resonant match for the infernal circles and the purgatorial terraces. But once again, I think Barolini here invents a problem that did not exist for the poet. The basic narrative conceit of the whole *Commedia* is that a living man has visited the realms of the afterlife and, upon his return, recorded what he saw. And I would argue that all of the qualities of the *Paradiso* that Barolini thinks need special explanation—its spatiotemporal presentation as well as its narrative drive—can be explained by that conceit. What the poet claims to represent in the poem is what the pilgrim saw, and, as I discuss in later sections, what the pilgrim saw is not "the realm of unity, of souls all united with God, no longer differentiated by space in time." Whatever else the poem might claim about its own deep ontology, the pilgrim's visit was phenomenologically spatiotemporal.[22] Likewise, the pilgrim's status as a mortal means that the "narrative continuum" is provided by the timeline of his own subjective experience, and not by the objective quality of heaven's eternal existence.

Finally, one might wonder, if my argument against Barolini is correct, what we should make of Dante's frequent protests about the impossibility of his poetic task, which start as soon as the fourth line of the canticle and continue almost to the last:

Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende

[22] Someone might argue that the "transhumanizing" that is announced in *Paradiso* 1.70-3 offers evidence against this claim, in that it suggests we should think of the pilgrim's experience as qualitatively different than it was in the first two canticles. But as I discuss below, *Paradiso* 4.40-2 proves that this is not the case, when Beatrice tells Dante, "Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno, / però che solo da sensato apprende / ciò che fa poscia d'intelletto degno."

> fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire
> né sa né può chi di là sù discende;
> perché appressando sé al suo disire,
> nostro intelletto si profonda tanto,
> che dietro la memoria non può ire. (1.4-9)[23]

Here I would draw attention to the fact that the poet's complaints about the inadequacy of language in the face of the divine are founded not on the necessary distinctions (temporal and otherwise) created by language but on the essential finitude of speech. His problem as a poet, in other words, is not that language cannot represent unity but that it cannot represent infinity.[24] We see this throughout the *Paradiso*, but an example from *Paradiso* 23 will suffice to indicate the mode:

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[23] "I have been in that heaven that most receives of His light, and have seen things which whoso descends from up there has neither the knowledge nor the power to relate, because, as it draws near to its desire, our intellect enters so deep that memory cannot go back upon the track."

[24] The difference between these two kinds of inadequacy are neatly demonstrated in Jorge Luis Borges's story "The Aleph." When the narrator Borges describes the aleph, he mentions, but dismisses as a concern, any worry about the nonsimultaneity or the distinctness of language; indeed, distinction is—as it was for Dante—an essential part of the vision he describes. What troubles him, as it troubled Dante, is the limitation of speech in the face of an infinite plenitude: "I arrive now at the ineffable core of my story. And here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols...Really, what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal. In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive. Nonetheless, I'll try to recollect what I can." A partial catalogue of the vision follows, and what's notable is that distinction inheres essentially in Borges's vision as much as it does in Dante's: "The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I

> Se mo sonasser tutte quelle lingue
> che Polimnia con le suore fero
> del latte lor dolcissimo più pingue,
> per aiutarmi, al millesmo del vero
> non si verria, cantando il santo riso
> e quanto il santo aspetto facea mero;
> e così, figurando il paradiso,
> convien saltar lo sacrato poema,
> come chi trova suo cammin riciso. (23.55-63)[25]

After remembering that we're now back in the realm of theologized readings, what's crucial to note about this kind of complaint is that it names the poet's representational problem as the insufficiency, not the differential quality, of language.

For all of these reasons, I cannot share Barolini's supposition that the difference and diversity of Dante's heaven exist primarily to solve a representational problem for the poet:

> Although the hierarchy of the heavens may be presented as an illusion, as a fictive expedient adopted for the sake of the pilgrim, in fact it serves a practical poetic purpose that is far from fictional... [T]he hierarchy of the heavens is not only helpful to the pilgrim, as the poet tells us; it is also—as he emphatically does not tell us—a sine qua non for the poet, who literally could not have written the third canticle without it.[26]

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saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror..."

[25] "Though all those tongues whch Polyhymnia and her sisters made most rich with their sweetest milk should sound now to aid me, it would not come to a thousandth part of the truth, in singing the holy smile, and how it lit up the holy aspect; and so, depicting Paradise, the sacred poem must needs make a leap, even as one who finds his way cut off."

[26] Ibid., 187.

Rather, I suggest that Dante's dedication to multiplicity in heaven is the result of a properly theological problem that was itself the product of the poet's political, ethical, and personal commitments. I argue that these commitments found theological expression thanks to a cultural matrix that was newly beginning to reconsider the status of the individual in society.

As a consequence of both my disagreement with Barolini and my interest in the *Commedia*'s soteriology, in what follows I also pay more attention to the thematic implications of difference than she does. Barolini does not deny that a thematic component of Dante's concern with difference exists, but she tends to reinscribe this concern within the horizon of the major representational problem she cites. Thus, for example, she will note that while medieval theologians had conceptual resources for accommodating degrees of goodness in their theories of salvation, they "do not have the problem of finding an adequate representation for the differing degrees of beatitude." Dante, by contrast, "project[s] onto the souls a concerns for representing themselves which is in fact a displaced articulation of his own concerns as writer of this text."[27] I argue instead that the soteriological problem of human individuality lies at the root of Dante's concern with difference. In short, and with apologies for the pun, my central effort in this chapter is to put some of the theology (but not the theologizing) back into Barolini's program of detheologization.

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[27] Ibid., 186.

3.1. Origins of the Problem

Some eighty years ago, Erich Auerbach argued that "the idea (whatever its basis may be) that individual destiny is not meaningless, but is necessarily tragic and significant, and that the whole world context is revealed in it" was "first discernible in Dante."[28] Though I am not so interested in holding out for Dante's absolute priority in expressing this sense, nevertheless I believe Auerbach is correct to note that in the *Commedia* "the situation and attitude of the souls in the other world is in every way individual and in keeping with their former acts and sufferings on earth...what is most particular and personal in their character and fate is fully preserved," while in other eschatological visions we often find "entirely different conceptions.... The idea of preserving a unity of character and dignity at every level of the otherworldly hierarchy, even the lowest, was utterly remote from them."[29] For a contrasting example that supports the point we might look to the soteriology that emerges out of Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons for the Feast of All Saints,*

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[28] Auerbach, *Dante*, 177.

[29] Ibid., 88. Auerbach goes on to argue, "Either they immerse all the dead in the levelling semi-existence of the realm of shades, in which the individual personality is destroyed or enfeebled, or else the separate the good and the saved from the wicked and damned with a crude moralism which resolutely sets at naught all earthly relations of rank." While his claim about the rarity of individual personality in medieval eschatological and soteriological visions remains persuasive, Auerbach's latter judgment about the abolition of rank has not stood the test of time. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang note that "A preoccupation with heavenly rank and hierarchy, while acknowledging the relative equality of the blessed, is a common theme in medieval texts.... Rank itself is not eliminated, but spiritual qualifications replace birth as the criteria shaping the hierarchy" (Bernhard Lang and Colleen McDannell, *Heaven: A History* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1988], 77). Cf. the visions recorded in Eileen Gardiner, *Medieval Visions of Heaven and Hell: A Sourcebook* (New York: Italica Press, 1989).

which Anna Harrison describes as follows: "the soul is not really *its* self *until* its will is lost in God's will. The soul becomes 'like God' and fully itself by becoming...other than it was in life. From a certain perspective, annihilation (of the will) *is* restoration."[30]

In this section I propose a basis for the fundamental idea that informs Auerbach's early reading of Dante. Granting that such a proposal can only be made in the spirit of plausible suggestion, and not proof, I nevertheless suggest that a collection of non-theological concerns conspired to produce a real theological, and specifically soteriological, problem for Dante: namely, the problem of what it might mean to suppose that the individuality of a human being is preserved even in God's eternity. On my reading, Dante's political vision, his ethics, and his early experience of Beatrice all contributed to his conviction that particularity and individuality were not something that would be lost in the beatitude of heaven. What's more, I propose that these personal

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[30] Anna Harrison, "Community Among the Saintly Dead: Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons for the Feast of All Saints," in *Last Things*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000), 196. Harrison also notes, "No clear picture of the saints as particular, specific people emerges in these sermons" and "Bernard expresses little interest in the complexity of the inner (or outer) life of the saints (on earth or in heaven), and he does nto detail the diversity of the lives lived by the saints, of which we are given little if any sense at all: the saints remain, thoughout, an anonymous, undifferentiated group." (Ibid., 339 n. 23; 341 n. 50.) Colin Morris concurs that the deification language of, e.g., Bernard's *De Diligendo Deo* puts the emphasis "on the unity of the Soul and God, and was relatively little concerned to make a distinction between them," though he notes that in later sermons (71 and 83, for example) Bernard would take a bit more care to emphasize the ontological separation that persisted within the mystical union (Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual* [Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991], 154-6). On the possible relation of Bernard's theory of *deificatio* to the *Paradiso* see Rosetta Migilorini Fissi, "La Nozione di *Deificatio* nel Paradiso," *Letture Classensi* 9/10 (1982), 39-72, and Stephen Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994], 194-241.

concerns would have resonated with a high-medieval theological tradition that was just starting to take seriously the implications of human individuality.

Of the three bases that I suggest for Dante's belief in the durability of individual differences, the one most commonly recognized among critics is his commitment to a strict sense of individual justice. Surely this has much to do with the influence of the *Letter to Can Grande,* which, whether wholly authored by Dante or not, accurately describes one central way that the poem relates ethics and soteriology: "Therefore, the subject of the whole work when taken in the literal sense is the status of souls after death understood simply.... And if the work is understood allegorically, the theme is man as subject to the justice of praise or blame insofar as he earns merits or demerits through the exercise of free will."[31] In the previous chapter I examined the ways that this commitment to justice affected the poet's conception of grace and free will. But it seems equally plausible that this commitment had much to do with Dante's belief in the importance of difference in the afterlife, especially if we accept, as I do, Jacques Le Goff's conviction that "the ideas that living human beings formed about the other world were inspired...more by a need for justice than by a yearning for salvation."[32] In the case of the *Commedia* we can point to Auerbach's suggestion that Dante shared Aquinas's

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[31] "Est ergo subiectum totius operis, litteraliter tantum accepti, status animarum post mortem simpliciter sumptus.... Si vero accipiatur opus allegorice, subiectum est homo prout merendo et demerendo per arbitrii liberatatem iustitie premiandi et puniendi obnoxius est" (*Ep.* 13.8).

[32] Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), 210.

belief that "freedom is [man's] principle of individuation."[33] Likewise, Barolini argues that "the pilgrim's last intellectual dilemma regards the presence of difference in the realm of unity and equality, and it reflects what can only be called Dante's obsession with justice, an obsession that causes him to worry not only about the damnation of the meritorious but even about greater and lesser degrees of beatitude among the saved."[34]

A second basis for Dante's belief is his political vision. In the second book of the *Politics*, Aristotle had rebutted Plato's notion, expressed in the *Republic*, that "it is best that the whole state should be as much of a unity as possible."[35] For Aristotle, the diversity of humanity made the state both necessary and possible. Necessary, because "the state consists not merely of a plurality of men, but of different kinds of men." Possible, because "you cannot make a state out of men who are all alike."[36] On Aristotle's reading, Plato's proposal would have destroyed the state, since "the farther it moves away from plurality towards unity, the less a state it becomes and the more a household, and the household in turn an individual."[37] At the root of Aristotle's argument with Plato was a disagreement about the extent to which goodness was compatible with complexity.

This ancient disagreement was one that carried over into the Middle Ages. The Platonic side of the argument was defended rather dramatically by Proposition 17 of the Neoplatonic *Liber de Causis:* "Every united power is more infinite than a multiplied

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[33] Auerbach, *Dante*, 85.
[34] Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 248.
[35] *Politics*, 2.2.1261a10. quoting *Republic* 422e ff.
[36] Ibid., 2.2.1261a22.
[37] Ibid., 2.2.1261a22.

power."[38] Meanwhile we need look no further than Dante for strong exponent of the Aristotelian argument. In *Convivio* 4.4, he sharpens Aristotle's emphasis on diversity to argue that man is a social [*compagnevole*] animal because "l'uomo abbisogna di molte cose, a le quali uno solo satisfare non può."[39] Indeed, it is the necessity of a shared political life ("la umana civilitade") that provides the "fondamento radicale" of imperial power.

Dante returns to this argument at the end of *Paradiso* 8, where we find Charles Martel offering a famous argument about the need for political diversity. After Charles explains how bad children can come from good fathers, and after (as we saw in the last chapter) he defends the benevolence of the heavens, he asks the pilgrim "sarebbe il peggio / per l'omo in terra, se non fosse cive?" (115-6).[40] Dante is so sure of his affirmative answer that he says he requires no proof, but Charles offers one anyway by way of a follow-up:

> E puot' elli esser, se giù non si vive
> diversamente per diversi offici
> Non, se 'l maestro vostro [i.e., Aristotle] ben vi scrive (8.118-120)[41]

As Charles is careful to note, his argument for diversity concerns "l'omo in terra." But the political principle that he defends—that diversity is a boon, not an obstacle, to a

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[38] Quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, trans. Vincent A. Guagliardo, O.P., Charles R. Hess, O.P., and Richard C. Taylor, (Washington, D.C: Catholic UP, 1996), 109.

[39] "Man has need of many things, which need one person along cannot satisfy."

[40] "Would it be worse for man on earth if he were not a citizen."

[41] "And can that be, unless men below live in diverse ways for diverse duties? Not if your master writes well of this for you."

functioning society—is also one of the foundations of Dante's soteriological vision. This is evident in the metaphors I cited earlier, but it becomes explicit in canto 6, where the former emperor Justinian explains how the diversity of heaven is compatible with eternal blessedness:

> Diversi voci fanno dolci note;
> così diversi scanni in nostra vita
> rendon dolce armonia tra queste rote. (6.124-6)[42]

This resemblance between Dante's politics and his soteriology is not particularly surprising. One need only recall the title of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* to be reminded that there is a long tradition within Christianity of using political ideas and structures as conceptual resources for theorizing about salvation and heaven. This tradition acquired momentum with the growth of medieval cities and the spread of mendicant preaching.[43] Dante's engagement with this tradition began as early as the *Vita Nuova,* where he describes the year of Beatrice's death as "l'anno che questa donna era fatta de li cittadini di vita eterna."[44] (A similarly deep tradition, whose most influential exemplar is probably the Book of Revelation, treated the relation from the other direction, using contemplation

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[42] "Diverse voices make sweet music, so diverse ranks in our life render sweet harmony among these wheels."

[43] See Lang and McDannell, *Heaven*, 70-80, for the urban turn in medieval eschatological visions. As they note, "The spiritual needs of the urban populace had to be met, and this was done by the new mendicant orders.... The friars promoted a more urban concept of heaven, one that gave prominence to culture over nature.... The idea of an urban hereafter echoed in the liturgy of the church" (73). See also Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*, 148-152.

[44] "The year that that lady was made a citizen of eternal life." (*Vita Nuova* 24)

of the afterlife as means of commenting on—and usually criticizing—contemporary political realities.)[45]

At the same time, it seems important to remember that there is something novel in the way Dante gave his soteriological vision such an evident and thoroughgoing political structure.[46] As John A. Scott argues, "No one before Dante had thought of setting up a figural link between the happiness attainable through good government and virtuous behavior on earth, on the one hand, and the Earthly Paradise lost through original sin, on the other."[47] Claire Honess makes a related point, arguing that Dante's notion of virtue is inextricably bound up with his sense of what it means to be a good citizen: "for Dante…the definition of the 'good citizen' may be conflated with that of the 'good man.'"[48] This conflation means that citizenship should not be considered as a category pertaining to a narrowly imagined conception of politics—one, say, based on a subject's participation in government or his fulfillment of a set of administrative requirements—but rather as a

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[45] To argue as I do in this section does not mean that Dante didn't also work in this other direction. For an example of this type of reading of Dante see Joan M. Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984). For an important modern reflection on the theme see Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. J. W. Leitsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

[46] Joan Ferrante has argued persuasively that there is not a simple one-to-one correspondence between Dante's heaven and a political or eschatological model of the city, noting that "Paradise is city, kingdom, and empire, the ideal model for government on earth, containing all the smaller unites within a single unified whole" (Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy*, 46.). Claire Honess notes that "it is immediately apparent that Dante's description of heaven in the *Paradiso* is not based in any systematic way on the notion of the Heavenly Jerusalem" (Honess, *From Florence to the Heavenly City*, 112).

[47] John A. Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996), 66.

[48] Honess, *From Florence to the Heavenly City*, 41.

vocation that involves moral considerations about individual and collective goods. Likewise, it means that virtue can never be conceived in the absence of human society; to be a "good man" for Dante is in the first place to be a person living among other people.

A third plausible origin for Dante's belief in the soteriological durability of the individual lies in his early experience of Beatrice. As I showed in the first chapter, the structures and rhetoric of Christian salvation in the *Vita Nuova* are never more than a metaphor for what Dante considered his true salvation, a salvation of which Beatrice is not only the sole agent but also the terminus. What's more, Beatrice's redemption of Dante was qualitatively unique, from beginning to end an experience that existed for him alone. In the *Commedia,* by contrast, Beatrice counts as just one among several (and not even the most exalted) of the souls engaged in the work of redeeming Dante on behalf of the Virgin Mary. His salvation is explicitly presented as an *exemplum*, a single instance of the general case that is (in theory) available to all.[49] Similarly, the *visio amantis* that ends the *Vita Nuova* is replaced in the *Commedia* by a theologically orthodox *visio Dei.*

The same is true of Beatrice's role as redeemer, though here the lesson is implicit: not that Beatrice will be there to save everyone, but that everyone will have his own version of Beatrice to save him. Thus, for example, Statius is saved by Virgil's poetry, and Trajan by the prayers of Gregory the Great. Unlike the *Vita Nuova,* which revels in Beatrice's extraordinary quality, and thereby lands itself in territory that edges on idolatry, the *Commedia* does its level best to circumscribe the phenomenon of Beatrice so as to better fit her into an orthodox framework of general salvation. Thus, for example,

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[49] On the poem's own terms, the only extraordinary fact about Dante's salvation is that it required a journey to the afterlife to effect it.

Steven Botterill can argue persuasively that the soteriological function of Beatrice's replacement by Bernard of Clairvaux in *Paradiso* 31 "is precisely to lead Dante away from his narrowly individual devotion to Beatrice towards comprehension of [a] larger scheme—first by showing him that Beatrice herself is only one element in the providential plan of Dante's salvation and not the object towards which that plan tends, and then by directing him towards the higher principle embodied in the Virgin Mary."[50]

And yet it seems reasonable to suggest that the experience of Beatrice as narrated by the *Vita Nuova*—no matter how much of it was based on actual events—had a decisive influence on the way Dante presents his salvation in the *Commedia*.[51] For all of the *Commedia*'s effort to convince us of the normalcy of Beatrice's role, the wonder of her presence—as an individual whose personal history is deeply imbricated with Dante's own—is something that the poem is never fully able to mitigate.[52] Thus it happens that Etienne Gilson, writing when the question of Beatrice's reality was still a subject of debate, could note that "a number of Dante's interpreters are astonished or even shocked that he could say what he did of Beatrice the blessed if it is true that to him she was first a

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[50] Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, 83.

[51] The best evidence for this claim is Dante's evident, nearly obsessive palinodic rewritings of his own oeuvre, which show a poet keenly aware of (and eager to control) his literary self-presentation. There is a large literature on the subject, to which Albert Russell Ascoli, "Palinode and History in the Oeuvre of Dante," in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto; Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1997) provides a good introduction.

[52] I therefore disagree with Guglielmo Gorni, who argues that "la sua funzione di guida dall'Eden...a san Bernardo...è indubbiamente prestigiosa, ma anche cancella...i referenti umani del personaggio" (Guglielmo Gorni, *Dante: Storia di un Visionario* [Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2008], 110).

woman."[53] Of course today no one doubts Beatrice's historical reality, and I suspect most critics would distrust the astonishment cited by Gilson, seeing in it either the signs of an uncritical deference to Christian orthodoxy or a failure to appreciate the complex modes of signification that allow Beatrice to be at once real and symbolic, literal and allegorical.[54]

And yet the startling quality of Beatrice's role in the *Commedia* is something that the poem all but demands we admit, starting with Virgil's description of her in *Inferno* 2:

> donna di virtù, sola per cui
> l'umana spezie eccede ogne contento
> di quel ciel c'ha minor li cerchi (*Inferno* 2.76-8)[55]

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[53] Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. David Moore (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 74. Gilson's great scholarly nemesis was Pierre Mandonnet, who wrote that "in Dante's mind it would be a profanation to make a real woman the symbol of Christian Revelation" (quoted in Ibid., 76). It iss worth mentioning that Nardi was less convinced than Gilson that the debate was still a live one: "I centinaio di pagine che il Gilson impiega a smontare (e lo fa in modo brillante) la cabalistica del Mandonnet, son certamente un capolavoro di dialettica e d'umorismo; ma, dopo tutto...chi, all'infuori di qualche ridardatorio, attribuisce ancore un significato allegorico alla Beatrice della *Vita Nuova?*" (Bruno Nardi, "Dante e la Filosofia," in *Nel Mondo di Dante* [Roma: Edizioni di "Storia e Letteratura", 1944], 210).

[54] Cf. my first chapter for a description of some of these as they relate to the *Vita Nuova*. Gilson himself seems to have recognized the astonishment of his interlocutors as something to be placated, arguing that Dante's poetic solicitation of Beatrice's intercession is based on the same ordinary "instinct that makes so many Christians pray to their mothers" (Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, 81). In a not dissimilar fashion, Gorni, writing decades later, will wonder "come poté accadere che a Beatrice fosse riservata una così lunga fedeltà?" His answer, like Gilson's, is offered as a way to minimize the surprise implicit in the question. He argues that by the time of the *Commedia*, Beatrice will become little more than "un nome di comodo per definire una storia amorosa ideale": "essere fedeli a Beatrice significò per Dante l'attaccamento, più che a una donna, a un nome significativo" (Gorni, *Dante: Storia Di Un Visionario*, 113).

[55] "Lady of virtue, through whom alone mankind rises beyond all that is contained by the heaven that circles least." Further indication of the distrust of astonishment among critics may be found in the debate about how to read these lines. For Chiavacci Leonardi, for example, who follows Singleton, the *cui* of line 76 refers to Beatrice and the passage as a whole to her symbolic representation of theology: "è solo per la rivelazione divina – e non

Joan Ferrante reminds us of just how extraordinary Beatrice's role would have seemed to a medieval reader. She notes the

> curious anomaly of Dante criticism that Beatrice is accepted as a symbol of theology by most critics, even as a Christ figure by some, and that she is also recognized by most as a real, historic woman Dante knew, yet no one has questioned Dante's use of a real woman, rather than an abstraction, to teach theology, in flagrant defiance of Paul's injunction, frequently echoed in the thirteenth century, against women teaching.[56]

Whatever else we may say about Beatrice's transformation from the boyhood crush of a young poet to the infallible mediatrix of his Christian salvation, one signal effect of that transformation is to elevate difference and all its human cognates (individuality, history, etc.) to matters of cosmic soteriological import. (A similar case, of course, can be made about Virgil's role.) Even though she will come, by the end of the *Paradiso,* to seem the very voice of *sacra doctrina,* we know from *Inferno* 2 that she was selected for her task precisely for her personal history with Dante, as she tells Virgil:

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per la loro virtù – che gli uomini possono elevarsi alla contemplazione di Dio trascendendo la loro natura." Meanwhile, for Hollander, who follows Mazzoni and Barbi in reading *virtù* as the antecedent of *cui,* "To make Beatrice unique among humankind would imply that no one but she 'exceeds' the dross of the physical universe. And that would go too far, even for Dante" (Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, ed. Robert Hollander, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander [New York: Doubleday, 2000]). What's notable in this debate is that neither side wants to claim Beatrice's earthly person as the focus of the tercet's claim to exceptionalism.

[56] Joan M. Ferrante, *Dante's Beatrice: Priest of An Androgynous God,* Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, Occasional Papers 2 (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), 4.

> Lucia, nimica di ciascun crudele,
> si mosse, e venne al loco dov'i' era,
> che mi sedea con l'antica Rachele.
> Disse: "Beatrice, loda di Dio vera,
> ché non soccorri quei che t'amò tanto,
> ch'uscì per te de la volgare schiera?
> non odi tu la pieta del suo pianto?
> non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte
> su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto?" (2.100-8)[57]

Similarly, when the pilgrim first meets Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, one of the first things she does is to remind him of a personal failing:

> Alcun tempo il sostenni col mio volto:
> mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui,
> meco il menava in dritta parte vòlto.
> Sì tosto come in su la soglia fui
> di mi seconda etade e mutai vita,
> questa si tolse a me e diessi altrui (*Purgatorio* 30.121-6)[58]

Auerbach argues that "in the early Middle Ages the historical sense had been dulled—the image of man was reduced to a moral or spiritualist abstraction, a remote legendary dream, or a comic caricature."[59] My argument here is that Beatrice's presence in the *Comedy*—her real presence, to borrow a loaded but accurate term—is proof against any such dulling. Even though, as Auerbach admits, "the danger of depersonalization and

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[57] "Lucy, foe of every cruelty, arose and, coming to where I sat with the ancient Rachel, said, 'Beatrice, true praise of God, why do you not succor him who bore you such love that for you he left the vulgar throng? Do you not hear his pitiful lament? Do you not see the death that assails him on that flood over which the sea has no vaunt?"

[58] "For a time I sustained him with my countenance: showing him my youthful eyes, I led him with me, turned in the right direction. When I was on the threshold of my second age and changed lives, he took himself from me and gave himself to another."

[59] Auerbach, *Dante*, 177.

monotonous repetition [in the *Paradiso*] is evident," and even though Dante commits his vision to a Neoplatonic framework that bears a powerful abstracting and generalizing force, the fact of Beatrice is enough to bind the third canticle inextricably to "the idea...that individual destiny is not meaningless."[60] Thus John Freccero will argue that the final cantos of the *Paradiso* help explain "how an apparently chance encounter of a boy and a girl in medieval Florence on an exactly specified day could at the same time contain within it the pattern of universal salvation, without any surrender of historicity to a vague realm of ideas."[61]

3.2. Theological Context of the Problem

The Neoplatonic influence that entered Christianity through the works of theologians like Origen, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius gave much medieval theology a strong bias towards metaphysical and eschatological accounts that stressed unity as the principle of all things. Plotinus's axiom, "Every thing that is, is because it is one," would come to be one of the preferred expressions of that bias; likewise, a twelfth-century commentator on Boethius (assumed to be Thierry of Chartres) could argue that "plurality is truly the unfolding of unity, and unity is the principle and origin of plurality."[62] The last half-

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[60] Ibid., 155.
[61] Freccero, "An Introduction to the *Paradiso*," 128.
[62] "Et pluralitas vero explicatio est unitatis et unitas est principium et origo pluralitatis." (*Lectiones in Boethii librum de Trinitate* 2.4, quoted by Tullio Gregory, "The Platonic

century of research on the *Commedia* has demonstrated the several ways in which the concepts, rhetoric, and metaphors of Neoplatonism are discernible in the poem. The most obvious of these is the influence of "light metaphysics" on the poem.[63]

From the start, the doctrine of the Trinity kept Christian theologians from ever being as severe in their understanding of the One as the Greek Neoplatonists who drew inspiration from Plato's *Parmenides*.[64] But Christian Neoplatonists nevertheless tended to interpret the Trinity as a secondary dialectical manifestation of the one God, and it was this One to whom all theories of salvific return (*epistrophe/anagoge/reditus*) pointed. Thus while Pseudo-Dionysius would argue that the Trinity (i.e., the *thearchia*) becomes apparent in God's cataphatic revelation to Creation, he would also insist that the subject of mystical theology (*theolgia mystike*) was, as Bernard McGinn writes, "the knowledge (or, better, 'super-knowledge') that deals with the mystery of God in himself, the *monē*."[65]

Inheritance," in *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy*, ed. Peter Dronke [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988], 71).

[63] Attilio Mellone offers a concise summary of the Scholastic understanding of light metaphysics, versions of which could be found in Bonaventure and the *De Intelligentiis:* "Secondo gli scolastici seguaci della metafisica della luce, la luce non è forma accidentale, ma sostanziale; Dio è luce non in senso metaforico, ma in senso proprio, sebbene analogo alla luce terrestre; le creature quanto più si avvicinano a Dio, tanto più partecipano della natura della luce. Quindi la luce è la stessa sostanza o forma sostanziale dell'empireo" (*Saggi e Letture Dantesche* [Angri: Ed. Gaia, 2005], 56). As Mellone notes, Aquinas rejected decisively the notion that "omnis influxus sit ratione lucis," and tolerated talk of light only insofar as it was strictly metaphorical. He argues further that while Dante often refers to God as light in the *Commedia*, he does so only metaphorically "e non afferma mai che Dio è luce in senso proprio; quando presenta la creatura come luche o come partecipazione della luce divina, non esclude mai il senso metaforico" (Ibid., 57 n. 163).

[64] See Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 44ff.

[65] Ibid., 164, 171.

By Dante's time the rediscovery of Aristotle, the development of the sacrament of confession, and a renewed emphasis on the theology of the Trinity had opened the door to a more positive estimation of individuality and multiplicity, one that contemplated not only the existence of diversity in Creation but also the persistence of difference and individuality even in the perfection of the world to come.[66] Scholars like Colin Morris, R.W. Southern, and Caroline Walker Bynum have described the emergence of what the latter describes as the "discovery of the self" and Le Goff has argued that the "nascent individualism" of the middle ages "affected the sphere of death and the other world" and encouraged the development of the doctrine of Purgatory.[67] The growing medieval

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[66] The influence of Aristotle is well known, and the emphasis on Trinitarian theology is discussed below. On the ways in which developments in the sacrament of confession aided an appreciation for the individual, cf. Claude Carozzi, who notes that through the sacrament, "progressivement, l'homme coupable...en pénétrant en lui-même pour découvrir les racines du péché, devenait un individu, une personne. Ce qui était acquis depuis longtemps dans les milieux monastiques ou canoniaux pénétrait, quasiment de force, dans d'autres groupe sociaux laïcs.... D'abord l'idée que le salut est affair personelle" (Claude Carozzi, *Apocalypse et Salut dans le Christianisme Ancien et Médiéval* [Paris: Aubier, 1999], 176).

[67] Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 233. See Caroline Walker Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" in *Jesus As Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984); Richard W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953), 219-57; Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual;* and Louis Dumont, "A Modified View of Our Origins: The Christian Beginnings of Modern Individualism," in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).

It is important to remember that what one means in speaking of "the individual" could and did vary over time and space; medieval understandings of human individuality had little to do, for example, with the Enlightenment sense of the autonomous self. As Louis Dupré notes, in *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven: Yale, 1993), "The exalting of the individual self [in the Middle Ages] did not transform the person into an atomic entity. The Church constituted a new community on which the individual depended as much for the attainment of his destiny as he had previously depended on the state, albeit in a

emphasis on the individual required a similar reconsideration of the theology of heaven. As Morris argues:

> Earlier eschatology had kept a balance, or alternatively a tension, between an individual and a corporate expectation.... Imaginatively, the whole strength of eschatology now became attached to the individual.... The uneasy combination of private and corporate hopes had now been resolved into the individual's desire for heaven.[68]

Theologians embarked on this task could draw on the Biblical warrant supplied by John 14:2—"In my father's house there are many mansions"—and the precedent of Augustine's insistence on the ranking and sociality of heaven.[69] But an even more important conceptual resource for theologians interested in the eschatological consequences of individuality was the doctrine of the Trinity. We can see this especially in the theology of Bonaventure, who was not content, as other Neoplatonists were, to

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different manner" (95). As we shall see, the kind of individuality at stake in Dante's soteriology is one related intimately to the question of community, which category allows for the preservation of difference within unity.

[68] Ibid., 147.

[69] Augustine interprets the mansions of John 14:2 as "diverse grades of merit that exist within the singular eternal life," and by way of illustration he used a celestial metaphor that Dante would have found amenable: "The splendor of the sun is one thing, the splendor of the moon another, and the splendor of the stars still another; thus, just as the stars differ in splendor, so it is with the resurrection of the dead" (*Commentary on John,* Homily 67). In *De Civitate Dei* he expands the point: "But who can conceive, not to say describe, what degrees of honor and glory shall be awarded to the various degrees of merit? Yet it cannot be doubted that there shall be degrees. And in that blessed city there shall be this great blessing, that no inferior shall envy any superior, as now the archangels are not envied by the angels, because no one will wish to be what he has not received, though bound in strictest concord with him who has received; as in the body the finger does not seek to be the eye, though both members are harmoniously included in the complete structure of the body. And thus, along with his gift, greater or less, each shall receive this further gift of contentment to desire no more than he has" (22.30).

conceive multiplicity as a property that emerged only after the overflowing or emanations from the One, a property that was therefore necessarily diminished in the *reductio* to God.[70] In his reflections on the Trinity, Bonaventure had, like Pseudo-Dionysius, argued that the very definition of perfect goodness (like the definitions of perfect charity and joy) implied plurality, since it was in the nature of perfect goodness to share itself with another.[71] Thus God's goodness implied a real diversity in God: "Since there is perfect goodness in God, and since perfect goodness must communicate itself perfectly in the

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[70] Most critics agree that Bonaventure was not a direct influence on Dante, though it seems clear that the poet's theological studies in Florence would have made him broadly familiar with the principles of the Franciscan's thought. See Edward Hagman, "Dante' s Vision of God: The End of the *Itinerarium Mentis*," *Dante Studies*, no. 106 (1988): 1-20. As Pompeo Giannantonio notes, "Dante perfezionò la sua cultura 'ne le schole de li religiosi e a le disputazioni de li filosofanti' (*Conv*. 2.12.7) frequentando a Firenze la scuola di S. Croce ove dal 1287 al 1289 aveva insegnato...il provenzale Pietro di Giovanni Olivi, che influenzò Ubertino da Casale, docente nello Studio francescano di Firenze negli anni in cui Dante vi si recava come studente di teologia.... L'opera di Ubertino, utilizzando alcuni spunti del *Lignum vitae* di S. Bonaventura e riecheggiando i precedenti lavori di mistici e teologi francescani, si ispira in gran parte alla *Lectura super Apocalipsim* dell'Olivi" (Pompeo Giannantonio, "Dante, S. Francesco e la Tradizione Francescana," in *Lectura Dantis Metelliana. Dante e il Francescanesimo* [Cava dei Tirreni: Avagliano Editore, 1987], 215-7). Zygmunt Baranski, however, argues that "non sembrano esserci dubbi sul fatto che nel forgiare l'ultima cantica, Dante attinse all'opera bonaventuriana e l'adattò ai suoi fini, perché solo nel dottore serafico troveremo la distinzione analogica tripartita in *umbra, vestigium* ed *imago*" (Zygmunt G. Barański, "I Segni di Dante," in *Dante e i Segni: Saggi per una Storia Intellettuale di Dante Alighieri* [Napoli: Liguori, 2000], 74). For a discussion of the *Commedia*'s politics in relation to Franciscan ecclesial controversies—which touches only lightly on theology, however—see N. R. Havely, *Dante and the Franciscans: Poverty and the Papacy in the Commedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).

[71] Pseudo-Dionysius argued in the *Divine Names* that "the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good, superabundance of his benign yearning for all is carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love (*agape*) and by yearning (*eros*) and is enticed away from his dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself" (*Divine Names* 4.13, quoted in McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 167).

production of another equal to itself and in the giving to this other his entire being, there must be plurality in God."[72] The deduction of the Trinity from God's perfect charity and perfect joy proceeds along similar lines: "If there is perfect charity in God, and if perfect charity is not interested, but rather communicative of itself to another, then there must be a real plurality in God, and if no good is possessed joyfully, except in the companionship of another, there must be in God a society, and thus plurality."[73]

What was novel about Bonaventure's reflections on the Trinity was his insistence that the charity that gave shape to the divine hierarchy not only formed the foundation of the outward manifestation of the Christian religion and practice (i.e. the Church Militant) but also implied that heaven was a fundamentally social affair.[74] The essentially communal nature of charity therefore had both angelological and soteriological implications, for it meant that multiplicity was necessary for the eternal perfection of both the society of angels and the Church Triumphant. Certainly charity had a unifying function, but since it is the nature of charity to require a plurality (at the very least a lover

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[72] "Si est summa bonitas, cum bonitatis sit summe se communicare, et hoc est maxime in prooducendo ex se aequalem et dando esse suum: ergo [requirit pluralitatem]" (*I Sentences*, d. 2, a. un, q. 2, quoted in Fehlner, *The Role of Charity in the Ecclesiology of St. Bonaventure*, 100).

[73] "...est ibi summa beatitudine; sed ubicumque est summa beatitudo, est summa bonitas, summa caritas, et summa jucunditas. Sed si est summa bonitas, cum bonitatis sit summe se communicare, et hoc est maxime in prooducendo ex se aequalem et dando esse suum: ergo etc. Si summa caritas, cum caritate non sit amor privatus, sed ad alterum: ergo requirit pluralitatem. Item, si summa jucunditas, cum nullius boni sine socio sit jucunda possessio, ergo ad summam jucunditatem requiritur societas et ita pluralitas. Item...si est ibi summa perfectio; sed perfectiones est producere talem, qualis ipse est in natura: ergo necesse est ibi esse multiplicationem" (Ibid.).

[74] As Caroline Walker Bynum notes, "the social implications of resurrection...[were] usually ignored in this period" (Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995), 287).

and a beloved), Bonaventure argues that the "unification" that would occur in the perfection of heaven was the unification of a community, not a unity—i.e. a unification that preserved distinction in the same way that a distinction of persons existed within the Trinity.[75]

It would be incorrect to suggest that Bonaventure's theology of the Church Triumphant is simply the Aristotelian political principle transposed into a soteriological key, for Bonaventure's description of the blessed community depends crucially on both his concept of charity and his theology of the Trinity—both of which, of course, are completely foreign to Aristotle's thought. And yet it is not too much to note that Bonaventure's vision of the Church Triumphant not only bears a resemblance to the Aristotelian vision of a perfect terrestrial society that Dante theorizes in the *Monarchia* and in the mouth of Charles Martel but also to the actual community of the blessed described in the *Paradiso*. Thus Peter Fehlner can summarize Bonaventure with a gloss that would function equally well as a guide to Dante's own poetry and thought:

> The true dignity of the human person bears an essential relation to society, not simply as the means or context in which this dignity is fully realized, but as the very essence of that dignity.... Such a realization is only possible supernaturally, in so far as only supernaturally is the human person capable of that charity which transcends any form of egoism, licit or illicit, and enables one to experience that generosity in giving totally of oneself, an experience that has as its measure not the limitations of created existence, but the very life of God himself. As this divine life is essentially social, so its direct experience in the order of grace is necessarily ecclesial.[76]

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[75] Fehlner, *The Role of Charity in the Ecclesiology of St. Bonaventure*, 156-7.
[76] Ibid., 167.

3.3. The Accommodative Metaphor

In the previous sections I suggested some plausible origins for Dante's conviction in the soteriological relevance of the individual, as well as two examples of theological context that would have made such a conviction thinkable in his time. As I noted, theologians like Augustine, Aquinas, and Bonaventure were comfortable, to varying extents, with the notion that goodness and complexity were not incompatible, which notion is exactly what we find dramatized in the *Paradiso:* nine hierarchical orders of blessed souls, each of which is associated with one of the nine heavenly spheres and one of the nine orders of angels. (The stratification is repeated—albeit without the nonary divisions—in the Empyrean, where the blessed souls are again seated and ranked in the heavenly rose according to their beatific condition.) And yet it is also true that the tolerance for difference was not unlimited. For as scholars since Bruno Nardi have recognized, Dante inherited a strong Neoplatonic influence that led him, as Boyde suggests, "to entertain misgivings about the goodness of a universe which could not be perfect because it was neither 'simple' nor 'one.'"[77] Therefore while the *Paradiso* shows Dante keen to test how far complexity, multiplicity, and especially individuality were compatible with an eschatological vision of perfection, it also betrays a certain anxiety about the extent of that compatibility.

Barolini is thus close to the mark when she argues that "the *Paradiso*'s source of tension is the Dantesque variant of the ancient dialectic between a self-sufficient God,

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[77] Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher*, 219.

independent of and hostile to multiplicity, and a creationist God, the loving maker of multiplicity...[a] paradox and tension deriving from Dante's double allegiance: his desire to synthesize Aristotelian sympathy for difference with the Neoplatonic One." And yet I'd argue that the theological stakes of Dante's wager on difference were somewhat more pressing and (for Dante) more contemporary than Barolini suggests. For the "ancient dialectic" between the One and the Many that Barolini cites was, as I've noted, a dialectic internal to Neoplatonism. It was a dialectic largely organized and resolved through the theories of the *emanatio* (which explained Creation as an overflowing of the One into the Many) and the *hierarchia* (which imagined that overflowing to develop in an ordered and usually triplex pattern).

Without denying the influence of this earlier metaphysical dilemma on Dante's thought, I would argue that the embrace of multiplicity that pushed him to the forefront of theological innovation in his time was an embrace akin to Bonaventure's advocacy of eschatological and divine difference: the soteriological vision of the *Commedia* proposes that multiplicity and individuality constitute a deep feature not only of the created universe—Christians had always understood Creation as essentially multiple—but of the perfect heaven (i.e. the Empyrean) that found its eternal residence in the Divine Mind, and even of the Godhead itself. In the following sections, I show how this deep feature remains evident even to the end of the *Paradiso,* first in Dante's presentation of the Empyrean, and then in the final vision that concludes the poem.

Along the way I shall take pains to demonstrate the ways in which Dante uses the resources of his poetry to mitigate his anxiety about his commitment to difference.[78] This anxiety, I propose, is not the result of any worries about orthodoxy, since the theologizing thrust of the poem is sufficiently forceful to keep it safe from any suspicion of heresy. Rather, Dante's challenge is how to preserve—both ontologically and poetically—the peace of a heaven that tolerates difference. As Umberto Eco has argued, for a theologian like Aquinas

> on the ontological level, peace is the perfection achieved when being is subjected to order. It means things becoming stable in form. It is a balance of energies. On the epistemological level, peace means the total delight of a contemplative perception which, freed from desire and effort, experiences love of the harmony which the intellect has shown it.... [A]esthetic pleasure is total and complete because it is connected with a cessation of the efforts of abstraction and judgment.[79]

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[78] In his brief but brilliant "Introduction to the *Paradiso*," John Freccero interprets a line from *Paradiso* 3 in a way that epitomizes the basic representational dynamic that I see at work in the canticle. In reference to what he calls "anti-images," he writes "One of the most memorable occurs in the first heaven (III, 15), where spirits appear within the moon and are described as 'a pearl on a white brow.' The comparison is obviously self-defeating as far as its function to convey information is concerned: we are told simply that the poet saw white upon white. The point is of course the *difference*, which we are unable to see, yet within which all of the reality of the *Paradiso* is contained. The juxtaposition of the pearl and the brow, in their concreteness, serve in a negative way to block the the attempt to leave the confines of the text, defying us, as it were, to find more than a shadow of reference to the real world" (212). To adopt Barolini's hermeneutical stance is therefore, in a sense, to take up the defiance of the text and to refuse to accept the poem's insistence that the pearl and the brow cannot be distinguished.

[79] Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), 200.

The *Commedia* works hard at each of these levels, i.e. within the world of the poem and in our experience of reading the poem, to prove its stability and harmony. But—and here my argument rejoins Barolini's—it requires a supreme amount of effort order to convince us that it is effortless.[80]

In *Paradiso* 3, which takes place in the heaven of the moon, the pilgrim meets Piccarda Donati, the sister of his old friend (and sometime poetic rival) Forese, whom Dante had encountered in cantos 23 and 24 of the *Purgatorio*. In his conversation with Forese on the terrace of gluttony, Dante had asked, "Ma dimmi, se tu sai, dov' è Piccarda" (*Purgatorio* 24.10).[81] Forese answered:

> La mia sorella, che tra bella e buona
> non so qual fosse più, trïunfa lieta
> ne l'alto Olimpo già di sua corona. (24.13-15)[82]

Now traversing "l'alto Olimpo," the pilgrim finally meets Piccarda face to face, though at first he does not recognize her. On Beatrice's urging, Dante initiates a conversation with "l'ombra che parea più vaga / di ragionar," and she tells him:[83]

> I' fui nel mondo vergine sorella;
> e se la mente tua ben sé riguarda,
> non mi ti celerà l'esser più bellla,

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[80] For more on the harmony of the *Paradiso*, especially in the canticle's final metaphor, see Nardi, "'Sì come Rota ch'igualmente È Mossa.'"

[81] "But tell me, if you know, where is Piccarda?"

[82] "My sister, of whose beauty and goodness I don't know which was the greater, happily triumphs on the high Olympus with her crown."

[83] "The shade who appeared most eager to speak"

> ma riconoscerai ch'i' son Piccarda,
> che, posta qui con questi altri beati,
> beata sono in la spera più tarda. (*Paradiso* 3.46-51)[84]

Dante responds by admitting that "non so che divino" has changed Piccarda's appearance so much that "non fui a remembrar festino."[85] But now, thanks to Piccarda's words, "raffigurar m'è più latino."[86]

Dante's conversation with Piccarda is important because it serves to introduce not merely the souls who appear in the heaven of the moon, but also the *modus essendi* of the souls that occupy the sub-Empyrean heavens in general. For example, the shift in tense and location that occurs between line 46 ("Io fui nel mondo...") and lines 49-50 ("i' son Piccarda...posta qui") is an important signal about what personal qualities the blessed retain in heaven. Piccarda's office ("vergine sorella") belongs to the world below, but her name and her personal history persist in eternity. (A similar situation occurs in canto 6, when Justinian tells Dante, "Cesare fui e son Iustinïano" (6.10), and in canto 9, when Cunizza says, "Cunizza fui chiamata, e qui refulgo (9.32).)[87]

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[84] "In the world I was a virgin sister, and if your memory be searched well, my being more beautiful will not conceal me from you, but you will recognize that I am Piccarda, who, placed here with these other blessèd ones, am blessèd in the slowest sphere."

[85] "Some indefinable divinity"; "I wasn't quick to remember"

[86] "It is easier to imagine."

[87] "I was Caesar, and am Justinian"; "I was called Cunizza, and I am refulgent here." What Barolini says about Cunizza is true, *mutatis mutandis*, about the others as well: "In her present and perpetual indulgence of her former self-indulgence she finds the confirmation of her unique identity, the essence of what makes her Cunizza and no one else.... It is precisely this preservation of the historical that makes difference a commodity that cannot be relinquished, not even in paradise" (Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 193).

Since canto 3 is the first contact that the pilgrim has had with any of the ultramundane blessed—not counting Beatrice, of course—it makes good narrative sense that he would wonder about the conditions of their existence. But when Dante asks Piccarda about these conditions, the question he puts to her is conspicuously pointed:

> ...voi che siete qui felici,
> desiderate voi più alto loco
> per più vedere e per più farvi amici? (3.64-6)[88]

Dante's question immediately and explicitly opens the question of difference, even though, as Robert Hollander notes, here the pilgrim plainly misunderstands what Piccarda meant when she said "beata sono in la spera più tarda."[89] Dante thinks that Piccarda and her kind are permanently assigned to the heaven of the moon, a misunderstanding that is encouraged by Beatrice's claim, earlier in the canto, that the souls in the heaven of the moon are "qui rilegate per manco di voto" (l. 30). As we will learn with the pilgrim in canto 4, however, this is not the case. The souls appear distributed through the heavens on this occasion only, for Dante's benefit; their true and permanent residence is the Empyrean, the "ciel de la divina pace" (2.112) that stands outside of time, space, and the created order of the universe.[90]

What's odd about what follows the pilgrim's question is that in place of the correction we expect, Piccarda responds to what seems a different question entirely.

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[88] "You who are happy here, do you desire a higher place to see more and to make yourselves more beloved [i.e. of God]?"

[89] Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, with notes by Robert Hollander, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 73.

[90] "The heaven of divine peace."

With a condescending smile—"con quelle altr' ombre pria sorrise un poco"—she tells Dante:

> Frate, la nostra volontà quïeta
> virtù di carità, che fa volerne
> sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta.
> Se disïassimo esser più superne,
> foran discordi li nostri disiri
> dal voler di colui che qui ne cerne;
> che vedrai non capere in questi giri,
> s'essere in carità è qui *necesse*,
> e se la sua natura ben rimiri. (4.73-78)[91]

Piccarda's response gives us a rare example of a misunderstanding on the part of the blessed in paradise. She seems not to realize the pilgrim's own error, or that his question about the "più alto loco" was meant literally. (Dante wanted to know if she wouldn't rather, say, have been placed in the heaven of the fixed stars.) Instead, Piccarda interprets Dante's question metaphorically, which is the only way to make sense of it given the ontology that she—but not he—knows characterizes heaven: she takes the "più alto loco" to refer to an advanced degree of blessedness. In so doing, she turn's the pilgrim's naïve question into one of maximum soteriological import: namely, if true happiness is to participate in the love of God to the greatest degree possible (as Augustine and every other Christian theologian argued) and if a soul knows that its own experience

[91] "Brother, the power of love quiets our will and makes us wish only for that which we have and gives us no other thirst. Did we desire to be more aloft, our longings would be discordant with His will who assigns us here: which you will see is not possible in these circles if to exist in charity is here of necessity, and if you well consider what is love's nature."

of the love of God is somehow lesser than what other souls experience, does that soul experience that difference as any kind of lack or diminishment?

In her response, Piccarda tells Dante that it is the power of *caritas* ("virtù di carità") that quiets the wills of the blessed and makes them thirst for nothing other than what they have. Were it otherwise, their desires would deviate from God's will, a situation that is impossible, according to Piccarda, because in heaven to be "in" love is necessary, as the nature of Paradise itself reveals:

> Anzi è formale ad esto beato *esse*
> tenersi dentro a la divina voglia,
> per ch'una fansi nostre voglie stesse;
> sì che, come noi sem di soglia in soglia
> per questo regno, a tutto il regno piace
> com' a lo re che 'n suo voler ne 'nvoglia.
> E 'n sua voluntade è nostra pace:
> ell' è quel mare al qual tutto si move
> ciò ch'ella crïa o che natura face.(4.79-87)[92]

The pilgrim confirms the lesson in the terzina that follows:

> Chiaro mi fu allor come ogne dove
> in cielo è paradiso, *etsi* la grazia
> del sommo ben d'un modo non vi piove. (4.88-90)[93]

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[92] "Nay, it is the essence of this blessed existence to keep itself within the divine will, whereby our wills themselves are made one; so that our being thus from threshold to threshold throughout this realm is a joy to all the realm as to the King, who draws our wills to what He wills; and in His will is our peace. It is that sea to which all moves, both what It creates and what nature makes."

[93] "Then it was clear to me how everywhere in Heaven is Paradise, even if the grace of the Supreme Good does not there rain down in one same measure."

Speaking with the voice of the poet, Dante presents the three lines as a summary of the lesson the pilgrim just concluded, a lesson that is supposed to resolve a key question: what difference does difference make in heaven? Or, to put it more windily, what is the soteriological significance of the claim that individual differences are a structural feature of Dante's heaven, both in the sensible paradise in which Piccarda appears and (we may presume) also in the Empyrean?

The answer, of course, is supposed to be that the differences make no difference at all. The whole point of Piccarda's speech is to deplete the *etsi* of line 89 of any real adversative force. That "every where in paradise is heaven" and that "the grace of the highest good does not fall everywhere in the same measure" are simply two complementary facts about this heaven. Piccarda explains why the two halves of her statement are not contradictory: it is the very definition of blessed existence ("beato *esse*") to conform to the divine will, thus if God says that there will be distinctions in heaven, then it is constitutive of the souls' happiness to celebrate this fact, just as the citizens in a well-ordered kingdom will celebrate the will of their just king (ll. 83-84).[94] Thus Piccarda wants us to believe, just as Bonaventure had argued, that the diversity of the blessed poses no serious threat to the stability of heaven.

And yet, as Lino Pertile has argued, Piccarda's speech is but the first proof of a truth that will be made ever more evident as we advance through heaven: namely, that

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[94] For this reason it is not quite accurate to call, as Barolini does, the two parts of Piccarda's statement a "paradox" (Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 183). As we saw in the last section, the notion that the saints might enjoy differing degrees of beatitude was, thanks to John 14:2, both orthodox and logical for medieval thinkers.

Dante conceives of heaven as a realm hospitable to desire.[95] Unlike the *Convivio,* in which Dante had followed Aquinas in arguing for the incompatibility of beatitude and desire (on the Aristotelian grounds that desire implies a lack), in the *Paradiso,* as Piccarda makes clear, a desire that comports with God's will is a central part of the experience of the blessed.[96] As Pertile notes, following Hans Jauss, "the preservation of desire in the blessed allows him to portray them as individual characters, for without the psychological differences of individual desires all identities would necessarily merge and be lost."[97] But the price of this differentiation is a threat to the calm that rules heaven: for however much Piccarda and the other blessed insist that every desire in heaven is instantly and fully fulfilled, even to name that experience as desire introduces a certain *frisson* or instability into the heavenly proceedings.[98]

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[95] Lino Pertile, "A Desire of Paradise and a Paradise of Desire: Dante and Mysticism," in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto; Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1997), 153ff.

[96] See Ibid., 154, for a catalogue of proofs for this statement.

[97] Ibid., 156.

[98] Cf. *Summa Theologica* II.IIae. q. 28 a. 3: "When once, however, perfect happiness has been attained, nothing will remain to be desired, because then there will be full enjoyment of God, wherein man will obtain whatever he had desired, even with regard to other goods, according to Psalm 102:5: 'Who satisfieth thy desire with good things.' Hence desire will be at rest, not only our desire for God, but all our desires" ["Quando iam ad beatitudinem perfectam perventum fuerit, nihil desiderium restabit, quia ibi erit plena Dei fruitio, in qua homo obtinebit quicquid etiam circa alia bona desideraverit, secundum illud Psalmi 102: 'Qui prelet in bonis desiderium tuum.' Et ideo quiescet desiderium, non solum quo desideramus Deum, sed etiam omnium desideriorum quies"].

Nardi, citing these lines, notes that for many medieval theologians, "il conseguimento del fine ultimo è pensato come termine di tutti i moti dell'animo, cioè come quiete. Siffatto concetto pareva ai teologi trovar corrispondezna nella espressioni bibliche rappresentanti la beatitudine eterna come riposo perfetto e compimento d'ogni umano desiderio" (Nardi, "'Sì come Rota ch'igualmente È Mossa,'" 337-8).

Here is a clear example, then, of the dialectical way in which a poetry and the theology of the *Paradiso* interact: for the non-theological reasons that I suggested in the first section, Dante decided to populate his perfect heaven with individual characters; and to better to represent the individuality of those characters, he made them desirous; but to introduce desire into heaven is also to introduce a potential metaphysical instability; and so to ease that instability requires a poetic solution that will convince the reader that the tension has been resolved.

Such a solution is precisely what we find in the ontological lesson that Beatrice delivers in canto 4. There the pilgrim learns that all the spirits whom he meets "non hanno in altro cielo i loro scanni" than the seraphim, the patriarchs, and the Virgin Mary—i.e. one and all have a permanent residence in the Empyrean (l. 31).[99] The spirits appear distributed through the heavens on this single occasion, however, for his pedagogical benefit (and, by extension, for ours). Beatrice tells Dante that the presence, e.g., of the souls in the moon is intended "per far segno / de la celestïal c'ha men salita" (ll. 39-40).[100] This celestial accommodative metaphor is necessary because human intellection can only, as Aquinas argued in the opening of the *Summa Theologica,* "da sensato apprende" (l. 41).[101]

This, at any rate, is the story that the poem tells about itself. But here we have a classic example of the way in which the *Commedia* attempts to convince us that it is doing something other than what it sets before our eyes. The pilgrim's own questions about the

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[99] "Have not their seats in any other heaven."
[100] "To afford sign of the celestial grade that is least exalted."
[101] "Through sense perception...apprehend."

structure of heaven anticipate our readerly wonder about what kind of sense it makes for the souls in a Christian eschatological vision to appear distributed among the nine celestial heavens, and the poem asks us to accept Beatrice's answer to those questions for our own.

Barolini has demonstrated the ways in which this explanation is, from the reader's point of view, deceptive:

> If this passage is candid in its highlighting of representation as an issue, it is, however, far from candid in its ultimate goals, which are to displace onto the souls—the author's fictional constructs—concerns that in fact belong to the author himself. It is as much a mistake for us to accept Beatrice's words uncritically and at face value, overemphasizing the heavens' metaphorical status, as it was for an earlier critical tradition to neglect Beatrice's caveat.[102]

The importance of this point should be underestimated, because it gives us critical license to return our attention to the world actually represented by the poem, rather than forcing ourselves to follow it into a purely intelligible dimension that not even the pilgrim has access to. If we take the poem at its word, then Freccero is plainly right that "the extraordinary poetic implication of Beatrice's words is that, unlike any other part of the poem, the *Paradiso* at this point can claim no more than a purely *ad hoc* reality."[103] As Barolini argues, however, to accept that perspective is already to implicitly concede that the world described by the poem is our own. To refuse that concession, to detheologize the poem, is to recognize instead that "the divisions of the *Paradiso* are not fictional or

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[102] Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 186..

[103] John Freccero, "The Dance of the Stars: *Paradiso* X," in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1986), 222.

metaphoric; rather, the claim that there are no divisions in the *Paradiso* is supremely fictional and supremely metaphoric".[104]

There is a sense, however, in which Barolini's demonstration of the deception doesn't go far enough, for she still allows that, for example, "[Marguerite Mills] Chiarenza's explanation for the hierarchy's existence, her suggestion that the souls 'stage this hierarchy because the pilgrim is not ready for a vision of totality,' is acceptable within the possible world of the *Commedia*."[105] Here it seems necessary to interrogate the question further, however, because for anyone but a first-time reader of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice's Thomistic claim about the pilgrim's need for sensory representations of the "celestïal c'ha men salita" should raise an eyebrow. Beatrice tells Dante that without the *ad hoc* representations that appear through the first thirty cantos of the *Paradiso*, it would be impossible for him (and us) to understand that the spirits in the Empyrean "differentemente han dolce vita / per sentir più e men l'etterno spiro" (ll. 35-6).[106] But of course we know that this is not true: as I shall discuss below, when the pilgrim gets to the celestial rose he is quite easily able to discern among the blessed—and more important, he and we find them ranked in the heavenly arena according to the quality of their love.

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[104] Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 189. While I agree strongly with Barolini's case here, I would note once again my disagreement about the reasons for the poem's deception. As we'd expect, Barolini sees the deception as the poet's attempt to grapple with the temporal nature of language: "Although the hierarchy of the heavens may be presented as an illusion, as a fictive expedient adopted for the sake of the pilgrim, in fact it serves a practical poetic purpose that is far from fictional. From a narrative/compositional point of view, in terms of what is actually on the page, the divisions created by the various heavens are not fictional but accurate reflections of that most real of poetic realities: the difference of language itself" (Ibid., 186).

[105] Ibid., 188.

[106] "Have sweet life in different measure, by feeling more and less the eternal breath."

One might argue that the rose, too, is an accommodative metaphor, a representation of a purely intelligible reality. This is likely correct—no one ever tells the pilgrim for sure, but the liquid mutability of forms in the Empyrean certainly suggests it. But if that is the case, then the story the poem tells us about its own ontology leaves us no way to account for the fact that the intelligible reality of the Empyrean needs not one but two representations. (The first being the souls distributed among the hierarchical heavens; the second, the white rose.) And so a detheologized reading shows another incongruity. One the one hand, Beatrice's explanation in canto 4 makes it sound as though the presentation of the Empyrean that we find in the late cantos of the *Paradiso,* or at the very least the representation of the Empyrean's diverse blessings, should not exist. On the other hand, the later representation makes the earlier deployment of accommodative metaphors seem superfluous; given the scene that we find in the late cantos it seems entirely possible that the whole of the *Paradiso* might have been staged within the Empyrean only.[107] In short, there is no good metaphysical or representational justification for the ontological division between the celestial heavens and the Empyrean that the poem insists on. By now it should not be surprising to learn that I read the existence of that division as an artifact of the poem's uneasiness about its commitment to

[107] One might object that Dante's power of vision increases between his visit to the heaven of the moon and the Empyrean to such an extent that what was impossible for him to view early on becomes possible later, but that requires a very weak interpretation of the epistemological limitations that Beatrice announces in 4.41. I would argue, based on the fact that the Empyrean still appears to him in sensible form, that that line establishes a limit on the manner in which the pilgrim is able to know that persists, if not for the entire canticle, then to all but the final flash that ends his vision.

difference, just as I read the accommodative-metaphor construct as a poetic means of mitigating that unease.

3.4. The Empyrean

As I've argued, to detheologize the accommodative metaphor described by Beatrice forces us not only to reevaluate the status of the heavenly hierarchies, as Barolini does; it also asks us to look again at the Empyrean. The Empyrean is especially important for my argument because it exists outside of Creation.[108] Thus to introduce individuality into the Empyrean, as Dante does, is to take a theological step beyond the Christian Neoplatonist reconciliation of the One and the Many.

One common way that critics have used to to make sense of the Empyrean that we find in the *Paradiso* is to compare it to the description of the Empyrean we find in the *Convivio*. Reading the *Commedia* with, through, or against Dante's minor works is a familiar enough procedure within Dante scholarship, and a whole line of critics from Etienne Gilson to Bruno Nardi to Christian Moevs have traced how the metaphysics of the Empyrean changes between the *Convivio* and the *Paradiso*. [109] This kind of comparative reading can produce some extraordinarily subtle and complex readings, and

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[108] Cf. Mellone: "Il divin Poeta ha ritenuto increato l'empireo" (Mellone, *Saggi e Letture Dantesche*, 67).

[109] See, e.g. Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 22-3, Bruno Nardi, "La Dottrina dell'Empireo nella sua Genesi Storica e nel Pensiero Dantesco," in *Saggi di Filosofia Dantesca* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1967), and Etienne Gilson, "À la Recherche de l'Empyrée," *Revue des Etudes Italiennes* 11 (1965): 145-161.

I don't want to diminish its obvious accomplishments. But it does succumb to the critical temptation that Barolini so neatly described: the temptation "to pose [our] critical questions and situate [our] critical debates within the very presuppositions of the fiction [we] are seeking to understand."[110]

The description of the Empyrean in the *Convivio* comes in Book 2.3:

> Veramente, fuori di tutti questi [cieli], li cattolici pongono lo cielo Empireo, che è a dire cielo di fiamma o vero luminoso; e pongono esso essere immobile per avere in sé, secondo ciascuna parte, ciò che la sua materia vuole. E questo è cagione al Primo Mobile per avere velocissimo movimento; ché per lo ferventissimo appetito ch'è 'n ciascuna parte di quello nono cielo, che è immediato a quello, d'essere congiunta con ciascuna parte di quello divinissimo ciel quieto, in quello si rivolve con tanto desiderio, che la sua velocitade è quasi incomprensibile. E quieto e pacifico è lo luogo di quella somma Deitade che sola [sé] compiutamente vede.... Questo è lo soprano edificio del mondo, nel quale tutto lo mondo s'inchiude, de di fuori dal quale nulla è; ed esso non è in luogo ma formato fu solo ne la prima Mente, la quale li Greci docono Protonoè.[111]

The passage is a description couched as a statement of a belief, a proposition ("pongono") about the characteristics of the Empyrean. We are told that the authors of the proposed description are "li cattolici," but since Dante makes no rhetorical effort to distinguish

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[110] Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 15.

[111] "Indeed, outside of all these [heavens], the Catholics place the Empyrean heaven, which is to say, the heaven of flame or bright truth. And they say that it is immobile because every part of it has what it wants. And this is the reason why the Primum Mobile has the fastest movement: the most fervent appetite that every part of that ninth heaven has to be joined with every part of the most divine and quiet heaven, which is right next to it. [The Primum Mobile] moves with such desire that its speed is almost incomprehensible. And the place where that high Deity looks upon Himself alone is motionless and pacific.... This is the sovereign edifice of the world, in which the whole world is enclosed and outside of which nothing is. And it does not exist in a place, but is formed only in the First Mind, which the Greeks called Protonoè."

himself from the description, we have every reason to presume, as scholars have done for centuries, that the description is Dante's own. Once we allow this presumption, we can go on to talk about what Dante thought about the Empyrean at the time he wrote the *Convivio*, comparing the passage to others in Dante's corpus or locating it within a philosophical and theological matrix of ideas ancient or contemporary. Thus Moevs can say that the *Convivio*'s version of the Empyrean

> is in effect identified with the *ens primum quietum et sempiternum*, the motionless and eternal First Being. By Aristotelian doctrine, all motion derives from desire or incompleteness; all motion is the actualizing or fulfillment of potentiality. The Unmoved Mover does not move because it alone is pure actuality; as the object of the desire that causes all motion, it must be eternal, without parts, and without magnitude. It is clear that if Dante is associating his Empyrean with what Aristotle places beyond the mobile spheres, he is implicitly dematerializing it.[112]

Several markers in Moevs's language—"in effect," "By Aristotelian doctrine," "as the object...it must be," "implicitly"—tell us what kind of criticism he is undertaking. He is reasoning with the text, or more precisely, he is reasoning on the basis of the text. To argue for the immateriality of the *Convivio*'s Empyrean, he even produces a kind of syllogism:

> a. Dante is associating his Empyrean with Aristotle's Unmoved Mover ("what Aristotle places beyond the mobile spheres")
>
> b. Aristotle's Unmoved Mover is immaterial ("it alone is pure actuality")
>
> c. Dante's Empyrean is immaterial ("[Dante] is implicitly dematerializing it")

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[112] Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 22-3.

Though Moevs allows that the *Convivio*'s picture of the Empyrean, when compared to the *Commedia*'s is "a little crude," and that a few differences obtain between them, he nevertheless concludes that in the latter picture, as in the former, that the Empyrean is "explicitly immaterial," "pure intellectual light," "the changeless substratum of sensible reality." "If we wish to picture it," Moevs says, "(for example, as a gigantic rose full of seats, children and sages), we must be aware that all is appearance (*parvenza)*, and the reality is light."[113]

As I've noted, this deductive, theologizing mode of criticism is common enough in Dante scholarship.[114] (Indeed, it is precisely the kind I employed in the last chapter.) But if we pay close attention to the poetic structure of these texts, we can find reason to question the traditional relation between the *Convivio*'s description of the Empyrean and the *Paradiso*'s. Reading with the strict and even stubborn literalness that detheologization requires, the proper analogy is in fact between the *Convivio*'s description and the speeches by Beatrice and Benedict and others on the nature of the Empyrean that occur *within* the late cantos of the *Paradiso*. Dante's extraordinary mimetic and poetic talent encourages us to see the relationship between the *Convivio* and the *Paradiso* as follows:

Dante (poet) : *Convivio* : reader :: Beatrice : *Paradiso* : reader

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[113] Ibid., 24.

[114] Another concise example of the mode may be found in Mellone, *Saggi e Letture Dantesche*, 50: "Quando [Dante] immagina di entrare dal primo mobile nell'empireo, si fa avvertire da Beatrice che sono 'usciti fore del maggior corpo.'...Esso nega la corporalità dell'empireo; perchè se anche l'empireo fosse corporeo, il primo mobile, essendo meno ampio dell'empireo, non sarebbe più il 'maggior corpo.' Quindi il luogo proprio degli angeli e dei beati non è corpo."

But the actual form of the analogy should be this:

Dante (poet) : *Convivio* : reader :: Beatrice : speeches in *Paradiso* : Dante (pilgrim)

What happened to the reader? Obviously we're still here, but rearranging the analogy as I did above reminds us that our ultimate interlocutor is the poet, not the character Beatrice. The analogy could be extended, therefore, as follows:

Dante (poet) : *Convivio* : reader :: Beatrice : speeches in *Paradiso* : Dante (pilgrim) :: Dante (poet) : *Paradiso* : reader

The point of drawing this analogy out is to argue that there are two Empyreans in the *Paradiso:* one is the purely intelligible Empyrean described by Beatrice and Benedict, the other is the sensible Empyrean described by the poet. It as true in criticism as it is in life that *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem,* but the necessity here is supplied by the fact that the descriptions of the Empyrean offered by Beatrice, St. Benedict, and others are not adequate to—and sometimes even contradict—the Empyrean described by the poet and visited by the pilgrim. For example, from the perspective of the blessed souls, who—unlike the mortal pilgrim and unlike us—no longer require sensory perception for knowledge, it is plainly correct to say, as Moevs does, that if we wish to picture the Empyrean "we must be aware that all that [which is visible] is

appearance (*parvenza*) and the reality is light, however understood."[115] The reality of the Empyrean as experienced by Beatrice and the saints is that it is a region of pure immaterial light that exists outside of space and time; it is identified with the Divine Mind.[116]

But from the perspective of the pilgrim, and from our perspective as readers, such a statement makes no sense at all. The Empyrean we encounter has visible forms (i.e. it is not pure light); it has rivers, flowers, and a heavenly rose-arena (i.e. it is spatial); and it allows motion and speech (in a way that suggests temporality). What's important to remember is that within the world of the poem the spatiotemporal forms that compose this picture of the Empyrean are not artifacts of some impossible poetic task; i.e., the poet does not tell us, "I only saw light but I'm going to describe it as a rose." Rather, he tells us that *other spirits* said the heaven is made of pure light but that *he himself* saw the river, flowers, and rose. Regardless of what the poem claims for the ultimate ontology of this vision, then, it is crucial to remember that in its presentation of the Empyrean, the poem is, strictly speaking, mimetic.

Among critics, the typical way to reconcile the disjunction between the theologized and detheologized perspectives on the poem is to take the poem at its word and invoke some notion of metaphor. Thus Gilson says that "physically speaking, [the Empyrean] is a myth; theologically speaking, it is a metaphor."[117] But what's crucial to remember about

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[115] Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 24.
[116] Ibid., 25.
[117] Gilson, "À la Recherche de l'Empyrée," 160. Cf. Mellone, who notes, "Senza dubbio il Poeta parla dell'empireo come se dentro vi fosse lo spazio, quindi come se fosse corpo,"

these elisions is that they always work in favor of the internal perspective of the poem. Again and again, we see the poet constantly asking us to deny the very readerly experience that he has just provided, as in passages like *Paradiso* 30.76-81, when, on the cusp of the Empyrean, he gives Beatrice the words:

> Il fiume e li topazi
> ch'entrano ed escono e 'l rider de l'erbe
> son di lor vero umbriferi prefazi.
> Non che da sé sian queste cose acerbe;
> ma è difetto da la parte tua,
> che non hai viste ancor tante superbe.[118]

The passage is remarkable for the narrative sleight of hand it accomplishes. From a theologized perspective, Beatrice's speech has a relatively simple function: to warn the pilgrim that thanks to a defect of his vision, the pilgrim is not seeing things as they actually are. But from our perspective, the passage reinforces the mimetic power of the poem, and it does so in a bewildering way: Beatrice secures the reality of the heaven she describes *precisely* by denying the reality of the heaven the *Paradiso* depicts. This may seem paradoxical, but we can see that it's not as soon as we remember that there are two audiences for Beatrice's speech: the pilgrim and the reader. In other words, by denying the actual existence of the river and topazes *for the pilgrim*, the poet encourages *the reader* to forget that they never existed in the first place. And in the case that doesn't

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citing for example the rose-arena. But he goes on to argue that "si spiega facilmente come una delle tante immaginazioni poetiche" (Mellone, *Saggi e Letture Dantesche*, 59).

[118] "The stream and the topazes which enter and issue, and the smiling of the grasses, are the shadowy prefaces of their truth; not that these things are defective in themselves, but on your side is the defect, in that you do not yet have vision so exalted."

work, he distracts us again with a second audacious maneuver: he uses the second-person address to put the reader in the place of the pilgrim, which means that we refuse to accept the poem's dismissal of it's *mimesis* on pain of admitting the "difetto" of line 80. This is, of course, a perfect example of the kind of poetic judo described by Barolini, in which Dante uses "what could have been moments of vulnerability, moments of exposed narrativity, to forge his most authentic voice."[119]

From a perspective internal to the poem, then, Moevs's presentation of the Empyrean that Beatrice and others describe makes perfect sense. (Indeed, I have chosen to focus on Moevs's reading not only because he is one of the few recent commentators to address the *Commedia*'s soteriology with insight and systematic rigor, but also because he is bold enough to push through to their conclusions the theologizing premises broadly shared by other critics.) But to accept Moevs's perspective requires us to explain away the Empyrean that the *Paradiso* actually depicts. It is absolutely true that Beatrice tells Dante that the Empyrean is "[il] ciel ch'è pura luce" (30.39) and that the poet tells us that on first arriving there the light "lasciommi fasciato di tal velo / del suo fulgor, che nulla m'appariva" (30.50-1).[120] But the theologized reading encourages us to neglect that the pilgrim soon gains a power of vision "di sopr' a mia virtute," which allows him to see the Empyrean as a world of manifold differences and bustling identities.[121]

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[119] Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 114.

[120] "The heaven which is pure light"; "left me so swathed in the veil of its effulgence that nothing was visible to me"

[121] The kind of theologized reading that I've described can also, of course, work to explain away features of the intelligible heaven. Thus Mellone asks us to reject Beatrice's description of the intelligible Empyrean as "pura luce" because to do so would be to

A similar situation occurs soon after. On first arriving in the Empyrean, the pilgrim sees a river flanked by flowers between and into which flit and dip "faville vive" (30.64).[122] He is warned by Beatrice, however, that these semblances are only "di lor vero umbriferi prefazi" (30.78).[123] Rachel Jacoff picks up this phrase in a manner typical of theologized readings, arguing that it epitomizes Beatrice's lesson about the accommodative metaphor, such that "Paradise is imaged in a series of 'umbriferi prefazi,' shadowy prefaces of its imageless reality"[124] As a statement of the relation between the paradise that the pilgrim can see and the paradise he can't, this is perfectly accurate. But it is noteworthy that in the poem the phrase "umbriferi prefazi" doesn't refer to this relation: what the pilgrim sees, after he partakes of the river of light and his power of vision increases, is not "imageless reality" but the white rose. There Dante tells us that he saw "più di mille angeli festanti, / ciascun distinto di fulgore e d'arte" (31.131-2)[125] Bernard of Clairvaux, who serves as Dante's guide to the rose, points out the variety of blessed souls admitted to the arena:

> puoi tu veder così di soglia in soglia
> giù digradar, com' io ch'a proprio nome

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commit Dante to the light metaphysics that Mellone is sure he does not accept. Thus he argues that Dante "usa la 'luce' metaforicamente per indicare la visione beatifica; poiché non può intendere con essa una sostanza" (Mellone, *Saggi E Letture Dantesche*, 57.).

[122] "Living sparks."

[123] "Shadowy prefaces of their truth."

[124] Rachel Jacoff, "Shadowy Prefaces: An Introduction to the *Paradiso," in The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 210.

[125] "More than a thousand angels making festival, each one distinct in effulgence and in ministry."

vo per la rosa giù di foglia in foglia (32.13-15)[126]

The soteriological ramifications of these and similar passages should be obvious. They offer counter-proof to Moevs's deduction that we ought to understand the Empyrean as the point at which the "the last traces of exclusive identification with a particular identity" are shed. Let us put the question directly: if, at the penultimate stage of Dante's salvation, Bernard sees fit to call out the blessed by their proper names, and if the angels can be individually distinguished by their brightness and office, does it make sense to speak of the *Paradiso*'s soteriological vision as one characterized by "the dissolution of duality"?[127] The answer can only be yes if we take the intelligible heaven (which, by the poem's own admission, appears neither to us nor to the pilgrim) as the relevant object of investigation. But it seems more than fair to protest that an inquiry into the *Paradiso*'s soteriology should account for what actually appears in the poem at least as much as (if not more than) what we are told lies beyond it. This means taking seriously the *ad hoc* and ontologically weightless visions that the poem sets before our and the pilgrim's eyes.

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[126] "You may see, thus from rank to rank in gradation downward, as with the name of each I go downward through the rose from petal to petal."

[127] Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante' s Comedy*, 81. I would note that Moevs is hardly alone in this view. Nardi, for example, recognizes that "per mantenere intatta la personalità individuale e salvarla dal totale assorbimento e dal nirvana buddistico, occoreva non menomare le attività che sono proprie di essa." Nevertheless, he concludes that Dante's vision of salvation ends up "sublimating" the individual soul: "Ora nell'ardore di somigliarsi a Dio, l'intelletto creato e il libero volere che è fulcro della personalità, non che annientati, sono anzi sublimati in un immutabile atto, senza fine, di visione e d'amore" (Nardi, "'Sì Come Rota ch'Igualmente È Mossa,'" 349). The appeal to something like the Hegelian *Aufhebung* seems like a useful way to describe the soteriology that the poem claims for itself, but not at all a good way to describe what it actually shows us.

I have so far proceeded on the assumption that detheologized readings are complementary to, and not replacements for, traditional readings that take the poem on its own terms. The point of drawing attention to the representations that the poem would have us discard is to insist that those representations are an important index of the *Commedia*'s treatment of soteriology, one that should be given equal consideration with the poem's more abstract and explicit theories of salvation. As I've argued, this is not at all to say that deductions like Moevs's have nothing to tell us. It is, rather, to say that there is an active tension between the two soteriological visions, and that the pacification of this tension is one of the central poetic challenges Dante confronted in writing the *Paradiso*.

With that said, it is also important to recognize that the deductions encouraged by theologized readings can, in their attempts to resolve the tension by collapsing it to one side, at times be misleading. Thus I'd argue that Moevs's theologized understanding of the Empyrean, which emphasizes unity and the dissolution of individual identities, leads him to confuse an important and properly theological point. He notes, correctly, that for Aquinas, "existence is an act, not a thing," and that "the distinction between creator and creation thus becomes the distinction between 'to be' and 'to-be-this-or-that.'" But he goes on from there to argue that "metaphysically speaking, for the pilgrim to cross the boundary of the Primo Mobile" means that "in terms of Aquinian metaphysics...a rational being is 'in the Empyrean' if, when it says 'I am,' 'am' is an active verb. Summed up in one sentence, Dante's journey of salvation would be to move from *I* am to I *am*. I am not

(primarily) a thing, but (one with) the act of existing itself, however qualified."[128] In short, Moevs argues that the delimited individual act of being that gives each creature its existence is essentially—I use the adverb under advisement—identical to the infinite act of being that is God. This is the theological basis for his claim that Dante's notion of salvation involves shedding "the last traces of exclusive identification with a particular identity" so as to be united with God.[129]

The problem is that in trying to defend his identification of what he calls a "non-dualistic" soteriology in Dante, Moevs misrepresents Aquinas's understanding of individual existence. His reading of Aquinas makes the theologian out to be a pantheist, such that "the divine is in every place because it gives being intimately, 'from the inside,' so to speak, to whatever exists in place, as the being of its being."[130] For Aquinas, however, the act of being (*esse*) that sustains an individual creature is not God. Rather, "each thing has its own being [*esse*] distinct from all others."[131] As John Caputo argues,

> Even though St. Thomas holds that creatures participate in *esse*, and that God is pure, subsistent *esse,* he does not want to suggest that participation of creatures in God's Being means that God is the Being of creatures. Thomas rejects a kind of Parmenidean pantheism in which all things are one by having the very *esse* of God. He also rejects a strictly Platonic participation in which creatures, by participating in the *esse* of God, would be different from God as mere shadows and reflections of God, images in which *esse* does not properly inhere, pale copies of true *esse*. St. Thomas had a robust sense of the instrinsic being, the genuine reality, of each

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[128] Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 31.
[129] Ibid., 78.
[130] Ibid., 32.
[131] "habet enim res unaquaeque in seipsa esse proprium ab omnibus distinctum." (quoted in Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine,* trans. L.E.M. Lynch [New York: Random House, 1960], 371).

> individual being or *ens*.... The creature which participates in God does not have a part of God's *esse*.[132]

Therefore, while it is true that God is the ontological *cause* of every act of being, this is different, *pace* Moevs, than saying that God simply *is* the act of each creature's being.[133] In a similar fashion, while it is also true that for Aquinas, "omne ens, in quantum habet esse, est Ei simile," to say that a creature's act of being is what makes it *like* God is nevertheless not the same as saying that a creature's *esse is* God.

The reason this discussion is important to the present inquiry is that the particular act of being [*esse*] that gives a creature its existence is also the principle of that creature's individuality. To accept Moevs's suggestion for the theological basis of Dante's Empyrean is to accept too a soteriological vision that sees the erasure of distinctions—between selves, yes, but more important, between a creature's limited act of being and the unlimited *Esse* that is God—as a necessary feature of Christian salvation.[134] Once again,

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[132] John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (Fordham Univ Pr, 1982), 140. Cf. Lawrence F. Hundersmark, "Thomas Aquinas on Beatitude," in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Jan Swango Emerson and Hugh Feiss, OSB (New York: Garland, 2000), who notes that "eternal union with the divine essence which alone brings human perfection does not mean, for Aquinas, that the creature in the state of beatification fully captures the Creator" (174).

[133] The argument that Moevs finds in Aquinas might be more properly attributed to someone like William of St. Thierry, who argued that "Just as a thing is bright because of light, and hot because of heat, so individual things derive their being from divinity. Whence God is truly said to be entire and essentially everywhere" (William of St.-Thierry, *De sex dierum operibus* 31, quoted in Gregory, "The Platonic Inheritance," 72).

[134] For this reason, but not for this reason alone, I often think of Moevs's *Metaphysics* as something of a mystical or esoteric reading of the *Commedia*. As I've argued, I believe that Moevs's reading, or one very similar to it, is one that's encouraged by the *Paradiso*, which, whatever else it may be doing, is also always operating as an *itinerarium mentis in Deum*. And as I've tried to make clear, even though my own methodological affinities lie

however, I would insist that this is not the soteriology that we find in Dante's depiction of paradise. Even when the poem is doing its best to dissipate the disturbances caused by its embrace of difference—as in the deployment of the accommodative-metaphor conceit or Beatrice's several disclaimers about what the pilgrim sees in front of his eyes—it never abandons that embrace. And therefore even at the height of heaven, as Barolini notes, we still find Bernard patiently explaining the diversity of the Empyrean to Dante:[135]

> Lo rege per cui questo regno pausa
> in tanto amore e in tanto diletto
> ...
> a suo piacer di grazia dota
> diversamente; e qui basti l'effetto.
> ...
> Dunque, sanza mercé di lor costume,
> locati son per gradi differenti,
> sol differendo nel primiero acume. (32.61-2; 65-6; 73-5)[136]

3.5. The Final Vision

The beatific vision that ends the *Commedia* is dominated by consideration of the three great Christian mysteries: God's relationship to Creation; the Trinity; and the Incarnation. In each case, the poet confesses his greatest bewilderment on the question

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elsewhere, I would never suggest that readings like Moevs's have no place in our comprehensive understanding of the poem.

[135] Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy,* 249.

[136] "The King, through whom this realm reposes in such great love...at His own pleasure endows with grace diversely—and here let the fact suffice.... Wherefore, without merit of their own works, they are placed in different ranks, differing only in the primal keenness of vision."

of how some multiplicity (of beings in the universe, of persons in the Trinity, of natures in Christ) is compatible with the perfect unity of God. What's more, as Barolini has argued, the poet's need to resolve this metaphysical challenge is compounded by a narrative demand: to bring the poem to a close.[137] Thus it is in the final vision that, if it happens at all, we would expect to find the final triumph of unity over multiplicity. Moevs suggests as much when he writes:

> What Dante saw [in the final vision], strictly speaking, was nothing: in him, Intellect (the power of sight itself) came to know itself as the being and substance of all things....Dante has experienced the revelation that all perceivers and things perceived ultimately are the qualified projections or reflections of one limitless and dimensionless reality."[138]

According to what the poet tells us, his readers, this is correct: each of the three mysteries are resolved in favor of unity. But here too we must remember that what the poet tells us is akin to what Beatrice told the pilgrim in canto 30, for in fact only the first mystery is resolved into unity within the mimetic frame of the poem. The latter two are only "resolved" diegetically; that is, while the poet tells us they are resolved, what he shows us mimetically is very different. Once again, the poem asks us to refuse to accept the very vision that it sets before us.[139]

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[137] See her chapter 10.

[138] Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante' s Comedy*, 78.

[139] As will become clearer below, I believe this narrative refusal is different from the kind of *apophasis* that was already in Dante's time an old mode of mystical literature. This is not, however, to say that *apophasis* plays no part in the final vision. On *apophasis* in the *Commedia* see, e.g., Giuliana Carugati, "Dante 'Mistico'?" *Quaderni d'Italianistica* 10, no. 1-2 (1989): 237; Vittorio Montemaggi, "In Unknowability as Love: The Theology of Dante's

In the middle of canto 33, after praying to the Virgin Mary, the pilgrim turns his gaze to the "vivo raggio" that was first introduced in canto 30. The experience that follows this turn is so overwhelming that the poet, looking back on it, confesses a fear that he will not be able to recall what he saw. Nevertheless, after offering his own prayer to the "somma luce," he narrates what little of the experience he can remember and put into words:

> Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
> legato con amore in un volume,
> ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:
> sustanze e accidenti e lor costume
> quasi conflate insieme, per tal modo
> che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume. (33.85-90)[140]

Here Dante gives us exactly what we would expect if we were hoping to confirm the *Paradiso*'s bias towards the Neoplatonic One: a vision of the universe's multiplicity becoming bound into a single book, a symbol of ontological unity.[141]

But—and this is the crucial point—the canto does not end there. What follows is a profoundly non-unitarian finale to the pilgrim's vision. This is immediately preceded by a bit of diegetic metanarrative in which Dante once more insists that he isn't up to the poetic task before him. "Omai sarà più corta mia favella" he says, and with one last heroic

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Commedia" in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2010); and Denys Turner, "How to Do Things with Words: Poetry As Sacrament in Dante's *Commedia*" in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*.

[140] "In its depth I saw ingathered, bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe: substances and accidents and their relations, as though fused together in such a way that what I tell is but a simple light."

[141] The book was, of course, a famous medieval metaphor for Creation.

heave he tries to torque the vision back into the monadic framework that he wants us to accept as ultimately real:

> Non perche più ch'un semplice sembiante
> fosse nel vivo lume ch'io mirava,
> che tal è sempre qual s'era davante;
> ma per la vista che s'avvalorava
> in me guardando, una sola parvenza,
> mutandom' io, a me si travagliava. (33.109-114)[142]

The problem for the poet here is that what he describes next is nothing like a "semplice sembiante"; it is a vision of three colored circles. What the pilgrim sees, of course, is the Trinity, appearing in a form that Dante seems to have borrowed from Joachim da Fiori's *Liber figurarum*:

> Ne la profonda e chiar sussistenza
> de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri
> di tre colori e d'una contenenza (33.115-7)[143]

After gazing at the three circles for an unspecified time, Dante notices something new:

> Quella circulazion che sì concetta
> pareva in te come luce reflesso,
> da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,

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[142] "Not because more than one simple semblance was in the Living Light wherein I was gazing, which ever is such as it was before; but through my sight, which was growing strong in me as I looked, one sole appearance, even as I changed, was altering itself to me."

[143] "Within the profound and shining subsistence of the lofty Light appeared to me three circles of three colors and one magnitude."

dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo. (33.127-32)[144]

As commentators are quick to point out, the circle in which "nostra effige" appears is the second circle, the circle of the Son, which means that the object of Dante's gaze is none other than Christ. The implication, in turn, is that "nostra effige" is an image of perfected human nature, one half of the two natures that comprise the person of Jesus Christ. The poet goes on to tell us:

Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige,
tal era io a quella vista nova:
veder voleva come si convenne
l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova (33.133-138)[145]

The metaphysical import of these latter two mutations of the pilgrim's beatific vision should not be underestimated, for (at least on a detheologized reading) they mark a final and insurmountable obstacle to the notion that the *Paradiso* is a teleological narrative progressing toward the utter simplicity and singularity of God. It has to count as significant that in each of the two final manifestations of the vision (the Trinitarian and the Incarnational) the poem makes no attempt to mimetically resolve into a unity the

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[144] "That circling which, once begotten, appeared in Thee as reflected light, when my eyes had dwelt on it for a time, seemed to me depicted with our image within itself and in its own color, wherefore my sight was entirely set upon it."

[145] "As is the geometer who wholly applies himself to measure the circle, and finds not, in pondering, the principle of which he is in need, such was I at that new sight. I wished to see how the image conformed to the circle and how it has its place therein."

difference that it presents. Instead, all of the work of resolution and simplification is handled diegetically: the poet will *tell* us that the multiplicities retained or regained their original simplicity, but he cannot (or does not) *show* us how. That we are willing to make this leap with the poem—to discredit what the poet has put before our eyes in favor of a reality that he can only describe negatively—owes everything to another brilliant narrative maneuver.

Like many critics, Freccero has argued that the poetry of the *Commedia* is governed by a direct correspondence between the "evolution of the pilgrim's understanding" and what might best be described as the density of poetic representation. Thus the movement from canticle to canticle "may be thought of as a gradual attenuation of the bond between poetry and representation, from the immediacy of the Inferno to the dreamlike mediation of the Purgatorio to the attempt to create a non-representational poetic world in the last *cantica*." And therefore the final moments of the poem should be the most poetically ethereal; that is, they should mark the extreme distance between *poiesis* and *mimesis*.[146]

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[146] Freccero's account of the attenuating bond between *poiesis* and *mimesis* is, in fact, an old argument within Dante criticism, one whose original and most influential advocate was Francesco de Sanctis. In his *Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, de Sanctis wrote: "[Paradiso] è una progressiva manifestazione dello spirito o di Dio in una forma sempre più sottile sino al suo compiuto sparire" (Francesco de Sanctis, *Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, ed. Luigi Russo [1870; reprint, Milano: Universale Economica, 1950], 95). It is instructive to compare the passage of Freccero's quoted above with de Sanctis's description of *Paradiso*: "Siamo all'ultima dissoluzione della forma. Corpulenta e materiale nell'Inferno, pittorica e fantastica nel Purgatorio, qui è lirica e musicale: immediata parvenza dello spirito, assoluta luce senza contenuto, fascia e cerchio dello spirito, non esso spirito" (Ibid., 94).

A large part of the reason that we accept the poet's disclaimer of his own poetry is because his diegetic interjections regularly undercut whatever mimetic force they might have. The performative claim of *mimesis* is always to say, "This is how it was." But in the *Paradiso*, and especially in the final canto, that claim to representation is continually at war with the poet's own diegetic commentary, which says, "No, it wasn't like that." That this back-and-forth isn't mutually canceling is testament, in the first place, to the power of dialectical apophasis. But an even more important reason for the success of the final canto's sleight-of-hand is that the attenuation of *mimesis* that pertains to the vision—the slipping of the representational bond between the poem and what the pilgrim saw—is compensated by an increase of *mimesis* that pertains to the writing of the poem. The writing of the *Commedia* is part of the world of the poem from the very beginning, by which I mean that the poem claims to be aware of its own composition. But it is only in the final canto that Dante's allusion to the writing of the poem begins to crowd out his representation of the world the poem describes. As a consequence, the kinds of statements that we are conditioned to accept as diegetic (e.g., the addresses to the reader) actually take on a quasi-mimetic purpose: they give us a vague picture of the poet at his bench, trying to describe a vision that exceeds the capacities of language, sight, and memory. By protesting so completely about the feebleness of the description of the vision that he's able to provide, Dante wins our sympathies and inclines us to believe his disclaimer of the mimetic vision he has set before us. Thus, while Freccero's account offers a fair account of the mimetic thinning that occurs with respect to the vision, it neglects the role played by the diegetic thickening that occurs with respect to the poem. That latter thickening is the crucial guarantor of the credibility of the final vision.

If we refuse to accept those diegetic claims, however, what we find is a soteriological vision that begins in unity (with the vision of the book of Creation) and ends in two versions of multiplicity (first the trinitarian spheres and then the appearance of the human effigy). To say this is not to deny Dante the benefit of hundreds of years' worth of Christian theorizing about how the triple hypostases of the Trinity did not violate the unity of the one God or how the two natures of Christ might coexist in one person. My argument is not about whether the poem's theology makes sense or should be considered orthodox—in both cases my answer would be a decided yes. Rather, my argument is that something as seemingly banal as the narrative ordering of the three stages of his vision (like the poet's refusal to mimetically "collapse" them into unities) here bears a crucial theological significance. For in place of the absolutely simple vision of the One that one finds, say, in chapter 7 of Augustine's *Confessions* or in Book 9 of Plotinus's sixth *Ennead*, we get a set of visions that show how far Dante is willing to carry his commitment to difference.

This metaphysical point sharpens even more when we examine the soteriological import of the final stage of the vision. What's significant about the appearance of the human effigy is the way it successfully forestalls any dissolution into the Godhead. Moevs sees this as a moment when "the pilgrim is seeking to understand how man—the human form, he himself—can be *imago et gloria Dei* (1 Cor. 11.7), Christ, God made visible."[147] But without saying Moevs is wrong, I would argue that his reading misleads by way of misplaced emphasis. "How man...can be *imago et gloria Dei*" was indeed one of the great

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[147] Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 81.

Christian themes, but it would hardly be an implacable theological mystery for Dante, who knew and endorsed Aquinas's doctrine of ontological participation. The extraordinary possibility that Dante confronts in lines 133-8, however, the one that baffles him like a geometer who cannot find the principle he needs, is that "si convenne / l'imago al cerchio e...vi s'indova."[148] I'd suggest that what the poem is here asking us to contemplate is something more than the mystery of the Incarnation. It asks us to confront the central implication of that mystery: namely, that the redemption of the species has given humanity a place within the eternal and unchanging Trinity, and not merely in the way that everything in the universe has its place within the Divine Mind. The force of the vision is to suggest that humanity has left its mark—has literally been "painted"—on the very nature of the eternal Godhead.

[148] "The image conformed to the circle and...has its place therein."

CONCLUSION: ON POETRY AND THEOLOGY

Throughout this dissertation, I have used the labels "poetic" and "theological" as distinct markers (roughly synonymous with "formal" and "thematic") to help clarify the terms of my arguments. Thus, for example, in the third chapter I argued that while Teodolinda Barolini sees the *Paradiso* employing poetic means to solve what is ultimately a poetic problem, I see the poetry of the third canticle enlisted in the resolution of a fundamentally theological problem. The basis of my argument was the claim that the poet's challenge was not how to represent unity in an essentially differential medium (i.e., language), but rather how to introduce individuality and difference into a vision of Christian perfection while maintaining the harmony and calm that such a vision demanded. From there I demonstrated two ways that Dante used the formal resources of his poetry to calm the disturbance provoked by his relatively novel insistence on the soteriological relevance of the individual.

In a broadly similar fashion, my first two chapters can also be characterized as discussions of the relation between poetry and theology. The argument of my first chapter was in some senses a mirror image of my third: I followed Robert Pogue Harrison in arguing that critics have been too quick to interpret the fundamentally poetic concern of the *Vita Nuova* (i.e. how to represent Dante's extraordinary experience of Beatrice) as theological. Specifically, I argued that the soteriological metaphor that structures the *libello*, which places Beatrice in the role of savior, derives from Dante's adoption and development of several Stilnovist tropes and ends up flirting with what a rigorist Christian

perspective would identify as idolatry. In the second chapter I argued that Dante's idiosyncratic understanding of postlapsarian free will can be traced to a narrative (or, in the broad sense of the word, poetic) necessity—namely, how to convince his reader that his justice was a suitable representation of God's own justice.

And yet here, at the end of this study, I would suggest that there is a deeper sense in which the distinction between poetry and theology is misleading. I am not the first to suggest such a thing, of course; we can immediately look to Boccaccio's claim in the *Trattatello* that "la teologia e la poesia quasi una cosa si possono dire, dove uno medesimo sia il suggetto; anzi dico più: che la teologia niun'altra cosa è che una poesia di Dio." Much more recently, John Freccero has noted that "the perennial problem in literary interpretation is the problem of the relationship to form to content, or of poetics to thematics," and in his own scholarship he has demonstrated several of the ways in which "thematics (that is, theology) and poetics might conceivably be joined in such a way as to offend neither historical understanding nor contemporary skepticism."[1]

We can push the point further. As I noted in the introduction, there has been a strong intuition among many—and, not surprisingly, especially among literary scholars—that there is something deeply untrustworthy about the traditional view that subordinates rhetoric to truth, literature to philosophy, and metaphor to proposition, a view Jacques Derrida summarized as follows:

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[1] John Freccero, "The Significance of Terza Rima," in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986), 258, 260.

> Metaphor is therefore classified by philosophy as provisional loss of meaning, a form of economy that does no irreparable damage to what is proper, an inevitable detour, no doubt, but the account is in view, and within the horizon of a circular reappropriation of the proper sense.... [T]he whole teleology of sense, which constructs the philosophical concept of metaphor, directs it to the manifestation of truth as an unveiled presence, to the regaining of language in its fullness without syntax, to a pure calling by name: there would be no syntactic differentiation, or at least no properly unnamable articulation which could not be reduced to semantic "sublation" or dialectical interiorization."[2]

Those of us who share this intuition are convinced that metaphor (and by extension, literary language in general) *is* capable, in Derrida's words, of working "irreparable damage to what is proper," and that syntax and other formal aspects of literature cannot be evaporated away to leave "a pure calling by name."[3] From this point of view, there is reason to be suspicious even of Freccero's "perennial problem" to whatever extent the reconciliation of poetics and thematics allows itself to be an instrument of the "semantic sublation or dialectical interiorization" that Derrida describes. In other words, and to return to Dante, the attempts to show how poetry and theology may be reconciled in the *Commedia*, however brilliantly illuminating in their own right—as Freccero's most

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[2] Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974), 5-74.

[3] There is a vast literature on the problem of non-discursive thought, but two very different texts that have been important for my own understanding of the problem are, besides Derrida's, Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric As Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition* (Southern Illinois Univ Pr, 2001) and Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007).

certainly are—nevertheless risk reinforcing the traditional critical deference to the preexisting theological matrix.[4]

Freccero's defense of his own formalist approach is instructive in this regard. He (justly) complains that "the coherence of Dante's poem is often taken to be a reflection of the coherence of his faith, which we take to be the primary cultural reality."[5] But after calling for a reversal of this formula, such that "the apparent coherence of Dante's belief is at least in part a projection of the coherence of his poem," he nevertheless makes appeal to theology to justify his proposal: "In a culture which called its central principle 'the Word,' a certain homology between the order of things and the order of words is strongly implied.... What ensures the possibility of the reversal is the central tenet of Christianity, the doctrine of the Word, according to which language and reality are structured analogously."[6] Reading this, we have to remember that Freccero was facing a strong headwind of historicism in Dante scholarship, and therefore we should not discount the probability that his conciliatory claim had a tactical purpose. But at the same time it seems fair to wonder if the time has not come when we can begin to appreciate the

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[4] Derrida cites Descartes to say that "a theologian would be content with metaphor" (Derrida, "White Mythology," 70), but for both the medieval Scholastics and the critical tradition on Dante, this is generally not the case.

[5] Freccero may have Singleton in mind here, who argued that "what we have to realize...is something which applies generally to Dante's poem as in all respects: *the poet did not invent the doctrine*. The shape of his poem is determined by the truth which it must bear and disclose in its structure, and that truth is not original with the poet. Dante sees as poet and realizes as poet what is already conceptually elaborated and established in Christian doctrine" (Charles S. Singleton, *Dante Studies: Journey to Beatrice* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958], 7, his emphasis). It may be noted that Freccero's argument contains *in nuce* the principles of Barolini's detheologization program.

[6] Freccero, "The Significance of Terza Rima," 260.

ways in which Dante's poetry accomplishes its theological work without looking to external crutches for validation.

In some small sense that kind of appreciation has been the latent effort of this dissertation. I have tried to demonstrate some of the ways in which the theological accomplishments of Dante's poetry are not always assimilable to his own explicit theological claims. As Barolini and other critics have noted, the poem's multiple levels of meaning often work at cross-purposes to one another. But while I appreciate and profit from readings that attempt to harmonize these multiple levels of meaning, I also find myself wary of the way they inevitably end up looking to the established theology of Dante's day for principles to sort and prioritize those levels.

This wariness, along with the investigations it inspired, has led me to two conclusions. The first is that Dante's theology is far more interesting and idiosyncratic than he would have us believe. Dante recognized and embraced his own novelty in the poetic and political realms, but it is only in reference to his (essentially terrestrial) criticisms of the papacy that he ever makes claims to theological innovation. As I have shown throughout this study, however, Dante's particular soteriological understanding, when read carefully against the context of his times, shows a remarkable and novel attention to the place of the individual within the Christian scheme of salvation.

The second, more general conclusion is that an appreciation of the full theological (or philosophical) significance of complex artifacts like the *Vita Nuova* or the *Commedia* requires a dual awareness. On the one hand, while recognizing that historicist readings can be an invaluable aid to understanding, we need to be ready to recognize the ways in which works diverge from or exceed their immediate historical context. This is not to

suggest that we should neglect the historical influences and limits that affected the composition of a work like the *Commedia,* but it is to suggest that the work is something more and other than the sum total of those influences and limits. The amphibological religious significance of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* is an example of such a case, for an understanding of the poetic and religious context in which the *libello* was written and first read, while illuminating in many respects, simply cannot tell us with any precision about how Beatrice relates to traditional models of Christian salvation. On the other hand, we also need to recognize that the explicit theological propositions contained in a work like the *Commedia* do not exclusively constitute and exhaust the work's theological significance. We saw this especially in my third chapter, where I argued that *the way in which* the *Paradiso* wrestles with the problem of unity and difference carries as much theological significance as *what the poem says* explicitly about that problem.

As I have insisted throughout this study, to put these conclusions into practice is not to turn one's back on philological or historicist modes of reading that stress the connections between a work and its sources and contexts. Indeed, I would argue that the kind of criticism I advocate here would be simply irresponsible—a kind of free-floating reader response—in the absence or neglect of such an appreciation. My claim, however, is that works like the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia* demand a further reckoning beyond the historical, one that respects both halves of the dialectic that obtains between an artwork and the culture in which it came to be. We need, in short, to be ready to follow a work as it leaves the shore of its making, to launch *per l'alto sale nostro navigio, servando il solco dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna equale.*

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