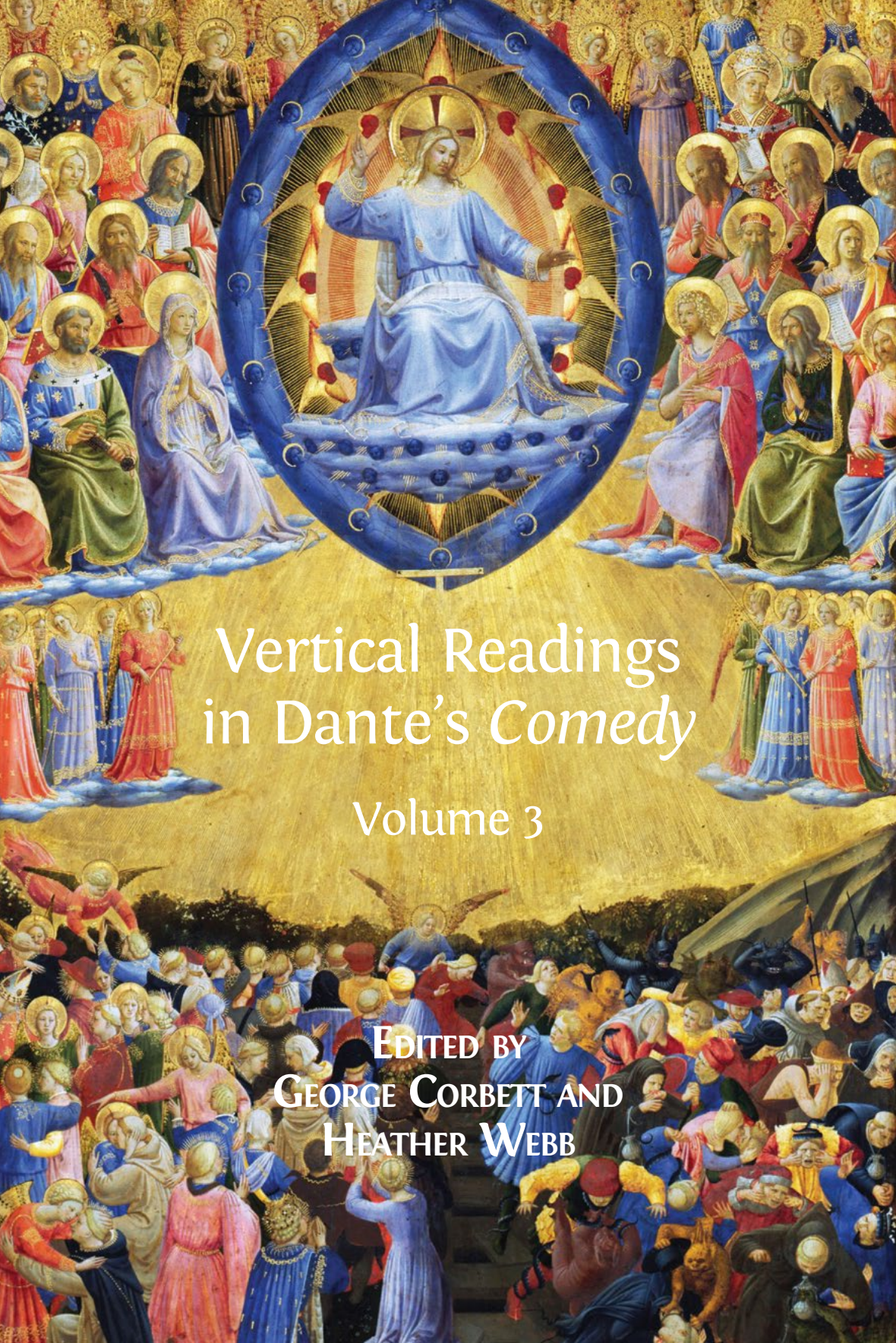

Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*

Volume 3

Edited by
George Corbett and
Heather Webb

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31. Beauty and the Beast

Catherine Pickstock

The project of a vertical reading of Dante suggests a 'speculative' — or *all at once* — grasp of the themes of the *Comedy*, as opposed to an horizontal *running-through* its various successive narratives, rhetorical appeals and snatches of dialectic. But if one were seeking a complete reading, one would need to combine a straight read-through with an horizontal succession of the parallel vertical readings.

In order to try to arrive at this combination in microcosm, I will read the three canto Thirty-Ones in chronological succession, but I will at the same time note the ways in which the vertical reading speculatively undercuts this. I will argue that this undercutting seems to require a problematization of the apparent tale of a journey from darkness to light. The reader seems to travel from below to above, but in another and specifically Christological sense, below turns out to be above, and above below. Therefore, the reader is implicitly invited not just to see herself as part of the receptive rose (*Par*., xxxi. 1, 10, 16–18),[1] but also of the company of seraphic bees who plunge downwards into the rose's heart (*Par*., xxxi. 7). For to travel towards the divine viewpoint turns out to have shared in it secretly from the outset. And since this is the viewpoint of a creative God, His gaze paradoxically looks downward and outward from Himself, by the force of his nature as love.

This substantive truth of the poem is echoed in formal and literary terms. The poem seems more to be anaphorically resumed or recapitulated,

1 I use the following English translation: Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. and ed. by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Classics, 2006, 2007, 2012).

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than forgotten, as it advances towards its conclusion, like the 'positive remembrance' involved in drinking the waters of Eunoe (*Purg*., xxxi. 92). Unlike a mere fiction, composed of surrogate signs, it does not dissolve upon completion, because it is 'about itself', in a sense that is stronger than the usual postmodern meaning of fiction understood formalistically. It is *about itself* because it invokes by imaginative means what Dante held to be truths, rather as Plato refers to the city of the *Laws* as the 'true tragedy', because it does not extrinsically represent the high realities, but lives them out, providing a context for their unfolding. In this way, the *Comedy* is closer to liturgy than it is to literature, as it inhabits what it is about. Indeed, Giorgio Agamben, in his short book *Ninfe*, places Dante just prior to the invention of 'literature', and Boccaccio just after. This, he argues, is because the imagination, for Dante, was not yet understood as primarily a portal between the real and the fantastic, but rather, between the corporeal and the intellectual, within a world-view that saw the intellectual as raising things into a higher reality, and as bringing us closer to the realm of really existing intellectual beings, the angels and God.[2] Similarly, at a lower level, the imagination starts the work of making things more real, and offers access to a realm of strange beings — gods, monsters, nymphs — in some degree or other real. If, indeed, the imagination misleads us, then this is somewhat in the sense of conveying us into a really monstrous sphere, a true tragedy, as opposed to one of benign, pastoral or sentimental enchantment.

What it means for Dante to write poetically and imaginatively about the very highest theological matters, and in the mode of secular lyricism, rather than the hymnic, is unresolved. It is however important that he does not just leave the secular repertoire of myth and mythic beings behind. It is almost as if he approaches Christian theology in the mode of what Boccaccio was soon to call a pagan 'poetic theology'.[3] This is a figurative idiom which returns, or bends back upon the human and the human city. In consequence of the poetic, and not theological, discourse of the *Comedy*, one can argue that its prime subject is the political rather than the theological. But it is never, as yet, a question of pure fiction; rather, of alternate dreams and nightmares which offer to us, or invoke, genuine omens of reality. There are questions here which one can only begin to understand, but Dante's translation in *Monarchia* of the Averroist collective intellect into the collective cultural and linguistic mind of the city suggests

2 Giorgio Agamben, *Ninfe* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007).
3 Giovanni Boccaccio, *La Vita di Dante* (Milan: Per Giovanni Silvestri, 1823), XXII.

that, for him, the political is a crucial threshold between the imaginative and the intellectual or theological realms.[4]

To speak poetically of the theological may be another way of remaining on the margin. And it is also a margin between the private and the particular, on the one hand, and the universal, on the other, as manifest in the role of Beatrice. For Averroes, only the imagination distinguished one human being spiritually from another, given the literal singleness for him of the intellect (as carrying to an extreme the more common Arabic versions of the Aristotelian theory of understanding, as for Avicenna). Even though Aquinas sharply rejected this, he nonetheless insists that the finite act of individual thinking can only be completed in the imagination.[5] Dante would perhaps more naturally be aligned with Aquinas, though there remains here a gesture towards Averroes in his *Monarchia*. In any case, for Dante to remain within a poetic discourse is to remain relatively within the earthly and the civic spheres. His invocation of the Heavens is arguably to refer or tie them mainly to a this-worldly anchorage.

Yet there is another possibility, which is that Dante seeks to write about both domains at once. This would suggest that the *Comedy*, as consciously intended or not, expresses a poetic theology as the most appropriate for a religion of the God-Man and of the Incarnation. As we shall see, a vertical reading of the canto Thirty-Ones tends to bear this out.

In the case of each of the canto Thirty-Ones, I will proceed from a more formal, textual and successive phenomenological analysis to a more allusive, symbolic and theological one.

Inferno xxxi

In *De libero arbitrio* 2, Augustine elaborates a phenomenology and metaphysics of the senses, which culminate in a discussion of the respective democratic thrall of our senses of sight, hearing, touch and taste. Whereas *my* tasting something precludes *your* tasting it at the same moment, and my touching a thing precludes your touching that same point, the senses of vision and hearing are more collectively structured; a thing may be seen and a sound may be heard by more than one person at one

4 See Dante, *Monarchia*, I. iii, 9, drawing on Averroes, *De anima*, 3. See also Dante, *Convivio*, IV. xiii. 8.

5 St Thomas Aquinas, *Tractatus de unitate intellectus contra Averroistas* Series Philosophica 12 (Rome: Universitatis Gregorianae, 1957).

particular moment.[6] For Augustine, this hierarchization of the collectivity and exclusivity of the senses, and especially the prioritization of the sense of sight, allows him to build towards a presentation of the transcendence of the Good, and the democratic lure of its contemplation or vision in the light of God. In this context, the collectivity of our sense of sight betokens the Beatific restoration of our vision after the Fall, even though for now the disparity and exclusivity of the compass of our senses is conditioned by human fallenness.

It is striking that the exclusivity and successive aspect of the lower senses, as outlined by Augustine, seems to determine or shape the compass of Dante's sense of sight when he is in Hell and Purgatory. What can be seen is determined not by collectivity and availability, which one could connect with Dante's politicized Averroism of collective understanding; but rather, by exclusivity and limitation. The reader becomes increasingly aware of the layer upon layer (or 'tier to tier', anticipating the redeeming layers of seraphim 'bees' at *Par*., xxxi. 16) of occlusions, whether physical, such as when Dante's (and so the reader's) view of an object is occluded, blocked from sight in some way; and of confusions or distortions of distance and size, or other kinds of inaccessibility impeding perception or passage; or of temporal interruption, such as when an object or person passes out of view, or is covered over in darkness. What might be momentarily and partially visible from a particular angle is soon lost from sight, or subject to a new perspectival limitation or perturbation, or is revealed to be something quite other than one's initial understanding.

Although the landscape of this domain at first seems hyperbolically static and fixed, bound up in chains and shackles, and held down in deep pits, with an abiding pseudo-eternal or slab-like determinedness, the visions it accords are scarce and fleeting, hard to obtain, and involve effort, machination, struggle and danger, or else are shifting, misleading or Protean. This partiality and precariousness of vision, linked with struggle, is at once a condition of human fault, and the beginning of the cure of such fault. One might say that the landscape is homeopathic in character, and that this applies as much to the Hellish landscape as to that of *Purgatorio*, at least insofar as it is being traversed by Dante, and not just dwelt in by the damned — although there is a sense in which Dante's own giving voice to the damned is in some way salutary for them.

6 St Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 2. 3. 9. 29 ff

Such perspectival limitation is accentuated by the meticulous documentation of physical layerings, until the reader becomes dizzy with a sense of the lack of possibility, caused by a kind of hyper-perspectivalization. Rather than a heightening of subjectivity and sense of human potential or scope, one feels a loss or curtailment of subjective unity:

> Quiv'era men che notte e men che giorno,
> sì che 'l viso m'andava innanzi poco (*Inf.*, xxxi. 10–11)
>
> [Here it was less than night and less than day, so that our seeing went no way ahead]

The fact that the infernal time is less than both night and day, a kind of intermediate twilight, not yet pitch-black night, is significant: it suggests that there is a murky way through, yielding a sense, as it were, of potential, and neither an absolute confinement or closure, nor any sense of latitude. Some degree of human vision seems still to be available, but what is in fact seen (or heard) cannot be trusted to be true to the reality of its first impression. And yet it *might* still be true, and this inkling of possibility ensures that a hollow kind of yearning issues forth. The faint chance of a foothold means that hope is not altogether extinguished, even in this Hellish place.

There are countless examples of the successive exclusivities of vision, in this canto and others in *Inferno*. One notes fastidious documentation of deictic positionings, of one thing or person in relation to another, of multiple over-layering, with every angle or line or temporal duration specified, every span anchored by a piercing comparator — a crossbow, a sharp edge, a sting or a bite — each giving a keen sense of occlusion or rebarbative difficulty (*Inf.*, xxxi. 82, 5–6, 1–3, respectively; see *Purg.*, xxxi. 85). It is interesting to note that such exactitude and deictic fastidiousness yields not a sense of command over the terrain, or acuity of perception, but rather unclarity and distortion. One can think of the several visual distortions — the towers that turn out to be monsters (*Inf.*, xxxi. 31–32) — and of the way that whichever angle Dante and Virgil look from, they are always 'too far away' (*Inf.*, xxxi. 23, 26). Deictic co-ordination is further confused by low-down things nonetheless being of great height; and by recourse to subjective measurements whose repeated assertion seems to make clarity recede, rather than to disambiguate: numerous measurements of proportion — the size of Hell, of the giants, of Satan — yield a sense of disproportion rather

than accurate comparison of size. The things described seem to be out of scale, such as the pine-cone, or the comparison of Antaeus with a leaning tower that appears to fall when a cloud passes behind it (*Inf.*, xxxi. 59, 136, respectively. See also *Inf.*, xxxi. 64, 83, 84, 113).[7] One might describe this chronotopic confusion as an asymptotically receding anti-plentitude, later balanced by Dante's chronotopic comprehensiveness in the *Paradiso*, where at last he draws his eyes dancingly through every step, 'mo sù, mo giù e mo recirculando' [now up, now lower, circling all around] (*Par.*, xxxi. 48).

I have so far emphasized visual perturbations, but human hearing is also subject to distortion. The speech of the giant Nimrod, the constructor of Babel according to extra-Biblical tradition, is impossible to understand; he screams an unknown language (*Inf.*, xxxi. 67–68, 79–81) in a hideous anti-betokening of speaking in tongues at Pentecost's reversal of Babel-Babylon, yielding for him a perverse unity of language: 'che a lui ciascun linguaggio / come 'l suo ad altrui, ch'a nullo è noto' [For every tongue, to him, remains the same as his tongue is to others: quite unknown] (*Inf.*, xxxi. 80–81). In a similar way, the horn, in the Psalms an emblem of pride, blasts so loudly that it confounds hearing and leads one backwards and not forwards (*Inf.*, xxxi. 13–15, 71–75).

A contrast is drawn between Dante's difficult, distorted and juddering movement through this domain, and its occupants' own physical stasis. Dante's journey represents their one chance in all eternity to speak to the living, to extend beyond their domain, to gain a foothold, as it were, via Dante to the reader, as exploited most notably when Virgil offers to the giant Antaeus the chance of worldly fame if he will aid Dante and himself (*Inf.*, xxxi. 115–29). Through his poetic textual delineation of the giants' fixedness, and their definitive immutable destinies, we espy their eternal situation: they are not obliterated, but held fast, thonged (*Inf.*, xxxi. 73), in their individual self-destroying forms, as if they were an archival array of God's judgements, a kind of abiding inverse homeopathy by which the doomed inhabitants, by *contrapasso*, continually repeat their self-condemning gestures and are in no way released from them by self-destruction, but rather held as perpetual contexts for their deployment ('Elli stessi s'accusa' [He stands his own accuser] (*Inf.*, xxxi. 76)). The pit in which the monsters are held up to their navels is a kind of alchemical still which outlines their condition more emphatically (*Inf.*, xxxi. 32–33), and

7 See Aristotle, *Ethics*, 5.3.1131b16: 'The just is the proportional, the unjust is what violates the proportion'.

seems to make them more themselves. This is later answered in *Purgatorio* where Beatrice, under her veil and beyond the stream, is said to 'surpass her former self' (*Purg*., xxxi. 82–84), and in *Paradiso*, where the veil's covering-over paradoxically shows forth the true image (*Par*., xxxi. 107–08).

A further contrast is drawn between Dante's own struggle to see past the constantly shifting occlusions, despite his relative bodily freedom to roam this landscape, and the disastrous occupants' own hyperopic vision. From their enchained emplottedness, nonetheless, in parody of divine foreknowledge, they can see all that is to come, living with prehending and panoptic vision, as if in hyper-life, but nonetheless in physical delimitedness and as fixedly dead (*Inf.*, xxxi. 127–28). Yet, unlike God, they see not with equanimity, but *with affliction* all that can be seen, via all the passions of life (*Inf.*, xxxi. 71–72), with no release in action or movement. This yields a sense of terrible distillation and compression, of a fixed scope of gigantic and barbaric concentration and unity, and with this, a kind of hideous purity of situation and character.

Whilst the occupants inhabit their own disasters, stand as their own accusers, and are fixed in an abiding position of circular crisis by a reverse homeopathic circuit, it is notable that a genuine, positive homeopathic opportunity seems to arise for Dante from his own passage through this landscape, just as he in turn presents an opportunity to the static inhabitants; as living still, Dante can carry back Antaeus' name (*Inf*., xxxi. 125–28). Here, where the fixed nature of the co-ordinates of situatedness is harshly thematised,[8] and there seems to be no reachable source of help, or assistance in movement, a 'walking further on' (*Inf*., xxxi. 112), it seems that movement is no more than a passage into a greater viscosity of torment and fear: 'così forando l'aura grossa e scura / […] fuggiemi errore e cresciemi paura' [so, boring through that dense, dark atmosphere, […] false knowledge fled and fear grew yet more great] (*Inf*., xxxi. 37–39). There seems to be a deictic exclusivity which withdraws help, assistance or mediation, in such a way that movement and release cannot come from without, but only, tormentingly, via recourse to the self-same spot one has been drilled into so definitely, and from the very things or place that cause the need to escape. Succour comes from the repeated crashings of condemnation, and direct appeal to the very sources of torment: so it is

8 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 167–69.

Antaeus to whom they must appeal for help to get to the next layer down (*Inf*., xxxi. 100f).

This chilling homeopathic and anaphoric manoeuvre, whilst it issues in a closed circuit which, one might think, would delimit or enchain the wayfarer still more, is nonetheless fundamental to his movement, albeit so slight. And without the redemptive effect of the homeopathic circuit, Dante might not have reached Purgatory at all. So, it is Antaeus, against all odds, who sets the travellers down with emphatic gentleness: 'ma lievemente al fondo […] ci sposò' (*Inf*. xxxi. 142–43) [Yet lightly he set us, lightly […] (*Inf*., xxxi. 142–43), echoing the tenderness with which Virgil had taken Dante's hand to lead him towards the giants (*Inf*., xxxi. 28).

Indeed, the canto seems to be structured by such discrete homeopathic detours. It opens directly into a series of perfectly circular travails:

> Una medesma lingua pria mi morse,
> sì che mi tinse l'una e l'altra guancia,
> e poi la medicina mi riporse
> così od'io che solea far la lancia
> d'Achille e del suo padre esser cagione
> prima di trista e poi di buona mancia (*Inf*., xxxi. 1–6)
>
> [The self-same tongue that bit me first so hard that both my cheeks had coloured up, bright red, now offered once again its remedy. So, too (as I have heard the story told), the spear that both Achilles and his father bore would cause a wound that spear alone could cure]

Here, meticulous plotting of fixedness presents one's only chance, as a kind of purification by filth, or a liberation by enchainment, and we find that a backwards step is still nonetheless a step; so Virgil asks Antaeus to carry them and he leans on the giant; here a risk is one's best hope. A cure of hunger increases hunger; a hideous horn clears one's vision, even if it confounds one's hearing; language as fallen also cures, as though in half-anticipation of speaking in tongues or incantatory purification at *Paradiso* xxxi. 97–99.

Just as the usual facets of speech, hearing and sight are mixed up or distorted, so the usual co-ordinates of vertical and horizontal are upset: down in the lowest depths, we find figures of vertiginous height; the giants are hyperbolically tall, being compared with tall and sublime things such as St Peter's pine cone, mountains, fallen ship masts which swing upwards suddenly (*Inf*., xxxi. 145). The pseudo-immediacy of the homeopathic

circuit, together with the plummeting of the high, and the soaring and upward swinging of the low, present a kind of proto-echo, or demonic foretaste of the Gryphon's own twofold nature (*Purg*., xxxi. 122–23), and of God's own mediation of Himself, and the turning of all to mediation in *Paradiso*, which I shall discuss below.

As such, the giants are like extreme ante-types of Christ, even though they are situated morally just above Judas and Satan, half buried to their torsos (just where the Gryphon's own two natures are joined: *Purg*., xxxi. 123), yet rising to the skies monumentally above their waists, and compared with massive things, such as Monteriggioni's crown of towers (*Inf*., xxxi. 41). Moreover, they can be mistaken for the towers of the city (*Inf*., xxxi. 20, 31–32), and so are like the very pillars of the cosmos. Ambiguities seem to abound: though Dante is more frightened to discover that they are giants, and not civic towers after all, Virgil thinks he should be less so (*Inf*., xxxi. 39). Is an irony here intended concerning human power and justice? What is more, the half-giant Antaeus, just *because* he is more wedded to the ground (and could not be defeated in wrestling, if he clove to it), failed to join the gigantomachy, or rebellion of the giants against the gods, when in their pride they piled Pelion upon Ossa to reach the heavenly domain (*Inf*., xxxi. 119–21). It is further suggested that if Antaeus had joined in, the rebellion might have been successful, implying a Christian ambiguity as to which side was in the right — pagan Heaven or pagan earth? And precisely on the Libyan terrain, where the earth-bound Antaeus had *defeated and eaten* monstrous lions (*Inf*., xxxi. 118), Scipio is later able to defeat Hannibal's elephants (*Inf*., xxxi. 116–17), which earlier in the canto were said to be wisely left, by shaping nature, bereft of intelligence (unlike the giants) (*Inf*., xxxi. 49–57). Even this benign monstrosity is defeated by Roman power allied with justice. It is not a god, but a giant, who is linked with this defeat, by Dante, and the same Antaeus seems not totally lost in Hell. He can still gain fame on earth, and is still capable of performing a charitable action — that of setting Dante and Virgil down in the very lowest, Satanic sphere, and doing so lightly (*Inf*., xxxi. 142). Here, his gigantic paradox is fully revealed. Just because he is so tall, 'che ben cinque alle, / sanza la testa, uscia fuor de la grotta' [rising high (omitting head) five yards above the pit] (*Inf*., xxxi. 113–14), he can bend right down, not just to the earth, his mother Gaia, to whom he is fatally bound, but even beneath her (*Inf*., xxxi. 142–43). Here is a kenotic act of charity, but in this case, charity is to commit people for a time to the lowest loss of all, in order that they further learn.

Once more, the logic would seem to be homeopathic in character. Faults and wounds are indeed damages, but in their very nature as privative, they must immediately also start to yield a cure, like the Spear of Pelleus, Achilles' father (*Inf.*, xxxi. 4–6). There may here be a derived link with the name of the Fisher-King Pelles, and Dante may have known of this and its Christological resonance. But this is surely invoked in any case: the bearing of a fault is what cures, as with the idea that the wood of Christ's cross was taken from the tree of good and evil which first precipitated disaster. And in the case of this canto, the healing instrument (which was also the first source of error) is *language*; rebuking words hurt, but also begin to heal, just as it is Antaeus' *name* which Dante will carry back to the living. This is the only way to restore language beyond Babel, a process to which Dante's mythopoesis itself contributes.

All of this is striking, if not exceptional for Christian tradition. Still more striking, perhaps, is the way in which, in this canto, not even Hell seems to be omitted from this homeopathic economy. The earth, her giants, are the foundation, and although this ground has slithered and erred, it remains the foundation. It must be rescued, not perhaps for its own sake, but for the sake of the entirety of reality which it supports. In addition, this rescuing is at one level a self-rescuing, since the giants, as both mythical and Biblical, for all their grotesque horror, point the way back to that foundation, by first plumbing the spiritual depths beneath even the level of their own monstrous but merely chthonic rebellion.

Purgatorio xxxi

Although *Purgatorio* xxxi opens with a physical boundary, and a sense of a goal being held at a distance, that of the span of a river crossing (*Purg.*, xxxi. 1), here a new sense of momentum and acuity is immediately sensed. For there is, right at the outset *direct speech*, a turning at once towards the reader with language, its sharpness of sword-point (*Purg.*, xxxi. 2), its lack of delay or postponement and a sense of immediacy (*Purg.*, xxxi. 1–6).

However, difficulty still remains, for this is the immediacy not of freedom or arrival, but of reproach and further reproach, of relentless fastidious upbraiding; so much so, that it is not Dante's sight or hearing which is impeded this time, but his own attempts to speak in reply (*Purg.*, xxxi. 8–9).

The image of the crossbow and sharp sword continue from *Inferno* into the opening of *Purgatorio*: Dante is confronted by the sharp-edged sword of

Beatrice's opening words (*Purg*., xxxi. 2), and by the crossbow shot, which had in *Inferno* xxxi been invoked to indicate the span of distance from the monstrous Ephialtes (*Inf*., xxxi. 83), but which is here presented in the opposite state, drawn up too far, indicating that the force of Dante's reply is pathetically enfeebled; one would need eyes to see it, as no ear could hear such weak speech (*Purg*., xxxi. 14–15). There is then a suggestion of a lack of 'being at the right distance'; either there is hellish distance from, or else purgatorial proximity to the other. The crossbow, unlike the spear, it seems, does not wound enough to heal, and verbal occlusion still seems to impede expression, rather as it was vision that became blocked by over-layerings in *Inferno*.

Beatrice asks Dante which chains and ditches had restrained him (*Purg*., xxxi. 25), such that he could not follow after her. So, here, it is not the occlusion of sight or sound, but of his physical passage, or action, which is invoked, and his failure of action upbraided (*Purg*., xxxi. 55–60). 'Present things with their false pleasures', he replies, had delayed him; again, his voice is weakened, and his mouth is struggling to shape the words (*Purg*., xxxi. 34). The occlusion of speech and the unclarity of the *Inferno* seem to distend here into Purgatory, and are later echoed in the inexpressible plenitude of delight and beauty at *Paradiso* xxxi. 136–38.

While speech may heal via confession, it was sound that had led him astray (the sound of the sirens (*Purg*., xxxi. 43–45)), and speech which, though curtailed, feeble and muffled, nonetheless brings purification. One finds in *Purgatory*, then, a continuation of the homeopathic trope, but here the resonance becomes Christological in character. The infernal vertical interpenetration of high into low, and low into high, is intensified, and mingled with a chiasmic interpenetration along a horizontal axis. We find a looking up and a looking down, just as there is height in the depths — giant monsters in Hell, who plummet so far down, only to rise up, are as long and broad as St Peter's pine cone, and swing up like ship-masts. So likewise, in Purgatory, the abject rise up — Dante is compared to an uprooted oak tree (*Purg*., xxxi. 70); he is drawn down and submerged into the waters (*Purg*., xxxi. 94, 101–02), so much so, that he swallows the water into his body, as a kind of extreme unction, an inner and outer comprehensive purification and compromise of boundary; the nymphs are elevated as stars in the sky (*Purg*., xxxi. 106–07); Beatrice, like Christ, was once descended (is she regarded as pre-existent, one wonders? (*Purg*., xxxi. 108)), and so now Dante looks upward towards her, through the upward gaze of others (*Purg*., xxxi. 110–11).

At this point of looking upward, we are surprised by an horizontal or lateral interaction, for Dante looks upward towards Beatrice, only to find her not looking down towards him, as we had been expecting — especially after the arrestingly direct speech of the opening lines (*Purg*., xxxi. 1–6) and her urgings that Dante look upwards (*Purg*., xxxi. 68–69, 73) — but rather, looking away and across at the two-natured Gryphon (*Purg*., xxxi. 120) who himself embodies the upper and the lower, as both Christ and man, embodying both Beatrice and Dante together (*Purg*., xxxi. 122–23). Her unexpected looking-away is later echoed in *Paradiso* xxxi, when Dante is expecting Beatrice to respond to him, but rather 'something else replied' (*Par*., xxxi. 57–58), and his expectation is finally realized only when she both looks towards him and away from him (*Par*., xxxi. 92–93) and he no longer feels a sense of unease or strife of absence, articulated in lines 57–58. The shift in *Purgatorio* from vertical mediation, whereby Beatrice points towards upwards intensification, to a shared horizontal gaze upon the mediator, Christ himself, anticipates the paradisal conclusion. As Heather Webb has pointed out, there is a progress towards *seeing with*, besides *gazing at* Beatrice.[9] And the shared gaze is not just directed towards a shared goal, which is God, but also at the shared medium, the God-Man, or incarnate *Logos*, which is the objective *milieu* within which both an interpersonal vertical assistance, and a more eschatological, horizontal and reciprocal exchange of persons, are possible.

Is this interpenetration of high and low, and here to there, and now to then, an acosmic mediation, a kind of pantheistic conflation, inflecting a newly connected-up landscape with a sense of being on the brink of becoming one-in-oneself, and no longer distended through the landscape of boundary and hopelessness? Is there almost no mediation here at all, but mutual interchanging? Or is this rather the paradox of the most extreme distance of inaccessible transcendence being immediately present in hyper-proximity, closer than mere immanence, as it were outside oneself, more oneself than oneself? This will be fully shown to us only in *Paradiso*.

Where Beatrice's direct and exacting gaze towards Dante had been a piercing kind of sight ('alza la barba' [raise your beard], an injunction which he felt as 'il velen de l'argomento' [the venom that her meaning bore] (*Purg*., xxxi. 68, 74–75)), to see Beatrice now, Dante's own gaze must be sharpened. This is at first described as a purification or *proving*, as the

9 Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 191–205.

prickling of a nettle, a sting and a bite (*Purg*., xxxi. 85–90), again via a homeopathic circuit, which leads almost without delay to inner and outer baptism, obliterating the memory of sin. It seems that evil is a sharp wound, its curing even sharper, and then the very nature of the cured is the most extreme sharpness of all, for it attains to the complete penetration affected by light and knowledge.

Dante's purified and renewed vision seems to be achieved by seeing with the gaze first of the four nymphs, who are versions of the natural virtues of fortitude, temperance, prudence and justice, infused by grace; and then of the three brighter lights of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. One of the first group declares:

> 'Merrénti a li occhi suoi; ma nel giocondo
> lume ch'è dentro aguzzeranno i tuoi
> le tre di là, che miran più profondo'. (*Purg*., xxxi. 109–11)
>
> ['We'll lead you to her eyes. Yet to that light, so jubilant, within, those three beyond — their gaze still deeper — will make yours more keen'.]

This leading and sharpening is achieved through dancing. Dante is inserted into the nymphs' dance (*Purg*., xxxi. 104) — this is a circular dance which nonetheless *leads to* Beatrice and the Gryphon — is it a spiral, then, and not a pure circle? Here, one can suggest that seeing is construed as dancing, prefiguring *Paradiso* xxxi, where dancing becomes seeing, and Dante will 'vola con gli occhi' [fly with wings of sight], and both seeing and dancing become a kind of dynamic purification (*Par*., xxxi. 97–99).

At this point, more bow imagery enters in: Dante was originally pierced by the arrow of *amor*, as both wounding and healing (*Purg*., xxxi. 107). And so now, after all, the arrow is presented as akin to the spear. But in seeing the eternal Beatrice, this double effect is not placated or cancelled, but rather increased. His eyes are drawn to hers in hot flames, yet Beatrice's gaze is cool and still, 'pur sopra 'l grifone [li occhi] stavan saldi' [fixed unmoving on the gryphon, never wavering] (*Purg*., xxxi. 120). The Gryphon is compared with both Dante and Beatrice; it is unchanging, and yet oscillates between divine and human, seen through the transparent medium of a mirror, anticipating the air as Beatrice's veil (*Purg*., xxxi. 145; see also *Par*., xxxi. 70–72).

As if indicating a cosmic transition at this point, and drawing the reader sharply into the cosmo-poesis of the poem, as Dante had been brought

up sharply by Beatrice's direct speech at the opening of the canto, so the reader is addressed directly, and asked to consider how Dante marvelled at the unchanging nature of the Gryphon and his transmuting 'twyform' image or reflecting kinds (*Purg*., xxxi. 122–24), anticipating the implicit direct address of the reader at *Par*., xxxi. 37–42, where the reader is similarly asked to consider his astonishment at coming to 'l'etterno dal tempo' [this eternal realm from time]' (l. 38) and to compare it with the stupefaction of barbarian pilgrims visiting Rome (ll. 31–35). It is interesting to note that being asked to consider the intensity of Dante's emotion is not something a reader can do without in part sensing that emotion herself; for who can bring an emotion to mind without somewhat re-living it? These interludes of direct address, therefore, reflect the idiom of this text as exceeding the extrinsic compass of literature, and indicating its transition to cosmic liturgical 'true tragedy', recalling the moment in the mediaeval liturgy when the Celebrant petitions the prayers of the congregation to assist the felicity of his sacrifice.[10]

And then, as if growing out of Dante's beseeching of the reader to imagine an emotion which is co-ultimate with feeling that emotion, the nymphs beseech Beatrice to turn to Dante. Here the repetition of 'grace' in line 136 suggests that their beseeching is inclining to grace, which is co-ultimate with final vision, and appropriate to the nymphs' own mixed character as super-naturalised natural virtues. Beatrice unveils herself to reveal her mouth as her second beauty (*Purg*., xxxi. 136–45). Sight and voice thereby meet, and so are synthesised as incoming and outgoing, upward and downward, as both light and sound, all in-gathered.

It is interesting to note that a shift has occurred in the recourse to vocal and optical intermediaries. The intensification of vision which comes by Dante's entering into the dance is not a mediation, nor a recourse to intermediaries, for he may look *for himself*; and yet, equally, his vision is not unmediated, for the nymphs are still needed, and their assistance intensifies his vision (*Purg*., xxxi. 111). One might construe this as a redeemed version of the *mille-feuille* of over-layerings of *Inferno*, which in that domain had occluded or distorted perception, even as they had been the only mediators. But here, the intermediaries make access sharper, smoother and more apparently immediate.

10 See Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 173–74; see also p. 179.

One can discern here the beginnings of a Trinitarian vision, of a God who is immediately present to Himself, and to all else, and yet paradoxically present as an ultimate interpersonal mediation. As mentioned above, Heather Webb has indicated that for God, and for our vision of God, to *see* is to see *with* and *alongside* someone else.[11] Moreover, it is to see with more than one, with many, as in the visionary dance, if God is triune. Not only does genuine dyadic love here give rise by contagion of generosity to the third person, who is (for Richard of St Victor and Thomas Aquinas) *condilectio*,[12] but also, from the outset, the third thing loved by the initial pair is always the objective, spatial and social medium assumed by their encounter, just as no private relationship really exists before a social and political order. The Father and the Son are immediately co-present, and yet, this immediacy is the mediation of the shared 'spirit' of their encounter, the summoning of its desire, which is present from the outset, and yet is further transmitted. For Patristic tradition, spirit is the product of Father and Son, as the bond of their love, and yet also the breath by which the Father utters the Son.

So, the dance exceeds a dyadic gaze, builds upon it, and yet is its pre-condition. The persons of the dance, as it were, generate one another through imitative steps, and it is intrinsic to the dance that there is a 'third' of rhythm, even between two solitary dancers. In this way, a third dancer, and then a fourth, etc. and so on, is always implied. As with the seraphim in *Paradiso* who merge movement with vision (*Par*., xxxi. 97–99), it would seem that there can be no vision of love without the generation and movement of love, which is at once reciprocal and yet communal, or even collective.

But can we make still more of the role of the nymphs here? As Giorgio Agamben has pointed out, nymphs in mediaeval to renaissance poetry and art were taken as the prime love objects for the imagination. As such, they hovered between human and preternatural, between the character of the elemental spirits of water, wood and field, on the one hand, and the possessors of a subtle matter, more rarefied than ours, on the other. Beatrice has nymphs for her handmaidens, and is herself perhaps a kind of nymph, or akin with them, both as a real woman of the city, and an imagined, ideal woman who is implicitly a pre-existent spirit who has descended from Heaven to aid Dante (*Purg*., xxxi. 108). Boccaccio's *Comedia delle ninfe*

11 Webb, *Dante's Persons*, pp. 191–205.

12 See Richard of St Victor, *On the Trinity*, trans. by Ruben Angelici (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), xi, p. 3. See also *Par*., xxxi. 25–27.

fiorentina was perhaps a gently satirical reference to the *Commedia* itself, which he admired. But as Agamben notes, for Boccaccio, there is already a 'literary' tension between real women, on the one hand, who have the advantage of accessible reality, and idealised personifications — of stars, of attributes, etc. — which lack solidity, but which at least, as Boccaccio advises, 'do not piss'.[13]

Yet for Dante, this tension does not seem to be present. Beatrice is both real and ideal, both embodied and ethereal, without contradiction. Similarly, the four actual nymphs are (after classical mythology), later elevated as stars (*Purg*., xxxi. 106–07), and yet later still, it would seem, restored after all to a nymph-status in the realm of the borders between the Earthly Paradise and Heaven. It appears that the eschatological horizon of resurrection resolves Boccaccio's dilemma, and sustains Dante's poetic discourse as embodied vision rather than literature; not as a hesitation between the real and the fictional, but as a poetic realisation of heightened reality.

One could suggest that the nymphs are counter-giants. Where the giants in pride try to reach the skies, the nymphs are elevated there (*Purg*., xxxi. 106–07). As the supernatural version of the natural virtues (spoken of by Aquinas, for whom justice can be elevated to a supernatural virtue), they represent a benign paradox of below and above; natural virtues are only really virtues, even as natural, when moved by grace. There can apparently be justice, for example, without charity, as for the pagans, but this is an illusion. There is no meting out justice without love. Aquinas notes that even the natural virtues are in reality obscurely ordered to the beatific vision.[14] They must become explicitly so ordered so as not to slide into lesser or quasi-virtues. So, one can suggest that the nymphs embody the paradox of a human nature which can only be fulfilled in its nature by surpassing itself, by receiving the gift of conjoining with God. They represent a raising by charity, but also a completion of charity, in the return to the city and the completion of its natural destiny.

The same paradoxical return is represented by Matelda whom Beatrice here invokes unnamed (*Purg*., xxxi. 92ff), and later names and connects with pure beauty and terrestrial innocence (*Par*., xxxiii. 118–19). Dante must now pass through her waters of Lethe, where forgiveness is a negative oblivion of past wrong. But later he must *drink* her waters of forgiveness, as positive recollection, the waters of Eunoe (*Purg*., xxxi. 94). It here seems

13 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta; Corbaccio*, ed. by Francesco Erbani (Milan: Garzanti, 1988), p. 243 ('tutte son femine, ma non pisciano').

14 See for example St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, q. 62.

that the written *Comedy* itself becomes one with this drinking, a reaching of the end, which is also a reaching down, and a reaching back, even into the depths of Hell. This is suggested especially by the cosmic summaries or recapitulations which in-gather the whole poem (as, for example, at *Purg*., xxxi. 106–08 or at *Par*., xxxi. 80–81), suggesting a clear distinction between Dante's metaphysics and a Buddhistic one, as suggested for him by Christian Moevs.[15] Beatrice may indeed be a kind of Bhoddisatva figure, but for Dante, beyond Buddhism, the reaching back and down belongs to the very eternal essence of God.

Paradiso xxxi

In *Paradiso* xxxi, the themes of occlusion and veiling, of the struggle for mediation, and of drawing together towards a redeemed simultaneity of disparate poles, in a spiral or circular form, are brought to the beginning of a conclusion.

Here, the intervening distances which both sight and sound must traverse to reach their goals become *one with* the poles which they mediate. Immediacy prevails, and yet mediation remains as now paradoxically *itself immediate*, like the sky itself, with both a Christological and a Trinitarian implication, as I have suggested in the foregoing. Thus, a flying multitude of angels does not impede vision, but becomes a diaphanous frame for seeing right through (*Par*., xxxi. 19–24), beyond even the veiling of the air (*Purg*., xxxi. 145), which had remained as a carapace at the end of *Purgatorio* xxxi. Just as the horizontal medium, as mere medium, is abolished in Paradise, so also is the vertical medium. There is no longer to be a linear journey, and the traversing of the paradisal realm cannot simply be read as a line of progress. For here, the mediators still lead one onward, and yet the immediate mediacy of the Trinitarian goal points one back again, rendering Beatrice, as Heather Webb has argued, as much the final goal as God, even though, in another sense, she leads through herself towards God. So just as Beatrice was veiled and shown forth by the veil of air at the end of *Purgatorio*, so Beatrice is God's airy veil. But she is an emanatory veil, and as such, remains, like all created things, in the ultimate, just as the Son, as the 'art' of the Father, remains with the Father, and all things are finally gathered up into this filial art.

15 Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's 'Comedy'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

The interpenetration of the axes in *Purgatorio*, mentioned above, here reaches a new intensity of combination. The complete absence of occlusion seems here to be thematised: the spiralling descent of the multitude did not get in the way of what was above, and the white rose, because God's light is penetrative (*Par*., xxxi. 22; see also ll. 13–15); the faces that are won to love are adorned by others' light, rather than shaded or occluded from the light (l. 49). And at lines 76–79, Beatrice is unimaginably higher than, and more distant from Dante, yet, as visible, she is as close as can be, and not mixed with any medium (*Par*., xxxi. 77–78).

The Christological vertices, or the drawing together of axes and dimensions, here reaches a higher pitch. The low is exalted, just as in Hell there are massive giants. Beyond the highest point, there is a pure unity of above and below, goal and grace.

But is it the case that in Paradise there is no more mediation? Are the figures of envoy and substitution of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* pushed aside, in favour of unmediated simultaneity? Are there no veils in Paradise?

If there is no more medium, that is because *all is now medium*, or veil, as reflecting the paradoxes both of the Trinity and of the Incarnation. To reach the goal is to reach a roundel of exchange, and to reach the top is also to return to the starting point. All, both horizontal and vertical, is finally resumed, in-gathered, rendering the progress and the exchanges along the way, the goal itself, when all things are finally seen in another, more final light. Beatrice has descended to Hell to rescue Dante (*Par*., xxxi. 80–81). The fusion of an arrow shot by one, and an arrow shot towards one, means only that the flight in the middle persists (see also *Purg*., xxxi. 107). The seraphim are at the goal, i.e. God, and yet they do not stop at the goal, but continuously fly around it (*Par*., xxxi. 130–32), rather as the nymphs' circular dance nonetheless follows a spiralling line towards Beatrice in *Purgatorio* xxxi (l. 104). So also, Dante's own gaze does not stop fixed at a single point, but is drawn up and then down, and circles all about (*Par*., xxxi. 43–48).

This continued circular motion at the goal recalls the mediaeval Canon of the Mass, in which the worshipper does not reach the altar of God once and for all, but rather travels around it, encircling it — '*et circumdabo altare tuum, domine*' [I will compass thine altar, O God][16] — combining singing, circling and seeing, all in one. The synthesis of a goal, and the movement

16 I. B. Botte and C. Mohrmann, *L'ordinaire de la Messe.* Textes et Études Liturgiques 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 1953), pp. 70–71.

towards the goal, or of medium, is one and the same with the liturgical roundel which we inhabit, distended through our passage through fallenness, where everything oscillates successively, occluding us, and falling short of us, all the way to the paradisal synthesising vertices, where everything is veiled and unveiled at once, without contradiction, and to a greater clarity. Indeed, such veilings or over-layerings, and comings-in-between, which might in *Inferno* or *Purgatorio* have veiled the passage of one's sight, in *Paradiso*, cause an *intensification of vision*:

> Né l'interporsi tra 'l dispora e 'l fiore
> di tanta moltitudine volante
> impediva la vista e lo splendore:
> ché la luce divina è penetrante
> per l'universo secondo ch'è degno,
> sì che nulla le puote essere ostante. (*Par*., xxxi. 19–24)
>
> [Nor, interposed between the flower and the height, did all that multitude in flight impede that radiance or the faculties of sight. Divine light pierces through the universe — to be received, as fit, in all degrees — in such a way that nothing can oppose.]

Crucially, things interposed between one thing and another are seen in *Paradiso* not as an occlusion, but as 'adornment', providing an accentuation or increased keenness, through delightful enflowering, of what is seen: the faces won to love are 'ornati' [arrayed] in others' light (*Par*., xxxi. 50).

In a similar manner, Veronica's veil tells us only 'more clearly', as it were adorning and accentuating, and not covering over, the truth of Jesus's face, the true God (*Par*., xxxi. 106–08), and problematizes the mundane distinction between thing and medium. The veil, it seems, remains, even in the reality which lies concealed beneath it, which is shown as its essential emanation. As seemingly in the case of Veronica, to remove the veil is to restore it, for it is not an extrinsic layer, but the right concealment through which the real and the true are given, or shown as themselves. When the Croatian pilgrim views the Veronica, at *Paradiso* xxxi. 103–08, his concern is with the veracity of what is shown forth, its accuracy of representation: 'was this the way, true God, you looked on earth?' (*Par*., xxxi. 108). The emphasis here is on the veil or covering singularly reconstruing an exactitude of image. The more the veil reveals, the more it remains a veil, and the pilgrim's own response to the image that is displayed to him (*Par*., xxxi. 106) becomes part of the veil's own exactness of image, since the onlooker's response to

the image is perforce part of Christ's own automatic image-making, which is continuous with his presence; just as God's impress is at one with his reality, instigated here through the pilgrim's response. The image of the true God, paradoxically as accurate and shown-forth, must be veiled. The veiled story of the transmission of the *vera icon*, then, is also the truest, and the most allegorically iconic of the icon, just as Christ's impress of an image of himself belongs to his image, which is to convey or transmit.[17]

Because the high and the low are synthesised, descent through sin in the end ascends in and through the descent of grace. The seraphim flying around, as pure medium, are also pure height as pure descent, indicated by their descent like 'a swarm of bees', into the rose of the Church (*Par*., xxxi. 1–7), in order to pollinate themselves (*Par*., xxxi. 10–12). Some commentators speak of a reversed figure of speech here, whereby the Church is pollinated by the seraphim with divine grace,[18] rather than the seraphim drawing pollen from the Church, as it were in the mode of real bees drawing pollen from a flower.

But one could argue, alternatively, that the figure remains natural, and that the bees remain founded in the literal, in accordance with the patterns of Biblical allegory which Dante applied to his own composition.[19] Rather, it is the theological metaphysics that is reversed; the seraphim are presented as depending upon the Church (*Par*., xxxi. 10). Perhaps this is because Christ is higher than the angels, and all of the cosmos depends upon him and exists through him, and the Church as his bodily extension. But beyond that, the Church is also Mary-Ecclesia, and comprises all beseeching and redeemed subjectivities (*Par*., xxxi. 100–01). This would seem to suggest that if the cosmos holds together in Christ (as for St Paul), then it also holds together through human assent and active reception. Another inversion is therefore on display. The movement 'beyond beatitude', yet defining of it, as for Pseudo-Dionysius, a share in the creative power of God, is at one with the circling around, and the movements downward and backward,

17 On the variable traditions of the Veronica, and the theological ironies of this variation in relation to the unmediated exactitude of the image, with detailed reference to material culture, see B. A. Windeatt, '"*Vera Icon*?": The Variable Veronica of Medieval England', *Convivium Supplementum* (2018), 3-15. See also Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

18 *Paradiso: Commentary*. ed. and trans. by Charles S. Singleton. Bollingen Series LXXX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 512–13.

19 G. A. R. Clifford, *Transformations of Allegory.* Concepts of Literature Series (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

spanning the course of the whole *Comedy* (whose soteriological course is summarised at *Par*., xxxi. 80–81), the very book we hold in our hands, and indeed spanning our own selves, addressed (directly at *Par*., xxxi. 40, and implicitly throughout, as privy to Dante's perceptions and affections), and drawn into that book, like the bees themselves, the creatures closest to God.

In this way, one can observe a zig-zagging movement. Like the Gryphon, as the ultimate beyond ultimate, so God's light, as the highest, penetrates completely down to the very lowest point, so that all becomes diaphanous, or veil-like. The light is three-fold in character; it is not just the source, but also the flowing, or flowering-out, and the medium (*Par*., xxxi. 71–72). The zig-zag implies a Trinitarian ontology whereby the summit is not an end-point, but eternally an ecstatic going-out, 'mirroring eternal rays, to form a crown or aureole around' (ll. 71–72). The vertical height of arrival is compared with the horizontal pilgrimage of barbarians to Rome, or Croatian pilgrims to see Veronica's veil (*Par*., xxxi. 31–35). Equivalently, Dante's own eyes now dance; they stroll and fly — in reaching their destination, they enter into the most perfect movement, which is circular (*Par*., xxxi. 46–48). Just as the seraphim, in flying around, obtain to the Beatific vision, so this vision is not statically held back, chained, thonged or covered over, but is itself defined as movement, and an infinitely fast or instantaneous journey. Arrival and sharply piercing are now contemporaneous and immediate, as everything has become the diaphanous medium (*Par*., xxxi. 46–48).

Comparably, Beatrice's heavenly crown does not simply descend upon her, but has to be made from rays of light coming to meet her, and radiating outwards; as if the rays make her, or she is part of the rays, which then disperse outward again (*Par*., xxxi. 71–72). One might say that Beatrice is an active receiver of emanating descending light, rather as for the Albertine tradition, and echoing Aquinas's recension of Avicenna's view of the active disposition of matter towards the reception of form. One might place this image of Beatrice's crown of constitutive refracting light beams in the tradition of Robert Grosseteste's considerations of light as the super-form.[20] Equally, to receive light is to receive something active, whose

20 See *Robert Grosseteste. De luce, seu de incohatione formarum*, trans. by Clare Riedl, Medieval Philosophical Texts in Translation No. 1 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1942); *Robert Grosseteste and His Intellectual Milieu*, ed. by J. Flood, J. R. Ginther, J. W. Goering (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols publishers, 2013); Albert the Great, *Summa Theologiae*, I. 6, 26. 2–3; 10. 59–60; *Commentary on Dionysius' Mystical Theology*, trans. by Simon Tugwell, O. P., 10. 59–60; Simon Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*: *Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei*, q. 5 a. 1 ad 5 and *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 20 [5].

motion continues in and beyond one's reception of it, and is intensified by another's gaze (*Par*., xxxi. 140–42), as mirroring eternal rays (*Par*., xxxi. 71).

Dante and Bernard go back to talking near the end of the canto. The final vision here is of Mary, and so of the God-bearer (*Par*., xxxi. 100–01). A tension arises between looking at Mary and trying to speak of her (*Par*., xxxi. 136–38). Sight here surpasses description, yet speaking of this difficulty is itself a — sublime — description. Mary is the brightest, and interestingly, here, occlusions again seem to outdo one another, in a curious redeeming echo of the agonistic infernal landscape in which one thing occludes another, but here it is an outdoing of brightness and not of darkness and shadow:

> Io levai li occhi; e come da mattina
> la parte orïental de l'orizzonte
> soverchia quella dove 'l sol declina,
> così, quasi di valle andando a monte
> con gli occhi, vidi parte ne lo stremo
> vincer di lume tutta l'altra fronte. (*Par*., xxxi. 118–23)
>
> [I raised my eyes. And, as when morning dawns, the orient horizon in new light defeats the part in which the sun goes down, so too, as though my eyes were travelling from valley up to mountain peak, I saw the rim outdo, in brightness, every other part.]

In Mary's sphere, moreover, there is still a multiplicity where each angel is equal but different in effulgence (*fulgore*) and art. Although there is a vision of Mary and angels at the end, each one actively has his art, 'ciascun distinto di fulgore e d'arte' [in blaze and chosen deed all differing] (*Par*., xxxi. 130–32). Language, games, songs and voice remain, even at this point, where one might think that sight was all that one needed. Rather, a synaesthesia of seeing and dancing, and seeing and singing, and singing as a continuation and intensification of movement, as dancing, seems to draw all human ecstatic expression into one perfect instantaneous mediation. The final vision here is of descending grace, of a human smile upon play (*Par*., xxxi. 92–93). Again, as in *Purgatorio*, Beatrice's mouth combines sight and speech. Beyond the sight of her face, there is the sight of her smiling mouth, and so a return to utterance.

Likewise, the descent of creation remains. Speech is not a surrogate sign which must vanish, but remains in the ultimate, as expressive art, and is exalted, as all becomes medium. Dante's own art 'about' these things is itself an aspect of what it is about — the indispensability of the

imagination, as the mediating realm, which Dante both sees, and sees by partially producing. The burning of desire and care remain for Bernard, and are not cancelled out in the ultimate. And again, as for the nymphs in *Purgatorio*, Dante looks through the gaze of others, and here especially through Bernard's gaze, but no longer with their looking on his behalf, or for his sake, but as an adornment, making it more ardent (*Par*., xxxi. 142). And so, right at the end, it is the look of the other which becomes a new kind of medium. If poles and medium are now as one, then the pole of looking or speaking can itself act as medium.

The final implication of the three canto Thirty-Ones, read together, as in the foregoing, could be seen as the shift from the mediation of objective properties via an objective middle to interpersonal mediation. There seems to be nothing outside the personal interplay of connections and objects, as they are also subjects, and *vice versa*. People see through and by one another, as poles to be seen, and as middles to be traversed, all one, and all as kinship and gift, as *condilectio*, and all as adornment. They overlap, assist, intensify and adorn one another, but not as successive perspectives of exclusivity, or ciphers, as before, one gaze at a time, ceding place to another, as if by a competitive *agon*, vying for presence. The 'right distance' to sustain relationship has been found at last. Here, finally, one sees particular individuals. Just as the angels are 'distinct in radiance and art' (*Par*., xxxi. 132), so we see the personal faces of Beatrice, Bernard and Mary. To see them is not just to see a final goal, but also to see the final medium which is all there is to see. The canto concludes with Dante's particular gaze, carried and intensified by Bernard's, as a borrowing of heat and ardour. He has now joined those 'won to love — adorned with others' light' ('a carità süadi / d'altrui lume fregiati', *Par*., xxxi. 49–50), carried, as we are as readers, by their return gaze. And not Mary alone, but Mary as the creative ambience of angels.

The chronological story of the three vertically-compared canto Thirty-Ones is one of inversions, and speculative synthesis, of below becoming above, and above below, where even Beatrice has left her footprint in the depths of Hell (*Par*., xxxi. 81); of over there coming nearby, over here, and yet remaining infinitely distant (*Par*., xxxi. 74–75); and of a final end-point still comprising movement, and movement-around (*Par*., xxxi. 46–48, 71–72); of servitude and freedom (*Par*., xxxi. 85–86); a story of the false and yet finally salvific compass of giants, and of the true reaching upwards of nymphs, which also hurls back downwards, in order to be re-woven

together in the labyrinth of gazes and adornments. Above all, it is a story of monsters, of the false yet true monsters, the giants and the true monster, Christ, who assumes even our distorted nature; and still more ultimately, a story of mediation between the false monsters and the true. The key mediators are female — Beatrice, the four nymphs, the three personified theological virtues, and the Heavenly Queen herself. By their height of beauty (*Par*., xxxi. 134), physical and spiritual, refracted 'ne li occhi a tutti li altri santi' [in all the eyes of all the saints] (*Par*., xxxi. 135), they lure the false monsters towards the truth; they even beguile downwards the divine into a saving hybridity. By this double action, they render the monstrous tame.

The vertical story of the canto Thirty-Ones is therefore the story of Beauty and the Beast; the instigation of redeeming homeopathy by a union of opposites.

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