

THE WILLIAM AND KATHERINE DEVERS  
SERIES IN DANTE STUDIES

Theodore J. Cachey, Jr., and Christian Moevs, editors  
Simone Marchesi, associate editor | Ilaria Marchesi, assistant editor

---

VOLUME 10

*Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*  
edited by Zygmunt G. Barański and Theodore J. Cachey, Jr.

VOLUME 9

*The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets*  
Winthrop Wetherbee

VOLUME 8

*Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy*  
Justin Steinberg

VOLUME 7

*Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture*  
Manuele Gagnolati

VOLUME 6

*Understanding Dante*  
John A. Scott

VOLUME 5

*Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body*  
Gary P. Cestaro

VOLUME 4

*The Fiore and the Detto d'Amore: A Late 13th-Century Italian Translation of the  
Roman de la Rose, attributable to Dante*  
Translated, with introduction and notes,  
by Santa Casciani and Christopher Kleinhenz

VOLUME 3

*The Design in the Wax: The Structure of the Divine Comedy and Its Meaning*  
Marc Cogan

VOLUME 2

*The Fiore in Context: Dante, France, Tuscany*  
edited by Zygmunt G. Barański and Patrick Boyde

VOLUME 1

*Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*  
edited by Theodore J. Cachey, Jr.

DANTE'S  
*Commedia*

THEOLOGY AS POETRY

edited by  
VITTORIO MONTEMAGGI  
and  
MATTHEW TREHERNE

---

University of Notre Dame Press  
Notre Dame, Indiana

2010

7		
Dante's Davidic Journey: From Sinner to God's Scribe	180	
<i>Theresa Federici</i>		
8		
<i>Caritas</i> and Ecclesiology in Dante's Heaven of the Sun	210	
<i>Paola Nasti</i>		
9		
Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Imagination in Dante's <i>Commedia</i>	245	
<i>Douglas Hedley</i>		
10		
"Il punto che mi vinse": Incarnation, Revelation, and Self-Knowledge in Dante's <i>Commedia</i>	267	
<i>Christian Moevs</i>		
11		
How to Do Things with Words: Poetry as Sacrament in Dante's <i>Commedia</i>	286	
<i>Denys Turner</i>		
AFTERWORDS		
Dante, Conversation, and Homecoming	308	
<i>John Took</i>		
Dante as Inspiration for Twenty-First-Century Theology	318	
<i>David F. Ford</i>		
<i>Bibliography</i>	329	
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	356	
<i>Index of Names and Subjects</i>	358	
<i>Index of Passages from Dante's Works</i>	380	
<i>Index of Scriptural Passages</i>	387	

ABOUT THE WILLIAM  
AND KATHERINE DEVERS  
SERIES IN DANTE STUDIES

The William and Katherine Devers Program in Dante Studies at the University of Notre Dame supports rare book acquisitions in the university's John A. Zahm Dante collections, funds an annual visiting professorship in Dante studies, and supports electronic and print publication of scholarly research in the field. In collaboration with the Medieval Institute at the university, the Devers program has initiated a series dedicated to the publication of the most significant current scholarship in the field of Dante Studies.

In keeping with the spirit that inspired the creation of the Devers program, the series takes Dante as a focal point that draws together the many disciplines and lines of inquiry that constitute a cultural tradition without fixed boundaries. Accordingly, the series hopes to illuminate Dante's position at the center of contemporary critical debates in the humanities by reflecting both the highest quality of scholarly achievement and the greatest diversity of critical perspectives.

The series publishes works on Dante from a wide variety of disciplinary viewpoints and in diverse scholarly genres, including critical studies, commentaries, editions, translations, and conference proceedings of exceptional importance. The series is supervised by an international advisory board composed of distinguished Dante scholars and is published regularly by the University of Notre Dame Press. The Dolphin and Anchor device that appears on publications of the Devers series was used by the great humanist, grammarian, editor, and typographer Aldus Manutius (1449–1515), in whose 1502 edition of Dante (second issue) and all subsequent editions it appeared. The device illustrates the ancient proverb *Festina lente*, "Hurry up slowly."

Theodore J. Cachey, Jr., and Christian Moevs, *editors*

CONTENTS

Copyright © 2010 by University of Notre Dame  
 Notre Dame, Indiana 46556  
 www.undpress.nd.edu

All Rights Reserved

Manufactured in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Dante's *Commedia* : theology as poetry /  
 Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne, editors.  
 p. cm. — (The William and Katherine Devers series in Dante studies)  
 Includes bibliographical references and index.  
 ISBN-13: 978-0-268-03519-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)  
 ISBN-10: 0-268-03519-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)  
 1. Dante Alighieri, 1265–1321. *Divina commedia*.  
 2. Dante Alighieri, 1265–1321—Religion. 3. Theology in literature.  
 I. Montemaggi, Vittorio. II. Treherne, Matthew.  
 PQ4416.D39 2010  
 851'.1—dc22  
 2009053254

∞ The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability  
 of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council  
 on Library Resources

*About the William and Katherine Devers Series* vii  
*Acknowledgments* ix  
*Abbreviations, Editions, and Translations* xi

Introduction: Dante, Poetry, Theology 1  
*Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne*

I  
 Polemics of Praise: Theology as Text, Narrative, and Rhetoric  
 in Dante's *Commedia* 14  
*Robin Kirkpatrick*

2  
 All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante's *Commedia* 36  
*Peter S. Hawkins*

3  
 In Unknowability as Love: The Theology of Dante's *Commedia* 60  
*Vittorio Montemaggi*

4  
 The Poetry and Poetics of the Creation 95  
*Piero Boitani*

5  
 Liturgical Personhood: Creation, Penitence, and Praise  
 in the *Commedia* 131  
*Matthew Treherne*

6  
 Dante's *Commedia* and the Body of Christ 161  
*Oliver Davies*

Our greatest debt is owed to Robin Kirkpatrick and Denys Turner. Their friendship and guidance have been unfailing throughout this project, and they continue to provide constant insight and inspiration.

Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne

ABBREVIATIONS, EDITIONS,  
AND TRANSLATIONS

Shortened citations are used throughout the volume. The following abbreviations are used in the notes and text:

CCCM	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Medievalis</i>
CCSL	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i>
Conv.	<i>Convivio</i>
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
Dve	<i>De vulgari eloquentia</i>
EC	<i>Epistola a Cangrande</i>
ED	<i>Enciclopedia dantesca</i>
Inf.	<i>Inferno</i>
Mon.	<i>Monarchia</i>
Par.	<i>Paradiso</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia cursus completus . . . Series Latina</i>
Purg.	<i>Purgatorio</i>
ST	<i>Summa Theologiae</i>
Vn	<i>Vita nuova</i>

For citations from Dante's works, the following editions as listed in the bibliography have been used:

- Commedia*, ed. Petrocchi, 2nd ed.
- Convivio*, ed. Agno
- De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. Mengaldo
- Monarchia*, ed. and tr. Shaw
- Vita nuova*, ed. De Robertis

Each contributor has chosen a preferred translation of the *Commedia*; references are given in the notes to each essay. Translations of Dante's other works are taken from the following versions:

[*Convivio*] *Banquet*, tr. Ryan

*De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and tr. Botterill

*Epistola a Cangrande*, tr. Toynbee

*Monarchia*, ed. and tr. Shaw

Unless otherwise noted, translations from primary sources are taken from the English editions listed in the bibliography. Translations from secondary sources are the editors' unless otherwise stated.

Biblical references are taken from the Vulgate (*Biblia Sacra*). Most English translations follow Douay Rheims.

In citing from Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, the abbreviation form is used whereby "ST IaIIae.3.8.ad2" refers to *Prima Secundae*, question 3, article 8, reply to second objection.

## Introduction

Dante, Poetry, Theology

---

VITTORIO MONTEMAGGI &  
MATTHEW TREHERNE

*Dante's "Commedia": Theology as Poetry* has its origins in an international conference of the same title, held in Robinson College, Cambridge, on December 12–14, 2003. The aim of the conference was to bring together theologians and Dante scholars to address two related questions suggested by our title. First, what are the theological implications of Dante's poetic narrative? Second, what light do theological considerations throw on Dante's poem as a literary text? We invited contributors to the conference to offer readings of the *Commedia* that either examine Dante's poem as a theological enterprise or explore the intersection in Dante's poem between theological and literary concerns.

When we set about organizing the conference, we were driven by a sense that theologians and *dantisti* had much to offer each other, and that opportunities for dialogue were much needed. We felt, on the one hand, that theological modes of inquiry could cast new light on Dante's text; and, on the other, that a close and detailed engagement with Dante's poetic voice might significantly enrich theological reflection. This sense of the potential value of dialogue between Dante studies and theology was confirmed by the conference, not only in the papers delivered but also in the formal and informal conversations that took place over the course of the conference; and, indeed, by the ways in which the papers originally presented and discussed have developed into the essays gathered in this volume.

The title of this volume makes the claim that theology is fully integrated with poetry in the *Commedia*. However, the notion of Dante's "theology as poetry," which the essays collected here variously explore, requires introduction. Most immediately, it is important to remind ourselves that for many of Dante's readers—from the Middle Ages to the present—the idea of an intersection between theology and poetry in the *Commedia* has not been uncontroversial.<sup>1</sup> In the context of modern Dante scholarship, for example, the frequently cited distinction by Benedetto Croce between *poesia* and *non-poesia* in the *Commedia*—as though the "nonpoetic" elements, including the theological, were an add-on, and an undesirable one at that, to the true lyrical and dramatic work of poetry—suggests a differentiation between form and content, between poetry and theology.<sup>2</sup> More recent scholarship, however, has worked to remove such dichotomies. Critics as different as Erich Auerbach and Charles Singleton, in the mid-twentieth century, have provided an important foundation in moving beyond the tendency to denigrate the theological in Dante's *Commedia*.<sup>3</sup> Further vital possibilities have been opened up by the seminal works of other twentieth-century critics working in different traditions, such as Bruno Nardi, Étienne Gilson, and Kenelm Foster.<sup>4</sup> Successive works of scholarship have shown, first, that Dante's theology is intellectually dynamic and in many ways highly original; and, second, that the theological and the poetic are inextricably intertwined in his work.

The study of theological aspects of the *Commedia* continues to develop in richly varied ways. One of the clearest indications of this is in the wide range of theological sources and affinities which are being identified in Dante's text (although Dante's direct knowledge of individual texts is often difficult to prove). For example, Thomas Aquinas—once seen as the primary theological influence over the poet—now tends to be viewed as a vital but not necessarily dominant part of Dante's intellectual formation.<sup>5</sup> This is partly due to an increasing recognition of the poet's engagement with broader Aristotelian strands in medieval thought.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, scholarship continues to demonstrate the centrality of Christian Neoplatonism, and the importance of Franciscan as well as Dominican currents for Dante's thought.<sup>7</sup> In searching for sources and affinities, moreover, scholars have turned their attention not only to the content but also to the narrative and poetic form of Dante's theological

discourse. It has been suggested, for example, that the *Commedia* can be read in relation to Augustinian frameworks of conversion and confession, or to the rhetorical and intellectual structures of medieval contemplative traditions.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, however, these various strands of scholarship suggest that Dante's poem does not simply accumulate elements of different theological traditions, but offers an original conception of the possible active and constructive relationships between them. As perhaps best emblemized by the cantos of the Heaven of the Sun, Dante does not treat theological traditions and positions as static or isolated: he makes them dance.

Recent scholarship also continues to enrich our understanding of Dante's use of his most important theological source: the Bible.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the status intended by Dante for the *Commedia* relative to scripture has represented one of the thorniest questions for readers of his poem. A distinction apparently made in the *Convivio* (the text that survives to us is, however, fragmentary) between the "allegory of the poets" and the "allegory of the theologians" suggests that, whereas scripture both contains allegorical meaning and is literally true, poetry can only signify allegorical meanings through fiction.<sup>10</sup> The problem for readers of Dante is that the *Commedia* is packed with claims for its own literal veracity. It appears to demand, in short, to be read through the same interpretive modes usually reserved for scripture: as both historically true and as containing allegorical, typological truths—a claim also explicitly made for the poem in a letter famously purporting to be written by Dante.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, the poem contains elements which seem to be self-consciously fictional. This apparent tension, long debated in Dante scholarship, continues to attract critical attention.<sup>12</sup> The question of the importance of the Bible for Dante has also been revitalized by studies paying attention to the complex ways in which scripture was read in the Middle Ages and the impact these might have had on Dante's work.<sup>13</sup>

Other fruitful possibilities reside in the recognition that Dante's theology can be understood not only in relation to theological and scriptural texts, but also in relation to the Word of God as it was seen to inform embodied experience and religious practice. An example of this is the increasing attention to Dante's representation in the *Commedia* of liturgy, whereby biblical passages and other religious texts are enacted and encountered through meaningful performance.<sup>14</sup> Another example is the

attention currently being paid to the theological aspects of Dante's presentation of human embodiment. Scholars have shown that in the *Commedia*, theological reflection on questions such as the Incarnation, Transfiguration, and Resurrection is not carried out in purely speculative terms but is intimately linked in multiple ways with lived experience.<sup>15</sup> A further important development is the exploration of the varied theological implications of the interpretive, ethical, and affective dynamic of the reader's relationship to the poem.<sup>16</sup>

The relationship between Dante's *Commedia* and its readers is also the focus of a prominent strand of scholarship that seeks to expose the textual strategies by which Dante constructs authority for his own work.<sup>17</sup> Such discussions are rarely cast in ways that explicitly point to the theological implications of these strategies. This mode of criticism, however, need not be seen as contradicting the study of the theology of Dante's text: a heightened awareness of the author's poetic and narrative techniques can only enrich our understanding of the intersection between his poetics and theology. As some recent assessments of Dante's work suggest, a full understanding of the theology of the *Commedia* ought to embrace, rather than deny, the means by which the text is carefully constructed as narrative and poetry.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the recognition of the integration of poetic practice and theological thought in the *Commedia* is central to the notion, suggested by the title of this volume, of Dante's "theology as poetry." Dante's theology is not what underlies his narrative poem, nor what is contained within it: it is instead fully integrated with its poetic and narrative texture.

Such an understanding of the notion of "theology as poetry" clearly has implications for debates beyond the concerns of Dante scholarship, for example in literary criticism and theory and in intellectual and cultural history. Indeed, the question of the relationship between poetic and theological concerns provides a valuable context for thinking about any dialogue between Dante studies and theology. This is not to suggest that this question need be the only aspect of such a dialogue. While detailed engagement with the *Commedia* does not often find a place in theological studies, much in contemporary theology could both illuminate and be illuminated by reflection on Dante's poem. Alongside discussions on the relationship between religion and literature,<sup>19</sup> one could think, for instance, of debates in contemporary theology on the relationship between

God and world, between faith and reason, and between theology and ethical theory,<sup>20</sup> or of debates on the nature of theology itself, on "mystical" theology, on liturgy, and on theological anthropology.<sup>21</sup> All of these debates have profound resonances with concerns in Dante's works.

Integrally related to all these fields of theological inquiry, and in many senses linking them together, is the specific question of the nature of theological language. What is it that human beings do when they speak about God? How does the way in which they conceive of such speech reflect and affect their understanding of the relationship between God and human beings? And how does all this, in turn, bear upon their understanding of the manner in which human beings use language more generally, in relating both to each other and to the world of which they are part? Concerns such as these are at the heart of reflection on what it might mean to read, and indeed do, theology as poetry. As such, they provide a valuable perspective from which to approach analysis of the theological nature of Dante's poem.

Furthermore, in recent years there has been a growing interest in the nature of theological language as understood specifically in and through medieval texts and thought.<sup>22</sup> Central to that interest are the ideas that medieval reflection on theological language reveals a particular understanding of the relationship between God, the world, and human beings; and that, in the light of this understanding, we may recognize the full value of the wide range of forms that theological language can take. This conception of the relationship between God, the world, and human beings is importantly characterized—not only in Christian but also in Jewish and Islamic traditions—by the fundamental notion that all that is, depends on God: the world is freely and lovingly created *ex nihilo* by a God who is not part of existence but who is the mystery in which all that exists originates, participates, and finds its goodness and meaning.

From this perspective, full comprehension of God lies beyond the grasp of human intellect and language, since the origin of all that is lies "beyond" being itself. To think otherwise would be to misunderstand the relationship between creature and Creator, between existence and the ground of existence. At the same time, human beings are seen as being made in the image and likeness of God, as free, intellectual creatures, whose very being is grounded by a direct and personal relationship with God and has its final end in perfect union with divine being itself. In

this mistrust was not necessarily accompanied by skepticism about the value of reflecting on, and foregrounding as theologically significant, linguistic and rhetorical form. And this, from our contemporary perspective, might be taken as an invitation to bring literary and poetic questions to the heart of theological reflection. In this context, the *Commedia* has particular significance. For, as the essays in this volume illustrate, it is firmly rooted in the medieval tradition of reflection on the nature of theological language, and at the same time presents us with an unprecedented piece of sustained poetic experimentation, which appears to attempt to move beyond traditional theological assessments of the status and value of poetry. Understood in this way, Dante's might be seen as one of the most original theological voices of the Middle Ages.

The essays in this volume provide a wide spectrum of possibilities for reflecting on the significance of that voice. In the first essay, Robin Kirkpatrick proposes that the theological value of Dante's *Commedia* lies in the narrative and poetic forms it offers for the activity of theology, more than in any specific theological doctrine it might present. He suggests, moreover, that theological questions and modes of inquiry ought to play a vital role in literary critical approaches to the *Commedia*. The essay argues that the richness of Dante's understanding of poetry, theology, and human personhood is most fully revealed by close readings of the *Commedia* that recognize the interdependency of literary and theological concerns. The question of the theological value of the narrative dynamics of the *Commedia* is also at the heart of the second essay, in which Peter S. Hawkins reflects on the relationship between theology and poetry through a detailed analysis of Dante's presentation of the smile. The essay relates the narrative dynamics of Dante's use of the smile both to Dante's construction of his own theological authority in the *Commedia* and to the presence and development of representation of the smile in the artistic context of Dante's day. Hawkins proposes that the smile might be seen as Dante's distinctive way of revealing theological resources unique to poetry, and as Dante's most original contribution to the Christian theological tradition. Also addressing the question of how the narrative poetry of the *Commedia* might be read as theology, Vittorio Montemaggi argues that the poetics of the text is grounded in a theological understanding of the nature of language. The essay proposes that, on the basis

of Dante's theology of language as presented in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, the *Commedia* is shaped by an interplay of affirmative and apophatic modes of discourse, and that through such an interplay, language ultimately reveals itself to coincide with love. As a way of testing and refining these ideas, the essay offers a close reading of the theological significance of the figures of Ulysses and Ugolino.

With Piero Boitani's essay, the volume's exploration of the theological dimensions of Dante's poetry turns to the specific question of the doctrine of creation. The essay first focuses on the theological significance of the metaphoric texture of the *Purgatorio*'s two discussions of the creation of the human soul, and then analyzes Dante's metaphysical and theological account in the *Paradiso* of the creation of the universe. By showing how, in both cases, Dante's conception of creation is linked to his poetic practice, Boitani presents a new evaluation of the *Commedia* as a uniquely rich and resonant moment in Western culture. Dante's conception of creation is related in the following essay, by Matthew Treherne, to the liturgical performance presented in the *Commedia*. Drawing inspiration from contemporary theorists of liturgy, Treherne argues that in the *Commedia*, Dante presents liturgy in ways that relate it to personhood. By examining the changes from a penitential to a doxological mode, Treherne suggests that liturgical performance is, for Dante, bound up with a recovery of a proper understanding of the relationship between God and the world—a relationship which Dante presents, through a striking pattern of allusions and references, as sacramental. Consideration of the relationship between God and the world is also central to the next contribution, in which Oliver Davies argues that Dante's presentation of materiality and human embodiment should be understood in the light of the doctrine of the Ascension; and that this recognition, in turn, ought to be at the heart of any attempt to read the *Commedia* as both theology and literature. Davies proposes that such reflection can lead us to a richer appreciation both of the way in which language, body, and world are for Dante inextricably linked, and to an enhanced sense of the bearing this might have on one's understanding of how to read and engage with medieval texts. On this basis, the essay argues, reading Dante's *Commedia* as both literature and theology can enhance our sense of the importance of doctrines that tend to be neglected in modern systematic theology, as well as of the particularly significant contribution of Dante's poeticization of those doctrines to the work of the modern theologian.



In the next two essays, the volume focuses on a detailed consideration of the relationships of Dante's poetry to the theological and religious tradition, with a particular focus on scriptural exegesis. Theresa Federici's essay examines the significance of the figure of King David for the *Commedia*, specifically in connection with the strategies through which Dante gives authority to his authorial voice. Through a close reading of the references in the *Commedia* to Psalm 50 and Psalm 9, Federici details the ways in which David is presented in the poem in the dual role of penitent sinner and psalmist and relates this presentation to medieval biblical exegesis and conceptions of penitence. In the light of this analysis, the essay proposes, the figure of David appears as the primary model for Dante's self-presentation, first as a penitent human being and then as a theological poet. Also focusing on medieval biblical exegesis, the essay by Paola Nasti analyzes Dante's ecclesiology, and especially the way in which it finds poetic expression in the *Paradiso*. Nasti reads the *Commedia* in close comparison with traditional theological discussions of the Church and charity, thereby revealing the originality of Dante's ecclesiological symbolism, and emphasizes especially the way Dante reshapes the image of the Bride from the Song of Songs in *Paradiso* 10-14. Dante, Nasti argues, thus offers a text that, specifically in its poetic texture, both remains firmly rooted in the theology of its day and opens up highly innovative theological perspectives.

The following contribution, by Douglas Hedley, brings the focus of the volume to the metaphysical aspects of Dante's theological poetry, by offering detailed reflection on the theological value and implications of some of the central Neoplatonic aspects of the *Commedia*, especially the question of divine immanence. This reflection is primarily addressed to the ways in which Romantic thinkers found in Dante a source of theological inspiration. In turn, Hedley suggests, this opens up fruitful ways for Dante's narrative poetry to contribute to contemporary thought on the imagination. Also concentrating on Dante's metaphysics, Christian Moevs analyzes the repeated references in the *Commedia* to the image and notion of the "punto" [point], revealing its full literary, philosophical, and theological potential. By relating the *punto* to Dante's presentation in the *Commedia* of the nature of truth and knowledge, Moevs's essay offers a fresh account of Dante's idea of the incarnational union between God, the cosmos, and human beings. On this basis, Moevs suggests that in Dante's view the act of reading the *Commedia* can itself, if properly

undertaken, actively participate in the dynamics of that union. With a continued focus on the incarnational aspects of Dante's thought, the final essay of the volume, by Denys Turner, considers Dante's understanding of language alongside Aquinas's and Eckhart's notions of the limits of theological expression. By locating the *Commedia* in the context of specific medieval reflections on the nature of language about God, Turner reveals that Dante's poetics are governed by engagement with fundamental questions of theological grammar. Thus, in its very nature as poetry, the *Commedia* is profoundly theological.

The essays gathered in this volume, then, suggest the rich variety of ways in which the question of theology as poetry might be explored in and through the *Commedia*. By bringing a variety of methodological perspectives to this question, and by drawing on the intellectual resources of both theology and Dante scholarship, they demonstrate the fruitfulness of the encounter between these disciplines. Some of the implications are assessed in the two afterwords with which the collection ends. In the first, John Took reflects on the conversation between Dante studies and theology in terms of a need for readings of the *Commedia* that pay serious attention to questions concerning the nature of human existence. In the second, David F. Ford reflects on the possibilities of learning from Dante something about what it means to do theology, and outlines seven ways in which reflection on Dante's *Commedia* can contribute to the work of the modern theologian.

Our hope is that *Dante's "Commedia": Theology as Poetry* will provide an impetus for renewed attention to the intersection of theological and literary concerns in Dante's poem. For not only does this volume make the claim that the *Commedia* presents us with "theology as poetry"; but, taken as a whole, it also suggests that the theological and literary significance of this claim is far-reaching.

#### NOTES

1. The bibliography on Dante and theology is vast, dating back to the earliest commentaries on the *Commedia*; to provide references to every scholarly intervention in the debate would be far beyond the scope of an introduction such as this. The references in this introduction are intended to be indicative of particular lines of thought and suggest starting points for further reading, rather than being comprehensive. We have, where possible, given references to works

accessible in English. For useful general overviews, see Foster, "Teologia"; Iannucci, "Theology"; Ryan, "The Theology of Dante"; A. N. Williams, "The Theology of the *Comedy*." Curtius's chapter, entitled "Poetry and Theology," in his *European Literature*, 214-27, is a classic statement of the relationship between poetry and theology in Dante as seen in the Trecento. See also Lansing, *Dante and Theology* (vol. 4 of *The Critical Complex*).

2. Croce, *La poesia di Dante*.
3. Auerbach, "Figura" and "St Francis"; Singleton, *Dante's "Commedia" and Journey to Beatrice*.
4. Nardi, *Dante e la cultura medievale* and *Nel mondo di Dante*; E. Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy* and *Dante et Béatrice*; Foster, *The Two Dantes*.
5. Foster, "Dante and St Thomas" and "Tommaso d'Aquino"; Mastrobuono, *Dante's Journey*.
6. Barański, "l'iter ideologico"; Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher*; S. Gilson, *Medieval Optics*; Moevs, *Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy"*.
7. Barański, "Dante's Signs"; Havely, *Dante and the Franciscans*; Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision*; Moevs, *Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy"*.
8. Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*; Freccero, *Dante*; Pertile, "A Desire of Paradise."
9. Barblan, *Dante e la Bibbia*; Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*.
10. *Conv.* 2.1.
11. *EC*.
12. Auerbach, "Figura"; Barański, "La lezione esegetica"; Charity, *Events and Their Afterlife*; Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's "Comedy"*; Moevs, *Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy"*, 169-85; Nardi, "Dante profeta"; Scott, "Dante's Allegory"; Singleton, *Dante's "Commedia"*.
13. Barański, "Dante's Biblical Linguistics"; Nasti, *Favole d'amore*; Pertile, *La puttana e il gigante*.
14. Armour, *Door of Purgatory*; Barnes, "Vestiges of the Liturgy"; Martinez, "Poetics of Advent Liturgies."
15. Cestaro, *Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body*; Davies, "World and Body"; Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife*; Jacoff, "Our Bodies, Our Selves"; Took, "Dante's Incarnationalism."
16. Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey*; Lombardi, *Syntax of Desire*; Moevs, *Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy"*; Raffa, *Divine Dialectic*.
17. Ascoli, *Dante*; Barolini, *Undivine Comedy*.
18. Boitani, *The Tragic and the Sublime*; Kirkpatrick, *Dante's "Paradiso"*; Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert*.
19. See, for example, Boyle, "The Idea of Christian Poetry" and *Sacred and Secular Scriptures*; Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*; Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*; Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*; Venard, *Littérature et théologie* and *La langue de l'ineffable*; Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*; R. Williams, *Grace and Necessity*.

20. See, for instance, Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God and Faith and Freedom*; O. Davies, *The Creativity of God and Theology of Compassion*; Hauerwas, *Community of Character*; Lash, *Holiness, Speech and Silence*; MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*; McCabe, *God Matters*; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory and Word Made Strange*; Moevs, *Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy"*; Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*; Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*; R. Williams, *On Christian Theology*.

21. See, for example, Coakley, *Religion and the Body*; O. Davies and Turner, *Silence and the Word*; Ford, *Self and Salvation and Christian Wisdom*; Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination*; F. Kerr, *Immortal Longings*; Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'*; McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*; Pattison, *The End of Theology*; Pickstock, *After Writing*; Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*; Soskice, *The Kindness of God*; Turner, *Eros and Allegory* and *The Darkness of God*; A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense*.

22. See in particular the works by Burrell, Moevs, Pickstock, Sells, Soskice, and Turner listed above.

23. Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xvi, xx-xxi.

## Polemics of Praise

Theology as Text, Narrative,  
and Rhetoric in Dante's *Commedia*

ROBIN KIRKPATRICK

### POETRY, PROPOSITIONS, PERSONS

The conference from which this essay proceeds demonstrated a wide variety of ways in which theologians and literary critics may collaborate. Dante's *Commedia* provided a natural focus for and encouragement to such collaboration. At the same time, the debate unsettled any easy assumptions about the relationship between theological and literary discussion. As quickly became apparent, it could not proceed fruitfully in an atmosphere of pious confidence, as if there were some such thing as "poetry," apart from specific texts and specific authors, betraying a religious dimension; or as if there were some such thing as "theology," in some equally generic way free from metaphor or simile in its deliverances. The specific matters. And this is as true of the *Commedia*—for all its apparently universal aspirations—as of any other text. Dante is a poet. But he is his own kind of poet. He is not Henry Vaughan, nor John Donne, nor even a born-again Bob Dylan. Not only did Dante write a long time ago, he also brought—in theory as well as practice—a passionately self-conscious interest to bear upon poetic and indeed linguistic tradition, seeking, in an unmistakably experimental spirit, to redefine the received idea of poetic art and even, perhaps, of language itself. One of the reasons why Dante was so beloved of twentieth-century modernists is that they recognized how far we had strayed in the Renaissance, Enlightenment,

and Romantic phases of our cultural history from a full understanding of his example. And indeed Dante's poem will deny us, at every point, any preconceived or lately conceived notion as to what poetry essentially is.

In part, then, the purpose of the present essay is to insist upon the detail of Dante's text, and (in outline at least) upon the often polemical theory that is instantiated in that text. But this aim is also associated here with a specific—though very radical—question: Is it possible to make valid statements about the Divinity in terms of human language and human logic? At first, it might seem that the very title of this volume of essays—*Dante's "Commedia": Theology as Poetry*—already implies a response. Does such a title not assume that, whatever the validity of logical propositions may be, a poetic text—the *Commedia*, that is—may exemplify a language of religious discourse different from, but no less valid than, the language of ratiocination? But then, by reputation, the *Commedia* might be thought to take an especially confident view of how propositions and poetry can be reconciled—and this impression seems to gather strength in the perspective of Dante's Scholastic inheritance.

These initial considerations lead to a range of questions concerning the conception of the human person and the peculiar status that poets might be supposed to claim as prophets or scribes of the divine—and, indeed, the even more peculiar status of professional scholars, who fill their works, days, and bibliographies with well-judged deliverances and propositions about the workings of revelation. Poetry, propositions, persons: this alliterative mnemonic calls for theoretical nuance. If, in Dante's phrase, the poet grows "macro" (*Par.* 25.3) [gaunt] in the service of heavenly and earthly truth, then what is his "person" if not an epicenter of self-denial? And if that is what our poet tells us about persons, what right have we—as his commentators—to grow fat on the textual proceeds? To put it another way: Is there any form of professional procedure—in theology or in literary criticism—in which we might willingly abandon the securities of second-order discourse—ever judicious, ever neutral—in favor of those dangerous waters of first-order discourse, where the heady confession of ignorance is as likely to be revealing as our learned footnotes?

As the second part of my essay's title suggests, I wish to propose that both poetry and theology are better realized in a detailed engagement with texts and historical situations than in any pursuit of vision or theoretical system. On this view, close reading, or practical criticism, seems

a very Dantean way to truth. And pursuing this view also allows me to insinuate the words that Dante attributes to Thomas Aquinas in *Paradiso* 13:

E questo ti sia sempre piombo a' piedi,  
per farti mover lento com' uom lasso  
e al sì e al no che tu non vedi:  
ché quelli è tra li stolti bene a basso,  
che senza distinzione afferma e nega  
ne l'un così come ne l'altro passo;  
perch' elli 'ncontra che più volte piega  
l'opinion corrente in falsa parte,  
e poi l'affetto l'intelletto lega.

(112-20)

[And let this be a lead weight on your feet, / so that you move as slow as if worn out / to any "yes" or "no" unclear to you. / For no fool is as low as one / who taking either of these steps will fail / affirming or denying in distinction. / So often when our judgement rushes on, / it happens that we veer in false directions / and then emotions bind the intellect.]

These are words that deserve to stand as an epigraph to any volume of essays, let alone the present one. In the preceding cantos, Aquinas offers a fairly comprehensive picture of the workings of the created universe but does so, surprisingly, to explain a single phrase uttered in *Paradiso* 10—"non surse il secondo" (114) [no second ever rose]—in which we find encapsulated the equally surprising proposition that King Solomon was the wisest of all natural-born human beings. Aquinas then concludes with these lines, which, so far from emphasizing the competence of logical analysis, insist upon an extreme caution and even a pedestrian attention to the use of words (13.112-14). Discrimination and linguistic tact are, it seems, for Dante at least, the core of the example that he took from Aquinas. Is not this tantamount to viewing the theologian Aquinas as a literary critic?

Returning briefly to the three enticing *Ps*—poetry, persons, propositions—there is little doubt that Dante's approach to issues such as these adds to their implication. Take, first, the question of what we think poetry to be; or, more precisely, what we think is the relation between poetic utterance and theological understanding or religious practice. A

familiar answer will evoke the notion of epiphany to suggest that artistic utterance can momentarily present us with a world transfigured, either by recording those moments when the lighting-effects of eternity seem to break through our temporal gloom, or even, in some cases, by sheer brilliance of form, causing an effect of unanticipated splendor. Or else poetry and the arts are described as somehow "sacramental" in character, where the notion of the sacramental is understood along the same conceptual lines as that of the epiphanic just outlined above, and without taking into account the theological complexity any discussion of the sacramental requires. In whichever version, the chosen example is likely to be Gerard Manley Hopkins: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil."<sup>1</sup> Yet it is not self-evident that these expectations comprehensively define the possibilities of what poetry can do for the religious mind. It is not clear that they even do justice to Hopkins. And as for Dante, the thrust of my argument in this essay is that they will not do at all.

#### EPIPHANIES, "PLOD," AND TIME

Our talk of epiphanies can easily invite us to a sort of visionary enthusiasm. Yet, whether *pro* or *con* such usage, there is a need for caution here. This is especially important when notions of the epiphanic are evoked through reference to the "sacramental." For it seems to me important—for literary critical as well as devotional reasons—that references to the sacramental should be associated conceptually with the notion of sacerdotal involvement. Priesthood is uniquely and indissolubly tied to the unknown and the unknowable—that Otherness on which all known and knowable existences depend. And whenever Dante refers with horror to the Church as the Whore of Babylon—which is to say, frequently—he demonstrates how dependent he saw himself to be upon the actions of true priesthood—true, beyond all the dreadful things he *did* know about the Church and its priests.

There is indeed a point at which priests and poets may have something in common: the interest they share in time. Priests are trained in a gamut of temporal possibilities, from the pastoral ebb and flow of life and death, to the surges of tradition, to the delicate rhythms of the liturgical year; and are thus qualified to attempt those elite syncopations

in which the sacraments reconfigure our normal lumber. Poets in their own, more limited way—in metrical sensitivity—have at least an analogous function in their experiments and performances in time. Poets may of course imagine transcendence. But poems, especially if they happen to be narrative poems, are self-evidently written along a line obedient to the sentences that human beings speak and understand. So my first polemic is directed against the uses and abuses that the word “epiphany” has suffered on the lips of literary critics when it is deployed, more or less loosely, to suggest that lyric poetry in particular may open for us a bright window on the eternal or convince us that we human beings are, after all, in Seamus Heaney’s phrase, “seeing things”—not merely *things* but things that can *see* and see things *anew*.<sup>2</sup>

Now, I do not deny that lyric poetry can stretch us to new lucidities. So, too, an Olympic high-board diver can expand our perceptions of muscle control and the sheen of air and water. Yet there are reasons—some of them theoretical, some of them specifically Dantean—to wonder whether the incandescent swoop of lyrical vision may sometimes be a camera-trick, or, less skeptically, whether such moments are all that poetry can encompass. Theoretically—and therefore, of course, in current circumstances *skeptically*—we have been urged by the modern Sorbonne to wonder whether words can ever deliver any vision at all. Words are not windows but rather reflective surfaces, subtly giving back—precisely because of the darkness beyond—the vestigial tracings of our own features and gestures. I shall argue later that Dante, who is not only a theorist but also a great comic writer, understands very well that, as human beings, we live most truly when we live on a comically small scale, within the limits of our human lineaments. It is also true, however, that Dante—in theory as well as in practice—has very little truck with unqualified lyricism. After all, in writing the *Commedia* he consciously abandons, once and for all, his earlier lyric practice and embraces the example of Virgil: he writes an epic narrative, an account of a journey articulated according to an interest in sequence rather than interruptions to that sequence. Immediately, this involves an alteration in his representation of time. The *Vita nuova* had been punctuated by visions, and by that marvelous nexus of terms that denote the life-renewing capacity of the contemplative eye: “mirare,” “miracolo,” “ammirazione”; a gazing at the unexpected, a filling of the mind with light. I am not forgetting that the narrative of the *Commedia* represents a journey back to Beatrice. Nor am I ignoring the pas-

sage in the *Convivio* where Dante speaks in unambiguously epiphanic and sacramental terms of his own use of vernacular Italian as a radiant “new sun,” offered, as in the miracle of loaves and fishes, to a hungry multitude.<sup>3</sup> Yet the shift in genre to epic narrative remains profoundly significant in assessing his understanding of language and indeed of thought itself. Epic poems take time—and are often about our use of time in destroying or founding cities. And poetry takes time especially when seen under another aspect that Dante constantly emphasizes—which is to say, his interest in the painstaking and time-consuming processes of the poetic craft. The emphasis in the *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia* falls less upon poetic vision than upon poetic workmanship—as it does also throughout the *Commedia* itself. The poet, for Dante, is one who labors in the “workshop of rhetoric,” who files and polishes or else who weaves subtle textures out of words that, in Dante’s own analogy, are as shaggy or silken as the fabrics of the Florentine clothing industry.<sup>4</sup> The *Paradiso* is his final labor—his “ultimo lavoro”—requiring the poet often to “put his back into it,” as in *Paradiso* 23:

Se mo sonasser tutte quelle lingue  
che Polimnìa con le suore fero  
del latte lor dolcissimo piu pingue,  
per aiutarmi, al millesmo del vero  
non si verria, cantando il santo riso  
e quanto il santo aspetto facea mero;  
e così, figurando il paradiso,  
convien saltar lo sacrato poema,  
come chi trova suo cammin riciso.

Ma chi pensasse il ponderoso tema  
e l’omero mortal che se ne carca,  
nol biasmerebbe se sott’ esso trema.

(55–66)

[Even if all those voices were to sound / that Polyhymnia and her sister muses / fed on their sweetest milk so richly once, / and aid me, singing of that holy smile / and how her holy look grew purer still, / I’d still not reach one thousandth of the truth. / And so, imagining this Paradise, / the sacred epic has to make a leap, / as when we find the road ahead cut off. / Yet no one if they’ve gauged that weighty theme— / and seen what mortal shoulders bear the load— / would criticize such trembling backing-out.]

When Dante does speak of vision and prophetic *furor*—alluding in *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.4 to the journey of Aeneas to the underworld in *Aeneid* book 6—his attention falls less upon the eagle-flight of prophetic rapture than upon the sheer difficulty of getting back into the temporal world: that is the “opus” that is the “labor,” the strenuousness that poetry demands. To use Hopkins’s phrase, “shéer plód makes plough down sillion / Shine” (“The Windhover”). The ploughshare glitters through the friction of the furrow. Grace shines, however unexpectedly and unconstrainedly, on our pedestrian works. Not perhaps on works that are “good” by any human standard, but on the working evidence of human potentiality, on those textured manifestations of being which demonstrate that we are alive. It greatly complicates the issue that Hopkins was a priest. Dante was not. But Dante did know how to render up the work of human hand for whatever benediction may then fall upon it. Few passages in the *Commedia* are more moving than the opening of *Paradiso* 25, in which Dante imagines the remote contingency, scarcely calculable within the parameters of temporal cause and effect, that his poem might win for him not a heavenly crown but a return to Florence, and that in returning he will receive the laurel crown in the very place where, at baptism, his name was first given him. The analogy is plain: in terms of theological hope, Dante submits to the sacraments, but in terms of poetry, he depends for his temporal identity on the responses of those who read him in his work.

There is, however, another way in which the poetry of Hopkins as well as Dante demands that we be cautious in our employment of the epiphany trope. For in Hopkins, poetic epiphanies are almost invariably—and literally—manifestations of the person of Christ. The whole birth-narrative of “The Wreck of the Deutschland” illustrates this, as do these lines from “As kingfishers catch fire . . .”:

for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.

This is a rather different epiphany from those that, say, T. S. Eliot might encourage. Eliot, influentially, was concerned with seeing the transfiguration of *things*, whereby the dry pools of the wasteland bloom with light and roses and fire intertwine. Notoriously, however, he is hopeless (in every sense of the word) with people. But Dante is not. From the

encounter with Francesca in *Inferno* 5, Dante is often disappointedly—but hopefully—seeking that shining-forth of personhood that he first experienced in his meeting with Beatrice and which, finally, he represents in the faces that are described in *Paradiso* 31 immediately before he arrives at the vision of God’s human features (“Vedeà visi a carità suadi, / d’altrui lume fregiati e di suo riso, / e atti ornati di tutte onestadi” [49–51] [I saw there faces swayed to *caritas*, / arrayed in their own smiles and light not theirs / and all they did adorned with dignity]).

The epiphany of persons must surely be a very different matter, theologically, from the epiphany of things. If Hopkins’s Harry Ploughman can be an epiphany, if the banker’s wife Bice Portinari can also be Beatrice, who is Dante’s God-bearing image, then anybody—poet, prophet, or even the odd academic—may likewise be enlisted, wholly out of the blue, to coruscate as such an image.

#### PROPOSITIONS AND PERSONS

Such possibilities—and responsibilities—point directly to the second and third of my introductory *Ps*, namely, persons and propositions, and certainly deny us any such thing as might be described as “intellectual property.” But to see how these *Ps* are enacted, let me focus on these lines from *Paradiso* 14.

Qui vince la memoria mia lo ’ngegno;  
ché quella croce lampeggiava Cristo,  
sì ch’io non so trovare essempro degno;  
ma chi prende sua croce e segue Cristo,  
ancor mi scuserà di quel ch’io lasso,  
vedendo in quell’ albor balenar Cristo.  
Di corno in corno e tra la cima e’ l basso  
si movien lumi, scintillando forte  
nel congiugnersi insieme e nel trapasso:  
così si veggion qui diritte e torte,  
veloci e tarde, rinovando vista,  
le minuzie d’i corpi, lunghe e corte,  
moversi per lo raggio onde si lista  
talvolta l’ombra che, per sua difesa,  
la gente con ingegno e arte acquista.

[And here remembering surpasses skill: / that cross, in sudden flaring, blazed out Christ / so I can find no fit comparison. / But those who take their cross and follow Christ / will let me off where, wearily, I fail, / seeing in that white dawn, as lightning, Christ. / From horn to horn, from summit down to base, / there moved here scintillating points of light, / bright as their paths met, bright in passing on. / So minute specks of matter can be seen— / renewing how they look at every glance, / straight in their track, oblique, long, short, swift, slow— / moving through sunbeams that will sometimes streak / the shade that people, to protect themselves, / have won through their intelligence and art.]

The epiphanic characteristics of this passage are immediately apparent, in its flashes of lightning, its sudden brilliancies and scintillations. Yet there is also a precise theological point at issue here, which is enforced not by the rhapsodic lyricism of the passage alone but also by its place in the continuing narrative and logical efflorescence of the *Paradiso*. These lines mark the point of transition from the episode in which Aquinas and Solomon have appeared to that in which Dante describes an encounter with his own forebear, Cacciaguida. And the crucial point is that this moment both interrupts a sequence and reintegrates it in a deeper understanding of persons and of their place in the temporal world. This, as in Hopkins's epiphanies, is a vision of the person of Christ. But it is not an invitation to contemplation of the Passion, either intellectual or affective. Dante at no point in his poem produces any such invitation. Rather, its call is to Christian practice. The Cross here becomes the underlying pattern in which the souls of the courageous display themselves to Dante. And, by analogy, even the motes of dust dancing in a beam of light—the tiny fragments of body, of skin loss—are enlisted to clarify that understanding. Dante here seems to echo Lucretius and yet to propose a wholly un-Lucretian approach to the knowable universe.<sup>5</sup> For Dante's world is posited on the mystery of the Cross. And the splendor of any created being in time is likewise posited on that. The dust may be a reality. Not, however, because in itself it reveals the design of divine creation—or any argument from design—but rather because it can march, in the columns of Dante's human text, as a similitude illuminating the human persons of the Heaven of Mars. So, more knowingly, must Dante's readers march, who are counseled here at line 106 to form a cross-bearing relationship with their author. Neither vision nor science

releases us from time-bound sequences. They drive us back into the very passion that animates our otherwise dusty deaths.

A further word on persons and propositions. If, for Dante, reality is actually constituted by the Trinity, by the Cross, and by the Resurrection, then all that we are and all that we say must be held forward in a spirit of dispossession and deference towards those three creative principles. And theologians, too, knowing this for two millennia, have a great deal to teach literary critics who have worried over the fragmentation of the self, or the construction and deconstruction of the subject. There may be a need for humility or penitence. Indeed, humility and penitence are exact expressions of our existential condition. But there is no need for *worry* or for the naughty intellectual terrorism that delights in shaking the foundations of our comfortable selfhood. That selfhood never was comfortable. It is just what theologians and theorists alike maintain it is: a cultural accretion. And if we *are* words, then we are not "mere" words or prisoners of language, but sentences in the discourse of the Logos. The trick—the "comedy"—is to want to say that we *are* part of the discourse of the Logos and thus convert our solemn self-importance into an agreement to play the creational language game.

These obvious points have a very particular relevance to our reading of Dante's work. It is as common now as it was in the nineteenth century to see in the *Commedia* evidence of poetic titanism, megalomania, or at least an ambition to encompass systematically the whole universe of knowledge and experience. Or else, in some highly sophisticated versions of this interpretation, Dante is seen as a wonderfully adroit trickster, who mentions God only to assert a covert authority born of his own creative talent over the unsuspecting reader. I am not going to deny that Dante was perhaps the first poet in modern cultural history to envisage such Promethean gestures as the raised eyebrow of Farinata (*Inf.* 10.35) or the heroic obscenity of a Vanni Fucci, flicking his Italian V-signs at God (*Inf.* 25.1–3). I would, however, want to say that, properly read, in the very moment of cultivating such an imagination, Dante in the *Commedia* submits his own imaginings to equally powerful criticism. Thus the *Paradiso*, above all, offers not only a more Christian but actually a more realistic account of what human beings are than anything the *Inferno* has to offer. Dante's Hell is a place of mere identity, a realm of self-definition where the apparently heroic voices of Francesca, Farinata, and even Ulysses are shown asserting their own (undoubtedly real) virtues.

In Paradise, however, human *beings* are *being* human—displayed, that is, through their activities rather than in pseudo-monumental attitudes of self-aggrandizement. We do not know anything about Beatrice's height—or girth—or whether her hair was really a Pre-Raphaelite ginger. We do know that, in Dante's imagination, she is a source of motion and that she talks in the *Paradiso* about topics that engage at least Dante's attention, all the time smiling—intelligently, one likes to think. The underlying mode of the *Paradiso* is praise, directed to the Trinity as the paradigm of personhood, in songs such as that in *Paradiso* 14.28–33, which annihilates and consummates numerical identity into pure melody: the one and two and three; the three and two and one.<sup>6</sup>

But, finally, are propositions, proofs, or even precepts likely to sustain any such understanding? Are there professional arguments to persuade us to be better at being persons? I doubt it, and again I take some strength in my doubts from the calming deliverances of theologians. Rowan Williams, drawing on Hans Urs von Balthasar, speaks of at least one of the functions of theology as being “celebration.”<sup>7</sup> In saying so, Williams does not disallow the interest that theologians might take in analysis and intellectual history. His words do, however, suggest that academic discourse need not always and forever be second-order comment, devoted to the assessment or production of plausible opinion. It may be just as valid for us, in our academic lives no less than in our domestic and interior existences, to be preparing for *performance*, in rehearsing words that will subsequently be used in the first-order discourses of creeds, prayers, hymns, and liturgies. And that, I take it, is consistent with an acceptance, running through Williams's writings, of language as the element in which human beings live, move, and have their being, as it is also with his recognition of play as the subtlest expression of human freedom. All of this is music to the ears of the literary critic. For decades now we have been in thrall to historical and philosophical models of discourse. Yet, without some such understanding as Williams offers, the fundamentally first-order character of literary criticism—by which I emphatically do *not* mean the cultivation of private sensibility—is likely to be lost. In their own sphere, literary critics, too, are preparing for performance, even for celebration. The brightest products of any literary course are likely to be those who have learned through their reading to *write* or at least learned the celebration of continuing exemplars.

Would Dante agree with this? One might be forgiven for thinking he would not, to judge from the centuries of scholarly comment on the nuances and positionings of the poet's intellectual affiliations. Dante himself does not make it any easier by offering in the *Monarchia* a work written in Latin for a professional audience. Yet I would strongly resist any suggestion that the *Monarchia* can be used to provide an explanation of—or alternative to—the *Commedia*. Once again, if Dante is a theologian, then his contribution lies less in any definition of doctrinal nicety than in the *form* of what he says—in his ability to make us reflect upon and appreciate the linguistic and narrative action of a Christian performance. After all, judged from our own professional point of view, the *Monarchia* appears to be not only very bad history—in its deeply distorted view of the Roman Empire—but also pretty feeble theology, paling beside Augustine and even beside recent writings that stress that there can be no talk of politics without talk of the Body of the Church and the community of Resurrection. There are, indeed, references in book 3 of the *Monarchia* to the Church as the true Body of Christian Truth.<sup>8</sup> Yet these suggestions come to fruition only when Dante turns to the sequences of metrical narrative. Such themes as these are not always explicitly addressed, even in the *Commedia*. But they are brought into play sometimes by imagery, sometimes by verbal suggestion, and always by an interrogative and *self*-interrogative narrative that forms itself in a confessional spirit and offers itself not as a last word in anything but as part of a narrative that its readers respond to and continue to expand. When, for instance, Dante is examined in Faith, Hope, and Charity in *Paradiso* 24–26, nothing is at stake. Dante is never going to botch his answers and so return in dudgeon to the dark wood of *Inferno* 1. The whole thing is a performance. This is to say that, just as the Creed is performative, as a promise of a way of life made in a communal context, Dante here likewise speaks to be heard by others, including the Otherness of God, and to be at one with the response that Otherness alone—whether divine or human—can offer.

A more extended anticipation of this theological disposition is offered at an earlier stage in the intellectual narrative of the *Paradiso*, in Dante's depiction of those Christian philosophers, including Aquinas, who might—one supposes—be most profoundly wedded to the validity of propositional statement. Yet Dante's Aquinas is concerned above all



to identify, as the exemplar of utmost wisdom, King Solomon, who is indeed a lover of Wisdom but is here emphatically portrayed as a ruler devoted to the well-being of his subjects in time. The whole thrust of Aquinas's speech is thus to displace any speculative appetite for intellectual system and to concentrate attention on the *ways* in which we think and conduct ourselves within a world of "brevis contingenze" (13.63) [brief contingencies], of time and decay, of growth and change. In such a world, says Aquinas, we are bound to proceed with leaden feet, with a cautious attention to the limits of our own nature. Solomon is displayed, not "in all his glory," but as a "voce modesta" (14.35) [modest voice], like the angel's voice in announcing God's will to Mary ("forse qual fu da l'angelo a Maria" [14.36]). The height of Wisdom lies in such an understanding. Solomon in his own speech delivers not a prudent review of fiscal possibilities but an ecstatic hymn to the Resurrected Body (*Paradiso* 14.43–66). Our ultimate point of arrival is to return to our limits, yet to know, in the community of resurrection, that they were never limits at all.

Until that time, there is the plod that Aquinas promised and the secular vision of witness and martyrdom as modes of performance, which Dante then proceeds to explore in the Cacciaguida episode (*Paradiso* 14–18). These cantos at the central point of the *Paradiso*—which at first demonstrate a surprising emphasis upon temporal rather than eternal existence—directly translate the implications of Solomon's wisdom into a consideration of the forms of activity—ethical, civic, linguistic, and poetic—that for Dante seem to stand as the truest expression of Christian theology. Here, as one began to see in *Paradiso* 14.88–124, Dante shifts from the consideration of Christian wisdom to that of Christian courage and imagines an encounter with Cacciaguida, his own grandfather thrice-removed, his *trisavolo*. Cacciaguida had died as a crusader on the Second Crusade. But there is no bellicose triumphalism here or tales of derring-do in foreign fields. On the contrary, the first canto of the sequence is concerned with the peace that once prevailed in Florence—and which now has been lost forever under the impact of rapid economic expansion. In Cacciaguida's day, Florence had something of the character of a tribal homeland. It lived within the tiny circuit of its ancient walls, designated, significantly, in a sort of acoustic geometry, by the limits of the echoes resonating from the Church of the Badia ("Fiorenza

dentro da la cerchia antica, / ond' ella toglie ancora e terza e nona, / si stava in pace, sobria e pudica" [*Par.* 15.97–99] [Florence, within the ancient ring, from which / she takes the bell-sound still of terce and nones, / lived on in modesty, chasteness and peace]). Within such a circuit all Florentines could be sure of their place within the sanctified rectilinearities of cradle and table, bed and grave.<sup>9</sup> But this primal organization of our brief contingencies has been shattered by the influx of economic migrants and by the restless centrifuge of mercantile activity, as bankers and merchants pursue their busy lives, not on crusades but in commercial traveling to their deaths in foreign fields. In canto 17, Dante proceeds to place his own misfortunes as an exile and his own mission as a poet at the center of these agitations. Here, as elsewhere, he represents himself as the victim of the political strife that arose in these changing times, and begins to envisage his own text as the only true homeland for those who seek a return to what Florence once was.

In all of this, Cacciaguida, as the ideal father, represents the courage as much to sustain the ethic of former civility as to fight and die for his cause. And this is a courage needed for facing life as well as death, for living in that austere attachment to age-old limits that was characteristic of the Florentine citizenry—says Dante—in Cacciaguida's day. Now that such virtue has been desecrated, the poet will require a similar courage, first of all to face the day-to-day martyrdom of exile; he must live bitterly dependent on patrons and every night climbing another man's stair.<sup>10</sup> But the poet is also called upon to engage directly and dangerously with these contingencies. For his witnessing to the truth will involve no secluded reading of comforting phrases in some universal book but rather a word-by-word descent into the temporal world. In *Paradiso* 17, Dante calls upon himself to speak out boldly against the destroyers of peace, to name names and risk the consequences of offence to those very families to which he may need to resort for his earthly crust. And his words will be as earthy as the extremely earthy phrase in which he purposes to "lascia pur grattar dov' è la rogna" (129) [let them all scratch wherever they itch].

In terms of poetics, the naming of names and the scratching of itches may well prove central in the Cacciaguida episode. But one is also bound to recall—for its theological resonance—that all such ordinary virtue is set against and supported by the image of the Cross. Although the whole

of this episode is located in the planetary orbit of Mars, the configuration that here replaces the circular dances of the Heaven of Christian philosophy is neither the sword nor the scimitar but the many-edged outline of the cruciform. I need not belabor the point. Our truth, with the Cross, lies in our response to the limits that define our nature. Our city is our exile. Our characteristic existence, from this Dantean perspective, lies in time and in language, themselves both modes of exile. So much to say, so little time to say it, and so much, anyway, that is unsay-able. The Cross confirms all that and gives it, quite undeservedly, some meaning.

#### POLEMICS OF PRAISE

All this leads us to reflection on the first part of my essay's title, which as yet remains unexplained. A full appreciation of Dante's understanding of propositions and persons will require reflection on the notion that praise—as the foundational relationship in liturgy and thought between creature and Creator—lies at the very heart of Dantean poetics. Dante himself suggests as much in *De vulgari eloquentia*, where he argues that the first word, rationally speaking, that Adam ever uttered was the word "God"—"Ei"—thereby recognizing his maker in the mode either of question or response (*Dve* 1.4). More importantly, the *stilo della loda*—the praise style—is the very style that Dante identifies as characteristically his own when, at a crucial moment in the *Vita nuova*, he realizes that his role as poet is not to flatter Beatrice or seek any benefit from knowing her, but rather to speak in praise of the fact that she exists at all. This is not to say that Beatrice ever becomes for Dante an idolatrous alternative to God. On the contrary, the praise of Beatrice, as a creature of God, is seen as an exercise, within the sphere of language, of that very virtue that Beatrice throughout the *Vita nuova* most clearly exemplifies—the virtue of humility. Thus, in pursuing his specific activity, the poet will not suppose that his words can ever encompass or possess the reality of a divinely created person, still less the person of God. Indeed, as the opening lines of "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" suggest, any attempt to write as if that were possible would render the poetry "vile"—ignoble—destroying that very delicately poised manifestation of nobility that Beatrice herself displays, paradoxically, in grounding her being in humility:

Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore,  
I' vo' con voi de la mia donna dire,  
non perch'io creda sua laude finire  
ma ragionar per isfogar la mente.  
(*Vn* 19.4, vv. 1-4)

[You ladies who have intelligence of love / I wish to speak of my lady with you / not so that I should ever conclude her praises / but speaking to give my mind an outlet.]

This position has implications that many Dantists are likely to resist. After all, to speak of humility in Dante runs against a view that, with some reason, celebrates the encyclopedic ambition of the poet to offer a total—and to some, a totalizing—view of the knowable universe. Yet I persist in this, particularly when the text under consideration is the *Paradiso*. This *cantica* is punctuated at every turn by passages insisting that the poet's words cannot exhaust the reality of his own vision, let alone the reality of God. (The opening of *Paradiso* 23, discussed above, emphasizes this: "Ma chi pensasse il ponderoso tema / e l'omero mortal che se ne carica, / nol biasmerebbe se sott' esso trema" [64-66] [Yet no one if they've gauged that weighty theme— / and seen what mortal shoulders bear the load— / would criticize such trembling backing-out].

I propose, simply enough, that instead of regarding Dante's words as a rhetorical topos, we should accept that Dante means what he says. It is an aspect of both praise and of humility that he should. And theologians can supply any number of examples from the apophatic tradition where the religious seriousness of such protestations simply cannot be questioned.

Yet to acknowledge this is not to embrace mere silence but rather to recognize the field in which we as language-animals most effectively graze and frolic. So, at the crystalline boundaries of linguistic possibility, Dante turns back and enters—to use his own phrase—the workshop of rhetoric and finds there a whole range of instruments, lenses and scalpels, mirrors, and even skewers, to employ in his dealings with other human beings in a range of semiotic functions. The *Commedia* shows the virtuoso at work, the craftsman at his forge; and the credit of course is his. It would be poor praise, however, that obscured with fantastic claims to cosmic domination the conditions of humility under which, realistically,