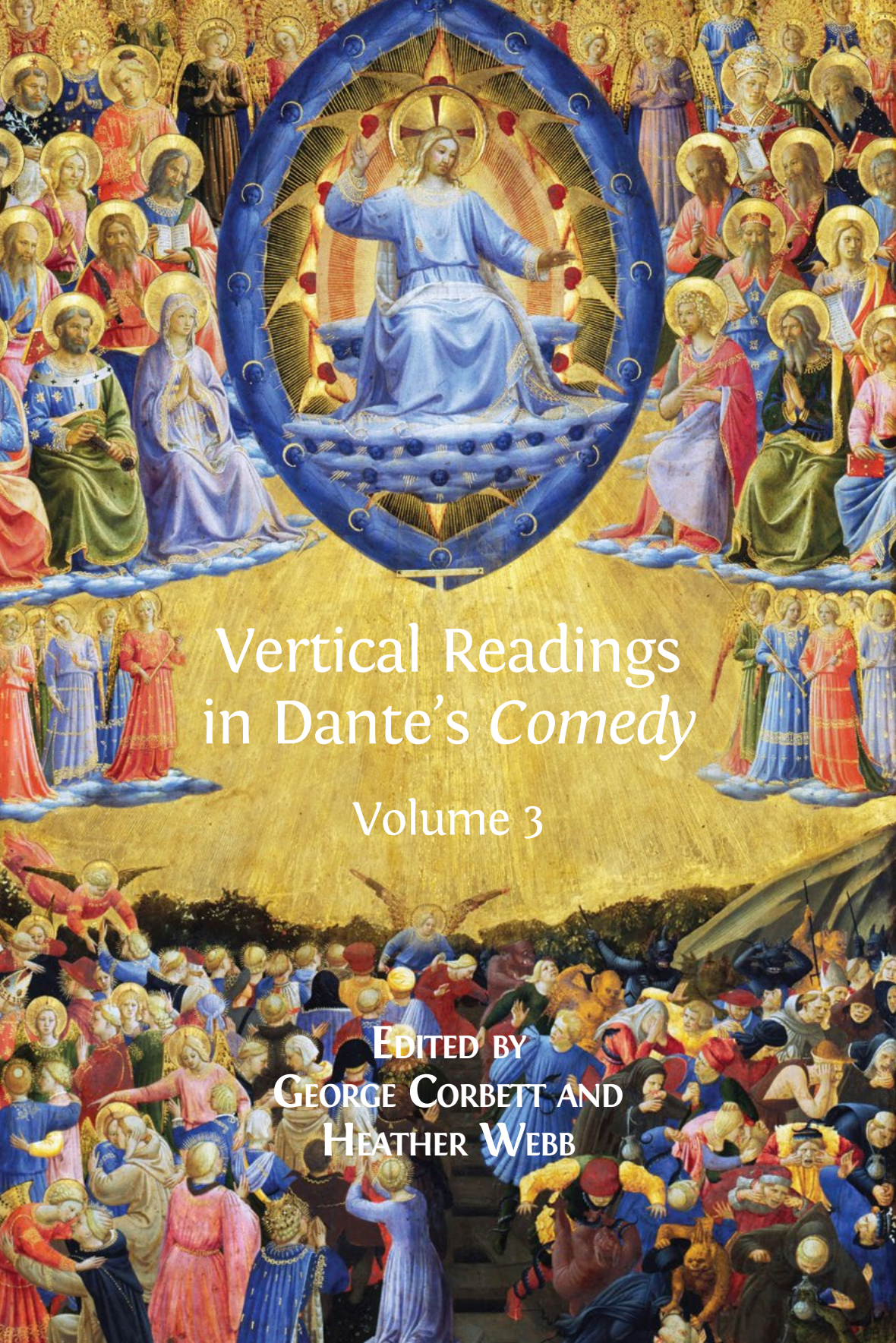

Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*

Volume 3

Edited by
George Corbett and
Heather Webb

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32. Particular Surprises: Faces, Cries and Transfiguration

David F. Ford

In their introduction to the first volume of *Vertical Readings in Dante's 'Comedy'*, George Corbett and Heather Webb describe this project as 'an experiment with a clear aim: to see what would happen when we asked scholars to read all the same-numbered canto sets of the poem vertically'.[1] This chapter is a variation on the other experiments so far, though perhaps more in line with the chapters on the canto Thirty-Ones, Thirty-Threes and Thirty-Fours. Mine is a reading by a Christian theologian whose main work is in contemporary theology, both as a scholar of it and a contributor to it, and who within that field has a special interest in hermeneutics and the interpretation of scripture — mainly the Bible but also other scriptures. Given the immense range of hermeneutical and contemporary theological possibilities opened up by the canto Thirty-Twos, I have set quite strict limits for myself, focusing on those three cantos with little reference to other parts of the *Comedy*, taking one of the many biblical references (the Transfiguration of Jesus) as my primary text within those cantos, and selecting just a couple of theological topics for attention with an eye more on contemporary discussions than on historical theology (where most of the theological scholarship has, understandably, been concentrated).

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

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Purgatorio xxxii: Transfiguration

I begin in the middle of the middle canto:

> Però trascorro a quando mi svegliai,
> e dico ch'un splendor mi squarciò 'l velo
> del sonno, e un chiamar: 'Surgi: che fai?'
> Quali a veder de' fioretti del melo
> che del suo pome li angeli fa ghiotti
> e perpetüe nozze fa nel cielo,
> Pietro e Giovanni e Iacopo condotti
> e vinti, ritornaro a la parola
> da la qual furon maggior sonni rotti,
> e videro scemata loro scuola
> così di Moïsè come d'Elia,
> e al maestro suo cangiata stola;
> tal torna' io, e vidi quella pia
> sovra me starsi che conducitrice
> fu de' miei passi lungo 'l fiume pria.
> E tutto in dubbio dissi: 'Ov' è Beatrice?'
> Ond' ella: 'Vedi lei sotto la fronda
> nova sedere in su la sua radice.
> Vedi la compagnia che la circonda:
> li altri dopo 'l grifon sen vanno suso
> con più dolce canzone e più profonda'.
> E se più fu lo suo parlar diffuso,
> non so, però che già ne li occhi m'era
> quella ch'ad altro intender m'avea chiuso.
> Sola sedeasi in su la terra vera,
> come guardia lasciata lì del plaustro
> che legar vidi a la biforme fera. (*Purg*., xxxii. 70–96)

> [So I speed on to when I came awake, and say how splendour tore apart sleep's veil and this cry: 'Rise! What are you doing there?'. When brought to see the budding apple flowers which make the angels greedy for their fruit, and makes in Heaven perpetual marriage feast, Peter and James and John were overcome but, waking once again, they heard that word which shattered greater sleeps than theirs had been, and saw the school they'd sat in two souls short — since Moses and Elijah both had gone — their teacher with his robe now much transformed. So, too, I woke, and saw, above me there, the one who in compassion led my steps along the river sometime earlier. And, full of doubt, I said: 'Where's Beatrice?' At which, 'See there', she said, 'beneath the leaves — new — she's seated at the root of that. And see the company that encircles her! The rest behind the Gryphon go on high, singing a deeper, ever sweeter song'.

> And if her speech flowed further on than this, I do not know. My eyes were set, by now, on her. She'd closed my mind to other thoughts. Alone, she sat upon that one true earth as guard, left there to watch the chariot which, as I'd seen, the two-form beast had tied.][2]

In the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, his three disciples, Peter, James and John, 'were weighed down with sleep' (*gravati erant somno*, Luke 9:32, Vulgate), and in *Purgatorio* xxxii this is taken as a point of connection with Dante falling asleep and being awakened. Other biblical transfiguration themes of splendour, seeing, being overcome, hearing the voice of God, the presence and then disappearance of Moses and Elijah, the command to rise, and the transformation of Jesus' clothing are present straightforwardly; but there are also surprising elements woven in. Two are especially striking.

One is the introduction to the analogy with the Transfiguration in lines 73–75. The mention of angels and Heaven echoes the passage that precedes the Transfiguration story in each of the gospels (for example, Luke 9:26–27) but this is given a very different context by references to the Song of Songs and the book of Revelation on the themes of love and marriage. Are the 'budding apple flowers' those of the Song of Songs 2:3–7, with its apples and apple trees, feasting and awakening, traditionally understood as an allegory of Christ and the 'tree' of his cross?:

> As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
> so is my beloved among young men.
> With great delight I sat in his shadow,
> and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
> He brought me to the banqueting house,
> and his intention towards me was love.
> Sustain me with raisins,
> refresh me with apples;
> for I am faint with love.
> O that his left hand were under my head,
> and that his right hand embraced me!
> I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
> by the gazelles or the wild does:
> do not stir up or awaken love
> until it is ready!

2 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 2: Purgatorio*, trans. and ed. by Robin Kirkpatrick (London and Harmondswith: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 305.

The 'perpetual marriage feast' in Heaven recalls the marriage feast of the Lamb who has died and been raised, Jesus himself, in the book of Revelation (19:6–9; cf. 21:1–14). His bride is the Church of the Saints, identified with the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, in the context of nothing less than the new Creation — 'a new Heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1). So Dante has cast himself analogously in the role not only of the disciples closest to Jesus at the Transfiguration but also as the lover in the Song of Songs, allegorically identified with God, and as a participant in the most comprehensive and surprising transformation of all, the renewal of both Heaven and earth.

Comparably daring is the second surprise. In the Transfiguration story there is a dramatic transition when the disciples emerge from the cloud, from which the voice of God had addressed Jesus as 'my Son, my beloved' (Luke 9:35), and then suddenly 'Jesus was found alone' (9:36).[3] But here it is Beatrice who is found alone by Dante (l. 94) — a further example of Dante's breathtakingly audacious figural representation of her.

This central trope of the Transfiguration and its intertexts resonates backwards and forwards in canto xxxii. Our imagination and theological understanding are prepared for the Transfiguration through the earlier part. There is repeated emphasis on sight and seeing, beginning with the opening lines:

> Tant' eran li occhi miei fissi e attenti
> a disbramarsi la decenne sete,
> che li altri sensi m'eran tutti spenti. (*Purg.*, xxxii. 1–3)
>
> [My eyes were now so fixedly intent to free themselves from that decade-long thirst that every sense but sight had been eclipsed.]

The sun, which also figures in Matthew's Transfiguration narrative, is mentioned no less than four times (ll. 11, 17, 52, 56). The lead-in to finding Beatrice alone is an intensity of seeing:

> già ne li occhi m'era
> quella ch'ad altro intender m'avea chiuso. (*Purg.*, xxxii. 92–93)
>
> [My eyes were set, by now, on her. She'd closed my mind to other thoughts.]

3 There are variant readings of Luke 9:35, but the Vulgate has *dilectus*, beloved, which is also the undisputed reading in the parallel passages in Matthew (Vulgate *dilectus*) and Mark (Vulgate *charissimus*).

But above all there is the choreography of facing, one of the pervasive and theologically important features of the *Comedy*.[4] In his Transfiguration, the face of Jesus is transformed (Luke 9:29) and shines like the sun (Matthew 17:2) as he converses with Moses and Elijah. And at the beginning of *Purgatorio* xxxii there is 'the holy smile' (l. 4) of Beatrice. My favourite theological essay on the *Comedy* is that of Peter Hawkins, 'All smiles. Poetry and Theology in Dante's *Comedy*', in which, after a delightful survey of smiling in the *Comedy*, he concludes that 'the smile is not only Dante's signature gesture but perhaps his most original and indeed useful contribution to medieval theology — and indeed to the Christian tradition itself […]. It is the gesture that moves us from *Inferno* to *Paradiso*, from the human to the divine, and from time to eternity'.[5]

Here it is Beatrice's smile as the lure of Dante's desire year after year. His face must be forced away from it to attend to anything 'less' (l. 7). When Dante is awakened from sleep he first sees Matelda — 'quella pia […] che conducitrice / fu de' miei passi lungo 'l fiume pria' [the one who in compassion led my steps along the river sometime earlier] (ll. 82–84) — but immediately asks about Beatrice and, when directed to her, concentrates on her alone.

Only when Beatrice reassures him about being with her both now and forever (ll. 100–03), and then directs his gaze towards the chariot, with an instruction to write down later what he sees, does he obediently give 'la mente e li occhi ov' ella volle' [eye and mind to where she said I should] (l. 108). There follows an allegorical plunge into church history. This has its own choreography of facing, in stark contrast with that between Jesus and his disciples or between Dante and Beatrice. It culminates in the 'puttana sciolta' [loose-wrapped whore] with 'le ciglia intorno pronte' [flickering

4 I have been fascinated by this for years. See especially David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) on Dante pp. 25, 80, 120 and (on Beatrice's smile), p. 275.

5 Peter S. Hawkins, 'All Smiles. Poetry and Theology in Dante's *Comedy*', in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, ed. by Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 36–59: 'Despite the degree to which Dante is associated with the infernal, it is his creation of a "smile of the universe", radiant throughout Purgatory and Paradise, that shows his spin on the ancient religion he inherited. To be told that God the Trinity smiles upon himself; to see Gregory smiling at his former error; to catch the delight in Mary's eye, which spreads like lightening throughout the heavenly rose; to consider that the resurrection of the body might mean the raising up of one's own distinctive smile; or to imagine seeing God face-to-face as an encounter with holiness that does not require eyes averted and lips closed tight but rather entails the spontaneity of a smile returning a smile — to entertain these possibilities requires a "new life" for the Christian imagination, one that did not take place in Dante's fourteenth century and is now (sadly) long overdue' (pp. 53–54).

lashes quick to look around], turning her 'occhio cupido e vagante' [wandering and cupidinous eye] on Dante and being whipped by the giant for this (ll. 148–56). There is something comparable in the aftermath to the Transfiguration, as Jesus and the disciples come down the mountain and plunge into a drama of demon-possession, leading to Jesus speaking of his own betrayal (Luke 9:37–45). Another commonality is the way in which the texts note the protagonists seeing things that cannot be understood or spoken about at the time but need to be witnessed later: 'And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen' (Luke 9:36; cf. Mark 9:9–10, Matthew 17:9).

Inferno xxxii: Frozen Faces; Embraced and Eaten by Hatred

This vivid, allegorical engagement with the corruption and sin of the church and Christian history sends us back to the choreography of facing in *Inferno* xxxii. There we have no allegory, only a realistic plain sense, reaching after what Dante calls harsh, rough, rawly rasping language (*Inf.*, xxxii. 1). This describes extreme face to face distrust, hatred, anger, violence, suffering.

There is no frank and open facing between the sinners, or between Dante and the sinners; rather, Dante underlines the difficulty of genuine facing repeatedly:

> Ognuna in giù tenea volta la faccia. (*Inf.*, xxxii. 37)
>
> [And each one kept his face bent down.]
>
> pur col viso in giùe (*Inf.*, xxxii. 53)
>
> [Still gazing downwards]
>
> latrando lui con li occhi in giù raccolti. (*Inf.*, xxxii. 105)
>
> [He barked but kept his eyes held firmly down.]

But there are two distinctive images in this canto that contrast with the sorts of facing that are to come in the *Purgatorio*, and above all in the *Paradiso*.

The dominant one is the frozen face. Dante vividly evokes this surprising feature of the depths of Hell: not heat but cold. Here the shadows are

'livide […] / dolenti ne la ghiaccia' [fixed in ice lead-blue] (l. 34) with teeth chattering, tears frozen solid, ears lost to frostbite.

> Poscia vid' io mille visi cagnazzi
> fatti per freddo; onde mi vien riprezzo,
> e verrà sempre, de' gelati guazzi. (*Inf.*, xxxii. 70–72)
>
> [And then I saw a thousand mongrel faces bitten by frost. (I shiver remembering — and always will — to see a frozen puddle.)]

Among these faces, smiling is unimaginable, as is any gracious interaction. Instead, even more horrific than the frozenness is the second, gruesome surprise: how they interact with each other, and how Dante relates to them. In a parody of love and Eucharistic communion, they embrace in fixed, violent hatred and cannibalistic consumption.

> Con legno legno spranga mai non cinse
> forte così; ond' ei come due becchi
> cozzaro insieme, tanta ira li vinse.
> […]
> Ch'io vidi due ghiacciati in una buca,
> sì che l'un capo a l'altro era cappello;
> e come 'l pan per fame si manduca,
> così 'l sovran li denti a l'altro pose
> là 've 'l cervel s'aggiugne con la nuca:
> non altrimenti Tideo si rose
> le tempie a Menalippo per disdegno,
> che quei faceva il teschio e l'altre cose.
> 'O tu che mostri per sì bestial segno
> odio sovra colui che tu ti mangi,
> dimmi 'l perché'. (*Inf.*, xxxii. 49–51, 125–35)
>
> [To wood wood never has been clamped so hard as these two were; and, overwhelmed with ire, each butted each like any pair of goats. […] But then I saw two frozen in one single hole, one head a headpiece to the one below. As bread is mangled by some famished mouth, so too the higher gnawed the lower head, precisely where the nape and brainstem meet. The dying Tydeus in this same way, in loathing, chewed the brows of dead Menalippus, gnawing the skull and everything besides. 'O you who by so bestial a show make known your hatred for the one you eat, now tell me — why?']

Even Dante himself is drawn into the violence, with an ambivalent, or rather multivalent, confession that poses sharply the philosophical and theological puzzle about human and divine freedom in the *Comedy*:

> se voler fu o destino o fortuna,
> non so; ma, passeggiando tra le teste,
> forte percossi 'l piè nel viso ad una. (*Inf.*, xxxii. 76–78)
>
> [And whether by intention, chance or fate (well, I don't know!) pacing among these heads, hard in the face of one, I struck my foot.]

It certainly seems quite intentional when Dante 'lo presi per la cuticagna' [grasped him tight against the scalp] (l. 97) and later 'tratti glien' avea più d'una ciocca' [yanked out several tufts] (l. 104). I will return later to this question of freedom, which relates to my theme of surprise.

Paradiso xxxii: Transfiguration in Abundance

For now, let us follow the interplay of facing into *Paradiso* xxxii. It is implicit throughout, as those in the rose of Heaven are pointed out to Dante in a series of gracious introductions. Within the rose, presided over by the Virgin Mary, the Hebrew women and men, such as Eve, Rachel, Sarah, Rebecca, Judith, Ruth, Adam and Moses, who came before Christ, come together with the Christian saints, such as John the Baptist, Peter, John the Evangelist, Francis, Benedict, Augustine,[6] Lucy and Anne. This echoes the Transfiguration's bringing together of Peter, James and John with Moses and Elijah. The surprise here is the presence of Beatrice alongside Rachel.

The first explicit mention is of the Christian saints 'quei ch'a Cristo venuto ebber li visi' [who turned their countenance to Christ now come] (l. 27). Dante is also told to note the faces of the children, as the mystery of their salvation and ranking is explored. Then there is a double climax of facing.

The first is a rich yet mysterious evocation of the way God, presented here as king in his kingdom, through his 'tanto amore e […] tanto diletto' [great love, his pure delight] (l. 62) and his 'lieto aspetto' [translated variously as 'look of happiness' (Kirkpatrick); 'glad sight' (Mandelbaum); 'own eyes' bliss' (Binyon) and 'happy image' (Huse)] (l. 64) creates everything and distributes grace:

6 One of the puzzles of the *Comedy* is why Augustine's massive theological presence in Western Christianity is not reflected in his role in the poem — he is simply mentioned here in passing.

Lo rege per cui questo regno pausa
in tanto amore e in tanto diletto,
che nulla volontà è di più ausa
le menti tutte nel suo lieto aspetto
creando, a suo piacer di grazia dota
diversamente; e qui basti l'effetto. (*Par.*, xxxii. 61–66)

[The king, through whom this kingdom is at peace, in such great love, and in such pure delight, that nothing in our wills dare aim so high, creating, in his look of happiness, all minds, bestowed, as he best pleased, his grace in different ways. The outcome says enough.]

I will return later to this interweaving of love, delight, daring, creativity, happiness and the differentiation of grace.

The second, more extended climax, evokes the face of Mary. Dante's adoration of Mary takes up and carries further his adoration of Beatrice; it is also his primary way into the adoration of Jesus Christ. And facing is central to this core set of relationships in contemplation, adoration, joy, wisdom, grace and love:

Riguarda omai ne la faccia che a Cristo
più si somiglia, ché la sua chiarezza
sola ti può disporre a veder Cristo. (*Par.*, xxxii. 85–87)

[Return now. See that face resembling Christ closer than all. For that bright light alone can make you wholly fit to look on Christ.]

One might debate whether Christology or Mariology is more central to the *Comedy*, but our cantos leave no doubt about the theological, conceptual priority of Jesus Christ, while perhaps giving imaginative and affective priority to Beatrice in *Purgatorio* xxxii and to Mary in *Paradiso* xxxii. In *Purgatorio* xxxii the 'binato' [two-formed] (l. 47) Gryphon symbolises Christ as human and divine, and the embracing framework is that of sin and salvation culminating in Jesus Christ, but the drama that grips the reader is between Dante and Beatrice. In *Paradiso* xxxii Christ is likewise central to the reality described, with all history pivoting around his coming or having come, and the light of Mary's face enabling looking on Christ; but what I have called the second climactic facing, that of Mary, is both longer and more intense.

Dante sees 'happiness rain down on her' ('sopra lei tanta allegrezza / piover', ll. 88–89), so 'that nothing I had ever seen before

had brought my wondering eyes to such a poise, nor shown so much to me of how God looks' ('che quantunque io avea visto davante, / di tanta ammirazion non mi sospese, / né mi mostrò di Dio tanto sembiante' (ll. 91–93). The effect on the 'beata corte' [happy court] (l. 98) of the angel Gabriel's singing is that 'ogne vista sen fé più serena' [their faces showed the more serene] (l. 99). Gabriel, in his delight, is noted by Dante, who asks:

> 'qual è quell'angel che con tanto gioco
> guarda ne li occhi la nostra regina,
> innamorato si che par di foco?'
> Così ricorsi ancora a la dottrina
> di colui ch'abbelliva di Maria,
> come del sole stella mattutina. (*Par.*, xxxii. 104–08)

> ['which is that angel who, with such delight, looks at our Queen and gazes in her eyes so deep in love he seems to be on fire?' I went, in this way, back to learn from him of one who drew his beauty from Maria, as, from the sun, the morning star draws light.]

This is transfiguration in abundance, being multiplied, shared — a contagion of light, love, beauty and delight; Bernard in his comments immediately sets it in the proper theological hierarchy of Gabriel, Mary and Jesus:

> 'perch' elli è quelli che portò la palma
> giuso a Maria, quando 'l Figliuol di Dio
> carcar si volse de la nostra salma'. (*Par.*, xxxii. 112–14)

> ['For he it is who carried down the palm to Mary when the only Son of God chose to take on the weight of human form'.]

Then, after Bernard has directed Dante's eyes to other saints in the rose, he prepares him for the ultimate facing of the Trinitarian God that is to come in the final canto:

> 'e drizzeremo li occhi al primo amore,
> sì che, guardando verso lui, penètri
> quant' è possibil per lo suo fulgore'. (*Par.*, xxxii. 142–44)

> [And turn your eyes towards the Primal Love, so that, in looking there, your eye should pierce as far as possible His dazzling light.]

But note the form of the preparation: it is 'praying for the gift of grace'] from Mary ('credendo oltrarti / orando grazia conven che s'impetri', ll. 146–47). Our third vertical canto ends with a colon, on the verge of Bernard's prayer to Mary. There will be more to say on this later.

The Soundtrack: Cries, Song, Conversation, Prayer

Before I come to my culminating set of theological issues I want to recapitulate briefly our three cantos. I have concentrated on the visual. What about the soundtrack that accompanies these dramas of facing? Before I begin with the *Inferno* it is worth making an obvious point: the *Comedy* is a verbal creation, to be read and heard, and all its visual vividness is evoked by words, by auditory and imaginative means.

Hell is noisy as well as nasty, and the opening of *Inferno* xxxii longs for a harshness of language to match it. The problem is that this is no 'impresa […] / da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo' [task for tongues still whimpering 'Mum!' or 'Dad!'] (ll. 7–9). So Dante turns to the Muses for inspiration, 'sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso' [so fact and word may not too far diverge] (l. 12).

What he portrays is the polar opposite of children crying out to loving parents. There are cries of pain and outrage:

> forte percossi 'l piè nel viso ad una.
> Piangendo mi sgridò: 'Perché mi peste?' (*Inf.*, xxxii. 78–79)

> [hard in the face of one, I struck my foot. It screeched out, whiningly: 'Why stamp on me?']

Conversation turns into interrogation, even accompanied by torture. Exchanges are full of insult, anger, hatred and cruelty:

> quando un altro gridò: 'Che hai tu, Bocca?
> non ti basta sonar con le mascelle,
> se tu non latri? qual diavol ti tocca?'
> 'Omai', diss' io, 'non vo' che più favelle,
> malvagio traditor; ch'a la tua onta
> io porterò di te vere novelle'. (*Inf.*, xxxii. 106–11)

> [Another yelling now: 'What's with you, Big Mouth? Not satisfied to castanet cold jaws? You bark as well. What devil's got to you?' And then I said: 'I'd have you speak no more. You're vile, you traitor. I'll augment your shame, I'll carry in your name a true report'.]

There is a clear contrast with *Purgatorio* xxxii, where, as Dante and Statius proceed, 'temprava i passi un'angelica nota' [Our steps were measured to the angel song] (l. 33). The first address there is a cry of blessing on the Gryphon. Then Dante is overwhelmed by a hymn:

> Io non lo 'ntesi, né qui non si canta
> l'inno che quella gente allor cantaro,
> né la nota soffersi tutta quanta. (*Purg.*, xxxii. 61–63)

> [I did not understand (it's not sung here) the hymn these people sang, nor could I bear in full the beauty of its harmonies.]

Such singing, like smiling, was absent from Hell. After Dante sleeps and is awoken by a cry of 'Surgi' ['Rise!'] (*Purg.*, xxxii. 72), the sight of Beatrice is accompanied by 'più dolce canzone e più profonda' [a deeper, ever sweeter song] (l. 90).

But we are still in the *Purgatorio*, and here in the Earthly Paradise where the first sin occurred, and the signs and sounds of hope and salvation are interwoven with reminders of sin and suffering. The allegory of Christian history is violent in action and imagery, and at its centre is a heartfelt cry from the Heavens at the corruption of the church: 'O navicella mia, com' mal se' carca!'['My little ship, what ill load weighs you down!'] (l. 129).

In *Paradiso* xxxii there is still a reminder of sin when Ruth is introduced as: 'colei / che fu bisava al cantor che per doglia / del fallo disse "*Miserere mei*"' [the one who bore the mother of the man who sang, mourning his fault, the '*Miserere mei*'] (ll. 10–12). But this is sin forgiven, people reconciled with God. The primary focus is on Mary, full of grace, to whom Gabriel sings, and the main sound besides singing — as in the case of the mother of Mary, St Anne, 'tanto contenta di mirar sua figlia, / che non move occhio per cantare osanna' [so happy as she wonders at her child she does not move her eyes to sing 'Hosannah'] (ll. 134–35) — is that of gracious introductions, conversation shot through with wonder, delight and desire, and the wise instruction of Bernard leading into the final line: 'E cominciò questa santa orazione' [And so he now began his holy prayer] (l. 151).

Grace and Surprise

Now for some theological ruminations. I noted earlier the remark from *Inferno* xxxii: 'se voler fu o destino o fortuna, / non so' [And whether by intention, chance or fate / (well, I don't know!)] (ll. 76–77) and its connection with Dante's understanding of freedom. Set that alongside the lines from *Paradiso* xxxii:

> Dentro a l'ampiezza di questo reame
> casüal punto non puote aver sito,
> se non come tristizia o sete o fame:
> ché per etterna legge è stabilito
> quantunque vedi, sì che giustamente
> ci si risponde da l'anello al dito;
> e però questa festinata gente
> a vera vita non è *sine causa*
> intra sé qui più e meno eccellente. (*Par.*, xxxii. 52–60)
>
> [Within the broad expanse of all this realm there cannot be a single point that's chance, nor any hunger, thirst or misery. For all that you may see here is decreed by God's eternal law. Hence, right and fit, all corresponds as finger to a ring. And so it is that, not without good cause, these children — sped too soon to this true life — are in their excellences less and more.]

If, in addition, one remembers Dante's assertion that human freedom is 'the greatest gift bestowed by God, on human nature'[7] one begins to grasp how complex this matter is, of which both the historical and contemporary theology of human and divine freedom are evidence.

But for now I will take as a key point of convergence between Dante's position in the *Comedy*, and a range of mainstream Christian thinkers in recent decades, the principle that human freedom and divine freedom are directly, not inversely related. In other words, the more involved we

7 Dante states this in *Paradiso* v. 19–22: 'Lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando, e a la sua bontate / più conformato, e quel ch'e' più apprezza, / fu de la volontà la libertate' [the greatest gift that God, in spacious deed, made, all-creating — and most nearly formed / to His liberality, most prized by Him — was liberty in actions of the will]. For a discussion of this freedom with relevant quotations, see Patrick Boyde, 'Aspects of Human Freedom', in *Perception and Passion in Dante's* Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 193–214.

are in loving God, living in line with God's free love for us, the more free we are. This, of course, contradicts those concepts of human freedom, or autonomy, which see human and divine freedom as in competition with each other. Heaven, for Dante, is the realm where God's freedom is seen in full harmony with human freedom. I do not want to undertake here the lengthy task of justifying this theology (with which I am in agreement) but to take off from it, and in particular to reflect on the next six lines, which have already been quoted:

> Lo rege per cui questo regno pausa
> in tanto amore e in tanto diletto,
> che nulla volontà è di più ausa
> le menti tutte nel suo lieto aspetto
> creando, a suo piacer di grazia dota
> diversamente; e qui basti l'effetto. (*Par.*, xxxii. 61–66)
>
> [The king, through whom this kingdom is at peace, in such great love, and in such pure delight, that nothing in our wills dare aim so high, creating, in his look of happiness, all minds, bestowed, as he best pleased, his grace in different ways. The outcome says enough.]

Grace can be seen as God's freely given love in action, and one of Dante's characteristic ways of describing grace coming together with human freedom is as love marked by delight, joy, happiness, beatitude. Smiling and singing are, as we have heard, among his favourite incarnate images of this. God's own 'look of happiness' is at the heart of creation, and human beings are fulfilled when this is mutual, in joyful adoration of God and delight in each other and in creation. And God, being infinitely free, is free to surprise us continually.

I want to dwell for a while on this theme of surprise. The *Comedy* is itself a massive surprise, and is full of surprises, within which I include its structure, its language and imagery, its plot and characters, its meetings and conversations, many philosophical and theological thoughts, its interpretations of scripture and other texts, the various turns, renewals, transformations and reorientations, and more. The most obvious indicator of the theme is Dante's repeated bewilderment and amazement as he travels through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, and the need for him to expand his capacities of heart, mind and imagination in order to cope with one new thing after another. One of his achievements as a poet is to portray Heaven

as a place of progressive astonishment. In *Paradiso* xxxii this is focused first on understanding the place of the children, and next on Mary, full of grace ('*gratïa plena*', l. 96), with the passage just quoted explaining the first but also relevant to the second. I want to highlight just two aspects of that passage.

One is the note of daring. 'Che nulla volontà è di più ausa' [nothing in our wills dare aim so high] (l. 63) is not only testimony to the transcendence of God's love, delight and creativity. It also implies that our wills might dare to aim quite high. We can, by God's grace, act in love, take delight, and stretch our minds, and Dante through the *Comedy* takes part in such daring creativity.

The second is the note of diversity, as given by God who 'a suo piacer di grazia dota / diversamente' [bestowed, as he best pleased, his grace / in different ways] (ll. 65–66). People are radically diverse, each unique, and we have no divine overview of them. How, then, are we to respond to them in all their otherness? The *Comedy* is a pedagogy of response to others, and Dante the poet dares to aim quite high — perhaps, at times, too high — in his judgements on them.

I now take a leap to our own situation of diversity, and in particular the theological daring that contemporary religious diversity requires. The logic of Dante's audacity in relation to his predecessors and contemporaries is that we who come after him might be inspired by his daring even when differing from his conclusions. God must be allowed to go on springing surprises, and if Dante does not allow his sources to have the last word so neither should Dante be allowed to have it now. Honouring Dante is not just a matter of repeating him, but of doing today things analogous to what he did in his day. So just as Dante was steeped in several cultural, philosophical, cosmological, political and religious traditions, and improvised audaciously on them all, so he can help inspire a comparably daring improvisation today. At a time when some in Italy are agitating for his removal from the school syllabus because of Mohammed being placed in Hell, and other negative references to Islam (including, many agree, the identification of the dragon in *Purgatorio* xxxii with Islam), what might be a creatively Dantean surprise in the area of interreligious relations? I would suggest two points for now.

First, between Christians and Muslims, their two scriptures, Bible and Qur'an, must be part of the engagement. Dante is a master of intertextuality,

brokering the fruitful interplay of texts and exploring their levels, and it would be fascinating to transfer some of his art to reading the Qur'an and the Bible alongside each other, and even to bring the *Comedy* as a biblically-shaped poem into dialogue with Muslim poetry inspired by the Qur'an. We have seen how the Transfiguration of Jesus, for example, resonates through our three cantos, together with many other scriptural texts. Peter Hawkins gives a consummate biblical analysis of *Purgatorio* xxxii, showing how it is part of a 'massive turn to scripture' at the end of the *Purgatorio*, one that stretches from Eden in Genesis to the Book of Revelation and ranges through the whole of the canon in between.[8] Hawkins also offers one of the most apt images of Dante's daring in dealing with the Bible, a quality from which the interplay between the scriptures of the two most numerous religions of the twenty-first century could greatly benefit. He suggests the inadequacy of Luca Signorelli's portrayal of Dante in the San Brizio Chapel of Orvieto Cathedral, and adds:

> Perhaps only a moving picture would do, for then we would see him as he really is over the long course of the *Commedia* — less a scholar safely ensconced within his library and more an aerialist of the afterlife, a tightrope walker who negotiates the perilous high wire he has himself strung out between God's Book and his own poem. Part of the excitement of watching him making his high-flying moves is the realization that he is always performing without a net, as if inviting the disaster that never quite befalls him. But, perhaps the most thrilling aspect of his artistry is the sustained *balance* of his entire act, the way his reckless daring is so artfully concealed. One simply cannot stop marveling at the sureness of his footing, the careful measure of each bold step forward, the confident way he holds on to the air.[9]

For our interreligious situation one might hope for a comparable artistry combined with the sort of respect, generosity and love towards the contemporary non-Christian other that Dante accords to Virgil but not to Mohammed.

A second point is the diversity of grace, if God 'a suo piacer di grazia dota / diversamente' [bestowed, as he best pleased, his grace / in different ways] (*Par.*, xxxii. 65–66). A combination of trusting the God of love, joy and

8 Peter Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments. Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 180–228.

9 Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, pp. 70–71.

compassion, together with an understanding of grace that is differentiated, particular and part of the mystery of how God is 'best pleased', might suggest a more positive attitude than Dante's to Muslims and others whom Dante confidently judges to be in Hell. At the least, Karl Barth's maxim that the Christian is one who, in the light of Christ, is permitted to hope for the best for all people, might be adopted, leaving Dante with more surprises than he might have anticipated. Inter-faith engagement needs an eschatology of surprise, as well as the agnosticism that is its necessary accompaniment, since by definition surprises are not known in advance. The practical effect of this should be alertness and openness to grace coming through new events, people, texts, and ideas, and so on.

Moving on from inter-faith relations, and still relevant to it, though of far wider relevance too, is the question, posed by the closing lines of *Paradiso* xxxii, about prayer for grace. It is easy to protest that, if all in Heaven is really 'per etterna legge […] stabilito' [decreed / by God's eternal law] (l. 55), then why does Bernard need to pray for Dante and beg for 'grazia da quella che puote aiutarti' [grace from her who can assist] (l. 148)? The answer leads us to the heart of the mystery of divine surprise.

Prayer is an alignment of human freedom with the freedom of God in radical intimacy with God. The freedom to pray is itself a gift of grace, and the free acknowledgement of this utter dependence on God is a recognition not only of the non-competitive relationship between divine and human freedom but also of the fact that the second is created by the first. And communion with a God of surprises opens the way to full and active participation in creating those surprises, which includes the writing of prayer and praise such as that which Dante puts into the mouth of Bernard in the final canto, and which leads into the ultimate surprise of the beatific vision.

It is a stupendous thought, that human beings might, in prayerful humility and yet in reality, receive the life, light and love, indeed the very Spirit, of the God of Jesus Christ, who does new things, renews old things, and is endlessly creative. Yet that is standard Christian teaching and Dante fully accepted it. In fact, if anything he appears to 'over-accept' it, entering into it with such wholehearted conviction that his *Comedy* claims the authority of scripture, he himself is assured of his place in Heaven, and 'his lady' Beatrice is his guide and the revealer of matters never before the subject of poetry.

Cadenza: In the Fitzwilliam Museum…

Finally, a cadenza. In the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, in Holy Week of 2015, as part of the King's College Holy Week programme, the poet Micheal O'Siadhail gave for the first time a reading from a work still in progress, called *The Five Quintets*.[10] This is a poem on something of the scale of the *Comedy*, consisting of five long poems on each of five themes: 'Making' (the arts), 'Dealing' (economics), 'Steering' (politics), 'Finding' (the sciences) and 'Meaning' (philosophy and theology). Each poem shows the influence of Dante, and explores how major areas of life and thought have developed in the past few centuries, as well as what is happening now, and how the future might be shaped. Here in conclusion (with the author's permission) is one of the poems from the five long cantos of 'Making'. It consists of four sonnets in the form of a conversation between the poet and Dante: the first and third sonnets are in the poet's voice; the second and fourth are in Dante's.

Dante Alighieri

1
My Dante, tend *nel mezzo del cammin*
Forgotten bulbs your times again unearth;
Your gift to see a flowering unforeseen,
To rake the soil for Europe's lush rebirth.
A rich pre-modern mind allows you mix
Rife thoughts retrieved with things so up-to-date
In science, art or purse and politics,
The cosmos in your seedbed city state.
You're lily-signed Firenze's exiled son –
Why is that place assailed by so much strife? –
Who'll name and face dead figures one by one,
Descending and ascending afterlife.
By conscious metaphor and fact combined
You parallel the purpose of God's mind.

2
Ah yes, the middle of the way and yet
Recall the years I yearned, a troubadour
For Beatrice since Mayday when we met

10 O'Siadhail has been working on this for nearly a decade and it is due for publication in 2018 (by Baylor University Press in the USA).

One fateful moment in 1284.
I break new ground and graft a Comedy –
I'm politician, poet citizen;
Though love can shape a tongue in Tuscany,
I end an exile, never home again.
With Virgil I will climb hell's deepest ice
To reach the doorway of the dead and weep
Till Beatrice, unknotting nerves in me,
Redeems my guilt and, braving paradise,
I dare allow my sacred poem to leap
From where we are to where we're made to be.

3
You're polymath and eager pioneer
Who doubling back becomes a daring scout,
Defining our modernity's frontier
By summing up what somehow opens out.
A fluke of birth, a lucky *floruit*,
As banished and uncoddled by soft fame,
You blame defectors' sham and counterfeit;
Unhampered your cold hell will name and shame.
But more! As certain as the second thief,
This day in paradise you too are shown
The smile whose warmth unzips the lily's leaf,
The light eternal in itself alone.
You're stretching still my mind and my desire
To walk our daring God of love's high wire.

4
But seven centuries beyond my theme,
You've chosen to pursue the selfsame path
And summing up an era work the seam
Between the modern and its aftermath.
You've climbed from hell to heaven's vertigo.
I'll be your guide! Though dazzled in that gaze,
Allow flawed words their spill and overflow,
For God delights in lily-gilding praise.
Imagine all we've done or left undone,
Our broken longings longing still for more,
Completed in the glory of one glance
And as both stars and atoms dance and dance,
Our lives unreel around one loving core
Where all our wills and all desires are one.

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