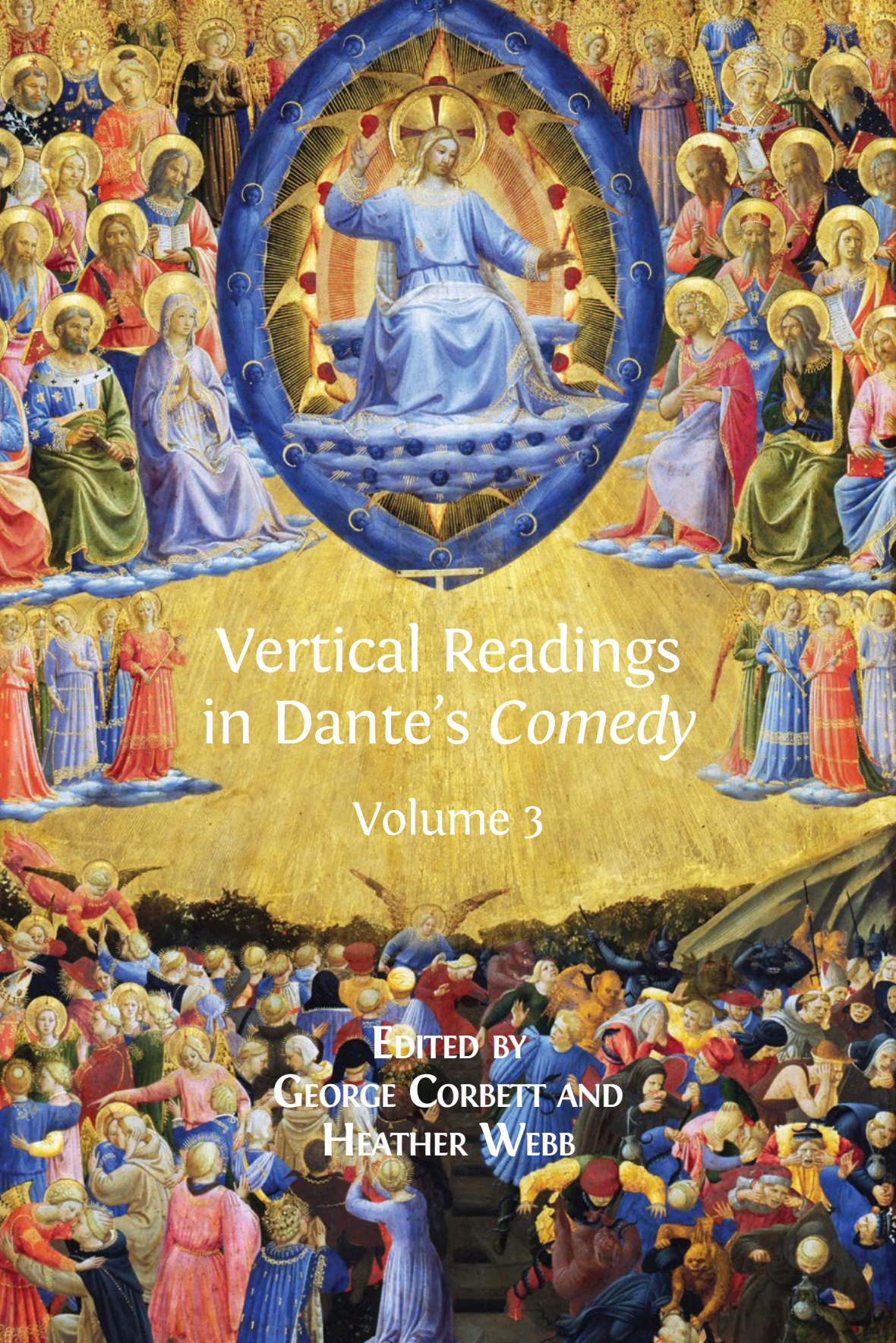

# Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*

## Volume 3

Edited by
George Corbett and
Heather Webb

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# Contents

# Introduction

*George Corbett and Heather Webb*

This third volume concludes the cycle of vertical readings in Dante's *Comedy*. In the introduction to the first volume, we surveyed the critical history of approaches of this kind, and outlined some interpretative justifications for such a reading of the poem.[1] In the second volume's introduction, we were able to reflect on the variety of methodological approaches and interpretative insights which had emerged in the course of the thirty-three public lectures (2012–2016) upon which the three published volumes are based.[2] The chapters contained within the three volumes convey, we think, a palpable sense of the opening of a discourse, and it is with excitement about new directions that we introduce the final volume of our series. The possibilities for vertical readings are indeed many and, as we have noted from the outset, each reading contained in these volumes offers only one possible thread of connection between the three cantos in question. As these threads of connection emerge, others come into view as well. Vertical readings are intentionally generative of further vertical, but also of 'diagonal' and 'horizontal', readings. They stress the desirability of seeking out resonances and retrospective patterns,

1 See *Vertical Readings in Dante's 'Comedy': Volume 1*, ed. by George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), pp. 1–11 (esp. pp. 1–8), http://dx.doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0066

2 See *Vertical Readings in Dante's 'Comedy': Volume 2*, ed. by George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), pp. 1–12 (esp. pp. 3–6), http://dx.doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0100. For videos of the public lectures, see 'Cambridge Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*', https://sms.cam.ac.uk/collection/1366579

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of attending to links between canticles and of heeding the poet's calls (particularly in the *Paradiso*) to pause and admire our changed perspective.

The third volume contributes in particular to the further opening of another discourse, which is born of the productive dialogue with theologians. Dante Studies in Britain, but also internationally, has begun to turn with increasing urgency to a renewed sense of Dante's *Comedy* as a theological poem.[3] From Robin Kirkpatrick's translation and theological commentary on *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* (2006–2007) to the collaborative volumes *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry* (2010), *Reviewing Dante's Theology* (2013) and *Le teologie di Dante* (2015), to single-author studies such as *Conversations with Kenelm: Essays on the Theology of the 'Commedia'* (2013) and *Reading Dante's 'Commedia' as Theology* (2016), scholars have set out explicitly to make the case for avowedly theological re-readings of the poem.[4] Many more works of recent scholarship have made arguments that situate themselves, moreover, within these considerations. At an institutional level, each of the public lectures in our Cambridge series was preceded by a video-conferenced workshop between the Universities of Cambridge, Leeds, and Notre Dame, providing an additional forum for such discussions. The lecture series also coincided with the interdisciplinary investigations *Dante and Late Medieval Florence: Theology in Poetry, Practice and Society* (2012–2016) and *Dante's Theology* (2013) directed by scholars then working in these universities.[5]

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3 Theological readings of Dante in Britain are, nonetheless, nothing new. In his wide-ranging survey, Nick Havely even makes the case for a potential reception of Dante as 'poeta theologus' in Cambridge as early as thirty years after the poet's death. See Nick Havely, *Dante's British Public* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 10–15. A current research project *Dante e la teologia secondo gli antichi commentatori della 'Commedia' (1322–1570)* is contributing to the reappraisal of this early 'poeta theologus': see *Theologus Dantes: Thematiche teologiche nelle opere e nei primi commenti*, ed. by Saverio Bellomo (forthcoming).

4 Dante, *Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, trans., ed. with comm. by Robin Kirkpatrick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006–2007); Dante's *Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, ed. by Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, vols 1 and 2, ed. by Claire E. Honess and Matthew Treherne (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013); *Le teologie di Dante*, ed. by Giuseppe Ledda (Ravenna: Angelo Longo, 2015); John Took, *Conversations with Kenelm: Essays on the Theology of the 'Commedia'* (London: Ubiquity Press, 2013); Vittorio Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's 'Commedia' as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

5 Matthew Treherne was principal investigator of the AHRC project *Dante and Late Medieval Florence: Theology in Poetry, Practice and Society*, with Simon Gilson and Claire Honess as co-investigators. In 2013, Anne Leone, Christian Moevs, Vittorio Montemaggi, and Matthew Treherne organised a two week symposium at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute

In envisaging the third volume, it was natural for us, therefore, to turn to theologians with a particular interest in Dante, to Dante scholars who have paid intense attention to theological concerns, and to Dante scholars, such as Peter Hawkins, who are also theologians. The discipline of theology is, of course, home to many different methodological approaches, faith perspectives and focal concerns, and this is one of the reasons why the increasing conversation between Dante scholars and theologians is so productive, with each theologian suggesting his or her own understanding of the enterprise of theology and of how that might be enriched by a close engagement with Dante's poem. This volume presents, then, theologians' interpretations of the poem alongside readings that emerge from the context of literary studies. This dialogue elicits new perspectives on the *Comedy*, a poem that, in systematically surpassing conventional boundaries, demands interdisciplinary investigation.

It seemed especially appropriate, given the 'matter' of the last eleven conumerary cantos, to foreground this dialogue with theology in the third volume. The end of each canticle strains towards ineffable theological truths, whether the vision of Lucifer, the mysteries of the procession in the Earthly Paradise and Beatrice's 'difficult' language, or the final vision of God. The cantos nearing those ends thus bear a burden that is both theological and poetic. As he tends towards the ungraspable and inexpressible, Dante draws upon Scripture as heavily as he draws upon his poetic predecessors, ancient and contemporary. The eleven scholars of this volume all engage with this immense scriptural and inter-textual richness, raising challenging questions about the reversals and recalls between the depths of damnation, the penitential ardours of Purgatory and the heights of Paradise.

In exploring the corporeality of the canto Twenty-Threes, Peter Hawkins brings together two worlds of discourse: the sacred, theological, and liturgical (animated more by his own 'Anglican imaginings' than by Dante's 'Latin mass') and feminist and queer studies. He emphasises the literary representations of the body across the three cantos, and establishes a contrast between the female and maternal aspects of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* xxiii, and the 'world of men' of *Inferno* xxiii (with Virgil, nonetheless, as 'mother' to Dante). He also registers numerous other lines of correspondence, weaving together the themes of exile and exodus, and the life of Christ, through the three cantos: his cross (*Inf*., xxiii), his

in Jerusalem entitled *Dante's Theology: An International Summer Seminar on the Theological Dimensions of Dante's Work*, with Robin Kirkpatrick as a respondent throughout.

passion (*Purg*., xxiii), and his salvific role as Wisdom incarnate (*Par*., xxiii). Hawkins provides a critical meditation on the interpretative enterprise as a whole, from his 'vertical reading *avant la lettre*' in 1980 on the cantos Twenty-Fours to Twenty-Sixes to his work in the series now, and presents a reading which gives 'both predictability *and* surprise their due'.

Janet Soskice opens her reading of the Twenty-Fours by contextualising the practice of vertical reading within early Rabbinic practices of Midrash (of setting different texts alongside each other with copious commentary) and of the mediation of Scripture in medieval Christianity through glossed bibles, liturgy, architecture and art. In layering his own received authorities, Dante creates 'his own poetic midrash', and thus invites us to read his text in a decidedly con-textual way, as we do in *Vertical Readings*. Soskice traces a line of desire through the Twenty-fours, beginning with what she identifies as the threat of Dante's despair in *Inferno* xxiv, countered by the salvation he finds in Virgil, drawing him through poetry towards the good. *Purgatorio* xxiv then shows a turn from the misuse of poetry in the *tenzone* with Forese towards a poetry of truth that re-orients the desire it conveys. In *Paradiso* xxiv we see Dante confessing his faith amongst the 'tongues of God' and it is here that he finally takes up the title of poet, within the context of graced writing and speaking.

As George Ferzoco highlights, the number twenty-five has particular theological significance with regard to the liturgical year and salvation history, the Annunciation (25 March) and the Nativity (25 December) being but the most notable instances. Ferzoco draws an archaeological analogy — of gently excavating along a narrow trench — to describe his approach to reading the three cantos through the significance opened up by the number twenty-five. After a concise literal synopsis of relevant features of each of the three cantos in turn, Ferzoco argues that Dante's use of the 'rarest rhymes' at the beginning of each of the three Twenty-Fives provides a compelling reason to believe that the poet intended and invited his reader to recognise them as structurally aligned. In the next section, Ferzoco shows how the Twenty-Fives are characterised by various kinds of changes: in *Inferno* xxv, the peculiar shift in narrative structure, the metamorphoses of the thieves, and a changing of 'the poetic gods' from Ovid to Dante; in *Purgatorio* xxv, the shift from pagan Virgil to a Christianised Statius, and the various stages of the human soul through the phases of 'nascence, life and afterlife with its changing bodies'; in *Paradiso* xxv, the graduation of Dante in his examination on hope, the pilgrim virtue.

Elena Lombardi's chapter interrogates Dante's theology of love and desire through the canto Twenty-Sixes. These conumerary cantos, she suggests, act like magnets in the structure of the poem as a whole: Ulysses' proto-humanist desire for wisdom in *Inferno* xxvi is contrasted with the celebration of St John's *caritas* or divine love in *Paradiso* xxvi, while erotic and poetic excesses are interrogated on the terrace of the lustful in *Purgatorio* xxvi. Tracing the 'tri-headed alias for the poet-traveller' (Ulysses, Dante, Adam), the chapter focuses on the shared themes of language, desire, and transgression in the canto Twenty-Sixes. Lombardi frames her account with two examples of 'a richly allusive reuse and repetition' of rhyming words, of the kind that K P Clarke discusses in his reading of the canto Tens, noting that 'the deployment, reuse and repetition of a rhyme word offers the reader a point of privileged intertextual access, acting like a lightning rod that runs vertically along the entire length of the poem'.[6] Lombardi points out the 'reverberation' between the rhyme 'riva / viva' in *Inferno* i and *Paradiso* xxvi and concludes her account with the reverberating 'guardo / tardo / ardo' rhyme that appears in both *Purgatorio* xxvi and *Paradiso* xxvi. Through these resounding rhymes, Lombardi traces a central concern in the poem: the theorisation of desire and transgression as a metaliterary conceptualisation of the nature of poetry and language.

Ronald Martinez's reading of the canto Twenty-Sevens unveils new perspectives on Dante's political theology, in relation to the twin powers of Church and Empire (with an original reading, for example, of the crown and mitre in *Purg*., xxvii), as well as in relation to Boniface's usurpation of spiritual and temporal power. Martinez considers temporal cycles as an underlying theme for the Twenty-Sevens and analyses *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* xxvii as major thresholds in the pilgrim's journey; this brings him, in turn, to his principal theme of containment. As Martinez highlights, *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* xxvii are dominated by the image of containers of fire, while *Paradiso* xxvii features a humble flowerpot, itself made of fired earthware. Martinez examines many different aspects of containment (astronomical, geographical, physical, causal, metapoetical), before exploring, more explicitly, the subjects contained. The chapter provides close readings of each of the cantos in turn, as well as of the many parallels drawn out between them.

6 See K P Clarke, 'Humility and the (P)arts of Art', in *Vertical Readings: Volume 1*, pp. 203–21, http://dx.doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0066.11

Where Ferzoco investigates the cultural importance of the number twenty-five in relation to the liturgical calendar, Theodore J. Cachey takes as his point of departure the numerological and theological significance of twenty-eight. He argues that the two perfect numbers of the poem, six and twenty-eight (which equal the sum of their divisors), play a key role in the macrostructure of the three canticles: while the Sixes progressively map the human community in geographical space (city, peninsular, inhabited world), the Twenty-Eights map the world cosmologically (*mappamundi*, terrestrial sphere, entire cosmos). Cachey also demonstrates how the 'perfect Twenty-Eights' resonate among the Fourteens, providing a broader system of references. His interpretations of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* in terms of cartography are substantiated with, and illustrated by, different kinds of medieval maps, and Cachey shows how Dante's poem itself makes considerable contributions to medieval cartography. He presents Dante's description of the nine rings of Paradise as, in cartographic terms, a kind of 'mandala of the cosmos': 'a diagram, chart or geometric pattern that represents the cosmos metaphysically and symbolically'. In conclusion, Cachey argues that the mapping programme discernible within the Twenty-Eights is a fundamental pillar that lends credibility to the poem's wider truth claims.

John Took begins his chapter by considering verticality in terms of the 'layered structure of [Dante's] mature spirituality'. In his view, Dante's intellectual development was characterised by successive encounters organised on 'the plane […] of the horizontal: first nature then grace, first philosophy then theology, first reason then revelation'. In the *Comedy*, then, the '*horizontality* of human experience' is arguably resolved in terms 'of its verticality, of the *height and depth* of that experience'. In light of this broader theological paradigm of 'verticality', Took then addresses the three canto Twenty-Nines. *Inferno* xxix, the canto of the counterfeiters and impersonators, is notable for 'the systematic dismantling in human experience of every kind of trust and concern', the burlesque tone and comic style reinforcing the 'indignity of it all'. The twenty-ninth canto of *Purgatorio* is concerned, by contrast, with 'a commingling of nature and grace at the still centre of personality' which 'affirms one way of loving over another'. *Paradiso* xxix, then, opens up 'a fresh model of the universe, an alternative way of seeing and understanding it'. Took suggests that, in this canto, God is presented not as '*containing* everything' but, rather, as 'subsisting at the centre of the universe […] the infinitesimal focal point of all being whatever'. All three Twenty-Nines, on Took's reading, share a common core concern: each is

preliminary with respect to the soul's movement 'into God' and, more specifically, each canto suggests a different kind of resolution of 'the many and the one in the moment of ultimate homecoming'. Where the saints realise their potential as *capax Dei* and are characterised by '*in-Godding*', the infernal counterfeiters settle for '*in-selfing*' ('the installation of self at the centre of its own universe').

Piero Boitani draws out the vertical ascent through the Thirties on two levels: first, from falsehood to the divine revelation of truth and, secondly, with regard to the transformation of poetry, from the high style of tragedy, through the 'sublime' use of liturgy, to the language of ineffability. Where Lombardi counterpoises Ulysses and Adam, Boitani reads Ulysses and Beatrice as Dante's two 'ancient flames' representing, respectively, his passion for knowledge and his love for Christian wisdom. Boitani works through the references to the Last Judgment across *Purgatorio* xxx and *Paradiso* xxx, and presents the former as foreshadowing figurally the latter. The reunion of Dante and Beatrice in *Purgatorio* xxx constitutes, for Boitani, 'the hinge of the entire poem, where Dante's past and present join hands and where human and divine meet'. Boitani shows how this encounter is fulfilled in the proclamation of Beatrice's beauty in *Paradiso* xxx, even as the poet declares himself vanquished. The difficulty in speaking of Beatrice, Boitani claims, is the same difficulty the poet will declare in the last canto when writing about God.

Catherine Pickstock suggests that the *Comedy* 'expresses a poetic theology as the most appropriate for a religion of the God-Man of the Incarnation', and reads the poem as liturgical, in that 'it inhabits what it is about, and takes up its own time in doing this'. Comparing the speculative and all at once grasp of vertical reading to the divine viewpoint of a creative God who looks downward and outward from Himself, Pickstock interprets this as undercutting the narrative journey from darkness to light of the horizontal reading. Her chapter works through each of the three canto Thirty-Ones narratively in turn from this divine viewpoint. Pickstock's reading of *Inferno* xxxi focuses on the obfuscation of sight and hearing, as well as the paradoxically homeopathic role of the region for the pilgrim ('purification by filth, liberation by enchainment'), which leads to the uncovering of evermore 'gigantic paradoxes'. She cumulatively develops through her vertical reading of the three cantos themes of God's own mediation of Himself, of occlusion and veiling, of the struggle for mediation, and of the drawing together of the disparate.

In his 2010 essay, 'Dante as Inspiration for Twenty-First-Century Theology', David Ford analyses seven key areas in which contemporary theology might learn from Dante: these are genre, the moods of faith, the relation of Christian theology to non-Christian sources; the primacy of a 'middle distance' narrative perspective, the immersion of theology in the contingencies of history, the relation of scripture to philosophy, and the desirability of twenty-first-century theologians relating deeply to twenty-first-century poets.[7] Some of these areas or key thoughts animate Ford's theological reading of the canto Thirty-Twos. Ford concludes his chapter with a 'cadenza' consisting of four as-yet-unpublished sonnets by Micheal O'Siadhail, a poet with whom Ford has engaged intensively.[8] Towards the conclusion of our 'Vertical Readings' project, these four sonnets provide, then, a dialogue between a contemporary poet and Dante. In the main body of the chapter, Ford provides a theological meditation on 'facing', sound, and the imagery of the Transfiguration of Jesus that runs, as he shows, through the three canto Thirty-Twos. As in Boitani's reading, Ford emphasises Dante's daring figural representation of Beatrice; here, Beatrice takes Christ's place in passages that recall the drama of the Transfiguration. In the section 'Grace and Surprises', Ford explores some broader theological points raised by Dante's poem that are especially pertinent to contemporary theology: first, the relationship between human freedom, God's freedom and grace, and secondly, the theological importance of surprise, daring and diversity. For Ford, Dante's audacious appropriation of his predecessors and contemporaries might model a 'comparatively daring improvisation today' in the area of inter-religious dialogue.

Rowan Williams's chapter presents a vertical reading of the final cantos of each canticle and is the only reading to account for four cantos, the Thirty-Threes and Thirty-Four. Williams traces a trajectory from the frozen stasis at Hell's centre, through the flowing grace of the Earthly Paradise to the intellectual movement of the Empyrean, from the betrayal of language itself (Satan and Judas silencing each other), through confessional truth-telling, to a wordless intensity as God impresses on the human mind that which memory cannot fully retain, let alone language adequately communicate. Dante's forgetfulness and 'baby-talk' nonetheless testify, Williams suggests, to the reality of the truth forgotten. Picking up on various strands of

7 See David F. Ford, 'Dante as Inspiration for Twenty-First-Century Theology', in *Dante's 'Commedia': Theology as Poetry*, pp. 318–28.

8 *Ibid*., pp. 327–28.

discussion in this volume on the strains of the inconceivable and ineffable, Williams joins with Ford in reflecting on the significance of the face and human inter-relationship (or its failure) in the closures of each canticle. The human face in the final vision of God, Williams argues, renders all faces worthy of contemplation and all voices (even those encountered in Hell) worthy of being heard.

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