

“THE SPARKLING OF THE HOLY
GHOST”: THE METAPHYSICS
OF NATURE AND GRACE IN
DANTE’S *PARADISO*

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“Being’s face manifested in the smile has an
ontological depth at the same time that it reveals
personal, concrete love.”



Nature considered under all its aspects—as the concrete things of creation; in the relation of the divine and human in the Incarnation; as a participant in the interplay with grace and freedom—is central to all Catholic thought. It should not be surprising, then, that it is central to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, a poetic microcosm of the faith. The *Inferno*, in which Dante, guided by Virgil, travels a very strenuous and difficult path, climbing always *leftward* and *down* the nine circles of hell, clearly depicts the rejection of the gift of grace and the relation between (deformed) nature and sin, and is perennially popular. The *Purgatorio*, in which Dante and Virgil climb always *rightward* and *up* the mountain’s cornices, “un-spiraling” the turning-in of oneself that is the sign and effect of the sins of hell, is highly praised for the beauty, both

natural and spiritual, of the scenes in the Garden of Eden. At the top of the mountain, Virgil vanishes and Beatrice becomes Dante's guide to *Paradiso*. No longer climbing, he rises effortlessly through nine spheres, from that of the moon through the sun and planets, to the fixed stars, and then to the *Primum Mobile*, the gateway to the Empyrean.¹ The *Paradiso*, the least read of the three canticles (though, for this reader at least, the most beautiful²), strikes many people as less concrete than the others, with nature disappearing into the divine, and less interesting—even boring—essentially a repetition of different descriptions of light interspersed with Scholastic expositions. It seems the last place to look for anything significant to be said concerning the theme of nature. But that expectation is due to a failure to grasp fully Dante's metaphysical and theological vision, best illuminated by what is perhaps an unexpected group of writers, whom this essay seeks to engage. In the end, it is in the *Paradiso* that we see the fullness of the grace-nature relation in all its spiritual and ontological depth.³

The intention of this study is very modest. It is not to propose an additional theoretical construct through which the *Comedy* can be viewed, but to shift the perspective we have on the whole to Dante's own constitutive, intrinsic theology of glory and metaphysics of beauty, gift, and love. The elaboration of this metaphysics will show that, rather than being erased, nature holds a place of central significance in the *Paradiso*. All an essay of this length can do is provide the briefest sketch, to point not to yet more possibilities of interpretation, but to promises, that is, promising vistas that open up when we do so—to say with Dante, *Ecco!*

In section I, nature and grace in the *Paradiso* and Dante's sense of a "third theology" are introduced. Section II is a brief

1. The Empyrean is not a "tenth sphere" of creation; it is rather of a qualitatively different order entirely: the divine mind.

2. See D.C. Schindler's *The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel Between the Ancients and the Moderns* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012). One could substitute, essentially *salve veritate*, Dante's name and his own version of the *dolce stil novo* ("sweet new style") for Schilling's "beautiful style," contrasted with a scientific presentation and a popular one, in the first chapter.

3. Though of course it *follows* the recognition of sin and atonement of the first two canticles. Sometimes it seems as if readers believe one can jump directly to the beatific vision without conversion and penance.

review of post-Enlightenment Dante criticism, specifically on the quintessential nature-grace questions of identity and dualism that consume so much of its attention: the union of the soul and God (*deification*, construed as a movement—successful or not—toward identity), and the relation of language to the (ultimately) inexpressible (*apophaticism*, in which the “failure” of language is either the ultimate expression of unsurpassable tensions and duality or the final identification of all mystical traditions). Christian Moevs argues that we must return to Dante’s metaphysics, the center of which are the relations of form and matter, and the crucial ontological gap between finite contingent beings and their ground in uncreated Being.⁴

The modern/postmodern trajectory has also been unconcerned with a third relation in Thomistic metaphysics: that of *created* being, *esse*, and the form-matter unity, for as Thomas says, *esse* is “formal” with respect to that unity.⁵ In Section III, a different trajectory—not “postmodern,” but perhaps “after-modern”—opens up the “real distinction,” disclosing a qualitatively different relation between nature and grace. Whatever it is called—hermeneutics of gift, metaphysics of being, beauty, and love, *communio*—it is, to borrow from Thomas, “more fitting” for Dante, as it is guided, as Dante was, by trinitarian and incarnational faith, and looks deeply into the original Christian sources while opening to new questions.

How this trajectory responds to deification and apophaticism is best seen in the two crucial visions of the poem. Section IV reflects on the Beatrician vision. Hans Urs von Balthasar had asked “whether the ineffable ground of being can express itself in the form of created being.” He answered that “the two, ground and form, meet in the human beauty of Beatrice.”⁶ The poetic vision of Beatrice’s beauty at its peak is for Dante the consummate intersection of created nature and the splendor of grace. “Beauty,” said Balthasar, “is objectively located at the intersection of two

4. Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 8, a. 1 co (hereafter cited as *ST*).

6. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, vol. 3 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 101 (hereafter cited as *GL3*).

moments which Thomas called *species* and *lumen* (form and splendor), [and] the encounter of these is characterized by the two moments of beholding and being enraptured."⁷ Dante's paean on beauty is conjoined to one of creation, for beauty presupposes the perception of three things: the *wholeness* of the immanent form and transcendent splendor between uncreated Being who gifts us with being and finite beings who receive it; the depth and beauty of Beatrice herself; and the equipoise/tension between created *esse* and essence *within* each created being, which relates to the *esse* in all created things, the glory of all reality.

Section V brings us to the beatific vision, in which finite, natural man is found and finds himself united with deifying grace. Language cannot adequately express the divine, in a linguistic counterpart to ontotheology, but apophaticism does not end "in the Plotinian opacity within which nothing can be said about the One because the One is not."⁸ Nor is Christian deification a kind of nirvana ("blowing out") that extinguishes the individual. In both of these cases, nature is annihilated. Dante's vision takes another turn entirely: one in which apophaticism and deification have different meanings; one that has a surprisingly corporate aspect; and one that lays claim not only on Dante but on the reader to enter into the deifying form of Christ.

Balthasar says that "*ultimately [Dante's] Paradise has a Marian form.*"⁹ A concluding section looks at Mary as the concrete embodiment of the metaphysics of being, gift, and love.

I. DANTE'S THEOLOGY OF NATURE AND GRACE

In Canto XIV, in the Sphere of the Sun, there is a brief event that Dante does not linger over (a mere fifteen lines in over 14,000), which might be seen as a harbinger of a new vision in the Au-

7. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 10 (hereafter cited as *GL1*).

8. Antonio López, FSCB, "Eternal Happening: God as an Event of Love," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 220–21.

9. Balthasar, *GL3*, 82 (emphasis added).

gustinian sense of “ever ancient, ever new.”¹⁰ When he enters the sphere, Dante sees a ring of twelve men of wisdom moving as a harmonious wheel. They sing with a sweetness that can only be known where joy, in one of many beautiful neologisms that play a small but delightful role in illuminating his metaphysics, *s’insempra*, “in-always-itself forever.”¹¹ Aquinas steps forth and tells Dante of “two princes” of the Church: Dominic, prince of wisdom, and Francis, prince of love.¹² He, a Dominican, sings the praises of Francis. Like the doubling of a rainbow, a second garland of souls forms, and Bonaventure the Franciscan sings the praises of Dominic. The two rings intertwine, and Dante asks the reader to imagine a new, living, dynamic constellation, a dual wreath revolving in opposite directions, one within the other.

Then something surprising appears. *Ecco!* (“Behold! Look there!”), he cries.¹³ A paradoxical celestial counterpoise is invoked as daybreak and nightfall are joined together to convey the novelty of what he sees. As at dawn, a glow (*lustrò*, a synonym for *fulgore*, a term we will encounter again) appears around the horizon, and as at nightfall stars begin to appear. Dante perceives new souls forming a radiant third ring that encompasses the others.¹⁴ But Beatrice becomes so beautiful at that moment that Dante must leave the ring behind, though he calls it “the very sparkling of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁵ This may be, as Balthasar noted,

10. I wrote a paper for Yale Divinity School in 1987 that invoked Kierkegaard’s difference between a genius and an apostle. In some sense, Dante was both. He was a poetic genius, and as his references to travelers who have dared to go where no man has gone before suggest, he had a vision of himself on an uncharted voyage. Yet his “newness” was not merely the novelty of the genius that first appears startling and is eventually assimilated, but of an apostle responding to a call, bringing a transcendent message that never grows old. Literary appreciation is not sufficient. He specifies that only those who have eaten the “bread of angels” would not become lost in following him in their “little barks” (Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto II, 1–12 [hereafter cited as *Par.*]). Unless otherwise noted, the English translations of Dante’s works cited throughout this essay are by Charles S. Singleton.

11. *Par.*, X, 148. I am indebted to Peter Hawkins for his translation.

12. *Par.*, XI, 35.

13. *Par.*, XIV, 67.

14. *Par.*, XIV, 74–75.

15. *Par.*, XIV, 76 (trans. John D. Sinclair).

a tantalizing glimpse of a "new, third theology"¹⁶ of which Dante sees himself as the originator—not a simple *coupling* of Thomistic wisdom with Franciscan love (or other characterizations of the first two rings), but rather something luminously beautiful that includes and transcends both.

Dante does not name any souls in the third ring, and if some critics have chosen Hegel, Heidegger, Gadamer, or Levinas, my personal opinion (with more evidential warrant) is that the third ring heralds a very different path, one that passes from Scripture, the Patristic Fathers, and Aquinas through Erich Przywara, Ferdinand Ulrich, Balthasar, and others. This path does not nostalgically resuscitate the past; rather, it opens the past into time to come (*s'infutura*, "in-futures itself").¹⁷

How can we characterize Dante's theology? For Balthasar, it is a theology of glory, in which the cosmos is "an expression of divine love," where "everything outside God is a ray of light from God."¹⁸ *Paradiso's* language of light—flashing, sparkling, gleaming, glimmering, shining, brilliant, and radiant in its splendor and resplendence—is precisely the language of the dance of nature and grace. "Sparkling" and "flashing" are not abstractions but real, concrete events that, like viewing the horizon, depend on the observer being precisely oriented (for example, to the sun and the ocean). They are relations that unite and distinguish two incommensurables for the observer (the limitless sky and the limited curvature of the earth; the mystery of light and tangible realities like water). What flashes out are "vestiges," Dante says, of the uncreated eternal light shining through (*traluce*)¹⁹ contingent, generated things (*contingenze . . . le cose generate*).²⁰

16. Balthasar, *GL3*, 10.

17. Another neologism. *Par.*, XVII, 98. According to Balthasar, "he was setting down something that had never existed before and that in its own way is inimitable, a work that raises him high above his own age, plants him in the future (*s'infutura la tua vita*), in eternity itself (*s'eterna*)" (*GL3*, 12).

18. Balthasar, *GL3*, 67–68.

19. *Par.*, V, 12.

20. *Par.*, XIII, 64–65.

Paradiso might appear far removed from nature,²¹ but the canticle has many metaphors drawn from nature that do not erase created things but transfigure them, and these natural things are microcosms of nature in the larger sense. The popular narrative regarding modes of thinking is that medieval Christians thought allegorically, so when “confronted with natural objects or images . . . of fish, birds, and trees, they automatically tried to find Christian religious significance by associating them with parables and key remarks in the Bible.”²² By contrast, beginning in the early modern period, if people “saw a picture of a fish or a bird, they thought about real fish and birds in the world.”²³ There is some truth in that distinction. However, Dante portrayed a different way, a way where things are neither transparent, vanishing before God’s grace, nor opaque to that grace, but *translucent*, in which each natural thing shines with radiance as something true, beautiful, and good *in itself*, but also and simultaneously as a gift in and from Another. While writers of the time often employed static pastoral metaphors borrowed from the artificial conventions of previous texts, Dante was a keen observer of natural phenomena. For example, he opens Canto XXIII with a yearning mother bird who, having spent the night nestled with her brood, longing to begin the difficult but joyful task of finding food to give them, “foreruns the time”²⁴ and moves out to an open bough where leaves do not obscure the advent of dawn. He relates this image to Beatrice, intently and expectantly looking toward the sun, from whence comes the vision of the triumph of Christ, the Radiant Substance that “opened the roads between heaven and earth”²⁵ and for whom all mankind had so long and expectantly yearned. There

21. Dante’s heaven has been criticized for being too “immaterial,” or praised for the same reason, depending on the reader’s perspective. What is missed by some is that Dante’s journey to heaven takes place *before* the final judgment and general resurrection. Dante himself, of course, is still in his mortal state (as many of the souls encountered remark upon), and Canto XIV makes it clear that the souls he meets eagerly desire the final bodily resurrection. With their “flesh, glorified and sanctified” they will be even more grateful for being whole and complete (*Par.*, XIV, 43–45).

22. Eugene C. Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 34.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Par.*, XXIII, 7.

25. *Par.*, XXIII, 38.

is a reciprocity to these relations: like the double vision of the "animal that is one person in two natures,"²⁶ the Griffin, "the Gestalt of the Incarnation,"²⁷ reflected in Beatrice's eyes now as a Lion, now as an Eagle, Dante was able to hold in dynamic equilibrium the realm of grace that called forth the corresponding natural image *and* the translucent beauty and actuality of the natural objects that raised his heart to God.

The paradoxical, oscillating, stereoscopic equipoise—movement and balance, transcendence and immanence—unfolds through a drama that unveils, as much as it is possible in this life, the perfection of nature by grace and their interplay. This is seen throughout the poem: in specific settings (the ninth sphere, the *Primum Mobile*, the interface between the created order and the Creator); in the immense and marvelous astronomical metaphors, analogies for the co-inherence of the concrete experiential horizon and transcendent truth;²⁸ in the beauty of Beatrice that is simultaneously part of Dante's deeply personal story while at the same time reaching to the divine (the more one is attentive to particulars, the more one is open to the whole and then to God, and vice versa); and most captivatingly in the *smile*, for in a sense the poem is a dramatic enactment of Balthasar's famous "Smile of the Mother," the nexus of being and love.

II. DANTE AND THE CRITICS

There are various books that bring Dante to the popular reader, from beginner's guides to how Dante can change your life. There is a tsunami of essays delving into the minute details of a

26. Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXI, 80–81 (hereafter cited as *Purg.*).

27. Peter Hawkins, "Poema Sacro," *Annali d'Italianistica* 25 (2007): 177–201, at 185.

28. These metaphors have exasperated many as abstract impediments to the narrative. But celestial orientation is on the one hand entirely personal, centered on the observer (e.g., the zenith is the point directly over your own head and the horizon moves as you do); on the other hand, it depends on a given, shared reality larger than ourselves. Perhaps the *Paradiso* should be read not only with dictionaries and commentaries, but with a nocturnal, a planetsphere, and an astrolabe!

segment of the poem, or puzzling out the relationship between his poetic genius and his theological claims (which, as so many critics mention in casual asides, we could not possibly believe today), or attempting to view Dante through the lens of an overarching methodology: from semiotics to psychoanalysis, to German hermeneutics, to French theories of difference.²⁹ One can be grateful to those critics who have given us so much insight, whether they see Dante as a phenomenologist, Hegelian, deconstructionist, subversive, or other postmodern *avant la lettre*, or have parsed the minutiae of references, influences, and recurring themes—as long as we remember Balthasar’s words:

Whatever view one takes of the integration achieved by Dante, there is always an excess over and above the constitutive elements; despite its structure, his work is not a sum-total but an indivisible prime number, and it is this insoluble mystery that has bestowed upon him his power over history.³⁰

Keeping that in mind, for comparison’s sake we will look at two central topics in Dante criticism that are especially germane to the nature–grace relation: deification and language, both the “failure” of natural language to express God, and the relation of language to reality.

2.1. Deification

Alison Milbank notes that “there has been a tendency in recent Dante scholarship not only to move Dante’s vision in an apophatic direction, but even toward a divinization of the self that nullifies the specificity of the individual subject as he or she becomes one with God.”³¹ She finds some of Christian Moevs’s

29. William Franke, *Dante’s Interpretive Journey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) (which covers Heidegger, Gadamer, Ebeling, Bultmann, etc.); William Franke, *Dante and the Sense of Transgression: The Trespass of the Sign* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) (which covers Derrida, Bataille, Blanchot, Barthes, and Levinas).

30. Balthasar, *GL3*, 13.

31. Alison Milbank, “Divine Beauty and the Grotesque in Dante’s *Paradiso*,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 39, no. 1/2 (2009): 155–68, at 165.

wording particularly troubling, such as "a self-awakening of the Real to itself in us:"³² She writes, "The idea of God 'awakening' . . . is quite heterodox and finds no justification in Dante's own writing."³³ It is true that Moevs's language is problematic for Christians. According to Moevs, original sin is the "obscuring of divine self-awareness—the ultimate ontological principle—by the attachment to the body and the senses," and salvation is "to experience one's own 'I' as not other than God's, as everything and nothing."³⁴ Finally, he says, "what has been said of Indian philosophy applies equally to medieval Christian thought," namely that reality is ultimately one: "If the Comedy has a philosophical or theological foundation and 'message,' that is it."³⁵

Similar to readings based on Eastern thought are neo-Platonist, emanationist, or "universal mystical tradition" readings. The danger again would be the dissolution of the finite into the infinite. Matter is an obstacle to enlightenment; concrete particularities dissolve in an acid bath, honored only in the breach (e.g., when "Christ" becomes the name of an experience rather than that of a person). None of this does justice to the positivity of the created order: to the resurrection of the body; to the bodily presence of Mary in heaven (Dante affirms her assumption in *Par.*, XXV, 127–28); to an understanding of matter in light of both the Incarnation and creation *ex nihilo* (in which

32. Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 8.

33. Alison Milbank, review of Moevs's *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, *Religion & Literature* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 118. "This is the language of Hegel, as is the idea of creation as 'alienation'" (*ibid.*). I would agree with Milbank that, despite certain concerns, this is a brilliant and erudite book.

34. Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 149.

35. *Ibid.*, 172. It is important to note that he clarifies that he is speaking of a nondualism that is not monism. He sees this as "almost identical" to Christian thought. However, Stratford Caldecott's articles are excellent sources for understanding the differences between Vedantic Hinduism and Christianity, as well as for providing a nuanced view of Meister Eckhart, whose works are also cited in Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*. As Caldecott explains, Eckhart does not place a nontrinitarian Godhead on a higher ontological level than the Trinity. See Stratford Caldecott, "Face to Face: The Difference Between Hindu and Christian Non-Dualism," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 616–39; see also his "Trinity and Creation: An Eckhartian Perspective," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 695–714.

matter is not just impregnated with form, but with *relations*); to the goodness of limitation; to the meaningfulness of what *can* be said about the divine; and finally to nature, which is here evacuated—not perfected—by grace, hence misunderstanding the meanings of both “nature” and “grace.” Dante, Claudel said, is the poet not of “dreams, illusions, or ideas” but of “sacred reality,” of the actual, not of infinite and unlimited potentiality.³⁶ The belief in a deification beyond finitude (one in which, to paraphrase Flannery O’Connor, everything apophatic must converge) leaves us bereft of the sacramental nature of contingent things, left only with the Many dissolved into the One, a “Gnostic plenitude of infinite consciousness.”³⁷

2.2. Language and reality

In the *Paradiso*, Dante refers many times to the limits of language and of his poetic ability. Metaphors like that of the wake that vanishes behind the boat³⁸ seem to bolster the notion that the canticle itself is the quintessential self-consuming, self-erasing artifact³⁹ (though for Dante poetry was a *relationship with the reader*, whom he addresses many times, not an autonomous aesthetic artifact). A central verse is, *Trasumanar significar per verba / non si poria*, in which the first line, “signifying transcending the human by way of words,” is denied in the opening of the second line, “is not possible.”⁴⁰ The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*—what cannot be said must be passed over in silence; it can only be shown—is often quoted, though the significance of this statement is not always properly grasped. Certainly—and this is crucial—Dante

36. Paul Claudel, “Religion and the Artist: Introduction to a Poem on Dante,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 357–67, at 359.

37. Thomas Werge, “Dante’s Ulysses and Ahab’s Voyage: The Angelic Imagination in the Literal World,” *Notre Dame English Journal* 12, no. 2 (1980): 141–74, at 162.

38. *Par.*, II, 13–15.

39. This phrase from Stanley Fish is a staple of commentary on apophaticism in the *Paradiso*.

40. *Par.*, I, 70–71 (translation mine).

both shows *and* speaks. William Franke summarizes the post-modern "ineffability" issues: in the final beatific vision, the entire poem erases itself.

The *Paradiso* moves beyond interpretation and beyond language. In the last part of his poem, Dante butts up against the limits of his whole project and of writing and language *tout court*. The universal synthetic vision, which he has so superbly constructed, in crucial ways comes undone. Indeed, this very undoing becomes the vehicle of the quest's fulfilment.⁴¹

It is a mistake, albeit one very easy to make, to imagine that Dante was engaged in constructing a "universal synthetic vision," an error often made about Aquinas as well.⁴² However, there is no denying the strong apophatic element in Dante and his Dionysian and Thomistic sources. Aquinas says that "at the end of all our knowledge, we know God as something unknown."⁴³ What that *means* is another matter, to which we will return in the discussion of the beatific vision.

The concomitant language question concerns the relationship between language and reality. John Freccero asks,

Does the order of language reflect the order of reality or is the "transcendent reality" simply a projection of language? What we have always taken to be a problem of Dante criticism turns out to be the central epistemological problem of all interpretation.⁴⁴

41. Franke, *Dante and the Sense of Transgression*, xi.

42. Franke does not make this mistake. He says that Dante exposes a gap in an otherwise apparently "totalizing representation of the whole order of Being" (*Dante and the Sense of Transgression*, 174), but fills that gap with Levinas's ethical encounter with the Other of infinity as an alternative to metaphysics rather than its fulfillment. It would take a long, separate study to explicate why Franke's assertion, however compelling, that Levinas is the quintessential lens through which to view the beatific vision, falls short. For Aquinas as "non-totalizing," see Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), esp. 88.

43. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Boethius's On the Trinity*, q. 1, a. 2 ad 1.

44. John Freccero, *Dante and the Poetics of Conversion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 260.

The wording of the above quotation reveals its dualistic presuppositions⁴⁵ and calls forth the next question: “How are we to respond to the poet’s insistence that he is telling us the truth?”⁴⁶ (Perhaps the most famous quote in Dante criticism: “The fiction of the *Comedy* is that it is not fiction.”⁴⁷) As Freccero wrote in 1965, “The duality of form and content . . . is the fundamental problem to which critics in our day have directed their attention.”⁴⁸ The paradigmatic example was Benedetto Croce’s split between the poetic form and the religious content or transcendent reality: wise readers will ignore all the religious baggage and simply relish the poetry.⁴⁹ While many thought that line extreme, the separation between the “poet” and the “theologian” got a lot of traction, with the poet as anticipator of postmodernism mostly overpowering that of the theologian.⁵⁰ On the theological side, some criticism repeats the neo-Scholastic separation of nature and grace: Virgil represents reason, the natural, *preparatio* for grace, John the Baptist; Beatrice represents faith, the supernatural, grace itself, Christ.⁵¹

In Freccero’s own solution to the Crocean bifurcation, both Dante’s poetry and his theology are “rooted in the structure which alone gave them meaning: the *structure of his experience*, of which the poem bears exemplary witness.”⁵²

45. To call them dualistic is not to imply that the answer is to *deny* the difference between language and reality, saying simply that there is no problem because language is already part of reality, as this denies the abiding difference. See D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 44–53.

46. Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 4.

47. Charles S. Singleton, “The Irreducible Dove,” *Comparative Literature* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1957): 129.

48. John Freccero, ed., *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1965), 1.

49. Benedetto Croce, *The Poetry of Dante* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922), 100.

50. Milbank, review of Moevs’s *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy*, 117.

51. Despite, for example, that Virgil is the guide to purgatory, realm of grace, and the one who places both the crown and mitre on Dante’s head (*Purg.*, XXVII, 142).

52. Freccero, *Dante: A Collection*, 2.

It is the experience that we must believe, not in the *exemplum*, the poem itself, which is his compromise, his expression of what for us is out of reach. Nor does he ask us to believe in the poem's theology or its Christianity, the commitments to which his experience led him, for these are inseparable from the dramatic representation and, like it, depend upon an experience which we must believe precisely because we cannot know it.⁵³

Of course there is a sense in which the first part is true—our own immediacies cannot be transferred to others. And it is true that we cannot appropriate Christianity simply by acquiescing to the statements of others without our own experience of grace, as Freccero notes. Yet whatever Dante says is still riddled by inescapable subjectivity. Our own "incommunicable experience" might lead us anywhere,⁵⁴ and the reader must take a leap of faith and accept Dante's, for *to us* it is akin to Kant's noumenal world. (Along the same lines, for Franke, Dante's *subjective state* is the origin of the poem and its vision. That state is "correlative to an experience of . . . something so radically other that it cannot be expressed at all or even be remembered."⁵⁵) This is imagining faith as something completely irrational (which it is for many as a "private experience"—and who are we to judge?). But there is no evidence that for Dante faith was a private experience devoid of communicable content, as if God had never revealed himself and had no claim on us.

Freccero says the "duality sensed by many" is due to Dante's theology being written for his contemporaries and thus being "antiquated."⁵⁶ Rather than bifurcate the poem into poetry and its antiquated content, and in order to escape the dualism of purely private experience versus objective fact, one might show

53. *Ibid.*, 3.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Franke, *Dante and the Sense of Transgression*, 155. Here we refer to the post-Enlightenment definition of subjective as the private, arbitrary opposite of the public, "factual" objective; there is another sense of "subjective" in which the subject is *modified* via a real relation and response to the object.

56. Freccero, *Dante: A Collection*, 3–4. "Criticism of a new kind [will] help us see poetry where before we had seen only antiquated dogma" (*ibid.*).

the poem's internal consistency and map it back onto accepted Christian doctrine.⁵⁷ Describing this method, Freccero says,

We need not privilege either pole; thematics (that is, theology) and poetics might conceivably be joined in such a way as to *offend neither historical understanding nor contemporary skepticism*, for in either case we are discussing a coherence that is primarily linguistic.⁵⁸

Another path of interpretation followed Hegel, whose view of Christianity as a “dialectical mediation of transcendence by immanence, of divinity by history” was crucial to Erich Auerbach, who “helped to inaugurate a new era for Dante criticism.”⁵⁹ But for many reasons that cannot be detailed here, Hegel and Dante cannot be reconciled. Suffice it to say that Hegelian metaphysics negates the ontological distance and is *insufficient to secure the positivity of the natural, created order*. (As Ferdinand Ulrich and others noted, the dialectic of Hegel's dynamics of conflict elevates the negative to a first principle).⁶⁰

Other paths went through Heidegger and thence to Bultmann, Schleiermacher, or Gadamer. Existential hermeneutics, which sees truth as an event of disclosure rather than a one-to-one correspondence between statements and real things (sometimes with an ahistorical reality floating somewhere above and outside the world), has affinities with Dante, but they are only superficial. Heidegger's either/or (*either* the event of the why-less, playful disclosure of being, *or* seeing God as First Cause in the sense of a manufacturer of artifacts that can be manipulated—his

57. Philosopher Alfred Tarski suggested plotting structural relations between a language and its background domain of discourse. This did not entail any metaphysical point about the background frameworks, such as why we should choose one over another.

58. Freccero, *Dante and the Poetics of Conversion*, 260 (emphasis added).

59. Erich Auerbach wrote *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* in 1929, which was translated into English as *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* in 1961. Hegel's writing on Dante in *Aesthetics*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), was crucial (see, e.g., pages 1103–04 on the plunging of individual deeds and fates into the “changeless existent” of God).

60. For a summary of Ulrich on why negation cannot be constitutive of being, see Marine de la Tour, “The Light of the Gift in *Homo Abyssus*,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 27–40.

criticism of what he thinks Christian metaphysics entails) leaves out another possibility, namely that the playfulness and wonder we wish to maintain in the face of the deep mystery of things is best safeguarded by the metaphysics of gift and love: by Aquinas's relationship between Being and beings, and the goodness and autonomy of creation (with the gift of secondary causality) in light of the generosity of God.

Undifferentiated, ineffable mystical experience, the "only internal coherence is possible" model, and the unresolved tensions of postmodernism are all inimical to the nature-grace relation and to the goodness of the creation itself. In the end, the unity and autonomy of the text is undermined; the poem subverts itself; the meanings are ever shifting. Rather than Balthasar's "beholding and being enraptured," we are bedazzled, left hapless to decide.⁶¹

So—with reservations about the language of deification—*Dantisti* owe a debt of gratitude to Moevs. His *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* brought to the fore the idea that the poet's work could not be understood without a recovery of the metaphysical tradition within which he wrote, for that metaphysics grounded all his concerns. Moevs says that what had been missing is the notion that radically non-self-subsistent finite reality is contingent, dependent every moment, upon self-subsistent Being. Though he said the book was necessary because Dante's understanding of reality "is so foreign to our own," it is only foreign to the world of discourse that follows the trajectory set by the Enlightenment, Kant, Hegel, etc.

In the next section we will look at a different trajectory, one that opens the path Moevs began into the full catholicity of Dante's metaphysics, a trajectory in which, as Balthasar saw, *beauty* resolves all dualities not by erasing them but by conjoining them, the apophatic and cataphatic (the way of negation and the way of affirmation) are transcended,⁶² and in which the deifying grace of the *trasumanar* means "a fullness of life which far ex-

61. A paraphrase of the late Paul Holmer, who often said that, rather than a sovereign self presented with a multitude of options, there is only one option (the True, Beautiful, and Good) and a dazzling array of selves in different stages of spiritual formation.

62. Balthasar, *GL3*, 32

ceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God.”⁶³

III. THE THIRD RING

While there are differences among the writers suggested for the “Third Ring,” their recognizable affinity is greater than what differentiates them. There are recurring themes with which readers of this journal are familiar. The themes connect like the interlocking chain of Dante’s *terza rima* (*aba, bcb, cdc*, etc.), or like the interweaving dance of the wheeling souls: the unity-in-difference in the Trinity is extended via the *analogia entis*—which, says Balthasar, is “presupposed and developed in Dante’s cosmos”⁶⁴—to the truth about the unity-in-difference between God and creation.⁶⁵ The deepening of the metaphysics of being in Thomas’s “real distinction” reveals the luminous interplay of *esse* and essence as mutual giving and receiving, as reciprocal generosity, as a metaphysics of gift and love. Pointing to what might be Dante’s “third theology” does not constitute another interpretive lens, nor an alien imposition on the poem, but comes from a reading attentive to what is implicit or what Dante explicitly says, from the perspective of those who look most deeply into his Catholic sources.

3.1. Trinitarian and christocentric

Some critics write about Dante as “one of us” in the sense of being the first “secular” postmodern, with Church teachings as

63. *Evangelium vitae*, 2.

64. Balthasar, *GL3*, 102.

65. It also relates to gift: if univocity reigns, beings are emanations, extensions of infinite being; if equivocity reigns, there can be no relation, only an absolute difference. In the former, the gift is not truly given away; in the latter, the presence of the giver in the gift is lacking. Analogy gives us “gift” as the “presence of the giver in the gift through loving separation of the gift with respect to the receiver” (Martin Bieler, “*Analogia Entis* as an Expression of Love According to Ferdinand Ulrich,” in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* ed. Thomas Joseph White, OP [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 333–34).

an unavoidable (if not regrettable) time-bound cultural overlay; others see him as a rebellious dissident who disingenuously paid lip service to the Church and its doctrines and dogmas while seeking to undermine them. But it is impossible to doubt that Dante was a believer in the institution and teachings of the Church, even while consigning a number of its practitioners to hell. To think otherwise arises from reading back our own era's skepticism, cynicism, excessive irony, and hermeneutics of suspicion. As Balthasar said,

It would be ludicrous to say that Dante is indeed a great poet but "still" bound by the dogma of the Middle Ages or of Catholicism in general: as a poet he can be interpreted only from the center of this dogma; he identifies himself existentially with it, plunges his inspiration into its waters in order to receive that same inspiration anew from it.⁶⁶

He did not write what he did *despite* the ostensible "constraints" but *because* of the freedom they gave him: the Church's teachings were apertures into inexhaustible mystery, horizons opening endlessly into deeper truth, beauty, goodness, and love.

Seeing Dante as one who subverted medieval theocentrism by placing man at the center, so that the "*Divina Commedia* [is] mostly read as a *commedia umana*,"⁶⁷ reverses the truth: though of course Dante is the main character of the poem, from a deeper perspective the Trinity, the communion of divine persons is ultimately the protagonist. In the trinitarian ontology opened up by the Cappadocian Fathers, the deepest reality is a communion of persons, substantial *and* relational; the Incarnation translates those relations into creaturely terms. The particular missions of Christ and the Holy Spirit (through Virgil, Beatrice, Bernard, and Mary) in bringing the prodigal Dante back to the Father "in-spire" the poem. *Pace* Croce and others, the poem has no meaning, no coherence, no unity without the persons of the Trinity as the "meta-hermeneutical" realities that overcome the two-tier reading (e.g., Virgil and Beatrice as nature and grace), secure the inseparability of form and content, protect the au-

66. Balthasar, *GL3*, 51–52.

67. T. K. Seung, "The Epic Character of the *Divina Commedia* and the Function of Dante's Three Guides," *Italica* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 353.

tonomy of created things, and do justice to Love in its splendor and resplendence throughout the poem.

However, calling the poem theocentric would be as misleading as calling it anthropocentric, if these modern terms are understood as being in opposition. The protagonists, God and Dante, are mutually though asymmetrically related. Throughout the *Comedy*, truth is seen as disclosed in history and revealed in personal, concrete encounters—in the incarnational, not Heideggerian sense. Trinitarian ontology⁶⁸ concerns the relationship between the world and the absolute-but-not-abstract first principle through the fruitful mediation of Christ:

The pure actuality of the absolute first principle, the radical generosity that is the source of all things, has entered into history. . . . God is eternal, as pure act, but not as timeless; instead, the Incarnation represents the “fullness of time.”⁶⁹

To borrow from Evelyn Waugh, “Grasp that, and you have the root of the matter.”

It will be the relationship between the first principle and created things that reveals why deification does not negate the individual person, and why apophaticism

no longer appears as negation but as a positive affirmation of the inexhaustible ontological profundity of God. . . . It does not deny the value of reason but only signals that its limit can also be a threshold, that is, that where metaphysical thought enters into crisis, new possibilities are thrust open like windows. In fact, in this way, *ratio* is fulfilled in *relatio*.⁷⁰

The Incarnation is the concrete *analogia entis*, to which we now turn.

68. As contrasted with the ontology of the Trinity, about intra-divine relations.

69. D.C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 270–71.

70. Giulio Maspero, “A Trinitarian Ontology: The Relational Approach,” (presentation at “New Trinitarian Ontologies” conference, Cambridge, UK, September 13, 2019). “The hypostatic union was not dissolved with the ascension of Christ into heaven. His acts . . . even the hidden life in Nazareth, are a union of time and eternity” (ibid.).

3.2. Analogia entis

If some Dante criticism, to borrow Brendan Sammon's phrase, "oscillates within the unbidden confines of its own equivocity,"⁷¹ it is because what is lacking is the maintaining of an abiding difference/otherness within unity through mediation by analogy. While the Aristotelian analogy of proportion and predicate analogy are staples of Dante scholarship, a rather static version of Aquinas's *analogia entis* has been invoked to explain why Dante's descriptions of and encounters with Beatrice are not blasphemous, as she seems so often to play a Christlike role.⁷²

Erich Przywara saw a more fruitful dynamic formulation in the Fourth Lateran Council's positing of an "ever greater" dissimilarity arising out of every similarity between God and the creature.⁷³ The *analogia entis* is a recognition that there is an infinite distance between God and creation that does not erase their unity, but is rather the only thing that makes it possible. While dialectic reels between the dark "night of antithesis" (equivocation) and a "passionate desire for the fusion"⁷⁴ (univocity), the *analogia* is the essential truth of the faith, "a *reductio in mysterium*."⁷⁵ God is encountered immanently in creation while at the same time transcending it, as ultimately incomprehensible. However, the *mysterium* of the *reductio* is not irrational mysticism. Dante scholars are right to quote frequently Augustine's *si comprehendis*,

71. Brendan Thomas Sammon, *The God Who Is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Areopagite* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 356.

72. See Robert Hollander, *Dante: A Life in Works*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 38–39. Franke comes closest when he speaks of Dante's Dionysian tradition as disanalogy at the base of every analogy. He quotes Bruno de la Forte: "There must be another relation between the Whole and the fragment than the Greek one . . . a relation of rupture, of scandal, of transgression" (*Dante and the Sense of Transgression*, 74). He also notes that this is picked up by Balthasar in his "paradoxically abject glory." But this rupture must be embraced within a dramatic notion of truth; Christ's coming is indeed a scandal, but within love and gift and the return to the Father.

73. Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 422.

74. *Ibid.*, 196.

75. *Ibid.*, 182.

non est Deus, but not as a sign of the dialectical opposition of knowledge and mystery. Instead, it should be seen as an opening into *how* it is that we can know truly, though not exhaustively. As Josef Pieper says, “Things are so utterly knowable that we can never come to the end of our endeavors to know them; it is precisely their knowability that is inexhaustible.”⁷⁶

This puts both apophaticism and deification in a different light. We will speak more about this when we come to the beatific vision, but here we can say that the “oscillating equipoise” noted earlier will not be stilled even at the height of union with God, for “in the very same act in which the human being comes to intimate God in the likeness of the creature, he also comes to intimate him as the one who is beyond all likeness.”⁷⁷

The *analogia entis* between God and creation is reflected (analogously!) whenever there is an intrinsic relationship between something and its “ever greater.”⁷⁸ This asymmetrical leitmotif is of course present in the beatific vision, but also in other instances of the nature-grace relationships, wherever the ever-greater splendor of transcendence breaks through the immanence of form, particularly in the Beatrician vision of beauty.

3.3. *Being, gift, and love*

We return to the crucial metaphysical distinction, the radical gap between finite, contingent, dependent beings and infinite self-subsistent Being, which Moevs introduced into Dante criticism. Giulio Maspero says that this radical gap, with apophaticism “as its reflection on the cognitive level,” does not “distance man from God but brings him closer because the radical difference between the eternal and created natures enables the reading of

76. Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 160.

77. Erich Przywara, *Schriften*, vol. 2 (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1962), 404, quoted in Betz, “Translator’s Introduction,” *Analogia Entis*, 61.

78. For example, rather than argue that humans and animals are on a quantitative continuum, or that there is an impassable gulf between them, we can say that they truly have things in common, while at the same time the human difference reflects what is “ever greater.”

their relationship as an eternal relation of gift.”⁷⁹ To see why this is so, it is necessary to look not simply at uncreated Being and created “beings,” but to unfold *nonsubsistent esse*, the “being” within created beings, which is not itself a thing but an act, itself created, that is, given, for *creare autem est dare esse* (“to create is to give the act of being”).⁸⁰ It is illuminating to note that Dante’s reflexive neologisms (e.g., *s’inzaffira*,⁸¹ said of Mary, she who ensapphires heaven) almost always show substances in action, nouns co-inhering within the creation of new verbs, revealing that what we tend to think of as static, self-enclosed entities are in truth one with the “act” aspect of their being. They are, ultimately, mysterious manifestations of the continuous gift of *esse* (which is why Aquinas said that even something like a fly is not completely knowable: because created *esse* is an act, a mediation, not a thing or mediator, there is an incommunicable mystery at the heart of all things). As such, the neologisms are miniature icons of Aquinas’s “real distinction.” If getting a grip on Dante’s metaphysics is the goal, an understanding of that distinction, which Balthasar called “the source of all the religious and philosophical thought of humanity,”⁸² is essential.

Ferdinand Ulrich pinpoints Aquinas’s crucial statement on created *esse*: “*Esse* signifies something complete and simple, but nonsubsistent,”⁸³ noting its paradoxical nature. Created *esse* is complete and simple, hence perfect—yet it *lacks something*. Without essence it is nothing; it does not subsist; it requires essence, as essence requires *esse*. The resolution of the paradox is that *esse*’s “poverty,” its apparent incompleteness, is neither a privation nor a deficit, but is constitutive of its perfection. The wealth of its perfection is radically given away, which is the very essence of love. “The ‘poverty’ of love,” for Ulrich, “is in fact nothing but the ultimate seal of its superabundant

79. Maspero, “A Trinitarian Ontology.”

80. Thomas Aquinas, I *Sententiarum*, d. 37, a. 1.

81. *Par.*, XXIII, 102.

82. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 112.

83. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia Dei*, q. 1, a. 1.

wealth.”⁸⁴ Through *esse*—a creative act, not a created thing—God demonstrates the plentitude of his generosity in that the gift of *esse* depends on just what is being-made-to-be. The real distinction structures creation as a play of reciprocal giving and receiving, and every created thing is a being-in-community, a being-in-relation.

On the one hand, the act of creation is an act of communion, a radical giving of “to be,” holding nothing back, that accounts for the autonomy and positivity of creation, a true “other.” On the other hand, all of creation participates in *esse*, in God’s love and generosity, yet *esse* is not exhausted in its unity with essence. According to D.C. Schindler, that nature is in full possession of itself while at the same time being self-transcendent makes the “superessentiality of being” analogous to the supernaturality of grace. “Only such a nature is capable of encountering grace ontologically, that is, of receiving grace into the roots of its being so that the whole of it is transformed without becoming something else. Only such a nature can be viewed as having an intrinsic openness to grace.”⁸⁵

3.4. The “Smile of the Mother”

Balthasar provides a luminous icon that draws all of the above together in his “Smile of the Mother,” developed in four “unfoldings.” The first moment, when the mother smiles at her child, is the gesture that brings the child simultaneously into a personal relationship of love as well as into the experience of the surprising giftedness of being; the two, *being and love*, are coextensive.⁸⁶ It is a dramatic exemplar of analogy, of the mutual inherence of unity and difference in which difference is neither external to nor destructive of unity (the mother is other than the child even as they are one in love). The

84. Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being*, trans. D.C. Schindler (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018), 372.

85. D.C. Schindler, “The Grace of Being: Ferdinand Ulrich and the Task of a Faithful Metaphysics in the Face of Modernity,” in *Christian Wisdom Meets Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Oakes (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 157.

86. Nicholas J. Healy Jr., *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Being as Communion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64.

image continues opening the real distinction as gift, for the second and third moments are revelatory of the mutual dependence as well as gift-character of *esse* and essence. The mother too is gifted with *esse*, as are all other created things, so limitless being appears as the source. Yet *esse*, as Aquinas said, is nonsubsistent and needs essence. These moments point to the fourth distinction between God and the world: the "ontological gap." If the nonsubsistent "poverty" of created *esse* "allows the positive otherness of the finite essences, then the poverty of being is itself a radiant image of God's being. Just as being lets existents be by generously allowing all things to participate in its fullness, so God freely lets being and the existent be by allowing all things to participate in his divine fullness."⁸⁷

The mother's smile is the moment from which all subsequent moments will unfold

precisely because it is understood in the very origin that the "Thou" of the mother is not the "I" of the child, but both centers move in the same ellipse of love, and because it is understood likewise in the very origin that this love is the highest good and is absolutely sufficient, . . . for this reason, everything—"I" and "Thou" and the world—is lit up from *this lightning flash of the origin with a ray so brilliant and whole that it also includes a disclosure of God.*⁸⁸

We will see the lightning flash again in the Beatrician and beatific visions. While there are studies of the word "smile" in Dante's work—including his "smile of the universe"⁸⁹—it apparently has not been remarked upon how Dante's experience and Balthasar's dynamic image illuminate each other. Beatrice's smile is the sign and the way by which Dante rises through the spheres of paradise to the vision of God (the mother's smile, says Balthasar, is the "first act, journeying toward transcendence [that] immediately touches the final end"⁹⁰), always accompa-

87. *Ibid.*, 70.

88. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Creator Spirit*, vol. 3 of *Explorations in Theology*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 15 (emphasis added).

89. *Par.*, XXVII, 4–5.

90. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, vol. 5 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Graham Harrison et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 635 (hereafter cited as *GL5*).

nied by increasing knowledge and increasing beauty. Being's face manifested in the smile has an ontological depth at the same time that it reveals personal, concrete love.

A great deal more could be said in this overview about the metaphysics of being and love,⁹¹ which underlies what it means to appropriate the *Comedy* for ourselves, and perhaps more importantly, what *expropriation* would mean: Dante's "grammar of love," love's ordering graciousness, is laid bare, allowing it to take hold of us, so that its terms range not only over the content of our intellect or our poetic sensibilities but over our entire lives as concrete persons. For Dante, this expropriation took place through his encounter with Beatrice, she who, in another neologism, '*mparadisa*, "im-paradises,"⁹² his mind, and this encounter is emblematic of his "third theology." Balthasar said that the natural love of Beatrice was neither aestheticized nor asceticized, neither lost in erotic madness nor sacrificed in renunciation. Carried up, transformed by grace, to the throne of God, it is "utterly unprecedented in the history of Christian theology."⁹³ We now turn to the Beatrician vision.

IV. BEATRICIAN VISION

I turned back my sight to my lady,
and . . . I was amazed,
for in her eyes was blazing such a smile
that I thought with mine I had touched the limit
both of my beatitude and my paradise.
—*Par.*, XV, 32–36.

Dante lovers know the story. Dante was nine years old when he first laid eyes upon Beatrice in the streets of Florence. It was

91. For Dante, Love and the great sea of being (*mar de l'essere* [*Par.*, I, 113]) over which all creatures move to their port, their telos, coincide for the Blessed: *s'essere in carità è qui necesse* ("to be, we ourselves, in love is here necessity") (*Par.*, III, 77 [translation mine]). Especially intriguing is the trinitarian character of *esse* itself—the substantial in-itselfness (*esse in*) that at once receives from the other (*esse ab*) and gives to the other (*esse ad*). See David L. Schindler, "The Given as Gift: Creation and Disciplinary Abstraction in Science" *Communio: International Catholic Review* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 90n50.

92. *Par.*, XXVIII, 3.

93. Balthasar, *GL3*, 32.

an experience of such wonder that he later wrote that he was affected in every part of his being: "*Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi* [Behold a god stronger than I, who coming shall rule over me]."⁹⁴ It was this astonishment that awakened his curiosity and love, that created such a great attraction—like the gravitational pull of the sun—that it provoked his entire life's work. At the end of his first book, *La Vita Nuova*, after the death of Beatrice at the age of twenty-seven, Dante vowed to write no more of her until he could say "what was never said of any woman."⁹⁵ That promise was kept, and it was not until the end of his life that he wrote of her in the *Divine Comedy*. He died two months after it was completed. The Beatrician vision discloses his personal and ontological position before the "ever greater" of Beatrice's incomparable beauty, and his humility opens the way for him to continue all the way to the beatific vision of God.

4.1. *The Primum Mobile*

Cantos XXVIII to XXX take place in a remarkable setting, never attempted in literature (and perhaps never even imagined as something that could be illustrated dramatically): the *Primum Mobile*, the philosophical-theological *passo* between *esse* and *Esse*, the created order and the uncreated Empyrean or mind of God. Dante turns from the eyes of Beatrice to that which is reflected therein, and there he sees something that confounds him. He believed he had been traveling through nine ever-widening spheres, but here he sees a reversal of magnitudes, of center and circumference: he is heading toward an infinitesimally small point (*punto*, which Dante uses both for dimension and time) haloed by nine encircling rings of fire, each one larger than the next. The point is God, who is surrounded by the encircling orders of angels and the spheres of paradise, wheels of light turned by love

94. Dante Alighieri, *The New Life of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Charles Eliot Norton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1898), 2. "Through the appearance of the beautiful we are wounded in our innermost being, and that wound grips us and takes us beyond ourselves; it stirs longing into flight and moves us toward the truly Beautiful, to the Good in itself" (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000], 126).

95. Dante, *The New Life of Dante Alighieri*, 90.

that are all the spheres through which Dante has passed. Beatrice says, “On that point the heavens and all nature are dependent.”⁹⁶ This is a vision of the true relation of grace and nature, the filial dependency—the total ontological reliance in every instant—of contingent persons and nature on their transcendent source (noted by Moevs as being of fundamental importance).

But there is much more. Cantos XXIX and XXX connect two astonishing astronomical metaphors with two expositions: one ontological—Beatrice’s on the metaphysics of creation—and one personal—Dante’s on Beatrice’s beauty. Much has been written about these two passages individually, but what is striking is that their juxtaposition reveals something deeper: their *communio*, their co-inherence.

4.2. Creation

Canto XXIX begins with a description of the equinox, when, at dawn and sunset (echoing the metaphor of the Third Ring), there is an instant (again, *punto*) when the sun and moon are perfectly balanced like scales from the zenith of the heavens on opposite sides of the horizon. For so long a moment the smiling Beatrice is silent. As always, she knows what Dante needs before he speaks: he wants to know, essentially, what is the motive for creation (specifically here of the circling angelic orders) if God is self-subsistent.

I tell, not ask, what you wish to hear, for I have seen it there where every *ubi* and every *quando* is centered [*s'appunta*]. Not for gain of good unto Himself, which cannot be, but that His splendor might, in resplendence, say, “*Subsisto*”—in His eternity beyond time, beyond every other bound, as it pleased Him, the Eternal Love opened into new loves.⁹⁷

These few lines might well be the summit and summary of Dante’s metaphysics. It is not only the angels who say *subsisto*;

96. *Par.*, XXVIII, 41–42.

97. *Par.*, XXIX, 10–18. Some have said that this passage refers *only* to the creation of angels, as it is part of a discourse on angels, but it is clear that Dante means to refer to all of creation. On this point, see note 101 below.

the donation of *esse* and the resultant positive yet relational autonomy of the creature are lit up as if by a "sparkling of the Holy Ghost": gathered together in this way, by this speaker, in this context, we see the radiance of being as the gratuitous gift of love. Patrick Gardner said, in a very Ulrichian comment on this passage, "God looked into the abyss of nothingness and saw new loves," he reached out into "absolute poverty, the abyss of nonbeing" and offered a gratuitous gift, "a share in his being."⁹⁸ The motive of creation is Love himself loving, giving the gift of being to new loves as part of their very constitution, generously, not out of necessity, freely, inexhaustibly, loves which can then reflect and resound his glory and cry out his very name, "I Am!" in all their own concrete reality and freedom. Something that can say *Subsisto!* is not an emanation, nor a Maya-like illusion, nor a dream that will vanish when we "wake up" from the finite;⁹⁹ it is fully *itself*, and, at the same time, it remains constitutively related to the Creator and to all of creation.¹⁰⁰

What is being given when the creature is gifted with being is a participation in the self-diffusive generosity of the goodness of God. Aquinas says, *bonum est diffusivum sui*. As Michael Taylor summarizes Ulrich: "The ontological wealth of the gift of being is self-diffusive: substantial being is structured as generous in the manner of gift, of what gives only as first given, and then it is able to participate in this generosity by passing it along, replaying the free exchange that characterizes being as love."¹⁰¹

98. Patrick Gardner, "Love That Reaches into the Abyss: Dante, the Pope, and the Mother of Mercy" (presentation at Thomas Aquinas College, Santa Paula, CA, November 4, 2015), <https://thomasaquinas.edu/news/dr-patrick-gardner-%E2%80%9C9Cdante-pope-and-mother-mercy%E2%80%9D>.

99. One awakens to oneself "christically . . . by voluntarily sacrificing the attachment to, or obsessive identification with, the finite" (Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 7).

100. "Created *esse, qua esse commune*, is an *order of being* that truly affects each being from within, such that all beings are understood from their original beginnings to bear a *unity*, to be *in* community with one another, in and through the Creator's bestowal of *esse* commonly to all and uniquely to each" (David L. Schindler, "Being, Gift, and Self-Gift (Part Two)," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 43, no. 3 [Fall 2016]: 433–34 [emphasis original]).

101. Michael Taylor, *Foundations of Nature: Metaphysics of Gift for an Integral Ecological Ethic* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, forthcoming).

Following this opening is Beatrice's last great exposition on God's creative act: "Form and matter, conjoined and simple, came into being which had no defect, as three arrows from a three-stringed bow; and as in glass, in amber or in crystal a ray shines so there that there is no interval between its coming and its pervading all, so did the triform effect ray forth from its Lord into its being, all at once."¹⁰² What is relevant here is that the biggest objection to creation as gift—that, as Gilson put it, "How can something that doesn't exist receive anything?"¹⁰³—dissipates when it is understood that "gift" in the "gift of being" is not used univocally with a "gift between persons," but analogically. There is a mutual but asymmetrical priority in creation *ex nihilo*: mutual, for the gift of being comes into existence at the same time as created substance (form and matter) that "receives" it,¹⁰⁴ and asymmetrical, for as created essence is formal as regards matter, created *esse* (Beatrice's "coming into being" of form and matter) is "formal in respect of all that is in a thing."¹⁰⁵

4.3. *Beauty*

Canto XXX begins at the hour before dawn¹⁰⁶ with a similar image of a balance point, here as a fulcrum rather than scales. As the sun rises up from below the horizon, the earth's conical shadow, in an opposing movement, sinks. At the astronomical instant of

102. *Par.*, XXIX, 22–29. This is not her final speech, a political one that would require a separate paper, but her final metaphysical exposition. It is usually limned as if it were only about the creation of angels (form activated by *esse*, without matter), and indeed it falls within a long discourse on their creation and fall, but the gift of *esse* itself is the deeper foundation of the exposition.

103. Etienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme. Introduction à la Philosophie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 6th ed. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. VRIN, 1986), 143, cited in Stefan Oster, "Thinking Love at the Heart of Things. The Metaphysics of Being and Love in the Work of Ferdinand Ulrich," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 677.

104. See David L. Schindler, "Being, Gift, and Self-Gift (Part One)," 242.

105. *STI*, q. 8, a. 1.

106. The sixth hour is noon. For an observer 6,000 miles away, it is just before dawn.

dawn itself, when the mathematical midpoint of the sun is on the horizon line, the apex of the shadow will be on the same plane in the opposite quarter—a perfect balance.

As the brightest handmaid of the sun advances, the heaven then shuts off its lights one by one, til the fairest is gone; not otherwise the triumph that plays forever round the Point which overcame me, seeming enclosed by that which it encloses, was gradually extinguished to my sight, wherefore seeing nothing and love constrained me to return with my eyes to Beatrice. If what has been said of her so far as here were all included in a single praise, it would be too slight to serve this present turn.¹⁰⁷

Dante is describing the sky just before dawn and the fading of the stars. The metaphor concerns the "dawning" of Beatrice and the concurrent fading of the remarkable vision of God as a Point with the encircling orders of angels. In Canto XXIX we had a moment when nothing is heard, of silence, but here we have an instant when nothing is seen, and the entire poem belongs to Beatrice without distraction. She is standing poised, balanced, in her full created glory, and in this moment when all her intelligence, beauty, and love are seen comes Dante's last great exposition on Beatrice's beauty, in the form of Dante laying down his poetic office (in poetry, of course!).

The beauty I beheld transcends measure not only beyond our reach, but I truly believe that He alone who made it can enjoy it all. At this pass [*passo*] I concede myself defeated more than ever comic or tragic poet was defeated by a point [*punto*] in his theme; for as the sun does to the sight which trembles most, even so remembrance of the sweet smile shears my memory of its very self. From the first day when in this life I saw her face, until this sight, the continuing of my song has not been cut off, but now my pursuit must desist from following her beauty further in my verses, as at his utmost reach must every artist. Such as I leave her to a greater heralding than that of my trumpet.¹⁰⁸

107. *Par.*, XXX, 7–18.

108. *Par.*, XXX, 19–35. It is not only in the beatific vision that language reaches its limit; if we could but see it, the beauty of every created thing would leave us speechless because of the infinite transcendental mystery of the gift of being.

Dante's vision of Beatrice, who first flashed upon his eyes when they were children, who made him tremble on the Mount of Purgatory, reaches its fulfillment and consummation in these verses that prefigure the final vision of God. Her smiling moment of unsurpassable radiant beauty means that they have passed beyond the created order into the heaven of pure light, "light intellectual full of love, love of the true good, full of joy."¹⁰⁹ As in the Third Ring vision, he is encircled by illumination, but immeasurably greater—a lighting flash that temporarily blinds him.

4.4. *Their connection*

The parallel astronomical descriptions of oscillating equipoise, of moments of balance within movement, of the metaphorical depictions of the dependence of creation on the Creator (the moon's light and the shadow of the earth are both caused by and depend upon the sun), have more than a surface resonance. There is a deeper reason for putting these two passages on the creative act and on created beauty together. Beauty is a "community of being"¹¹⁰ that ontologically gathers together God's relation to creatures, the creatures' relations to each other, and the creature's relation to itself. It brings together the One and the Many without dissolving either: every star, person, and blade of grass and the Creator, the tiniest *punto* and all of eternity. This truth speaks to the question of the relation of nature and grace, to Balthasar's ineffable ground of being revealed through the form of Beatrice's beauty.

Dantean beauty is that which flashes out of the oscillation between the finite, intelligible form and the infinite and incomprehensible act of existence that God graciously grants.¹¹¹ In a passage that recalls for us the lightning flash, *fulgore*, of Beatrice's smile (and prefigures the *fulgore* of the beatific vision),¹¹²

109. *Par.*, XXX, 40–41.

110. Sammon, *The God Who Is Beauty*, 367.

111. This would require another full-length essay. The best gloss on Dantean beauty is Dionysius the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas on the divine names.

112. *Par.*, XXI, 11; XXXIII, 141.

Aquinas says that God "transmits to all creatures, with a certain lightning-like brightness [*fulgore*], a ray of His own brilliant light, which is the source of all illumination. And these lightning-like communications . . . understood according to analogical participation . . . are beautifying, that is, productive of beauty in things . . . the act of existing [*esse*] of all things stems from the Divine Beauty."¹¹³ This participation in beauty

is neither the logical mode of participation (where a limited intelligibility shares in a less limited intelligibility), nor the kind of participation of a concrete thing in an abstract thing. In both cases, the participated source only ever shares a part of itself with the acting participant. For Thomas, however, *a beautiful thing is a thing that is literally full of beauty; it bears a real or ontological participation in beauty. . . .* A given entity's beauty, then, is a creaturely imitation of the Son, whose being is constituted as the complete reception of God.¹¹⁴

The beauty Beatrice participates in is not akin to the abstract intellectual concept of the universal in later philosophy, but has its foundation in reality. What William Desmond calls an "intimate universal" is deeper than idealism's "concrete universal"; it is the "ontological surplus of being at work in the most intimate immanence and in solidarity with the most unconstrained transcendence. . . . The community [it] comes to realize is not an inclusive totality but an openly intermediating gathering of others."¹¹⁵

In contrast to the translucent Beatrice, Dante earlier showed us an opaque image in the Dream of the Siren. As Dante becomes mesmerized, the distorted Siren seems to appear more and more attractive. Her song in the Italian is as lulling as waves gently, hypnotically lapping upon the shore: "I am," she sang, "I am your sweet siren / who leads mariners astray in mid-sea" ("*Io son,*" *cantava*, "*io son dolce serena / che marinari in mezzo mar*

113. Thomas Aquinas, *De Divinis nominibus* IV.5, as translated by James F. Anderson in *Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Regnery-Gateway, 1953), 89, 92.

114. Sammon, *The God Who Is Beauty*, 366–67 (emphasis added).

115. William Desmond, *The Intimate Universal: The Hidden Porosity among Religion, Art, Philosophy, and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.

dismago").¹¹⁶ The Siren's beauty is a deceptive false one that would have locked Dante into himself, again "dazzled and left hapless to decide," had Virgil not intervened. Contrast this with the words, among the very first that Beatrice speaks to Dante, in Canto XXX of *Purgatorio*: "Look well! Pay Attention! I am, I am indeed Beatrice!" (*Guardaci ben; ben son, ben son Beatrice!*).¹¹⁷ These are the hard-as-diamond words of the particular, concrete woman who makes Christ present for Dante. And in *Paradiso* she says, "Open your eyes and see what I am" (*Apri gli occhi e riguardo qual son io*).¹¹⁸ According to Charles Williams, "The poem cannot, for all it has said and will say, say more than that."¹¹⁹

Created being is a contracted presentation of infinite Being, which is coextensive with Beauty, and in "intimate universality," suspended in and dependent upon the gift of existence, that being becomes not only an epiphany of Being itself but a calling *to* and annunciation *of* Beauty. All things participate in the harmony and order between form and existence and can present at once both the real presence of highest Beauty as well as point beyond themselves *to* that Beauty. As Dante stands before Beatrice, revealed in her full beauty, perfect form standing out in sharp relief like a lightning flash against the darkness, so he will stand before Christ's face and the Trinity. As the real distinction reveals, because of the tension between essence and existence, man always "knows" more than his rationality can state, and the more he tries to say, the more he sees that he stands before an unfathomable mystery. This standing is Faith, this mystery is that which Beauty manifests—a darkness, a light such that "I should have been lost if my eyes had turned from it."¹²⁰ We now turn to that final vision.

116. *Purg.*, XIX, 19–20.

117. *Purg.*, XXX, 73 (translation mine). The "hidden joy, praise, and beatitude" of Beatrice's name "is precisely the poet's task to reveal" (Claudel, "Religion and the Artist," 366–67).

118. *Par.*, XXIII, 46.

119. Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 216. "She has hurled herself from heaven to save him; but now she has a second task, to show him what she is—that is, to show herself. It is a duty to contemplate; it is also a duty to be contemplated" (ibid.).

120. *Par.*, XXXIII, 77–78.

V. THE BEATIFIC VISION

The heavens call to you and circle around you,
 displaying to you their eternal splendors. . .
 —*Purg.*, XIV, 148–49.

In the Polynesian “starpath” method of wayfinding, the navigator is posited as stationary: “You simply point the boat in the right direction, and the island comes to you.”¹²¹ One might similarly say that, rather than Dante being the one who ascends the spheres of paradise, heaven has been coming to him as he undergoes his own transfiguration. In fact, Dante says this explicitly: what he has seen temporally and spatially spread out in the spheres were actually projections from the Empyrean (where each saint has his or her true place), appearing to Dante in a way that is a concession to his mortal faculties.¹²² At the appearance of each sphere, the radiance increases, beginning with Canto I, where the “day seemed added unto day.”¹²³ More than once he is temporarily blinded by the light, but his “sight by seeing learned to see.”¹²⁴ After the last time he is blinded, a horizontal river of light appears from which he “drinks” with his eyes, and the river is transformed, as if upending itself vertically. Dante is no longer looking *along* the light but is encircled by it. This is the great Rose of the Empyrean, the communion of saints where all the blessed have their place.

5.1. Before the vision: Apophaticism

Before the vision there are a series of metaphors: a fading dream, melting snow, scattered leaves, and one of the most cited verses on the impotence of language: “Now will my speech fall more short . . . than that of an infant who still

121. Mary Taylor, “A Deeper Ecology: A Catholic Vision of the Person in Nature,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 583–620, at 620.

122. *Par.*, IV, 28–48.

123. *Par.*, I, 61–62.

124. *Par.*, XXXIII, 112–13 (Barbara Reynolds’s completion of the Dorothy Sayers translation).

bathes his tongue at the breast.”¹²⁵ According to Franke, Dante thus opens metaphysics to apophatic theology, recognizing God as “manifest precisely in the experience of language’s failure,” which brings the *Paradiso* “close to various post-modern modes of thinking particularly of transgression.”¹²⁶ However, Wittgenstein noted that if you “no longer rest your weight on the earth but suspend yourself from heaven, then everything will be different.”¹²⁷ Both situations look exactly the same, but “the interplay of forces . . . is nevertheless quite different.”¹²⁸ The “experience of language’s failure” before God means something very different for Christian thought than for postmodern thought.

First, in the beatific vision Dante says, in the most widely used translations (Singleton, Mandelbaum, Hollander), that speech *fails*: “Thenceforward my vision was greater than speech can show, which fails at such a sight, and at such excess memory fails.”¹²⁹ Dante was so careful about his words that if he could not find the right one, as we have seen, he invented new ones. The verb used twice for “fails” is not the Italian *fallire* but rather *cedere*. Dante used *fallire* in its true sense as the opposite of succeed: “Follow your star and you will never fail to find your glorious port.”¹³⁰ *Cedere* is better translated as “yield,” for the word means to *surrender* to something greater.¹³¹

Second, the weakness of our language is a *felix culpa*, one which, like the weakness of our wills and of our flesh,

125. *Par.*, XXXIII, 106–08.

126. Franke, *Dante and the Sense of Transgression*, 153. Dante says he feels his joy increase, and Franke takes this to show “the same structure of inference from a subjective, *purely emotional residue* that becomes the origin of all possibility of representation,” a “feeling,” reducing it to private sensation (*ibid.*, 156). On the contrary, Christian joy is deeper than emotion or sensation, a *reality* marked by hope, faith, and love, possible even in the face of suffering.

127. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 33e.

128. *Ibid.*

129. *Par.*, XXXIII, 55–57.

130. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto XV, 55–56 (trans. Anthony Esolen).

131. *Vocabolario etimologico della lingua italiana*, comp. Ottorino Pianigiani (Rome: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1907), s.v. “cedere.”

serves as a permanent reminder of our created status and our dependency on God. While Dante's baby at the breast has not mastered language, what is equally true is that *the baby is utterly dependent*. The ontological reality is that we *need* God and always will. Ontological poverty is the other side of ontological wealth: seeing the limitations in all creaturely beings as *good* amplifies rather than demeans their ultimate value, and to lament the weakness of language is to lament that we are not God.

The very defects that we see in things are not a source of sadness for us, but of joy. . . . It is because all created things are imperfect, because they all have a certain lack, a certain radical emptiness, that they breathe, that they live, that they can enter into relation, that they need God and other creatures, that they lend themselves to every analogy in poetry and love.¹³²

Third, Dante's speechlessness is not a sign of the opacity of God but rather of the radiant, divine darkness of which the Patristic Fathers spoke. That to which our speech *cede* (surrenders) is not black obscurity; it is God's silence, the plenitude of love and communion. The stress should not be on the failure of our language, or on futility due to limits that cannot be escaped, but on the silence of God who "*dwells and waits for us, watching the horizon,*"¹³³ like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The poverty of our language is a key to our access to the glory of God, and our own silence is, in the words of St. John of the Cross, a form of "sounding solitude," a sounding that will never reach a final depth.

Finally, it is *not our task* to express God in all his fullness in language, so we do not "fail" if we cannot do so. The express image of the invisible God is Christ, "the signifier par excellence," in whom "God the signified (equally par excellence) is perfectly expressed."¹³⁴ It is grace that perfects our natural lan-

132. Claudel, "Religion and the Artist," 367.

133. Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 154 (emphasis added).

134. Aidan Nichols, OP, *Christendom Awake: On Re-Energizing the Church in Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 60.

guage, and what we can say about God, our access to the mystery, is what is granted, gifted, revealed by the divine. It is Christ who redeems and consummates apophatic theology.

4.2. *The vision: Deification*

In Canto XV of *Paradiso* (73–84), Dante says that love and intelligence¹³⁵ are equally weighted (as in a scale's balance) for those who see God, the "Primal Equality" in whom, as in the sun, warmth and light (love and intellect) coincide. However, it is not so in mortals. That perfect equipoise and its contrast with Dante were prefigured in *La Vita Nuova*, written in his youth. There, Dante had a vision of Love weeping because, he says, "I am as the center of a circle to which all parts of the circumference are equidistant; but it is not so with you."¹³⁶ The *telos* is achieved at the end of the *Paradiso*. Even most people who have not read the *Comedy* are familiar with the line, "My desire and my will were revolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."¹³⁷

It has been said that the last verse reflects Aristotle's unmoved mover, but the *archē* sought by the Greek philosophers here has a personal face. Seeing the triune circling rotations "of three colors and one magnitude," Dante focuses upon the one from whom shone forth the human image, wanting to see how it agrees with (conforms itself to) the circle, how it *s'indova* ("in-wheres-itself"), how humanity and divinity co-inhere. He compares this task of uniting the incommensurables of nature and grace with a geometer trying to square a circle. Then, gazing upon the face as upon the host in eucharistic adoration, with a flash (*fulgore*), Love turns Dante's desire and will in equal balance. The sentence structure is active in the original Italian, where Love is the subject—it is changed to passive in English translations to maintain "stars" as the last word.

135. *Il senno*, a comprehensive term for sense, feeling, but also will, understanding, "intimate wisdom," to receive impressions through the senses, and to "perceive with the mind, understand, know, judge" (*Vocabolario etimologico della lingua italiana*, s.v. "senno").

136. Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, XII (translation mine).

137. *Par.*, XXXIII, 143–45.

While it is true that believers will be called "gods" (Jn 10:34–36), and that in the words of Aquinas, the blessed are "made deiform," deification for Dante is not a movement of identity but a transformation through mediation, the *analogia's* simultaneity of identity and difference. "One seeks," says David Bentley Hart, "not to take leave of one's humanity, but to fathom it in its ultimate depth, to be joined to the Godman who would remake us in himself, and so to become *simul divinus et creatura*."¹³⁸ In the movement of grace perfecting nature, the *fulgore* that can only be received as a gift, Dante enters into "an unheard of relationship of love, in a divinizing adoption that in some way reverses, without otherwise annulling, the metaphysical order, the necessary relation of the Creator to the creature."¹³⁹ A "divinizing adoption" that maintains both Creator-creature distance and the most interior intimacy is quite different from an individual-canceling, nature-erasing deification, or from a vision of union with God as experiencing "oneself as one thing, all things, and no thing through the love that moves the sun and the other stars."¹⁴⁰ Similarly, there is the tradition of the apotheosis of the self through an uncreated spark in the soul, outside of time and space, and "through this spark, beyond the duality of 'creature' and 'God,' the soul is God and God is the soul."¹⁴¹ But as Nicholas Healy notes, "deification is not a compromise or halfway house that achieves union by flatly identifying an abstracted part of man (spark of the soul) with a reduced part of God."¹⁴² Rather, it is a

138. David Bentley Hart, "The Anti-Theology of the Body," *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society* 9 (Summer 2005): 65–73, at 72.

139. Maurice Blondel, quoted in Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 159.

140. Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*, 185.

141. *Ibid.*, 68. "We come to it only by turning away from ourselves and created things, accepting or seeking nothing outside ourselves, diving into the bottomless well within us through absolute detachment and renunciation, annihilating or abandoning ourselves, wanting nothing, knowing nothing, having nothing" (*ibid.*). There is a resonance here with, for example, Elizabeth of the Trinity, but her writings unfold within a very different context than the Vedic, namely the christological-trinitarian form of deifying grace.

142. Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 215. "Against a position that conceives bodily and spiritual mediation as a penultimate means to be superseded by the immediacy of a direct vision, Balthasar argues that

communication, an entrance into communion with God, not via a spark but via Christ's return to the Father, comprising the whole person, body and soul. It is not a static state but a dynamic, inexhaustible fountain.

5.3. *After the vision: Mission*

Precisely because that personal fulfillment was at the same time an objective commitment to the cosmic order, it entailed a responsibility to bear witness to the Light, as do the sun and the other stars. . . . The final simile, then, is not only a most intimate experience of self-fulfillment, but also a public testimony to God's grace.
—Freccero, *Dante and the Poetics of Conversion*¹⁴³

One of the most striking moments in the beatific vision is Dante's transformation of the abstract image of the circle that the geometer attempts to square into the concrete image of a *moving wheel*. The former is a sign of eternity and perfection, the latter is a beautiful image of the harmony of nature perfected by grace. Like the Carthusian motto—"the Cross is the still center of the turning world"—the wheel is an image of simultaneous rest and movement, for a turning wheel is a *compound*. In one uniform motion, its circumference rotates around its own center while at the same time that center becomes another circumference whose wider revolution provides both forward motion and contact with the ground or road.¹⁴⁴ There is an aspect to beatitude such that, to borrow from David L. Schindler's book title, the divine center of the Church turns out to be integrated with the heart of the world. As Dante's desire and will turn, that contact with the ground—with created reality—is never lost.

even in the very end our relation to God will be mediated by the humanity of Christ made fluid to include the whole cosmos" (ibid.).

143. On page 247. Freccero wrote insightfully about the wheel in "The Final Image," which can be found in *Dante and the Poetics of Conversion*.

144. In the *Timaeus*, Plato notes that stars rotate on their own axis and revolve around the heavens (from the perspective of a viewer on earth), which Freccero calls an analogue for "perfect circling within . . . and perfect circling without, because of a perfect integration into a harmonious cosmic order" (Freccero, *Dante and the Poetics of Conversion*, 251).

This contact reminds us of two things: first, that the beatific vision is not an entirely private experience, as so many think, but a corporate one in the "both/and" sense that a person is an-individual-in-community, always in contact with the Church as the Body of Christ. Dante stands in the center of the great Rose of the Empyrean, in which the communion of saints—who all fold their hands and pray for Dante¹⁴⁵—forever gazes in love upon God. He loses neither his place in the Mystical Body nor his individuality.

Second, the wheel is also a marvelous depiction of the person, who is, as Aquinas said, a boundary between eternity and time, the corporeal and spiritual, but a boundary of a specific kind: a *horizon*, which is not static like a wall, but rather opens up, ever deeper, as an observer on a ship moves forward on the turning world.¹⁴⁶ D.C. Schindler notes that Aquinas called the will the "intellectual appetite," denoting the double movement of openness to being that characterizes the intellect and the *movement out toward the other* that characterizes appetite. The will as intellectual appetite "culminates in the affirmation of things in their very being, which is the most basic act of love."¹⁴⁷

"Turning outward" in love is Dante's mission,¹⁴⁸ which is, *after obedient listening and contemplation*, both to show and to speak. He prays to God: "Make my tongue so powerful that I may leave to people of the future one gleam of the glory that is Yours."¹⁴⁹ Earlier we spoke of neologisms as manifesting the "act" aspect of beings. They do much more. Joseph Luzzi noted that "whereas hell touted the defeat of language, heaven proclaims its victory, and the neologism plays a major role in this triumph . . . as the resurrection of a regular word in

145. *Par.*, XXXIII, 38–39.

146. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 11.81.12.

147. D.C. Schindler, "The Word as the Center of Man's Onto-Dramatic Task," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 73–85, at 81.

148. Claudel is right that Dante is first a poet, not a theologian or missionary; but every Christian is "sent" as a witness and in this sense has a mission.

149. *Par.*, XXXIII, 67–72 (trans. Allen Mandelbaum).

a new Christian light"¹⁵⁰ that extends to the resurrection of all language. In contrast to an over-emphasis on the apophaticism surrounding the beatific vision, it is notable that every person Dante meets in paradise has *already experienced* that vision—in fact, *is experiencing* it—and still the encounters are primarily marked by speech. Dante's own task is also speech: "Open your mouth" (*apri la bocca*), says his ancestor Cacciaguida.¹⁵¹ "Transcribe what you have seen" (*e quell che vedi . . . fa che tu scrive*),¹⁵² says Beatrice, echoing Christ's words to St. John (Rev 1:19). His "turning outward" of the wheel is the gift of the poem itself, via a word that is

the simultaneity of knowledge and love, which is breathed forth, sent on its way, spoken to and with others. Thus a proper word is a word that articulates the essential truth of things . . . [and] shapes this knowing affirmation in a fitting way which makes it accessible to others as what we might call a common good.¹⁵³

In the section on Dante's critics, we looked at the *trasmunar* passage. That tercet—prompted by the apotheosis of Glaucus the fisherman, who became a sea god after eating a magical plant—conjoins the themes of language (the impossibility of signifying) and deification (the passing beyond the human). A pagan metaphor is not enough; it is a rough draft, so to speak, best read in tandem with the verses immediately following the vanishing of the Third Ring. There, Dante sees a vision of the Cross. Because these verses gather together the two themes with Christ "flashing forth," they function as a luminous final gloss on both the *trasmunar* tercet and the beatific vision.

Here my memory outstrips my wit;
for that Cross so flashed forth Christ,
that I can find for it no fit comparison;

150. Joseph Luzzi, "As a Leaf on a Branch...": Dante's Neologisms," *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (March 2010): 322–36, at 331.

151. *Par.*, XXVII, 65. Beatrice had told Dante, "Take note, and even as I speak these words, do you transmit them in your turn to those who live the life that is a race to death" (*Purg.*, XXXIII, 52–54 [trans. Mandelbaum]).

152. *Purg.*, XXXII, 104–05 (trans. Mandelbaum).

153. D.C. Schindler, "The Word as the Center," 83.

But he that takes up his cross and follows Christ
 shall yet forgive me for what I leave untold,
 when he sees Christ flash in that dawn.¹⁵⁴

Again, there appears to be the "failure" of language: memory outstrips wit. *Remembering* tends to be treated in Dante scholarship only as the attempt to recreate via words or ideas that which occurred in the past; that which is remembered is the memory, seen as "a treasure store of retrievable contents."¹⁵⁵ But the scriptural sense of remembrance is the making present of God's acts;¹⁵⁶ things are left untold only because *one must take up the Cross and follow Christ*. And again, there is the "flash": it seems odd to say that in the beatific vision Dante only *experienced what he sought for a flash* ("for ever so brief a moment"¹⁵⁷), rather than that it *came to him in a flash*, as if there were no such thing as sanctification. While of course Dante remains a mortal, living man who cannot fully describe what occurred, something has *changed* for him; the final vision is *beatific*, not synoptic. It was not simply a matter of seeing a whole greater than the sum of its parts, a momentary understanding as if lightning had lit up, for a millisecond, a dark landscape that now must be reconstructed in words (he already had a synoptic vision earlier, when he saw the universe as a single volume¹⁵⁸). Instead, it was like St. Paul's "twinkling of an eye" in which "we shall all be changed" (1 Cor 15:52). Labor pains are not re-created by memory, as Scripture says,¹⁵⁹ nor captured in words, as experience shows. But the key thing is that *a baby has been born*, and the mother has been changed forever in a hundred thousand ways. The action of labor

154. *Par.*, XIV, 103–08. The root of the word for "flash," *lampeggiava*, is a synonym for *fulgore*.

155. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 92.

156. *Rosarium virginis Mariae*, 13.

157. Singleton, "The Irreducible Dove," 587. It is also odd to say that the vision is "from the earth, looking up," as if Dante fell backwards. Surely this is the reverse of what happened. If anything, at the end he is looking out from a God's-eye perspective.

158. *Par.*, XXXIII, 85–90.

159. Jn 16:21.

and delivery extends itself not only in words (which “fail”) but in deeds, behaviors, passions, daily decisions and choices, and innumerable concrete particularities as to how one loves, sacrifices, thinks, prays, lives. The vision of God, like labor, “vanishes,” but not as a mirage does. Rather, we no longer see it, we see *by* it.¹⁶⁰ Following Christ, being conformed to Christ, *is the very form of our deification*. In the end, the relation of nature and deifying grace is not a puzzle to be solved linguistically or conceptually, like the geometer’s conundrum, but the concrete response to God’s call.

VI. A MARIAN CODA

In the Canto of the mother bird, Dante sees a garden of indescribable loveliness blossoming beneath the rays of Christ. He calls upon another image from nature: the sun breaks through the clouds and a single beam falls on a field of flowers, turning them into a blaze of glory. The most beautiful is Mary, the Rose, the “sweet flower to whom I pray morning and night,” the Living Star, the crowned Sapphire,¹⁶¹ whose name is made to “resound in every sky.”¹⁶²

It is remarkable how often Mary is at best noted in passing as a quick assist before the final goal, or at worst entirely overlooked. (There are, of course, notable exceptions.) But the journey to God is impossible without her. The original impetus comes from Mary, who sees Dante’s need before he asks (she “foreruns the asking”¹⁶³ as the mother bird foreruns the time), who sends St. Lucy, who asks Beatrice to send Virgil to Dante in the Dark Wood of the first Canto. Hers is the face that most resembles Christ’s and “whose radiance alone can dispose you to

160. Dante no longer sees *along* the light (the river) but *by* it. Beatrice had explained the moon not as a flat, opaque disc but a translucent opening to light, where *virtù* shines through “as gladness does through a living pupil” (*Par.*, II, 144).

161. *Par.*, XXIII, 88–89, 92, 101.

162. *Par.*, XXIII, 111 (trans. Anthony Esolen).

163. *Par.*, XXXIII, 18.

see Christ."¹⁶⁴ It is her grace for which Bernard prays, lest Dante fall back: "Whoso would have grace and has not recourse to thee, his desire seeks to fly without wings."¹⁶⁵ The gateway to the beatific vision is the Mother of God.

6.1. *The metaphysics of being, gift, and love*

St. Bernard prays, "Virgin mother, daughter of thy Son, humble and exalted more than any creature."¹⁶⁶ Mary's radical humility and her radical exaltation are the pattern and paradigm of the poverty-wealth of *esse* in the real distinction. Mary, the crown of created nature, is the surety that limitation is not an imperfection, but is rather love's most positive expression; it opens the door to the reception of the gift and the Magnificat's glorifying praise of the Giver. Beatrice had earlier told Dante to fix his eyes "into the abyss of the eternal counsel" (*l'abisso de l'eterno consiglio*).¹⁶⁷ In Bernard's prayer we learn what this means: Mary is not only most humble and most exalted, but also the "fixed goal of the eternal counsel" (*termine fisso d'eterno consiglio*).¹⁶⁸ In another Ulrichian passage, Gardner says, "She alone . . . knew fully and did not resent her nothingness before the Lord; and thus she was at the bottom, the foundation, of the unfathomable abyss of the eternal counsel, the depth of love which was from all eternity preparing her to receive Himself."¹⁶⁹ Abyss calls to abyss, says Elizabeth of the Trinity, quoting Psalm 42: "The abyss of our nothingness encounters the abyss of mercy."¹⁷⁰ And so Mary is the merciful diffusion of the Good. Bernard continues, "In

164. *Par.*, XXXII, 85–87 (translation from the Angelus of John Paul II, December 8, 2008).

165. *Par.*, XXXIII, 14–15.

166. *Par.*, XXXIII, 1–2.

167. *Par.*, VII, 94–95.

168. *Par.*, XXXIII, 3.

169. Gardner, "Love that Reaches into the Abyss."

170. Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Major Spiritual Writings*, vol. 1 of *I Have Found God: Complete Works*, trans. Aletheia Kane, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2014), 95.

thee is mercy, in thee pity, in thee munificence, in thee is found whatever of goodness is in any creature."¹⁷¹ She is "the common good of all creation, . . . the greatest good in creation, or the sum of all goods."¹⁷²

Mary is nature perfected by grace: she is fully creature and full of grace, *Gratia Plena*.

6.2. *The smile*

Balthasar's "Smile of the Mother," seen in Beatrice's seemingly unsurpassable beauty, reaches its full bloom in the smile of the Mother of God. Beatrice's eyes and smile have been with Dante throughout—her first smile is her salutation in *La Vita Nuova*; her last, when she turns to the Eternal Fountain—and when Bernard turns Dante's eyes to the Queen of Heaven, he sees "a loveliness that when / it smiled at the angelic songs and games / made glad the smiles of all the other saints."¹⁷³ Her smile magnifies all the smiles of the created order; the Rose of paradise is full of "faces . . . adorned by the light of Another, and by their own smile,"¹⁷⁴ revealing that they are both uniquely themselves and translucent to God's grace at the same time.

However, Mary's smile is not the last, but the penultimate smile of paradise. Her own smile, rebounding in the saints, is itself a reflection of God's. Her eyes, "beloved and revered by God," turn to the Trinity, and the smiling Bernard points upward.¹⁷⁵ When Dante, surrounded by the celestial Rose as the pupil of an eye is surrounded by the iris, enters into the beatific

171. *Par.*, XXXIII, 19–21.

172. Gardner, "Love that Reaches into the Abyss." "To that part God showed His mercy infinitely, by filling her womb with Himself. Therefore she is not merely a great recipient of the divine mercy; she is the divine mercy, outside of God himself. For the whole extent of that mercy, outside of God himself, is simply all creation, whose goodness God willed to supply from His own superabundance; and Mary is the whole goodness of creation in one being—that is what Bernard has said" (ibid.).

173. *Par.*, XXXIII, 133–35 (trans. Mandelbaum).

174. *Par.*, XXXI, 50 (emphasis added).

175. *Par.*, XXXIII, 40, 49–50.

vision, an encircling trinity of lights reflect each other "as rainbow by rainbow" (*come iri da iri*), like the iris of an eye looking into Dante's own eyes.¹⁷⁶ There he sees the smile of the Trinity, the Light Eternal who "known to Thyself and knowing, loves and smiles upon Thyself."¹⁷⁷ The "Smile of the Mother" and the "very sparkling of the Holy Ghost" converge: *Ecco!* All the saints and Mary are smiling at the smiling Trinity, the "three-fold light . . . in a single star" that is forever "sparkling" (*scintillando*)¹⁷⁸ in the sight of all who behold it, enraptured. "Might not the great gift of the beatific vision, the end for which humankind was made, be the infinite mirroring of God's smile?"¹⁷⁹ □

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176. The Italian for "iris" (of the eye) and "rainbow" both stem from the Latin *iridem*, which stems from the Greek for the name of the flower (due to its color gradation).

177. *Par.*, XXXIII, 124–26.

178. *Par.*, XXXI, 28–29.

179. Peter Hawkins, "All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante," *PMLA* 121, no. 2 (March 2006): 371–87, at 382.