

Theologians as Persons in Dante's *Commedia*

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Abstract

This thesis examines the roles of four major theologians in Dante's *Commedia*: Augustine (354-430), Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1275), and asks what their appearances as persons in the poem can tell us about Dante's conception of theology. Dante chooses to represent theology through a series of personal encounters with individuals and individual theologians: the project asks how he transforms or incorporates these perceptions in the *Commedia*. My claim is that the character of Beatrice should be understood as a theologian within the poem, even though her claim to such status relies not on an established historical authority—on written treatises, sermons, works or reputation—but purely on the nature of the particular person which Dante constructed in his poetic career.

CONTENTS

	Abbreviations and notes on translations	6
Introduction	Summary and Definition of Terms.....	7
	The Theologians within Dante Studies	13
	Methodology	42
	Overview of the Thesis	49
Chapter I	The Person of the Theologian.....	51
	1. Personhood in the <i>Commedia</i>	51
	2. The Theologians in Florence	64
Chapter II	The Virtuous Theologian.....	87
	1. Theology emerging from the shadows	87
	2. Bernard's Authentic Heart	90
	3. Bernard's Heart in the <i>Commedia</i>	100
	4. Bernard and Aquinas: Loving and Knowing	115
Chapter III	Narrating Turning Points.....	137
	1. Changing Personhood	137
	2. Persons Vulnerable to Error	157
Chapter IV	Beatrice as Theologian.....	177
	1. Interpreting Beatrice through Augustine	177
	2. Beatrice and Bernard	184
	3. Beatrice and Gregory	197
	4. Beatrice, Aquinas and Theological Discourse	201
	5. The <i>I am</i> of Beatrice	217
Conclusion		225
Bibliography		233

Abbreviations, editions and notes on translations

All quotations from the *Commedia* are taken from the following edition: *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, 4 vols, edited by Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1966-67).

All translations from the *Commedia* are taken from the following, unless otherwise stated: *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, edited and translated by Robert M. Durling; commentary by Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996-2011).

All biblical quotations from the Latin Vulgate are taken from the *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, edited by Robert Weber and Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994). English translations in the footnotes are taken from the Douay-Rheims American Edition Version (Baltimore, MD: John Murphy Co., 1899).

VN	<i>Vita nova</i>
Conv.	<i>Convivio</i>
Mon.	<i>Monarchia</i>
Ep.	<i>Epistole</i>
PL	J.P. Migne, <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina</i>
ED	<i>Enciclopedia Dantesca</i>
EN	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
Conf.	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i>
Civ.Dei	Augustine, <i>De civitate Dei</i>
Moralia	Gregory the Great, <i>Moralia in Iob</i>
ST	Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i>
SG	Aquinas, <i>Summa contra Gentiles</i>
BML	Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Firenze
BNC	Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Firenze
BR	Biblioteca Riccardiana, Firenze

INTRODUCTION

1. Summary and definition of terms

This study forms part of the AHRC-funded project, 'Dante and Late Medieval Florence: Theology in Poetry, Practice and Society', based at the universities of Leeds and Warwick.¹ It examines the roles of four major theologians in Dante's *Commedia*: Augustine (354-430), Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1275), and asks what their appearances as persons in the poem can tell us about Dante's conception of theology. As case studies, they present rich opportunities for understanding Dante's own views about theology, not least because their representations as characters within the poem are each very different. These theologians, in some senses exemplary of particular theological traditions, will be studied alongside their presence in the context of Dante's Florence in the years between 1280 and 1300. Again, their presence here—in the sources through which they were perceived as persons—is markedly different. So, as Dante chooses to represent theology through a series of personal encounters with individuals and individual theologians, the project will ask how he transforms or incorporates these

¹ The project, led by Professor Matthew Treherne, Professor Claire Honess and Professor Simon Gilson, casts light on the ways in which medieval theology was mediated and experienced within a specific historical and geographical context. Nicolò Maldina and Anna Pegoretti carry out post-doctoral work on the religious and learning contexts of Florence; Kevin Marples's doctoral thesis examines the prophetic, political and theological intersections in Dante's works; Ruth Chester's public and cultural engagement work, which was assisted by Lois Haines, provides new guides for tourists in Florence, based on the outcomes of the research.

https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125117/dante_and_late_medieval_florence

It should also be noted that the volumes, *Dante's 'Commedia': Theology as Poetry*, edited by V. Montemaggi and M. Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) and *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, 2 vols, edited by C.E. Honess and M. Treherne (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), form foundational entry points into the discussions that are found in this thesis.

perceptions in the *Commedia*. Finally, I make the bold claim that the character of Beatrice should be understood as a theologian within the poem, even though her claim to such status relies not on an established historical authority—on written treatises, sermons, works or reputation—but purely on the nature of the particular person which Dante constructed in his poetic career, beginning in the *Vita nova*, and supposedly based on a real woman whom the poet saw in Florence, and who died in 1290.²

Above all, I shall argue that by including these theologians as *persons* in his poem Dante gives us an opportunity to engage with theology in a way which moves beyond merely the analysis of theological *texts* and therefore enables us to see Dante's theology in a new light. Aspects of their characters, how they appear in the poem and in the historical sources, will determine the thematic structure of the study, rather than an analysis of each theologian in turn. As I have already alluded to, as characters within the poem these five appear in very different ways. Augustine is hardly present at all: he is mentioned in passing in the Heaven of the Sun, *Paradiso* X, 120, and then later his seated position in the Empyrean is described at *Paradiso* XXXII, 35. Gregory's name appears only twice in the poem at *Purgatorio* X, 75, and *Paradiso* XXVIII, 133, and together with an implicit reference to him at *Paradiso* XX, 109, he can hardly be described as a fully-formed character as such—especially as the mentions of him are twice found to be describing someone else, the Emperor Trajan. Aquinas, Bernard and Beatrice are different again, of course. Each has a role within the second and third *cantiche* which are substantial, speaking parts.

² I am indebted to Professor Elena Lombardi who first suggested I should consider the character of Beatrice as a theologian, in response to my paper, 'Bernard of Clairvaux in Late-medieval Florence' which was given at 'Dante's Theology in Poetry, Practice and Society' at University of Notre Dame's London centre, 13-14 July 2013. Without Professor Lombardi's helpful comments this thesis would have no doubt have taken a very different course.

Aquinas, beginning at *Paradiso* X, 82, introduces himself and the other 'candles' of the Heaven of the Sun—the dancing theologians, and then proceeds in the next canto, from line 19 onwards, to eulogise St. Francis of Assisi and to chastise members of the Dominican order who have strayed from the example which Francis had shown. Bernard's role, hugely important for the pilgrim's final vision, begins at *Paradiso* XXXI, 58, with Beatrice's surprise removal from Dante's side, and her replacement by the Abbot of Clairvaux. Bernard's final words, closing his prayer to the Virgin at *Paradiso* XXXIII, 37, are the last spoken in the poem, and the final image of him, beckoning and smiling to Dante at line 49, are the last human gestures that the pilgrim sees before his final vision of God.

Beatrice, Dante-*personaggio's* second guide, appears at *Purgatorio* XXX, line 31, in the Earthly Paradise, but we have known of her intervention in Dante's story since *Inferno* II, when Virgil tells the pilgrim of his commission from Beatrice. At *Purgatorio* XXX, 55, we hear her words directly, naming Dante, commanding him not to weep at Virgil's disappearance, and hinting that there may well be more pain to come. And so it proves. She takes up the role of guide but becomes his teacher too, and her explanations of theology—for example, of the Incarnation in *Paradiso* VII—are crucial for Dante-*personaggio's* spiritual development, and indeed comprise much of the more explicitly theological passages of the *Commedia*. Her removal at *Paradiso* XXXI, 58, when she returns to her place in the celestial rose, is a necessary part of his learning about the true nature of divine love.

Before we can progress any further, it will be necessary to define exactly what it is we are talking about, especially as it will be immediately obvious that to include Beatrice as a theologian in this study I am already pushing at the boundaries of what it means to be one. More basic than that, though, as Zygmunt Barański has helpfully shown, is that to call even Augustine,

Gregory, Bernard and Thomas theologians, and to categorise their respective works as theology, as though that is a stable term, already trades on assumptions that need to be questioned, spelled out in definition, and argued for. Laments Barański:

No one feels the need to explain or specify with any sort of rigour what she or he means by theology, never mind what Dante, not to mention the Middle Ages, might have meant by the term.³

This quote opens up nicely the three-fold way in which this study will need to engage with the term theology: how it is used today (also, whether this is significant); how Dante understood it; and what the debates in the Middle Ages over its status – and Barański tells us that these debates ‘raged’ – mean for the appearance of the characters in the *Commedia* whom I am claiming for theologians. Barański’s essay neatly sets out the many ways in which the term theology is employed today, counting six uses of the word, mostly connected, but in subtly nuanced ways quite different from each other. Broadly, these can be divided into two camps: firstly, those which take up an ‘external’ viewpoint, and treat of theistic religion as a practice to be studied wholesale, passing no judgement on the truth-claims internal to that religious practice. And secondly, those which take up a position internal to a particular theistic religion and claim truths within it according to different ways of knowing: for example, through theoretical principles, through revelation, or through scripture.

Given the differences in definitions over the practice itself, it is unsurprising that the word *theologian* brings with it alternative definitions, ones which pick out different sorts of people in each case. For Barański, a theologian in the modern sense may be any of those who carry out the practices outlined above. For Dante, though, and for others in the Middle

³ Z. G. Barański, ‘Dante and Doctrine (and Theology)’, in Honess and Treherne (eds), *Reviewing Dante’s Theology*, I, pp. 9-63 (p. 13).

Ages, the terms *teologia* and *teologo* brought with them their own specific meanings. In the *Convivio*, Dante calls theology 'la scienza divina' (*Convivio* II, xiii, 8), which he characterises in terms of revelation of the divine through scripture. It is a definition which bases its authority on Christ's words in the Gospels, and on the Old Testament; theology's subject is God, a subject which is certain, and not up for debate. In *Convivio* II, xiv, 19-20, Dante describes theology, by way of analogy with the Empyrean, thus:

[L]o Cielo empireo per la sua pace simiglia la divina scienza, che piena è di tutta pace; la quale non soffera lite alcuna d'opinioni o di sofisticati argomenti, per la eccellentissima certezza del suo subietto, lo quale è Dio. E di questa dice esso a li suoi discepoli: 'La pace mia do a voi, la pace mia lascio a voi', dando e lasciando a loro la sua dottrina, che è questa scienza di cu' io parlo. Di costei dice Salomone: 'Sessanta sono le regine, e ottanta l'amiche concubine; e de le ancille adolescenti non è numero: una è la colomba mia e la perfetta mia'.

Kenelm Foster, in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* entry on *teologia*, draws attention to the unusual focus on peace in Dante's conception of theology, found in the *Convivio*, and underlines the fact that it bears little resemblance to the practice which Aquinas had helped to establish, and which had at its core the role of reason.⁴ Instead, Dante's focus on revelation through scripture, and an idiosyncratic engagement with the notion of peace, downplayed reason and was, according to Barański, 'a sincere effort to mitigate conflict rather than foster it'.⁵

In the *Monarchia* III, iii, 13, Dante extends the reach of theological authority to include not just scripture, but the written works of the Fathers of the Church, naming (only) Augustine as the prime example of an authority divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit:

⁴ K. Foster, 'Teologia', in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, V, pp. 564-68.

⁵ Z. G. Barański, 'Dante and Doctrine', p. 26.

Sunt etiam Scripture doctorum, Augustini et aliorum, quos a Spiritu Sancto adiutos qui dubitat, fructus eorum vel omnino non vidit vel si vidit, minime degustavit.⁶

Thus there is a two-fold distinction in the activity of Dante's theology itself: the first is available to all Christians, as they read and interpret scripture and respond to its affective revelation. The second is the remit of individuals who produce written exegesis upon the Bible: those who engage in scripture's interpretation are theologians, properly understood, but only insofar as they avoid error, according to Dante's own prescription. Augustine's expertise as an exegete provides not only a benchmark towards which other theologians can aim, but also furnishes them with a hugely influential method of *doing* theology by way of his allegorical readings of scripture.

Albert Ascoli sees an ambiguity in Dante's use of the word *teologia*.⁷ Like Barański, he notes Dante's focus on biblical interpretation, but Ascoli gives further emphasis to Dante's question of scriptural *authorship* and the nature of those 'theologians', the scribes of the Bible. In doing so, Ascoli revives the debate over whether the scribes could be understood as writing poetry in their use of metaphorical language when describing the nature of God, and he reminds us of Aquinas's gloss on why scripture employs such devices—a reason which separates theology from poetry.⁸ In canto II of

⁶ 'There are also the writings of the doctors of the church, of Augustine and others; anyone who doubts that they were helped by the Holy Spirit has either entirely failed to see their fruits or, if he has seen them, has not tasted them.' *Monarchy*, ed. and trans. by P. Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 68.

⁷ See A. Ascoli, 'Poetry and Theology' in Honess and Treherne (eds) *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, II, pp. 3-42.

⁸ See: *ST* Ia.i.9.1: 'Ad nonum sic proceditur. Videtur quod sacra Scriptura non debeat uti metaphoris. Illud enim quod est proprium infimae doctrinae, non videtur competere huic scientiae, quae inter alias tenet locum supremum, ut iam dictum est. Procedere autem per similitudines varias et repraesentationes, est proprium poeticae, quae est infima inter omnes doctrinas. Ergo huiusmodi similitudinibus uti, non est conveniens huic scientiae.' 'It seems that Holy Scripture should not use metaphors. For that which is proper to the lowest science seems not to befit this science, which holds the highest place of all. But to proceed by the aid

Purgatorio, Ascoli reads the souls' 'enactment' of Psalm 113, *In Exitu Israel*, which they also sing, as a deliberate contrast with Casella's song of Dante's earlier poem, *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* (*Purgatorio* II, 112).⁹ For Ascoli it is a means for Dante-*poeta* to claim a closer identification with the scribes of the Bible than with those authors of straightforward poetry, including his own earlier self. I return to this question, that is, Dante's supposed claim to theology as someone who writes scripture, below. For now, it is enough to suggest that this further definitional ambiguity over the nature of theology will need to be addressed in light of Dante's poem and his engagement with the theologians within it.

2. The Theologians within Dante Studies

What follows is a review of five examples of works which explore the connection between Dante and a particular theologian. The works are, in the order which I consider them: Steven Botterill's study of Bernard; Vittorio Montemaggi's essay on Gregory; Elena Lombardi's article on Augustine; and Simon Gilson's analysis of Christian Aristotelianism, which focuses in large part on Thomas Aquinas. My fifth, and possibly at this stage controversial, inclusion is Regina Psaki's essay on Beatrice. It will be left to the remainder of this thesis, and in particular, Chapter IV, to show why I have included Beatrice as an example of a theologian, when by almost every conceivable definition of that term, she is no such thing. As should be obvious, this is not in any way meant to be an exhaustive examination of the field but, rather, an illustration of the different ways in which one might want to consider the person of the theologian and how that person, their works, ideas and influence appear in the *Commedia*. The

of various similitudes and figures is proper to poetry, the least of all the sciences. Therefore it is not fitting that this science should make use of such similitudes.' *Summa Theologiae*, ed. and trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), also available at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>

⁹ Throughout this study I will be using the numbering of the Psalms from the Latin Vulgate.

literature on each of these theologians is vast (so, too, on the character of Beatrice) and thus my intention here is to maintain a focus on how these theologians have been read *in contact with Dante*. I shall restate this at points throughout the thesis because it is important: my aim is not to critically assess any of the particular positions that these theologians might espouse; this is emphatically not a work of academic theology, by way of literary criticism. Rather, it is an examination of how Dante the author co-opts the portrayal and the authority of these individual theologians – given what emerges of their personhoods from their works, images, hagiographies and plain old common knowledge – in order to do something very particular in his poem, with the concept of theology itself.

It will become clear that the aims of my project do not map precisely on to the aims and methodologies of those found in these examples, but, having said that, in some cases there is considerable overlap, and in each, there are useful things to be learned both from the content of the analyses and the methodological approaches to the context of Dante's culture. Of the five outlined here, Steven Botterill's book-length study of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, appears closest to my project in its methodological approach.¹⁰ His analysis looks at the historical Bernard and how he might have been known to Dante, through his works, his reputation and his influence on other theologians and schools of thought. Botterill's study comes closest to the approach that I will be taking because he wants to know why Bernard was chosen by Dante for such an important role within the *Commedia*, and whether or not sense can be made of his characterisation and function in the text when compared with the knowledge of the real, historical Bernard which was available. But Botterill's focus is not exclusively on the Bernard that was available to Florentines of the 1280s and 1290s, as is my particular project, even though

¹⁰ S. Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the Commedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

he does sketch some of this knowledge in. Thus there is room here for further exploration, particularly with regard to representations of Bernard beyond his own works—in the visual and oral culture of Florence.

It must be said that all four of the examples about the historical theologians here focus—as one would expect—on the content of the works of the respective theologians and not necessarily on the person of the theologian himself. Vittorio Montemaggi's essay on Gregory the Great is undoubtedly interested in the person of Gregory—indeed, the subject of personhood and particularity is central to his essay—but he approaches the person of Gregory first and foremost through his appearance in the text, and this includes both explicit mentions of Gregory the character, and implicit appearances of historical Gregory's influence and works. For Montemaggi, the appearance of a particular theologian in the text provides a rich source of ways to think about the theology within the poem more generally (and, in fact, provides a model for theological discourse and practice itself). This I will argue is exactly right—and so although Botterill's methodological approach will be closest to mine, it is Montemaggi's starting assumption which I share from the outset and which will inform my critical engagement with the text. At the end of his article, Montemaggi suggests how further explorations of how Dante may have encountered the historical Gregory in Florence could be helpful to his analysis, extending the reach of the study of personhood beyond the character found in the text, but out in to the context which Dante inhabited.

Elena Lombardi's approach gives a passing nod to that context, noting that Dante may have come to know Augustine in the schools of Santa Maria Novella, Santa Croce and Santo Spirito, and most probably through his relationship with the Franciscans, but she provides no concrete examples of how that knowledge was transmitted, suggesting only that the mediation of Augustine via other authors was complex and now possibly opaque to

modern readers. Indeed, she claims that the dialogue between Dante and the works of Augustine must be 'imagined', because Dante provides only very few echoes of Augustine and his works in the poem, and because he as a character in the *Commedia* has no speaking role at all. Thus she provides no presentation of Augustine the person, other than claiming that he must have been known to Dante as a 'decontextualised [...] authority'.¹¹ How this fits with Dante's familiarity with the ineluctably personal work of the *Confessions* is unclear.¹² Further, although she hints at Dante's acquaintance with the Augustinians at Santo Spirito, Lombardi does not pursue in any depth how the order were using the works, reputation or image of Augustine to further their own ends during this period (bringing them close to the machinations of Boniface VIII, in fact) or how it could be argued that his *Regula* there and at Santa Maria Novella provided an enactment of some aspects of Augustine's own character.

Simon Gilson's essay is not aimed at pursuing the perception of the person of the theologian in question—in this case, Thomas Aquinas—either. How to get at the person of Thomas himself is left for other studies. Nor does Gilson examine the character of the person within the text, but rather provides a closely argued but extremely high-level history of the transmission of philosophical and theological ideas. How scholasticism was developed by Aquinas and Albert, and how Aristotle was mediated through a matrix of other authors gives us a better understanding of the Aquinas and the Aristotle that Dante would have known. Moreover, it provides an alternative view of the intellectual milieu of the late Middle Ages which Gilson suggests was more nuanced than is often portrayed. The debates coming out of Paris, however, and their relationship with the *studia* of Florence, go unexamined by Gilson in this essay, so there is scope

¹¹ E. Lombardi, 'Augustine and Dante', in Honess and Treherne (eds) *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, I, pp. 175-208 (p.178).

¹² See *Convivio* I, ii, 14.

here to build on what is a useful overview of the intellectual territory in order to bring its horizon down to the local, Florentine level.

2.1 Botterill/Bernard

In *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, Botterill argues for a reading of the Bernardine episodes from two perspectives: the first, he says, should be an attempt to re-create an initial, innocent encounter with the final three cantos of *Paradiso*.¹³ The second should be a 're-reading', in light of the first

¹³ For other discussions of both the historical Bernard and the character in the poem relevant to this study, see: A. W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); P. Boitani, 'The Sibyl's Leaves: A Study of Paradiso XXXIII', *Dante Studies*, 96 (1978), 83–126; S. Botterill, 'Mysticism and Meaning in Dante's Paradiso' in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. by T. Barolini and W. H. Storey, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), pp.143-152; A. H. Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Between Cult and History* (Edinburgh: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing and T&T Clark, 1996); K. Brownlee, 'Language and Desire in Paradiso XXVI', *Lectura Dantis*, 6 (1990), 45–59; M. Casey, *A Thirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005); M. Chiaranza, 'Solomon's Song in the *Divine Comedy*' in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and its Afterlife*, ed. by D. E. Stewart and A. Cornish (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp.199–208; P. Dronke, 'The Song of Songs and Medieval Love-Lyric', in *The Bible and Medieval Culture*, ed. by W. Lourdaux and D. Verhelst (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979), pp. 256–62; G.R. Evans, *The Mind of St. Bernard of Clairvaux* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); F. Ferrucci, *Il poema del desiderio* (Milan: Leonardo, 1990); E. G. Gardner, *Dante and the Mystics: A Study of the Mystical Aspect of the Divina Commedia and Its Relations With Some of Its Mediaeval Sources* (London: JM Dent & sons Limited, 1913); E. Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990); M. Gragnolati, *Amor che move: Linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini, Morante* (Rome: Il Saggiatore, 2013); M. Gragnolati, T. Kay, E. Lombardi, F. Southerden, (eds), *Desire in Dante and the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Legenda, 2012); B. S. James, *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: An Essay in Biography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1957); R. Kay, 'Dante in Ecstasy: Paradiso 33 and Bernard of Clairvaux', *Mediaeval Studies*, 66 (2004), 183–212; R. Kirkpatrick, *Dante's 'Paradiso' and the Limits of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); J. Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976); *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); E. Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2012); B. McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, 7 vols (New York: Crossroad, 1991-2017); R. McMahan, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent: Augustine, Anselm, Boethius and Dante* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006); P. Nasti, *Favole d'amore e 'saver profondo': La tradizione salomonica in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 2007); L. Pertile, 'A Desire of Paradise and a Paradise of Desire: Dante and Mysticism', in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed.

encounter, and in light of the rest of our cultural baggage and histories. For Botterill thinks that modern-day readers, now familiar with the abbot of Clairvaux's sudden appearance at the end of the *cantica*, and aided by critical commentaries and helpful notes, miss much of the significance of Dante's choice. The significance is lost as we are already conditioned to the inevitability of the appearance, thus losing its dramatic import, but also because, simply put, saints mean different things to us now than they did in Dante's day: the choice of this saint in particular, presented as a character with such a prominent role in the *Commedia*, should be questioned in light of Bernard's meaning for readers in fourteenth-century Italy.¹⁴

The first part of the book, then, attempts to reconstruct the figure of Bernard as he was in the Middle Ages and, in doing so, attempts to see Dante's choice and his characterisation of Bernard with new eyes. Botterill is alert to criticisms of this methodology, criticisms which my own study will tackle head-on too, namely 'that the attempt to re-create Dante's own cultural horizon [...] can no longer be reconciled with the awareness that we ourselves are inescapably conditioned by our own historical situation'.¹⁵ This is what critics of this approach call a 'fundamental and insoluble incompatibility', but it is something which Botterill believes can be overcome by proposing his condition of the innocent reader, although one not 'blind to historicity'.¹⁶ Botterill is cautiously optimistic that such a

by A. A. Ianucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp.148–166; *La puttana e il gigante: Dal Cantico dei Cantici al Paradiso Terrestre di Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1998); *La Punta del Disio: Semantica del desiderio nella 'Commedia'* (Fiesole, Firenze: Cadmo, 2005); M. B. Pranger, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Shape of Monastic Thought: Broken Dreams* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994); F. Sissini, 'Il canto di San Bernardo', *L'Alighieri*, 25 (1984), 18–31; D. Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995).

¹⁴ For more general considerations of the representation of Bernard in his works, and especially his hagiography, see Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux*.

¹⁵ Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, p. 8.

¹⁶ Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, pp. 8-9.

reading of Dante will provide new and fruitful interpretations which will head off any charges of anachronism.

Although my study will be attempting a similar trick, I am not so confident as Botterill that by merely assuming the position of an innocent reader, we will be able to re-create in ourselves someone significantly closer to the first readers of the *Commedia* in the fourteenth century. We know both too much and too little for that. This is why some filling in is needed — perhaps from the ground up — in order to see Dante's culture afresh. The danger of anachronism is still there: the question remains, can we separate when and where it takes hold, even in the midst of our readings? It is a question to which I shall be returning below, when I set out the methodological assumptions of my study, the opportunities it opens and the pitfalls to which it is subject.

In any case, Botterill begins by asking what a Trecento reader would have made of Bernard's appearance in canto XXXI of the *Paradiso*. What would such an opinion be of Bernard, given his reputation in the Middle Ages? The myriad forms which make up his reputation are analysed in depth, and Botterill's careful research into the cultural transmission and presentation of these forms — literary and material — will prove invaluable for my study. There are additional ways in which the historical Bernard is present in Dante's Florence which Botterill misses, for example in the *lauda* tradition which I will be examining, but overall, Botterill's summary of Bernard's presence in Duecento Florence is thoroughgoing and meticulous.

The first point that Botterill makes is that by the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, Bernard's legacy was already being appropriated by different groups for different purposes. The Cistercians, interested more in his miracles and in writing hagiography, were fashioning Bernard's image in readiness for their attempts to see him canonised, whereas the

scholastics were reading his written works as those of an *auctor*. But Bernard did not sit well amongst the scholastics, and was most often taken up by those who were theologically conservative. Aquinas, notes Botterill, was sceptical about Bernard's intellectual achievements, whereas Albert quotes him extensively. Of the Franciscans, Bonaventure is particularly enamoured with the abbot of Clairvaux, lauding Bernard as a preacher and mystic. Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), Peter John Olivi (1248-1298) and Ubertino da Casale (1259-1329) all quote Bernard in their works, Ubertino most of all. Botterill provides further useful references to Bernard in the works of other medieval writers and theologians, ones to whom Dante may have had access, including the Franciscan and Tuscan popular text, *Meditazioni delle vita di Cristo*, in which Bernard is prominent, and in which the aspects of Bernard present are his devotion to Mary and his renown as a contemplative.

So Botterill gives us a useful overview of the forms in which Bernard was present in Medieval Florence—noting the surprising lack of evidence of his works in the Franciscan house of Santa Croce, where his influence one would have thought might have been greatest. He goes on to show how Bernard's image in the culture of Dante's day is entirely compatible with the character who appears at the end of the *Commedia*, and who, on Botterill's reading, has a specific purpose in the narrative action which Trecento readers would have recognised as suitably Bernardine. This conclusion is furnished by a careful reading of each of the cantos in which Bernard appears, which re-balances some earlier scholarship which had focused heavily on the historical Bernard's devotion to Mary as the primary motivation for Dante's choice.

The 'appearance' scene is pivotal for Botterill. It functions as a dramatic means for a reassessment of the point of Dante's journey which seemed to be heading for its culmination with Beatrice. Bernard's sudden appearance

and Beatrice's removal to the *candida rosa* echoes the earlier switch of Virgil for Beatrice—but reinforces, here, for Botterill, the difference between the earlier guides. Beatrice sits now in glory, whereas Virgil is back in Limbo. More than this, though, Bernard's arrival heralds the possibility of Dante-*personaggio* seeing Beatrice as an 'icon rather than a person' placed now within a universal and not merely personal order.¹⁷ With Bernard revealing his identity in such an abrupt manner, Botterill notes the conscious narrative effect which further underlines the separation from Beatrice and provides the way for Dante to develop his devotion to Mary as intercessor who will bring his gaze, ultimately, to Christ, and to the vision of God itself.

The unveiling of Bernard's identity receives careful scrutiny by Botterill, as he asks at what point a Trecento reader would recognise the abbot of Clairvaux through the character's self-ascriptions. It is through Bernard's devotion to Mary and in his mystical contemplation that he can be recognised, and these aspects of the historical Bernard, as they are represented by Dante in his fictional character, are analysed in depth by Botterill. In addition, he goes on to offer a reading of Bernard in *Paradiso* XXXII, which Botterill thinks has been too-often overlooked, as the *dottore* whose duty it is to speak. Thus Bernard's lecture on doctrine (specifically, lines 67-87), although seemingly placed in a strange position within the *cantica*, provides evidence for Dante's perception of Bernard as an *auctor*; indeed, Botterill thinks that Dante uses Bernard's voice to authorise his own non-orthodox views on infant baptism—views which the historical Bernard did not necessarily espouse. Botterill suggests that historical Bernard's conservatism on doctrine—in *De Baptismo* and in his letters he states that he has no wish to 'usurp' the teaching of Church Fathers—is used to great effect by Dante in order to create a language of authority for himself. And Botterill makes an important point about the difference

¹⁷ Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, p.72.

between theologians as they might appear in the *Commedia* and how they and their teachings are presented in their theological works:

It is not necessary to assume, because a historical figure in the *Commedia* presents certain teaching, that such teaching invariably conforms to the historical figure's real view of the same subject, or even to Dante-poet's acquaintance with it. On the other hand, it seems unduly reductive to assume that Dante's choices of such spokesmen (and women) are arbitrary.¹⁸

Botterill's aim in this section of the book, though, is to set out in the strongest terms how and why Dante-*personaggio* is in need of someone like Bernard, and it is here that Botterill wants to pay particular attention to the attribute of eloquence at the centre of Dante's characterisation of the saint. This eloquence, Botterill shows us, is fully 'consonant with a widespread perception of the historical Bernard in Dante's culture' but is an aspect of the abbot of Clairvaux that has become neglected in favour of other attributes, such as his Marianism.¹⁹ Bernard's words, his prayer to the Virgin, are not only the last that are spoken in the poem, they are the climax of his role in paradise. Through his eloquence, Bernard is able to teach Dante-*personaggio* how to approach God; where to direct his eyes; and secure for Dante the intercession of Mary. His voice speaks for the ranks of the blessed in the *candida rosa*, in a prayer for Dante's salvation.

In chapter six of the book, Botterill provides a careful critique of Rosetta Migliorini Fissi's argument²⁰ which proposes that Dante's coining of the term *trasumanar* (*Paradiso* I, 70) is indebted to the historical Bernard's use of the concept of *deificatio*; indeed, that they are part and parcel of the same mystical experience, described in different ways. Botterill is in broad agreement with Migliorini Fissi that Bernard's renown as a contemplative

¹⁸ Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, p.99.

¹⁹ Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, p. 113.

²⁰ See R. Migliorini Fissi, 'La nozione di deificatio nel Paradiso', *Lecture classensi*, 9/10 (1982), 39-72.

mystic is key to unlocking Dante's choice of Bernard (together with the other reasons that have been outlined above), but Botterill is unsure that there is enough evidence in the text to suggest that it is exclusively Bernard to whom Dante is indebted. He traces the long and complex history of the concept of deification and then places this alongside his reading of the *trasumanar* passage in *Paradiso* I. What he concludes is that both Dante and Bernard are in agreement about deification being about the 'accord of wills' between human beings and God (set out nicely by Piccarda at *Paradiso* III, 85) but suggests that *trasumanar* is actually merely the first step in the process towards deification which Dante-*personaggio* only reaches, in a fully Bernardine sense, in line 143 of *Paradiso* XXXIII. That deification is possible for Bernard on Earth, and for Dante-*personaggio*, before his own death, provides succour to the argument that the 'accord of wills' between man and God does not necessarily mean the negation or abolition of the human will altogether: that 'deification' is possible whilst still fully human, the will being an essential part of human personhood which does not require annihilation in order to participate in God.

Botterill ends his study by returning to the theme of eloquence, and picks up the ineffability *topos* that a reading of the *Paradiso* inevitably invites. Far from a gloomy analysis of the final canto that focuses on the failure of human language to get close to speaking of God, or further, one that is sceptical about meaning full stop, Botterill presents a positive estimation of Bernard's—and Dante's—eloquence which celebrates its power. It is the attempt to say things at all that matters: Dante knows that 'imperfection is inherent in the human condition yet it does not make life unliveable or words unsayable', and it is this that Botterill thinks Dante 'rejoices in'. Through a mouthpiece like Bernard, Dante can 'come infinitesimally close to the plenitude of meaning, beauty, and referential power that, in the last analysis, is reserved for the Word that is God'.²¹ Such a reading leaves

²¹ Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, pp. 251-252.

room for an unequivocal acceptance of the apophatic nature of language, but sees great value in it all the same.

2.2 Montemaggi/Gregory

How better to understand the capacity of human language and intellectual endeavour in relation to theology and its practice is, ultimately, what the figure of Gregory can teach, according to Vittorio Montemaggi, in his essay 'Dante and Gregory the Great'.²² In this study Montemaggi invites us to reappraise the figure of Gregory and his significance in Dante's works, as he believes that a misperception has arisen over Gregory's presence in the *Commedia* and its influence on Dante's thinking. Within his essay Montemaggi focuses on the few appearances of Gregory in the *Commedia* and on the mention of him in the letter to the Italian cardinals, providing a close reading of these episodes which reveals a new way to make sense of Dante's understanding of Gregory. Montemaggi generously concludes the essay by offering ways in which this particular reading of Gregory might bear fruit in future research, both in what it means for scholars reading the *Commedia*, but also for those thinking about Dante's connection with

²² V. Montemaggi, 'Dante and Gregory the Great' in Honess and Treherne (eds), *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, I, 209-262. Montemaggi draws attention to the extremely sparse literature on Dante and Gregory. His essay builds on the work of his doctoral dissertation, "'Nulla vedere e amor mi costrinse': On Reading Dante's *Commedia* as a theological poem' (Cambridge, 2006). Three other works have Dante and Gregory as their specific focus: a very short work by Agostino Bartolini, 'S. Gregorio e Dante' in *Giornale arcadico di scienze lettere ed arti*, 5:1 (1904), 227-29; Simonetta Saffiotti's entry in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, 'Gregorio I', III, 282-83; and Nancy J. Vickers, 'Seeing Is Believing: Gregory, Trajan, and Dante's Art', *Dante Studies*, 101 (1983), 67-85. For a more general literature on Gregory, his legacy and theology which connects with themes in this study, see: G. R. Evans, *Getting it Wrong: The Medieval Epistemology of Error* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); G. R. Evans (ed.), *The Medieval Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); McGinn, *The Presence of God*, vol. I; J. Moorhead, *Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005); V. Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's 'Commedia' as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Turner, *Eros and Allegory*.

historical figures, their works, influence and authority, and the aims of theological discourse more generally.

The fact that there are only three brief, and sometimes indirect, mentions of Gregory in the *Commedia* might be good grounds for supposing that Dante was more interested in other theological and ecclesiastical authorities.

Indeed, Montemaggi asks whether the lack of prominence in the *Commedia* of such an important figure of medieval Christian history does not warrant the relative lack of scholarship in this area. His answer, an emphatic no, comes with a helpful summary of the literature of Dante's portrayal of Gregory, including the interpretations of Gregory's famous smile which the scholarship contains. He also outlines some of the major critical works on Gregory's own theological corpus, which might provide the literary scholar with new clues in how better to conceive of Gregory through Dante, and vice versa.

The core of the essay is split into two parts: the first concerning the connection between the significance in the *Commedia* of the Thrones and their relation to love and justice, and the second, Dante's conception of prayer and humility. Gregory's connection with such large themes of theological import, Montemaggi says, shows us that 'to think seriously about [...] Gregory is to engage with some of the most important questions concerning Dante's theology'.²³ A theme which arises throughout, connected in fundamental ways to both the Thrones, love and justice, and to prayer and humility, is the particularity of individual human beings. This Montemaggi illustrates in relation to the notion of human error, a theme to which I return in greater depth in Chapter III.

Montemaggi begins by setting out the ways in which Gregory appears in the *Commedia*, both implicitly and explicitly, the first of these in reference to

²³ Montemaggi, 'Dante and Gregory', p.211.

the debate—or confusion—over which heaven the angelic Thrones govern. For Montemaggi, the pilgrim’s journey through the Heaven of Venus contains important allusions to Gregory, from start to finish. Charles Martel describes the sphere and the angelic order that governs it, quoting Dante’s own words from the *Convivio* at the pilgrim. The actual line taken does not describe the Principalities, to which Charles Martel refers, but the Thrones, which Dante in his earlier work had claimed governed the Heaven of Venus. Thus the poet has Charles correct what Dante must have thought was his own mistake, albeit in a rather underhand (or perhaps, satirical) way; one which does not draw attention to this alternative view. The change adopts the order found in the Pseudo-Denys and leaves behind Gregory’s hierarchy.²⁴

Montemaggi sees further implicit reference to Gregory later on in the Heaven of Venus in *Paradiso IX*, during Folco’s speech. It contains a description of the souls laughing in light of the Love that has saved them from the sins that they have repented. This foreshadows, Montemaggi claims, Gregory’s smile at his own shortcomings later in the *cantica*. This may well be right, but to be a ‘foreshadowing’ Folco and Gregory must be responding with joy to the same object: the Love which in its perfection resolves both sin and human error. Cunizza, too, is joyful at being saved from the sin that caused her fate, in lines 34-36. It is useful to think of all three of these individual responses as connected, and in some sense echoing each other, but Montemaggi offers no distinction—or separation—between sin and intellectual error here. Viewed from the perspective of the limited human being, as opposed to the omnipotent and perfect God, this may not be a problem *per se*, but some fruitful work might be done to probe more deeply Dante’s characterisation of the difference between sin and

²⁴ For a discussion of Beatrice’s intersection with this error see, A. Cornish, *Reading Dante’s Stars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 117.

error.²⁵ Such a study would, of course, need to take into consideration Dante's use of the phrase 'grande errore' which Beatrice uses to describe original sin at *Paradiso* VII, 29.

Where Montemaggi's discussion of error and Gregory develops most convincingly and has real impact on how we should think about Dante's theology, is where he shows how error is no obstacle in reaching God. In fact, error can take on a real theological significance as we understand that it is not in philosophical propositions or treatises that truth is found, but 'in, through, and as love that the mystery of our relationship with truth proceeds'.²⁶ So the theologians in the Heaven of the Sun are in harmony with each other, in fact can dance, even though their respective theologies might have been in tension with each other on Earth. And Dante humbles himself, just as Gregory is humbled at his own error, in questioning Peter Damian in the Heaven of Saturn, an encounter which, for Montemaggi, is captured within one of the most important *terzine* in the *Commedia*, *Paradiso* XXI, 103-5:

Sì mi prescrisser le parole sue
ch'io lasciai la quistione e mi ritrassi
a dimandarla umilmente chi fue.

This seemingly backward step of the pilgrim's, from his lofty curiosity about the whys and wherefores of the structure of Heaven, to the rather more mundane, face-to-face encounter with another human being, demonstrates that recognising and responding to the particularity of individuals, even here in the heaven of contemplation, should be 'placed at the core of theological reflection'. The theme of particularity is developed

²⁵ See also T. Barolini on 'non-false' errors in Chapter 7 of *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) pp.143-165.

²⁶ Montemaggi, 'Dante and Gregory', p. 228.

further, to beautiful effect, in Montemaggi's discussion of Gregory's prayer for Trajan.

The legend of the prayer for the soul of the emperor—Gregory's apparent response to seeing Trajan depicted in sculpture (or, perhaps, in marble relief in Trajan's column), helping a widow—is referred to by Dante in *Purgatorio* X, 70-96, the terrace of Pride. In these lines, Trajan is again portrayed in marble, albeit animated and seemingly talking, and is celebrated here as an example of humility. At this point, Montemaggi draws our attention back to the letter to the cardinals, where the leaders of the church are berated for abandoning the works of the Church Fathers, including Gregory:

Iacet Gregorius tuus in telis aranearum; iacet Ambrosius in neglectis clericorum latibulis; iacet Augustinus abiectus, Dionysius, Damascenus et Beda; et nescio quod 'Speculum', Innocentium, et Ostiensem declamant. Cur non? Illi Deum querebant, ut finem et optimum; isti census et beneficia consecuntur.²⁷

Epistola XI, 16.

The cardinals' actual pride and Dante's perceived pride are themes of the letter. Further, the work which the cardinals have supposedly left to languish in the cobwebs, Gregory's *Moralia in Iob*, itself ends with Gregory's concern that he appear proud in writing a book which will win him praise. And Dante does indeed praise Gregory in the *Commedia*, not for his celebrated theological treatise, but for the 'great victory' that he wins for Trajan's soul. The compassion, love and hope which Gregory has for Trajan

²⁷ 'Your beloved Gregory languishes among the cobwebs; Ambrose lies neglected by the clergy in some forgotten corner, along with Augustine, Dionysius, John Damascene, and Bede. Instead they trumpet some *Speculum* or other, and the works of Innocent, and the man from Ostia. And this is only to be expected, for the former sought God as their goal and supreme good, whereas the latter only pursue wealth and favours.' *Four Political Letters*, trans. by C. E. Honess (London: MHRA, 2007), pp. 92-93.

is enough for the pagan to be saved. The poet tells us that humans cannot explain the mysteries of salvation, or the divine will which sanctions it, so that all we are left with, as Montemaggi cogently points out, is 'the possibility of telling and reflecting on the stories of salvation of individual human beings'.²⁸ Thus, although we may not understand how it is that Trajan could be saved, we can reflect on the particularity of the story, and on the lives of the individuals themselves, in order to reach a clearer understanding of our own peculiarly human relation to Truth. The pilgrim does not understand why Peter Damian should meet him in the Heaven of Saturn. Here his vulnerability to error and pride is pointed out, but he is able to reorient himself, through his error, back to the particular individual he is now encountering.

Montemaggi's overarching argument, then, is that for Dante, vulnerability can be a route to Truth; errors may be constitutive of theological understanding; the unknowability of the divine is due to humans as creatures, particular and individual, dependent on God and yet able to participate in God through this dependency and not without it. The upshot of Montemaggi's argument has real repercussions for my thesis, building as it will on the concept of particularity and personhood, not just in relation to Gregory and the theological importance of him for Dante, but to Augustine, Aquinas, Bernard and Beatrice, and in developing an argument which will see the theologians in the light of Dante's text and in the light of their historical contexts and presence in Florence (which was not part of this, Montemaggi's introductory essay). My engagement with the theologians in the *Commedia* will enrich our understanding of how and why Dante chooses to

²⁸ Montemaggi, 'Dante and Gregory', p. 242.

[...] craft theology in the form of a narrative poem in which progress towards God is made primarily not through abstract argumentation but through the concrete interaction of human persons.²⁹

2.3 Lombardi/Augustine

Elena Lombardi pays some attention to the historical context in which Dante would have encountered St. Augustine, in her essay, 'Augustine and Dante', but, like Montemaggi, focuses primarily on the rhetorical modes and theological themes that they share.³⁰ The context that she delimits is one of the 'Middle Ages' and, as such, does not restrict her purview to

²⁹ Montemaggi, 'Dante and Gregory', p. 242.

³⁰ For other studies which engage with the way Dante and Augustine intersect, see: E. Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge, 1958); T. Barolini, 'Autocitation and Autobiography' in *Dante: The Critical Complex*, ed. by R. H. Lansing, 8 vols (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2003), I, 217-54; P. Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); A. Dunlop and L. Bourdua, (eds), *Art and the Augustinian Order in Early Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Ashgate, 2007); M.W. Ferguson, 'Saint Augustine's Region of Unlikeness: The Crossing of Exile and Language', *The Georgia Review*, 29, no. 4 (Winter 1975), 842-65; J. Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1986); *In Dante's Wake: Reading from Medieval to Modern in the Augustinian Tradition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Gragnolati, Kay, Lombardi, and Southerden (eds), *Desire in Dante*; W. Harmless, ed., *Augustine in His Own Words* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010); P.S. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); 'Divide and Conquer: Augustine in the Divine Comedy', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 106 (1991), 471-82; Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves; The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, the Modistae, Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); S. Marchesi, *Dante and Augustine: Linguistics, Poetics, Hermeneutics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); F. X. Newman, 'St. Augustine's Three Visions and the Structure of the 'Commedia'', *MLN*, 82 (1967), 56-78; M.C. Nussbaum, 'Augustine and Dante on the Ascent of Love', in G. B. Matthews, ed., *The Augustinian Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 61-90; S. J. Paolini, *Confessions of Sin and Love in the Middle Ages: Dante's 'Commedia' and St. Augustine's 'Confessions'* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982); J.C. Schnaubelt, and F. Van Fleteren, *Augustine in Iconography History and Legend* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003); C. Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion: a Guide to the Argument of 'Confessions' I-IX* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990); J. Took, 'Dante and the Confessions of Augustine', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 8 (1990), 360-82; G. Wills, *Augustine's 'Confessions'* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Italy, or to the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Gregory and Bernard are key figures in understanding how Augustine's mysticism took hold in the Middle Ages; Bonaventure is central in presenting Augustinianism in a Franciscan context through his interpretation of Augustine's works. The theological dialogue between Franciscan and Dominican orders, between Augustinianism and Aristotelianism/Thomism is, according to Lombardi, 'a continuous attempt at reconciliation, a mutual exchange which permanently modifies both doctrines'.³¹

These broad brushstrokes are helpful in framing Augustine's huge influence on medieval Europe and the developments in theology to which his works gave rise. Lombardi gives a useful account of the changing influence of Augustine from the early to the later Middle Ages, from a decontextualised *auctor* to an interpreter of scripture, as the Augustinian order helped to recover more of his corpus. Indeed, by the time he is writing, Dante's appeals to Augustine as an authority to highlight the weaknesses in others' thinking are intended to persuade and to cajole. In the *Convivio* and in the *Monarchia*, Augustine is mentioned on each occasion almost in the same breath as Aristotle, confirming his status as *auctor*. In the letter to the Italian cardinals, as we saw in Montemaggi's essay with Gregory, Augustine is chosen as a named authority to which the Church should take heed, and yet his works, Dante tells us, gather dust in the libraries.³² In the letter to Cangrande,³³ Dante challenges the naysayers who doubt the 'truth' found in the *Commedia*, 'legant Bernardum in libro *De Consideratione*, legant Augustinum in libro *De Quantitate Anime*'.³⁴ It is

³¹ Lombardi, 'Augustine and Dante' p. 177.

³² *Epistola* XI, 16.

³³ There has been, of course, lengthy debate about the authorship of the Letter to Cangrande. The prevailing view in the current scholarship, which I follow here, suggests that it is indeed authentic.

³⁴ *Epistola* XIII, 80. '[...] let them read Bernard in his book *On Consideration*; let them read Augustine in his book *On the Capacity of the Soul*.' Dantis Alagherii Epistolae: *The Letters of Dante*, ed. by Paget J. Toynbee, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

notable that Dante demands that the texts themselves are read, that Augustine's authority (and Bernard's) comes here specifically from his written corpus, rather than, for example, knowledge of his life, actions, or ideas (although, as I discuss at length in Chapter III, the *Confessions* presents a particularly personal written articulation of a life).

Of the corpus itself, Lombardi suggests that *De civitate Dei*, *De doctrina christiana* and the *Confessions* had the longest-lasting impact on the Middle Ages. *De civitate Dei* provided a way to make sense of the unfolding of time and of providential history, through the images of exile, grace and return. *De doctrina christiana* inaugurates the hugely pervasive method of fourfold scriptural interpretation, which would leave an indelible mark on medieval exegesis. And the *Confessions* just about 'created' the genre of autobiography—which would be an influence on the early 'self-explorations' of Guibert of Nogent and Aelread of Rievaulx—and established a new model of conversion which would, unlike Paul's Damascene moment, unfold over time.

The major Augustinian themes which impact on Dante's thinking are, for Lombardi, those of providential history; rhetoric and interpretation; love, language, and desire.³⁵ The first, of course, with complex repercussions for Dante's *Commedia*, and the vision contained therein, is Augustine's impassioned response to the sack of Rome, and the blame that the Christian church received for its part in its downfall. It led him, in *De civitate Dei*, to lay out how the history of two cities, one earthly and one heavenly, could make sense *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, under the purview of providential history, a history which is rescued from meaninglessness by the Incarnation, and which culminates in the resurrection of Christian souls at the Last Judgment, creating the city of God in paradise. Dante's and

³⁵ For a fuller account of desire and language in Augustine and Dante, see Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire*.

Augustine's ideas of Rome, and its pagan past—including its celebrated poets—are markedly different, of course. On Augustine's account, although he quotes him throughout *De civitate Dei*, and refers to his love for the poet in his youth in the *Confessions*, Virgil is part of the pagan culture which should be vilified: Virgil's own vision of the founding of Rome, and its future glory, is further at odds with Augustine's history.

Alongside the writing of history comes its interpretation, inevitably bound up, for Augustine, with Biblical interpretation and exegesis. Lombardi joins the majority view, in her comment on *De doctrina Christiana*, that 'Augustine's theory of signs and things, his theory of styles, and his principles of exegesis are crucial to understand medieval culture and literature'.³⁶ The *Convivio* is where Lombardi sees Dante, when he becomes his own interpreter in the commentaries on his poetry, begin to take on the rhetorical modes of a narrator who 'expounds his own experience', as Augustine had done nine centuries before him, in the *Confessions*.³⁷ John Freccero has likened Dante's dark wood with Augustine's 'region of unlikeness': the structure of these conversions played out and narrated in the same way.³⁸

Augustine's skill as a professional rhetorician is put to use most powerfully in the *Confessions* and it retains its power because we recognise in it a person with an internal life that resembles our own. It is tempting to think that the presentation of this particular self must be timeless, equally powerful for any who encounter it in any time. But the *Confessions* may well have resonated for Dante in subtly different ways, conditioned by and drawing upon sources to which we no longer have immediate access. In

³⁶ Lombardi, 'Augustine and Dante' p. 182.

³⁷ Lombardi, 'Augustine and Dante', p. 187.

³⁸ See especially, Freccero, *Poetics of Conversion*; Took, 'Dante and the *Confessions*'.

late-medieval Italy, the tools and approaches for deciphering life-writing and autobiography were necessarily different from our own and would, inevitably, have yielded different understandings. So, although Lombardi is right that on a structural level, Dante's writing about his own putative journey to God draws heavily on the 'narrator who expounds his own experience' in Augustine, yet there is more fruitful work to be done on how this particular Augustine of the *Confessions* is received and understood in Dante's late Duecento Florence. Lombardi offers no account of the person of Augustine found in this intensely personal work, or what such an intimate portrait of conversion might have had on Dante and his own work.

Lombardi's essay is at its most powerful when she reads Dante's language in the *Commedia* in an Augustinian mode, taking her cue from *De doctrina christiana*, where Augustine claims that human language and signs had been moving towards obscurity until Christ intervened in their history. Christ and the apostles present the sacraments as signs that are both simple and holy when practiced, signifying something else of great magnitude, which a person of 'servile weakness' would misinterpret. For Lombardi, the understanding for the pilgrim and for us as readers, 'that signs stand for something else [...] mysterious [...] is the beginning of the redemption of language and language users'.³⁹ Christ as the redeemer of signs means that, by the time the pilgrim reaches Paradise, meaning is no longer 'exiled' from language, but becomes stable and communication is 'excessively easy'.⁴⁰

As for the explicit appearance of Augustine in the works of Dante, there are rather more examples than Montemaggi found of Gregory: ten altogether in the *Convivio*, *Monarchia* and the *Epistles*, where he is appealed to as an

³⁹ Lombardi, 'Augustine and Dante', p. 200.

⁴⁰ Lombardi, 'Augustine and Dante', p. 205.

authority, rather than as a contemplative or mystic. Lombardi notes the significant absence of Augustine from *Paradiso* X and XII, in the Heaven of the Sun, where the other theologians, not all of them *auctores*, are found. This absence seems almost pointed: dancing around Dante are the giants of Christian theology, and yet Augustine is not there, indeed his naming at *Par. X*, 120 draws attention to the fact that he is missing. In *Paradiso* XXXII, Augustine is back where we expect him, in the garland of the rose, alongside the leaders of holy orders. He is named, as he was in *Convivio* IV, in amongst a list of authorities, but has no active role in the narrative action. This brief mention of Augustine in the Empyrean where he faces Sarah confirms him, Lombardi suggests, as an orthodox figure in Dante's conception. But these few explicit mentions of Augustine are, for Lombardi, 'disconcerting, even disappointing'.⁴¹ My reading of Augustine in the *Commedia* acknowledges this deliberate omission of the person of Augustine in the fiction, but suggests that the narratorial structure that the *Confessions* provides, in which the various persons of author, narrator and character stand in relation to each other, is one which is fundamental for Dante.

2.4 Gilson/Aquinas

Simon Gilson, in his essay, 'Dante and Christian Aristotelianism', traces the ways in which Aquinas' Aristotelianism has been aligned with Dante's theology, since the earliest commentary tradition to the present day, and asks how this tendency to assimilate the two has affected our reading of theology and poetry in Dante's works.⁴² Gilson develops a careful criticism

⁴¹ Lombardi, 'Augustine and Dante', p. 208.

⁴² S. Gilson, 'Christian Aristotelianism' in Honess and Treherne (eds), *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, I, 65-110. For other works on Aquinas, Dante, and themes which connect them in this study, see: Z.G. Barański and L. Pertile, ed., *Dante in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); B. C. Bazàn et al., *Les Questions disputées et les questions quodlibétiques dans les facultés de théologie, de droit et de médecine* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1985); R.B. Begley and J.W. Koterski, ed., *Medieval Education* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); P. Boyde, *Human Vices and Human Worth in Dante's 'Comedy'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000);

of commentators who suggest Dante offers a critique of theology in oppositional terms—that is, positing one school of thought against another—and focuses instead on the nuance that can be read in Dante’s treatment of supposedly competing theories. This nuance, thinks Gilson, can only be understood if we ask ourselves about the ways in which thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato were mediated through centuries of other commentators, translations and criticism. Such an approach will leave behind easy and over-simple categorisations of the way in which Dante would have encountered his philosophical and theological learning,

K. Foster, *The Two Dantes: And Other Studies* (Los Angeles, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1977); M. Gindhart and U. Kundert, (ed.), *Disputatio 1200–1800. Form, Funktion und Wirkung eines Leitmediums universitärer Wissenskultur* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2010); M. Gagnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2005); R. Jacoff “‘Our Bodies, Our Selves’: The Body in the *Commedia*”, in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and its Afterlife*, ed. by Stewart and Cornish (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2000) pp. 119–37; G. Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); *Dante’s Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); ‘The Heaven of the Sun: Dante between Aquinas and Bonaventure’, in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. by Barolini and Storey, pp. 152–68; C. Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); G. Palémon, *La littérature quodlibétique de 1260 à 1320*, 2 vols (Le Saulchoir, Kain: Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques, 1925 and Paris: Vrin, 1935); E. Panella, ‘Nuova cronologia remigiana’, *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, 40 (1990), 145–311 (pp. 180–82); “‘Ne le scuole de li religiosi e a le disputazioni de li filosofanti” (Dante Alighieri). *Lectio, disputatio, predicatio*’, in *Dal convento alla città. Filosofia e teologia in Francesco da Prato O.P. (XIV secolo)* ed. by F. Amerini (Florence: Zella, 2008), pp. 115–31; C. Ryan, ‘The Theology of Dante’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by R. Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 136–52; *Dante and Aquinas: A Study of Nature and Grace in the Comedy* (London: Ubiquity Press, 2013); C. Schabel, ed., *Theological Quodlibeta in the Middle Ages. The Thirteenth Century* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006); *Theological Quodlibeta in the Middle Ages. The Fourteenth Century* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007); J. Scott, ‘The Unfinished Convivio as a Pathway to the Comedy’, *Dante Studies*, 113 (1995), 31–56; *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); D. Turner, ‘How to do things with words: poetry as sacrament in Dante’s *Commedia*’ in *Dante’s ‘Commedia’: Theology as Poetry*, ed. by V. Montemaggi and M. Treherne, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 286–305; *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); C. Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); O. Weijers, *La ‘disputatio’ dans les Facultés des arts au moyen âge* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002).

and will provide a snapshot of the perspective which he must necessarily have had, given the time in which he was working. Gilson's analysis gives us a clearer idea of how Dante's Aristotle would have been very different from our own: necessarily partial; appropriated and recast by thinkers with whom we are not now familiar; and perhaps, most importantly, not actually considered as 'a current of thought to be defined in conflict with other currents'.⁴³

Gilson begins his study by giving us a concrete example of how modes of interpretation will alter with time and with intellectual fashion. So, for example, the earliest commentators on the *Commedia* suggest that Aquinas was Dante's principal theological authority, and saw the Dominican's influence in many parts of the poem. As scholasticism waned in popularity in to the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so too did the tendency to view Dante as a loyal disciple of Thomas, or, if he was still judged to be Thomist in his thinking, then this was cause for disapprobation rather than celebration. Reminding ourselves that we are context-bound interpreters is a useful lesson to learn. But as I suggest below, whether one can slip loose the chains of cultural determination is another matter. Gilson's reading of the last twenty years of scholarship on Dante's Thomism, conceived more widely as a Christian Aristotelianism, and wider still as an Aristotelianism richly endowed with the platonising tendencies of the Pseudo-Denys, shows us a more complicated picture. It is a Dante clearly heavily influenced by 'scholastic commonplaces' (these not necessarily direct borrowings from Aquinas), but one who also engaged with monastic theology, rich in Biblical commentary, especially the commentaries on the Song of Songs, and with the works of affective and non-rationalist thinkers.

⁴³ Gilson, 'Christian Aristotelianism', p. 104.

But there are gaps in the scholarship which Gilson thinks could be fruitfully filled: a closer attention to the institutional contexts and curricula of the two Florentine *studia* and the Bolognese *studium*, including a wider appreciation of the works of those who were teaching at the time and who have been largely forgotten and even, most obviously, further consideration of some of the more 'minor' theologians of the Heaven of the Sun who get overshadowed by their more famous counterparts. And all these to be read, for Gilson, with an acute eye on Dante's synthesising and creative force: one which marries the rigours and forms of scholasticism with the poetry of affective theology; which joins Aristotle's theory of desire, through Virgil, with the doctrine of divine love, as in *Purgatorio* XVIII; and which brings the contemporary poets of his day and recent past into dialogue with centuries of philosophical and theological discourse.

2.5 Psaki/Beatrice

The literature on the figure of Beatrice in the *Commedia* shows how the portrayal of an individual woman can be pressed into the service of a host of functions: literal, symbolic and allegorical.⁴⁴ From the earliest

⁴⁴ The literature on Beatrice is vast, of course, but for discussions which are relevant to the argument that I develop in this thesis, see: Z. G. Barański, 'The "New Life" of "Comedy": The *Commedia* and the *Vita nova*', in *Dante: The Critical Complex*, 8 vols, ed. by R. H. Lansing (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2003) I, 279-307; T. Barolini, 'Beyond (Courtly) Dualism: Thinking about Gender in Dante's Lyrics' in *Dante for the New Millennium; Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); C. Bologna, *Il ritorno di Beatrice: simmetrie dantesche fra Vita nova, 'petrose' e Commedia* (Roma: Salerno, 1998); Brownlee, 'Language and Desire'; A. Cornish, 'A Lady Asks: The Gender of Vulgarization in Late Medieval Italy', *PMLA*, 115.2 (2000), 166-80; P. Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of the Medieval Love-Lyric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966); J. M. Ferrante, *Woman As Image in Medieval Literature: From the Twelfth Century to Dante* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975); *Dante's Beatrice: Priest of an Androgynous God* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992); Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife; 'Paradiso XIV e il desiderio del corpo'*, *Studi danteschi*, 78 (2013), 1-25; 'Nostalgia in Heaven: Embraces, Affection and Identity in the *Commedia*', in *Dante and the Human Body*, ed. by Barnes and Petrie (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 117-37; R.P. Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); P.S. Hawkins, 'Dido, Beatrice, and the Signs of Ancient Love', in *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante's Commedia*, ed. by Jacoff and Schnapp, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University

commentaries, her rendering in the *Commedia* has variously been equated with Love, Grace, Theology, Christ, the Church and Wisdom, amongst others. And yet, crucially, her appearance remains in the poem the historical individual—the uneducated, Florentine woman—whom Boccaccio tells us was called Beatrice Portinari. This is a point to which I shall return throughout this thesis, and in Chapter IV particularly: how it is and why, that Dante should endow this portrait of a real woman with the kind of attributes one might have expected to be better embodied in other, celebrated and authoritative persons.

In this introductory section, though, I start by considering F. Regina Psaki's essay, 'The Sexual Body in Dante's Celestial Paradise' as an entry point for considering how Beatrice and Dante-*personaggio's* relationship provides a far from straightforward way of understanding the truths that are available

Press, 1991), pp. 113–30; O. Holmes, 'Dante's Two Beloveds: Ethics as Erotic Choice', *Annali d'italianistica*, 19 (2001), 25–50; *Dante's Two Beloveds: Ethics and Erotics in the 'Divine Comedy'* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008); A. A. Iannucci, 'Beatrice in Limbo: A Metaphoric Harrowing of Hell', in Lansing (ed) *Dante: The Critical Complex* ed. by R. H. Lansing, I, 255-77; Jacoff, "'Our Bodies, Our Selves'"; 'The Tears of Beatrice: Inferno II', *Dante Studies*, 100 (1982), 1–12; 'Transgression and Transcendence: Figures of female desire in Dante's *Commedia*', *Romanic Review* 79 (1988), 129-42; V. Kirkham, 'A Canon of Women in Dante's *Commedia*', *Annali d'italianistica*, 7 (1989), 16-41; Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves*; Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's 'Commedia' as Theology*; Pertile, 'A Desire of Paradise and a Paradise of Desire'; *La puttana e il gigante*; 'Does the *Stilnovo* Go to Heaven?', in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. by Barolini and Storey, pp. 104–14; *La punta del disio*; R. F. Psaki, 'Dante's Redeemed Eroticism', *Lectura Dantis*, 18–19 (Spring–Fall 1996), 12–19; 'Love for Beatrice: Transcending Contradiction in the *Paradiso*', in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. by Barolini and Storey, pp. 115–30; 'The Sexual Body in Dante's Celestial Paradise', in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. by J. S. Emerson (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), pp. 47-61; G. Raffa, *Divine Dialectic: Dante's Incarnational Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); J. T. Schnapp, 'Dante's Sexual Solecisms: Gender and Genre in the *Commedia*', in *The New Medievalism*, ed. by Brownlee, Brownlee, Nichols, *The New Medievalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1991), pp. 201–25; M. Shapiro, *Woman Earthly and Divine in The 'Comedy' of Dante* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1975); C.S. Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1977); D. E. Stewart, *The Arrow of Love: Optics, Gender, and Subjectivity in Medieval Love Poetry* (Lewisbury: Bucknell University Press, 2003); C. Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); C. Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1943).

in Heaven. Psaki insists that we should resist the tendency to *erase* the erotic, the sexual, from the relationship as it is represented, that erotic love is neither replaced by, nor metamorphosed into, divine love. Her argument is that what occurs in the narrative between Dante and Beatrice after Purgatory XXVII is ‘emphatically [...] not [...] a purification or transformation of desire’.⁴⁵

It is not hard to understand why critics have been drawn to allegorise the figure of Beatrice almost to the point of her annihilation as a person: the text certainly invites readings of her character as being *anything other than herself*, because—they could cry—what else could Beatrice be, beyond the passive, silent figure, like the one in the *Vita nova*, a cipher that only gives up something of the poet, and nothing of herself, a figure that adumbrates the limitations of a woman’s power over her own life and its meaning within the medieval period? Indeed, the type of exegesis that Bernard of Clairvaux produced in his *Sermones super Cantica canticorum* exerts a pull on us to read an active female figure in medieval texts as though it is something else entirely: the Bride of the Song becomes both more and less than just a woman, a lover: she is the Church, and as such her desire for her beloved is chaste, because it is the desire to kiss the mouth of God.⁴⁶

Beatrice’s back-story as Dante’s beloved, the desire for her that powers Dante-*personaggio*’s journey, and the desire for *his* salvation that powered Beatrice’s intervention and which gave Virgil his commission, shows us that the author of the *Commedia* considers that love for an individual—and erotic love at that—has the capacity to reveal truths about our place in God’s universal order. The desire that functions as the narrative driving force of the poem begins as fully human and ends in the absolute peace of a vision of God which harmonises all desire and will. Psaki sees in the erotic

⁴⁵ Psaki, ‘The Sexual Body’, p. 48.

⁴⁶ I return to Bernard’s preoccupation with the love and desire found within the Song in Chapters II and IV.

desire of Dante for Beatrice a love that remains sexualised, even in Heaven; her 'heterodox' view, as she calls it, fixes our focus on the lover-beloved relationship and takes seriously the resurrection of the body and all that that entails in Heaven. This will be an important element in my discussion of Beatrice, too, and indeed, the other theologians in this study, particularly Augustine and Gregory. As Psaki says:

[T]he blessed remain individuals forever, not blending their identities into a kind of cosmic amoeba, their memories, knowledge, will and desire, though resolved and harmonized in the divine, can remain specific and unique, with their individual memories and loves.⁴⁷

For Psaki, 'sex can inhabit the sacred' and as such she

cannot conclude that for Dante erotic love is desexualized, purged of the corporeal, superseded by generalized and purely mental communion. The individual matters; the relationship with Beatrice powers the entire journey; and Dante insists too heavily on the return of the body for his experience of her to remain aphysical.⁴⁸

And yet, as I shall explore in Chapter IV, where in the *Commedia* there seems to be some kind of resolution about the nature of erotic love specifically, in the Earthly Paradise, when the whole poem seems to have been leading up to this point of retrieval, the ground shifts and we are told by the theological virtues that Dante-*personaggio*, in fact, looks at his beloved 'troppo fiso' (*Purgatorio* XXXII, 9). According to Hollander, here, 'Dante is caught up in carnal appreciation of a spiritual entity'.⁴⁹ So the erotic love that powers his journey to God, that provides the conditions under which he is able to appreciate Beatrice as a manifestation of God's truth and perfection, still retains the power to distort—in ways as old as time—that truth. It is a perplexing and precarious situation.

⁴⁷ Psaki, 'The Sexual Body', p. 56.

⁴⁸ Psaki, 'The Sexual Body', p. 58.

⁴⁹ See Hollander's commentary on this canto:
<http://dante.dartmouth.edu/commentaries.php>

The impetus to view the character of Beatrice as something other than herself, as a *something* that would make her powerful and authoritative enough to effect the pilgrim's journey and ultimate destination, is unsurprising. And it is certainly not wrong-headed to read Beatrice under these different aspects—Church, Grace, Wisdom, and so on—as many critics have already done: I am not advocating a one-dimensional view of her function in the poem. My concern is that the person of Beatrice is reinstated such that we can understand Dante's way of thinking about theology—his way of understanding the truths contained within the Bible—as being available through the personal relationships that we have on Earth; that something of God can be understood in loving Creation itself, demonstrated in the love of our particular, temporal, limited selves. Psaki's challenge to 'orthodox' Dante scholars is to collapse the 'decontamination zone between the erotic vocabulary of salvation and erotic vocabulary period', and in doing so break apart a binary opposition which does not help us 'into the illogical verities of Christian doctrine'.⁵⁰

3. Methodology

As I hope has been made clear, the five pieces of work which I reviewed above, demonstrate that the relationship between Dante and theology, and between Dante and specific, named theologians, can be approached in very different ways. My study will be picking out features of each of these approaches, but will be going beyond them too, as the fundamental question at the heart of this project focuses on a concept—that of personhood and its relationship with theological practice—which none of the scholars took to be their primary target. Montemaggi, as I indicated, comes closest to this intention, but his study remains partial with its text-based approach. In addition to the conceptual upshot of an inquiry into the nature of persons—which I tentatively introduce at the start of Chapter I—

⁵⁰ Psaki, 'The Sexual Body', p. 58.

my approach will also embed this theoretical engagement firmly in the historical context of Dante's early life.

It is a methodology, then, which examines closely, and takes seriously, the material and intellectual culture of a very specific time and place—Florence in the 1280s and 1290s—when we know, according to his own hand, that Dante attended the 'le scuole de li religiosi e a le disputazioni de li filosofanti' (*Convivio* II. xii. 7). And so the project is motivated by the thought that the *Commedia* will be better understood if we have a richer account of the precise time and place in which its author lived. Rather than reading the text itself as the *sine qua non* of how to understand a medieval, theological mind-set, our readings go in the other direction: contextual evidence, in an array of forms including but also going beyond the literary, will open up the poem to new interpretations of the theological questions that it raises and the way in which those questions are expressed. The aim is to avoid supposing any naïve causal connections between the existence in Florence, say, of a particular theological work, or image, or hymn, and its appearance in the *Commedia*. Instead, the drive will always be to ask how Dante's seemingly radical poetic experimentation and theological expression intersected with the cultural, social and intellectual life of which he was a part, and with which he was in dialogue.

On a practical level, this will involve returning to Florence itself in order to create a portrait of the city's life which was available to an educated young man like Dante. This portrait will take in the intellectual, social and political, religious and aesthetic texture of the time and place and will consider both 'high' and 'low' culture as equally enlightening. Inherent in the research will be the privileged position of the learned, written texts which have been preserved in the archives, and the visual and material culture which has survived in the fabric of the buildings and in the spaces of museum collections. Even so, it will be an attempt, in the new historicist

tradition, to create what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt call the 'life-world' of Dante.⁵¹ The intention will be to read this context in parallel with a close study of the text itself, and thus I will not assume an order of priority for interpreting the evidence on the page in light of the evidence in the archives: my working hypothesis will be that they will each illumine the other, and present perspectives for understanding medieval theology—Dante's and others'—which literary scholars of Dante may heretofore have missed.⁵²

The textual sources are mostly to be found in manuscripts now housed in the libraries of Florence, at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana and the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale. Nicolò Maldina and Anna Pegoretti have identified, via the surviving catalogues of the libraries of the convents of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce, the works which we know with some certainty were present in Florence during the period that I am considering. Their work builds upon and updates earlier analyses, particularly those of Charles T. Davis⁵³ and Gabriella Pomaro,⁵⁴ and provides a detailed account of the manuscripts held by the two *studia*—for my purposes, not only of the theologians themselves, but also those others who were influenced by them.

Further, the work of the wider project, *Dante and Late Medieval Florence*:

⁵¹ *Practicing New Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 12.

⁵² For a discussion on the opportunities that an historicist approach might provide in Dante studies, see T. Barolini, "'Only Historicize': History, Material Culture (Food, Clothes, Books), and the Future of Dante Studies", *Dante Studies*, 127 (2009), 37-54. For an interesting example of an historicist approach, see J. Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

⁵³ C.T. Davis, 'Education in Dante's Florence', *Speculum*, Vol. 40.3 (July 1965), 415-35; 'L'Istruzione a Firenze nel tempo di Dante', in *L'Italia di Dante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988), pp.135-66; 'The Florentine Studia and Dante's "Library"', in *The 'Divine Comedy' and the Encyclopedia of Arts and Sciences*, ed. by Giuseppe Di Scipio and Aldo Scaglione (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1988), pp. 339-66.

⁵⁴ G. Pomaro, 'Censimento dei manoscritti della Biblioteca di S. Maria Novella', *Memorie Domenicane*, N.S. 11 (1980), 325-470.

Theology in Poetry, Practice and Society, will be invaluable for my study because it enriches these sources in ways which would have been beyond the scope of this thesis alone. Maldina's research on the sermons preached in Florence, and the preachers themselves, provides another source of information about the perception of named theologians.⁵⁵ So too, will an investigation into the Dominican disputations, which Dante mentions in the *Convivio*, and of which we have some textual record from Santa Maria Novella. Pegoretti's analyses of individuals and the practices within the convents, will shed further light not only on which texts were present, but also in what form they were kept and catalogued by the mendicant orders.⁵⁶ My study can take advantage of such an analysis because the way in which manuscripts were handled or loaned by the libraries brings with it information about how particular theologians were perceived.

Another textual source, which supplied both visual representations of the theologians and information about the oral culture of the city, are the *laudari* once belonging to the confraternities in the city. An Augustinian *laudario* survives, for example, containing illuminations of both Augustine and Bernard (BNCF Banco Rari 18). The visual and material culture in the city, including paintings, frescoes and sculpture in the churches and the civic buildings of Florence will provide yet another perspective on the theologians in this study.

It is also clear that I need to account for the decision to focus on a narrow time period, the 1280s and 1290s, and place, the city of Florence. During this time we know that Dante, from his mid-teens to mid-thirties, was studying and writing in Florence, but of course, this was his early work: the *Vita nova* was completed by 1295. The first copies of *Inferno* were not in

⁵⁵ N. Maldina, *Dante, la predicazione e i generi della letteratura religiosa medievale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, forthcoming).

⁵⁶ See, for example, A. Pegoretti, 'Filosofanti', *Le tre corone*, 2 (2015), 11-70.

circulation until well after Dante was in exile, his geographical location harder to pin down, and his encounters with people and institutions becoming hazy for historians to see. Importantly, the decision to focus on a specific period and place necessitates a reconstruction of a context which brings together different discourses and practices: intersections which might not have been obvious, or have come to light at all, in an analysis of a broader geographical area and wider sweep of history.

There are deep methodological and theoretical issues going on in the background, here, some of which trade on assumptions which it would be useful to spell out in a little more detail. Such reflections are not, ultimately, going to undermine this study, but it will be useful to have some answer to those critics who suggest that a context-bound approach to reading Dante is wrong-headed. It is almost impossible to reconstruct the Florence of the last two decades of the thirteenth century without importing into it the conceptions of our own modernity. We may remain blind to what is in front of us in such a reconstruction: meanings which would have been available, if not obvious, to an individual living during those times, because they have been made inaccessible by our own conceptual and, in the philosopher Charles Taylor's words, inescapable frameworks.⁵⁷ That is a risk, but one worth taking, because such a reconstruction renders at least the possibility of new understandings—both of those times and of our own, of texts and of ideas, of persons and of ourselves. We may breathe the invigorating air of modernity and postmodernity, confident in the powers of our own critical interpretations, but that air is supplied to us by an iron lung of which we may be aware, but from which we are unable to escape. The critical acuity with which we ask what inevitable distortions impede our understandings of cultures past, in virtue of own predicament, does not in itself remove our potential blind spots.

⁵⁷ *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 3.

Another contemporary philosopher who has engaged with such questions, Hans-Georg Gadamer, understands this worry about subjectivism but counsels us that our historical situatedness, our inevitable hermeneutical position derived from the tradition in which we find ourselves, brings with it positive ways to engage with other, past traditions.⁵⁸ There is no need to view these dialogues as a clash or as a battle of competing world-views: our hermeneutical 'horizons', as Gadamer calls our particular historical situations, can engage with another, and that horizon can be understood in light of our own. In turn, our understanding of our own position will be changed as a result. The dialogic process need not have a definitive end, but can be characterised by ever-unfolding understanding.⁵⁹

So it is on the basis that meaning can arise from such an analysis that we proceed, trusting we are able to understand a tradition, its practices and its art in light of our own horizons. A historicising approach, which is what this project proposes, also 'carries the core hermeneutical presumption that one can occupy a position from which one can discover meanings that those who left traces of themselves could not have articulated'.⁶⁰ That is, we may well find new medieval meanings which resonate with us today, but we may also be able to provide meanings from our own perspective which were unavailable to the medieval culture which we are studying: these meanings I anticipate below, and they centre around the concept of personhood itself. That is, how modern accounts of personhood, taking in the sweep of intellectual history available to us now, but unavailable to Dante and his contemporaries, can shed light on 'persons' in the *Commedia*,

⁵⁸ H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

⁵⁹ For a discussion which connects Gadamer's position with a historicist approach to theology, and to the thought of Wilhelm Dilthey in particular, see S. Greeve Davaney, *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

⁶⁰ *Practicing New Historicism*, p. 8.

and on the person of the theologian in particular. These are two sides of the same coin: we will be able to uncover new meanings through a closer appreciation of the precise time and place from which that text arose, whether by better understanding the dialogues between the poet and his own cultural and intellectual milieu, or, the flip-side, by providing an interpretive framework for understanding or discovering that culture and the texts to which it gave rise, that is peculiarly our modern-day own.

To be clear, we are talking about reconstructions of a particular context, so as to render a fuller account of the 'life-world' of a particular poet, in order that *we* can better understand something that comes out of that life-world, in this case a particular text—and within it a vision of a life and its relation to God. In these reconstructions, we may attempt to build a city, or a church, read its books, feel its materiality, hear its sounds and see its visual arts, and occupy the position of its different inhabitants—whether high- or low-born, male or female, from the laity or clergy. We hope that this will reveal new things about that world of which the poet was a living, breathing part: someone who encountered those sights, sounds and people, those ideas and institutions every day.

But we are also talking about applying interpretations which discover new meanings about those lives—about the poet himself and the texts which he wrote, or about the man in the Florentine street, or about the theologians from farther back in history—which those individuals 'could not have articulated', using as I will a conceptual apparatus which is only available to us now, and unavailable to them. That seems to me two quite different modes of going about this project, even though they will be inextricably, and sometimes invisibly, intertwined.

4. Overview of the thesis

Chapter I introduces the concept of personhood, and in particular, the substantive features of personhood that Dante prioritises in his characterisations within the *Commedia*. These features, I suggest, are: names and naming; embodiment; memory; language; interpersonal relationships and the values and commitments which hold them together. I further consider how some twentieth-century conceptions of personhood might be useful when we consider Dante's text. Finally, I sketch the ways in which the four theologians of this study were 'present' in the Florence of the late Duecento, and how something of their personhoods might have been transmitted to Dante, via the visual, material, educational and religious cultures of the city.

In Chapter II, I consider the virtues of the characters of Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas as they appear in the poem, and ask how and why Dante represents them as he does. I explore how their characterisation either adopts or departs from the kind of personhood that is transmitted in the sources of the historical theologians that were available in Florence. Further, I sketch case studies of virtue and vice in the *Commedia* that might embody a peculiarly Bernardine sensibility. Lastly I consider the question of the primacy of the intellect over the will, and ask how Dante's depiction of Bernard and Aquinas illuminates Dante's own particular stance on this perennial question.

Chapter III has as its focus the figures of Augustine and Gregory. It considers how the nature of turning points and error play a crucial part in the conception of personhood, contained within either the historical theologians' oeuvre or the poem itself. I compare Augustine's narration of his own conversion with the architecture of Dante's poem, and consider how echoes of the Bishop of Hippo's subsequent mystical experience at Ostia can be read in the pilgrim's journey through the Earthly Paradise and

beyond. The role of memory for Augustine and for Dante, in constituting personhood, including beatified personhood, is also considered. The second part of the chapter considers how human vulnerability to error is embodied in the character of Gregory the Great. I end the chapter with a discussion of the positive role of error and its power to individuate particular persons, on the one hand, and on the other, to carve out the ways in which Dante's God must remain unknowable, and his theology apophatic.

Chapter IV, the last chapter, builds on the analysis of the theologians' qualities of Chapters II and III and compares them to the characterisation of Beatrice in the poem. I argue that of any character within the poem, it is Beatrice who fulfils the function of theologian most effectively because of, rather than in spite of, the role she plays in the author's biography. My analysis of the way in which the poet constructs her authority, which depends both on Beatrice being the locus and the originator of an erotic desire, and upon her theological discourse, brings into focus how it is that in Dante's poem the only way for the pilgrim to understand theology, to reach the face of God, is through the person-to-person relationship he has with his beloved. Only in and through love of a particular person can he understand the requirement upon him, as a creature of a Creator, to take up his proper place in God's universal order.

CHAPTER I

The Person of the Theologian

1. Personhood in the *Commedia*

The panoply of characters that Dante-*personaggio* meets on his journey in the afterlife already calls attention to the poet's considerable interest in individual stories. This much is obvious even as we ask what the representation of these individual characters reveals about the importance which Dante attaches to the concept of personhood itself. Personhood might be a tricky concept, no doubt meaning something different to Dante from how we understand it today. My reading of personhood in Dante is theoretically framed, to be sure, but it takes Gadamer's optimism about understanding the historic horizons of the past seriously, and is thus an attempt to capture and distil something about human beings which Dante presents in his work, even though the term may not have been one which he would have used. Thus I begin, below, with a brief look at some of the features of persons-in-general in the *Commedia*, as an entry point for looking at the person of the theologian more specifically.

As is well known, many of the individual persons found in the *Commedia*—those who take part in the narrative action of the poem, or speak with the pilgrim directly—are named individuals, even when they are relatively minor characters. At times we are left to work out who the characters are by description alone, but in many cases, this naming is performed by the character themselves. For example (and chosen with a certain degree of randomness), Ciaccio, the glutton who the pilgrim comes across in *Inferno* VI, refers to himself thus, at line 52: 'Voi cittadini mi chiamaste Ciaccio', possibly suggesting a porcine nickname; Sapia, the envious soul, at *Purgatorio* XIII, 109, says, 'Savia non fui, avvegna che Sapia fossi chiamata'; and, with one of the shortest narrated lives in the *Commedia*, Pia, at *Purgatorio* V, 133, says, 'Ricorditi di me, che son la Pia'; finally, Folco at

Paradiso IX, 94: 'Folco mi disse quella gente a cui fu noto il nome mio'. Naming, then, is important, and for the souls themselves it remains important, even in the afterlife. This is the first feature of personhood found in the *Commedia* which I want to suggest is deliberately foregrounded by Dante, and it is a theme to which I return throughout this study, but especially in the last chapter. Below, these four characters will further illustrate, through a very brief sketch, some other features of personhood through which Dante constructs his characters, and which I propose in the short philosophical discussion below, will provide a way of understanding the person of the theologian in a way that is capable of yielding a deeper understanding of theological truths themselves. But first, I return to persons-in general.

The characters in the *Commedia* are immaterial souls and, following the orthodox view, will not be reunited with their bodies until after the Last Judgement.¹ But, as we know, they are 'embodied' in a peculiar way throughout the poem and are obviously different from the living body of Dante-*personaggio*, to whom some respond with anger or confusion — as at *Purgatorio* V. 25-34, when the singing shades are almost stunned to silence, and yet this difference is not spelled out until Statius explains the nature of aerial bodies in *Purgatorio* XXV. So when we meet Ciacco in *Inferno* VI, and Dante-*personaggio* and Virgil walk *over* the bodies of the gluttons, from line 34, the corporeality of the shades is emphasised, not least by reference to the soles of the feet of the pilgrim and his guide:

Noi passavam su per l'ombre che adona
la greve pioggia, e ponavam le piante
sopra lor vanità che par persona.

Inferno VI, 34-36

¹ For discussions about the state of Dante's bodies in the afterlife, see: Gragnolati *Experiencing the Afterlife*; 'Nostalgia in Heaven'; Jacoff, "'Our Bodies, Our Selves'".

The shades seem like persons to the pilgrim and even though their 'vanità' speaks of a kind of absence, it is a moral absence and not a corporeal one. A strong sense of the shades' bodies is crucial throughout the poem because bodies are not merely the site or the cause of sin for Dante: bodies are essential, along with souls, for constituting persons. This can be true even if, in one's metaphysics, souls are ontologically prior to bodies. And without their aerial bodies, souls in the afterlife would be unable to communicate with the pilgrim, having neither sense organs nor the capability to converse with him through language.² Although this might seem an obvious point, it has deep significance for discussions about how persons are individuated and recognised, how they conceive of themselves and their histories through memory, and, crucially, how they come into communion with each other. Virgil's prompt to Dante-*personaggio* at *Inferno* VI, 106-08 to remember his Aristotle, shows us that the poet believes a fully embodied soul, after the Last Judgement, is more perfect than any other.

So, with their strange aerial bodies the souls throughout the *Commedia* can take on characteristics which are recognisably earthly in their humanity. Sapia recounts her memories to the pilgrim through a haughty language which one suspects was the same on Earth. Language is personal and powerful here and it is memory and language, hand in hand, that enable Sapia to narrate her life and reconstruct a person which she claims as her self:

Eran li cittadin miei presso a Colle
in campo giunti co' loro avversari,
e io pregava Iddio di quel ch'e' volle. [...]
E cheggioti, per quel che tu più brami,
se mai calchi la terra di Toscana,
che a' miei propinqui tu ben mi rinfami.
Tu li vedrai tra quella gente vana

² An exception to this rule would be the souls who make up the eagle of *Paradiso* XVIII-XX.

che spera in Talamone, e perderagli
più di speranza ch'a trovar la Diana
ma più vi perderanno li ammiragli.

Purgatorio XIII, 115-17 and 148-54

There is much to notice here, just in this one brief example, which must stand for now for other characters throughout the *Commedia*: firstly, that memories are constitutive of who a person thinks they are; secondly, that language is essential in understanding that person, forming part of their individual particularity and making possible a narrative about their life and enabling social interaction. Further, Sapia's memories of her life are spoken in such a way that she defines herself by and through the relationships she had with civic and familial entities. So important are these relationships, even many years after her death, that she entreats the pilgrim to restore her reputation to her family when he returns to Earth. That persons, for Dante, are defined – and define themselves – in relation to others will be a recurring theme in this study.

Pia, like Sapia, wants to be remembered on Earth, and turning to her example now, I show that Dante's persons, even when they appear for just a few lines, are characterised, in addition to the attributes I sketched above, by their values and commitments. Says Pia, of her 'unmaking' – a reference to her violent death at the hands of her husband:

Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma:
salsi colui che 'nнанellata pria
disposando m'avea con la sua gemma.

Purgatorio V, 134-6

Pia's poignant narration of her life retains within it her absolute commitment to the sacrament of marriage. Her quiet judgement of her husband's treachery makes him in her words the very opposite of the Creator. Such words may well be surprising for a person treated so terribly – there are no words of anger of a wronged wife, or of a creature

abandoned by her God—and so they speak of the values and commitments that Pia must have held when she was still living. And of course, it is these values and commitments which fundamentally structure the entire poem. That the whole edifice of Hell and Purgatory is built around the literal stratification of sin, vice and virtue means that it is impossible to view any of the characters within the poem unless from a perspective which calls in to question their values. These values not only tether these persons to a geographical location within the architectonic of the afterlife, as Dante describes it, but they are visible in the persons themselves through their actions and their words.

A person's values and commitments only become concretised when activated by will and desire. Folco's desire—according to him, a sexual desire which burned more than Dido's—was renounced in old age by his own free will on Earth, and now in Heaven this desire has been transformed by something which beautifies. Will and desire can be seen throughout the poem, not least in the character of *Dante-personaggio* himself, as fundamental mental categories which constitute personhood. That free will is central to Dante's conception of personhood does not differentiate him from many other Christian medieval thinkers. Indeed, it secures for him an orthodox position within the Christian tradition. Humans must take responsibility for their own actions and their own sins and, as Dante says in the voice of Marco Lombardo in *Purgatorio* XVI, 82-83, 'se 'l mondo presente disvia, l'in voi è la cagione, in voi si cheggia'.

Christian Moevs makes the point concisely: humans have the capability to recognise in themselves their absolute freedom from being in the power of any other thing. This freedom rains down directly from the Empyrean. The possibility that souls have for understanding themselves as free is drawn out by Statius in his speech on generation when the soul 'sé in sé rigira' (*Purgatorio* XXV, 75). Such self-knowledge, says Moevs, is the 'power to

know all things as itself as (one with) the ground of all things'.³ And further, that 'it is essential to realize that no matter what one's [...] characteristics and character may be, they in no way preclude the human soul from coming to self-knowledge'.⁴

Such inwardness, self-knowledge, is at the centre of Dante's vision for how as creatures we can understand ourselves in relation to God. In Dante's poem, this inwardness takes on a particularly Augustinian character.⁵ It is a knowledge which will illuminate the reality of our own existence as persons, unaffected by our particular characters, values or physical make-up. It is a failure of the will, and of the intellect, to see this clearly, and a failure which means sin will remain a barrier which keeps the human soul separate from participation in God, eternally. Both *Dante-personaggio* and Folco clearly show that Dante's persons are defined, and define themselves in relation not only to their families and their civic ties, but to God. The entire cast of characters of the *Commedia*, sinners and redeemed alike, orient themselves either explicitly or implicitly towards or away from God, through their gestures, postures, words and actions. These souls retain their earthy personhoods: recognisably human in their 'bodies', with language and memory, with narratives to tell, top-full of values and desire, with a more or less imperfect understanding of what it means to be a human creature, dependent on God.

What of these persons, then? What do they tell us about Dante's priorities when it comes to understanding human beings and ourselves? It is a question which strongly connects the ontology of persons with the realm of moral action. Dante represents saved souls not as disembodied, pure

³ Moevs, *Metaphysics*, p. 127.

⁴ Moevs, *Metaphysics*, p. 128.

⁵ For a challenge to the view that Augustine's account of conversion was centred on inwardness, see D. Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

intellect, able to leave behind their earthly identities to take up a place in a homogenous beatified order. They remain particular individuals with histories, memories, language, values and desires who are part of a community with which they interact. In the heavenly rose they each have their own place, a specific seat which is theirs alone. Even though the guilt associated with the memory of sin is now faded since the cleansing waters of the Lethe, these characters know who they are and can tell their particular stories. Folco can smile at the power that brought about his redemption, and does not worry about the sin which 'a mente non torna' (*Paradiso IX*, 104). But he knows what that sin was, and the part that it played in his own history, which forms part of his own self-conception.⁶

This concrete filling-in of personhood enfolds within it a strong moral sense which takes as its starting position an individual's particularity before God. Although this particularity might be so for the moral anthropology of all types of Christian—individuals must repent for their own sins, and nobody else's—on this account, souls do not gain their perfection through divesting themselves of their bodies on their ascent towards truth: a Neoplatonic view this is not. That the soul is ontologically prior to the body does not mean that a full sense of personhood cannot include both body and soul: it is, to be sure, the intellect which looks to itself for understanding, but it is the body too which exists as part of humanity's excellence and reflects in it something divine. Much closer, then, unsurprisingly, is Dante to the Aristotelian account of persons who can gain in excellence through the exercise and habituation of certain positive traits and the suppression of negative ones. Of course, this type of practice is acted out explicitly on the mountain of Purgatory, the realm in which shades can understand their moral position and do something to improve themselves. This understanding is furnished through both

⁶ In Chapter III, I suggest a way in which the waters of the Eunoë and Lethe might be problematic for Dante's conception of paradisiacal personhood.

physical processes, for example, carrying heavy weights, or experiencing the sensation of hunger; and through psychological ones, in hearing and telling stories of damaging vices.

Dante's and Aristotle's notion of perfection here is different, of course: the end to which Dante's shades are heading in Purgatory is to become oriented in a proper way to God in order to be able to praise him, unhampered by vice. Like Aristotle, whose goal was to produce a well-functioning community with members who had a shared object in *eudaimonia*, Dante's community is one of harmony in paradise. This is, admittedly, a caricature of Aristotle's moral theory, but it serves to remind us of the centrality of moral character and its necessity in the pursuit of the Good. Modern-day philosophers, Aristotelian in spirit, can help us further make sense of Dante's persons. In the late twentieth century, Alasdair MacIntyre, building on strong Aristotelian foundations, famously constructed a conception of the Good which was able, in his view, to order the moral virtues within it. It was a picture of a self enmeshed in time, in community, inhabiting particular roles, and able to conceive of itself on a journey, telling its story in an attempt to light its way ahead and provide self-understanding. MacIntyre asks:

In what does the unity of an individual life consist? [...] The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest [...] A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge.⁷

Understanding the 'unity of a human life' in this way, the individual person can come to know themselves better, and can come to see which virtues it will take to better enable their quest, and better understand the object of that quest itself. Charles Taylor agrees with MacIntyre that the

⁷ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn (London: Duckworth, 1985), p. 219.

role of narrative is integral to how personhood is constituted. He fleshes out the possibilities that it provides even further:

[N]arrative must play a bigger role [...] what I am has to be understood as what I have become. [This] is inescapably so for the issue of where I am in moral space. I can't know in a flash that I have attained perfection, or am halfway there. Of course, there are experiences in which we are carried away in rapture and may believe ourselves spoken to by angels; or less exaltedly, in which we sense for a minute the incredible fullness and intense meaning of life [...] But there is always an issue of what to make of these instants [...] how genuinely they reflect real growth or goodness. We can only answer this question by seeing how they fit into our surrounding life, that is, what part they play in a narrative of this life. We have to move forward and back to make a real assessment.⁸

Both these accounts of personhood retreat from certain existentialist ideas of the self that regard narrative as distinctive of art alone, and not of human lives. Sartre, no doubt, would consider the move a hugely backward step.⁹ No matter: these re-formulations of an essentially Aristotelian schema can help us throw light on what Dante prioritises in his account of persons. This may sound like a topsy-turvy approach, because these accounts themselves are, in turn, informed by centuries of Christian stories and Christian art—most likely, including Dante himself—and are a response in part to secularism's growing dominance by two avowedly Catholic philosophers. But I suggest that it is an approach which will yield results for understanding what is going on in the *Commedia*. Dante-*personaggio* is undoubtedly on a quest which involves a development in

⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 48.

⁹ For accounts of personhood in the philosophical literature which engage with these debates, see: P. Goldie, *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion and the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); M.C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); J. D. Velleman, *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); B. Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

self-understanding as well as growing realisation about the ultimate aims of that quest. As a narrated journey, the poem is about how a person can come to know how he stands in relation to God. It is a story about learning what God is, and how to think about God and what the self is in relation to God; it is transformative in the sense that the individual must learn how to transform himself—how to orient himself to God, and how to re-order his values, desires and will—and *be* transformed by the power and the mystery of God, in order to take up his proper place in the universe.

What does this brief sojourn into some contemporary debates about personhood and our discussion of Dante's persons-in-general, tell us about the person of the theologian in the *Commedia*? It reminds us that the theologians and the theological positions which they might espouse are subsumed within a narrative that contains personal encounters between the pilgrim and other human persons. Theology is not represented as a series of treatises on doctrine, or as enfolded within a particular practice, but as embodied in the narrative poetry of fictional characters with whom Dante-*personaggio* can meet face-to-face and begin to understand as instances of God's creative power. In the cases where the theologians do not appear explicitly, or have direct contact with Dante-*personaggio*, we can find traces of them and their works in the text itself and see that the narrator of the poem and its author remain in dialogue with those persons and ideas.

Beyond the poem, too, we can use Dante's understanding of persons to frame our questions about the real theologians as they were encountered in Florence in Dante's time. This will require us to confront the long and distinguished debate which considers Dante's theology as poetry, and poetry as theology, and perhaps offers new ways of thinking about both of those practices. One difference between the two, relevant to the overarching concerns of this project as a whole, connects our question of

personhood back to theology and to poetry. We have seen that the characters that make up the *Commedia* are drawn in such a way that a particular view of personhood emerges. But the concept of personhood has repercussion that move beyond the fictional characters themselves: it arises again in the relations between theologian or poet, reader and God. The relations will be different in poetry and theology, and in each individual text, but we start from the very simple position that reading theology and reading poetry are two different activities—or, at least, had been until Dante was writing—with different sets of relations between author, narrator, reader and God.

The concept of personhood within theological texts, as well as in poetry, can thus be found within the wider Florentine context, where questions about individual theologians—how these persons were perceived and understood—remain operative. There are questions to be asked about reading personhood into the author of the text; the person of the narratorial voice, as it appears; the person who is addressed specifically in the subject of the text—the person before God, shall we say; the person of the reader; the personhood of God himself. The relations between these persons are ripe for interpretation, because the relations themselves tell us much about theology and its perceived possibilities at any particular historical moment.

Foucault famously considered some of these relations, and the hermeneutic pitfalls to which they give rise, in his essay, 'What is an author?'. We do well to remember his lesson, particularly when we consider how it is inevitably our own psychological 'projections' that we might read into Dante's texts.

The third point concerning this 'author-function' is that it is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author. Undoubtedly, this construction is assigned a 'realistic' dimension as we speak of an

individual's 'profundity' or 'creative' power, his intentions or the original inspiration manifested in writing. Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice. In addition, all these operations vary according to the period and the form of discourse concerned. A 'philosopher' and a 'poet' are not constructed in the same manner; and the author of an eighteenth-century novel was formed differently from the modern novelist.¹⁰

Our 'way of handling texts', when it come to Dante's poem and the works of the theologians that this thesis considers, is inevitably determined by our own particular psychologies and the physical, temporal and cultural context which we inhabit. As I suggested in the Introduction, there is no way of perceiving what effect these may have. Even so, we are able to detect that Dante's poetry plays with the nexus of relations (between reader, narrator, author, God) to which it gives rise—and may even seek to undermine their interpretation, ultimately. But our initial starting position is this: that the theologian as author, the historical person who takes up his pen, stands in relation to God, in the first instance, in a peculiar role: he takes on his shoulders a putative responsibility to God which places on him some kind of burden—whether to explain, to describe, to account for or to interpret, or even to become the *scriba Dei*—whereas there is no *prima facie* corresponding responsibility on the poet, even though he may well be devout, or deal in God-speak, or discuss the nature of truth—or, indeed, claim for himself the same salvific, rehabilitative or didactic commission.¹¹

¹⁰ See M. Foucault, 'What is an Author?' trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* ed. by D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113-38 (p.127).

¹¹ For a book-length discussion of the creation of Dante's authority, see Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*.

Augustine says in the first lines of *De civitate Dei* that the book is a fulfilment of a promise which he had taken upon himself to write: Augustine cannot refrain from speaking and must relay his message to a world in peril.¹² The weight of responsibility of this narrator is clear: both to God and to his readers. Gregory, too, in his epistle to Bishop Leander at the start of the *Moralia*, speaks of the responsibility he feels towards his readers, saying that whoever speaks about God must be careful to search out thoroughly that which furnishes moral instruction in their hearers.¹³ We can see, even in these two very brief examples, that the author sets up and comments upon his relationship with God and with the reader. In doing so, he starts to create for himself an authoritative, authorial voice which speaks of the serious responsibility resting on his shoulders—but one which is sanctioned directly by God, and which is undertaken carefully and thoroughly to address the moral needs of his audience.

I suggest there are two ways in which the transmission of a theologian's personhood is important for Dante: firstly, because it provides a model in which theological authority is constructed, a model which Dante might adopt or reject, as we shall see below in Chapters II-IV. How Dante constructs an authority for his own work will form an essential strand in this study; it will by necessity include a consideration of how the poetic form must be different from the form of the theological treatise. This mode of thinking about personhood is *structural*: it provides a means for Dante to build an authority for himself which is not based on any particular way-of-being, so to speak. The second reason why the transmission of the theologians' personhood is important for Dante is because such accounts provide rich resources for understanding the *qualitative* nature of personhood itself: the virtues which a person might embody, the particular values to which a person might be committed, and how a person might

¹² Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, I.

¹³ Gregory, *Moralia*, *Ep. Ded.* II.

conceive of themselves, in relation to these virtues and commitments, and in relation to others—and God.

These two ways in which Dante reads the personhood of the theologians in this study, both structural and qualitative, will be necessary if we are to reach a deeper understanding of how Dante interprets them through their presence in late-medieval Italy, and how he then recreates them as characters (or not) within his own poem. Chapters II-IV will explore the features of personhood that Dante prioritises and how a consideration of the theologians can bring these into focus. Ultimately, these aspects of personhood in their different ways, will be essential in understanding how Dante thinks, as humans, we can approach the divine. But I begin, below, by considering the theologians with whom Dante would have been acquainted in Florence, and how their authority was communicated, and their personhood was transmitted, by their texts and by other means.

2. The Theologians in Florence

This section summarises, briefly, some of the ways in which Augustine, Gregory, Bernard and Aquinas were present in Florence during the late thirteenth century. Reconstructing the religious and cultural milieu of so distant a time and place has its difficulties, as I alluded to in the Introduction, but my purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive or definitive account of the Florentine context but to give a taste of the type of texts, practices, sights, and sounds that might inform an individual's knowledge of the figures of the four theologians and their works. Dante records details of his own learning in *Convivio* II, xii, 7, when he says he attended, 'le scuole de li religiosi e [...] le disputazioni de li filosofanti'.¹⁴ How thoroughgoing and systematic was his education within the walls of the convents remains unknowable.¹⁵ The library archives and the city itself

¹⁴ See Pegoretti, 'Filosofanti', especially p. 37.

¹⁵ Indeed, as I highlight below, whether one could, strictly speaking, call it an 'education' is still a matter of debate.

retain, today, some of the material culture of medieval Florence, which is of course tangible and visible; but less easy to grasp is the influence, or depth of penetration, of the theological ideas for which these four theologians are known, and further, to what extent a sense of their personhood was communicated alongside the transmission of their ideas. What we read into their texts now need not be the same—indeed, will almost certainly not be the same—as that which a medieval reader saw. Botterill's attempt to read the *Commedia* at first sight as a contemporary of Dante's is almost bound to fail and in ways which we cannot know.

2.1 Texts and libraries

Many of the canonical texts of the theologians were found in the convent libraries; by the end of the thirteenth century the houses of the mendicant orders in Florence had begun gathering biblical, philosophical and theological manuscripts. The library at Santo Spirito was likely the oldest of these, but according to Charles T. Davis, almost nothing is known about what it contained, or the teaching and reading habits of the friars, let alone whether the convent was accessible to an educated layman like Dante.¹⁶ Its existence can only be dated to the late thirteenth century because Santo Spirito was designated a *studium generale* in 1287, and so would have had, by necessity, an *armarium* and a *scriptor*.¹⁷ There is no surviving catalogue from Dante's lifetime, although later catalogues show a picture which is congruent with our understanding of the Augustinian order: texts from their putative founder, together with those of Thomas Aquinas and Giles of Rome, his disciple, and ostensible intellectual leader of the order.

¹⁶ Davis, 'Education in Dante's Florence', p. 420.

¹⁷ D. Gutierrez, 'La biblioteca di Santo Spirito in Firenze,' *Analecta Augustiniana*, xxv (1962), 5-88 (p.6).

Of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce we know considerably more.¹⁸ Recent work by Nicolò Maldina and Anna Pegoretti has revealed the ways in which manuscripts were housed, borrowed and read.¹⁹ Pegoretti, in particular, has done useful work on the borrowing practices of the friars, and the use of the *nota di possesso*—showing in whose keeping a particular codex might have been placed (a practice, in fact, which might well have precluded Dante from seeing a particular manuscript at all).²⁰

In Santa Maria Novella, then, at the end of the thirteenth century, we have evidence that the following of Augustine's works were housed in the library: the *Enarrationes in psalmos*;²¹ *De Doctrina Christiana*;²² *De poenitentia* (which has a disputed authorship);²³ *De corpora Domini*²⁴ and the *Regula*.²⁵ In Santa Croce, a manuscript contained *De Civitate Dei* and *De Trinitate* (in a tabulated format, which is suggestive of the way in which it was put to

¹⁸ On the Franciscan and Dominican libraries, see: G. Brunetti and S. Gentili, 'Una biblioteca nella Firenze di Dante: i manoscritti di Santa Croce', in *Testimoni del vero. Su alcuni libri in biblioteche d'autore*, ed. by E. Russo, in *Studi (e testi) italiani*, 6 (2000), 21–55; Gabriella Pomaro, 'Censimento dei manoscritti della biblioteca di S. Maria Novella', in *S. Maria Novella. Un convento nella città. Studi e fonti. VII centenario della fondazione di S. Maria Novella in Firenze, 1279–1979*, 2 vols (Pistoia: Provincia Romana Frati Predicatori, 1980), ii, pp. 325–70.

¹⁹ See N. Maldina and A. Pegoretti and the outputs of the University of Leeds/Warwick University AHRC project, Dante and Late Medieval Florence: Theology in Poetry, Practice and Society'.

https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125117/dante_and_late_medieval_florence.

²⁰ On this practice more generally in the order, see Neslihan Senocak, 'Circulation of Books in the Medieval Franciscan Order: Attitude, Methods, and Critics', *The Journal of Religious History*, 28 (2004), 146–61.

²¹ BML, Conv. soppr. 555; BML, Conv. soppr. 553.

²² BNC, Conv. soppr. F.3.1126.

²³ BNC, Conv. soppr. F.3.1126.

²⁴ BNC, Conv. soppr. F.3.1126.

²⁵ BNC, Conv. soppr. G.3.451.

use—and perhaps often so—by the friars);²⁶ Letter 148 to Fortunatianus;²⁷ the *Sermons*;²⁸ and the *Confessions*.²⁹

The works of the other theologians in this study were also represented in the *studia*: we know that of Gregory's texts, for example, the following were found in Santa Croce at the end of the thirteenth century:³⁰ a collection of *Excerpta, Dicta, Sententiae, Auctoritates*;³¹ two copies of *Moralia in Iob* (one of them tabulated);³² and the *Homiliae in Evangelia*.³³ At Santa Maria Novella were more *Excerpta, Dicta, Sententiae, Auctoritates*; expositions on the canticles;³⁴ plus two copies of the *Moralia*, one of which was tabulated.³⁵

Of the works of Thomas Aquinas, the Franciscans had copies in their library of the *Summa theologiae*;³⁶ the commentaries on Aristotle's *Ethics*, *de Anima*, and the pseudo-Aristotelian *de Causis*.³⁷ The Dominicans also

²⁶ BML Pl. XX dext. 10.

²⁷ BML Pl. XXIII dext. 3. Letter 148 is interesting because it deals with a dispute over the meaning of the possibility of seeing God 'face-to-face', either in this life or the next. The letter is peace-making in its tone but unapologetic for its insistence on the fact that, given the Creator's essential nature, humans will only ever be able 'see' God with 'spiritual eyes', following the teachings of Ambrose and Jerome. It also dispenses with any false notion of anthropomorphism in as swift a way as Beatrice's lesson on scripture's 'condescension' at *Paradiso* IV, 44-5.

²⁸ BML Pl. XVIII dext.5.

²⁹ BML Pl. XIX dext.10.

³⁰ This research is based on the work of Anna Pegoretti, as part of the Leeds/Warwick University AHRC project, 'Dante and Late Medieval Florence: Theology in Poetry, Practice and Society'. Many thanks to Anna for sharing her work with me prior to its publication. There are many more of Gregory's works, and some of Bernard's, too, which cannot be accurately dated as being within the library at that time. Of those works which entered the library at an unknown date, Gregory's included: BML Pl. XIX dext.6; BML Pl. XX dext. 9; BML Pl. XX dext. 1; BML Pl. XX dext. 2; BML Pl. XX dext. 4; BML Pl. XX dext.5; BML Pl. XX dext.11; BML Pl. XX dext.12.

³¹ BML Pl. XVIII dext.8.

³² BML Pl. XIX dext.2; BML Pl. XX dext.10.

³³ BML Pl. XIX dext.5.

³⁴ BML, Conv. soppr. 387.

³⁵ Biblioteca Riccardiana 817.

³⁶ BML Pl. XXIX dext. 3.

³⁷ BML Pl. XXIX dext. 10.

housed Thomas's works in Santa Maria Novella, as one would expect, of course, but the evidence that we have shows that the number of texts during Dante's time is rather sparse: another (tabulated) commentary on the *Ethics*³⁸ and a copy of the *Summa contra Gentiles*.³⁹ This is somewhat surprising, as Davis notes; he points to evidence from a later catalogue (Sardi's of 1489) that shows at least one hundred manuscripts of Aquinas's works, including many of his commentaries on Aristotle.⁴⁰

Bernard's works, unsurprisingly, given the mystical-affective tradition with which the Franciscans were in sympathy, are well-represented at Santa Croce: *De Conversione*; two hundred and fifty-eight of his letters; the *Sermones de diversis*; *Sermones per annum* and the *Vita Prima* were all contained within one codex which seems to have been dedicated almost entirely to the Abbot of Clairvaux: his works, his life and his canonisation.⁴¹ Further, a work named *De tribus oculis*, taken from his sermons, was

³⁸ Biblioteca Riccardiana 817.

³⁹ BML, Conv. Soppr. 614.

⁴⁰ Davis, 'The Florentine Studia', p. 357. On the *studia*, see also, 'The Early Collection of Books of S. Croce in Florence', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 107 (1963), 399–414.

⁴¹ BML Pl. XXI dext. 1. The biography of Bernard found in Santa Croce, the *Vita Prima*, was begun during Bernard's own lifetime, and was authored by three different monks who knew him. Adriaan Bredero makes a strong case that the *Vita* should be read as cult-making hagiography, given the fact the Cistercians were desperate to get one of their number canonised. His argument is compelling when considering that the second edition of the *Vita Prima* was heavily redacted for re-submission to the Curia after the Cistercians' first request for Bernard's canonisation was rejected. The fact that the *Vita* was primarily intended as evidence for Bernard's saintliness is important when considering what type of character emerges from it. Even though it was written by his contemporaries, who knew much about his life and works, the authors of the *Vita*, and above all the final editor, Geoffrey, Bernard's secretary, present a life that leaves out as much as it includes. For example, it is silent about much of Bernard's involvement with the crusades. In fact, the tenor of the *Vita* is much less political than Bernard himself must have been, given the evidence that his own letters provide. What the *Vita* does attempt to show is that even before his birth there were reasons to suspect that Bernard was destined for sainthood, or at the very least, a career as an important preacher. The story of his mother's vision whilst pregnant—that she was bearing a barking dog—is recorded as evidence that Bernard's voice would provide a clarion call to the unconverted. See Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux*.

housed in Santa Croce.⁴² In Santa Maria Novella, Bernard's texts are almost entirely absent, apart from some of his letters.⁴³ A later catalogue from the second half of the fourteenth century, shows that his *Sermones super Cantica canticorum* were present, but when these were first acquired by the library cannot, now, be accurately estimated.

These are the works that are recorded in the catalogues that are available to us today, but a definitive list of all manuscripts in a particular library at any one time is impossible to compile accurately. What this aggregation of facts and figures means for Dante studies remains a contested issue:

The time has come for us as a community of scholars to converge around certain points which even if hypotheses, in light of the historical and textual evidence currently available, seem difficult to challenge: Dante is not alluding to Bologna in *Convivio* II. xii; he did not spend time reading in the Florentine mendicant libraries; indeed, to term these 'libraries' is a misnomer, since what we are actually talking about are books for the friars' exclusive use that were kept in cells and *armaria* and not in monastic libraries; Dante's knowledge of Aristotle before the exile was extremely restricted [...] How we then use such historically and textually validated conclusions in our own work will of course be a matter of personal choice. What we should not do is cling to positions that, in light of the best available evidence, have been demonstrated to be unsatisfactory.⁴⁴

Barański is right to be concerned about the misuse of the contextual information that we have at our disposal. To reiterate the point I made in the Introduction, my aim is not to make any naïve claims about causal links between a particular manuscript in a library and Dante's use of a particular theologian's works or ideas. The point of this brief sketch of the literary, theological landscape of Florence, including the holdings of the 'libraries', is to give a sense of the intellectual milieu of late-medieval Florence and the

⁴² BML Pl. XXII dext. 7.

⁴³ BNC, Conv. Soppr. G.1.695.

⁴⁴ Z. G. Barański, 'On Dante's Trail', *Italian Studies*, 72.i (2017) 1-15 (pp.14-15).

currency which each of the theologians might have retained. For now, I suggest, we can gain some idea of the relative importance of these texts given their number, and also because they contain within their fabric ways for understanding how the friars might have classified or prioritised particular aspects of the theologians' works: through, for example, the use of tables and summaries. An idea of when an item in the library was borrowed and in whose possession a codex was kept gives further, if only suggestive, evidence of the transmission and penetration of a theologian's works. It should also be noted here that there may well have been other sources either in the convent itself, or, indeed, elsewhere in the city—in private libraries and collections—which we cannot now trace but which would no doubt expand on this necessarily partial account.

2.2. Teaching and preaching in Florence

Beyond these works in the libraries, the lessons and sermons of the teachers and preachers in Florence at the end of the thirteenth century can help to illuminate the ways in which some of the theologians' texts may have been put to use: here I only have space to gesture towards the educational programmes of the *studia* and of the sermons of the clergy and itinerant mendicant preachers.⁴⁵ The careers of some of these teachers, such as Remigio de' Girolami, and preacher-theologians, such as Giordano da Pisa, Joachim of Fiore, Peter John Olivi and Ubertino da Casale, are relatively familiar in the context of Dante's Florence. Others, such as the Franciscan Servasanto da Faenza, may be less so, because they have only recently begun to be uncovered.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For a general introduction, see D.R. Lesnick, *Preaching in Medieval Florence* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

⁴⁶ On Olivi and Dante, see V. Stanley Benfell, 'Dante, Peter John Olivi and Apocalypse', in *Dante and the Franciscans*, ed. by Santa Casciani (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006), pp. 9–50; Alberto Forni 'Dialogo tra Dante e il suo maestro. La metamorfosi della *Lectura super Apocalipsim* di Pietro di Giovanni Olivi nella *Divina Commedia*', *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo e Archivio Muratoriano*, 108 (2006), 83–122; Marian Michèle Mulchahey 'First the Bow is Bent in Study ...'. *Dominican Education before 1350* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies,

We know something of the educational environment at Santa Maria Novella, thanks in large part to some of the remaining lectures of their long-serving *lector* and preacher, Remigio de' Girolami (d. 1319). Charles Davis claims that Remigio's sermons and *Prologues*, which were lectures based mostly on scripture and on Aristotle, must have made use Aquinas's commentaries—commentaries, found, as we saw above, in later catalogues of the library at Santa Maria Novella.⁴⁷ We know that Remigio began teaching as early 1273 and continued for forty-two long years. He was greatly influenced by Aquinas, and may well have heard Thomas himself teach in Paris between 1269 and 1272.⁴⁸ The style of academic teaching that flourished in Paris and which was emulated throughout European universities had at its heart the *quaestio* format, wherein masters would set out the question for debate and interlocutors would, in turn, provide responses and replies. The standardised format of the scholastic method was, of course, epitomised in writing by Aquinas's magisterial *summae* themselves. In the *studia* of Paris and throughout Europe this method would be heard daily in the disputations in the classrooms, and twice yearly in the more public spaces of the *quodlibetal* debates, which were open to members of the public before Christmas and Easter.⁴⁹ It is my suggestion that even though university curricula had been shaped in the *quaestio* format before Aquinas was in Paris, or had written the *summa*, by the time Remigio was teaching in Florence, Thomas had already come to embody and stand for, through the huge influence of his written works, the scholastic method.

1998), pp. 384–96. On Servasanto, see Nicolò Maldina's work as part of the Leeds-Warwick project referred to above. On Remigio see C.T. Davis, 'An Early Florentine Political Theorist: Fra Remigio de' Girolami', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 104, 6, (December 1960), 662-76.

⁴⁷ Davis, 'The Florentine *Studia*', p. 357.

⁴⁸ See Anto Gavrić, *Une métaphysique à l'école de Thomas d'Aquin. Le 'De modis rerum' de Rémi de Florence* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2006), especially pp. 89–151.

⁴⁹ For more on the quodlibetal debates, see, Schabel (ed.), *Theological Quodlibeta in the Middle Ages. The Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

By 1289, Remigio was promoted to the *lectorate* in the provincial *studium* at Santa Maria Novella (it gained the status of *studium generale* in the early years of the fourteenth century) and he remained a prolific teacher and preacher, embodying the spirit of the order's greatest intellectual master, and getting involved, too, with questions of governance of the city.⁵⁰

Although there is no single piece of evidence that connects Remigio with Dante, placing the poet inside Remigio's classroom at Santa Maria Novella, the fact of their shared intellectual interests, Remigio's celebrated preaching career in Florence, and his involvement in the polity beyond the walls of the convent, suggests that a meeting between the two was not unlikely.⁵¹

2.3 Religious Orders and Rules

An additional but important strand of inquiry concerns Augustine's *Regula*, and how it structured the lives of those living under religious orders in Florence. I suggest that the *Regula* itself helps us to understand a sense of how the saint's personhood was known to a layman in the city, if through a rather diffracting lens.

Augustine is named in *Convivio* IV, xxviii, 9 and *Paradiso* XXXII, 35 amongst the founders of religious orders. For us, this might seem thoroughly conventional, but it was an issue pressing in Dante's time. Even though there is some dispute over whether Augustine had established a religious monastic community as such, several of his texts—and in particular Letter 211 to a community of nuns—were later taken as the blueprint for what would become the Augustinian Rule in major fraternities, specifically, the Augustinians, the Canons Regular, and the Dominicans. The Grand Union

⁵⁰ M. M. Mulchaney, 'Education in Dante's Florence Revisited', in Begley and Koterski (eds), *Medieval Education*, pp. 143-81.

⁵¹ Davis says: 'The Florentine government referred to [Remigio] as 'prothorethore' and as 'foremost father of our university'. This last title is the best evidence that the *studium* of S Maria Novella was open to laymen; otherwise it is difficult to see why it should have been called 'our university', 'Education in Dante's Florence', p. 430.

of 1256 had established the Order of Hermits of St Augustine (in Florence, they were housed at Santo Spirito) out of a number of heterogeneous groups who had no real common ground or vocation: some were hermits, some preachers, some shared property in common. So the union brought together a miscellaneous collection which needed some uniformity and unity for its own survival, a uniformity provided by the adoption of the *Regula*. From 1274 and the Second Council of Lyons, the Augustinians were required to prove their own legitimacy, but in 1298, Boniface VIII confirmed the Augustinians' right to existence by overruling Lyons.

Through stories of Augustine's life and works, primarily through readings of Possidius's *Vita*, Philip of Harvengt's *Legenda famosa*, and chapter 120 on Augustine in Jacobus da Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, the Augustinians began to create stories of their own foundational heritage, centred squarely on making (spurious) claims about Augustine himself having established a distinct religious order (and some stories even claimed that he came to Tuscany after his baptism). These attempts brought the Hermits into tension with their opposite numbers in the Canons Regular, who were attempting a similar trick. The three biographical works, above, foreground different aspects of Augustine, and draw attention to different episodes in the bishop's life. Possidius makes no mention of the *Regula*, but focuses on the qualities found in episcopal office; Philip lauds Augustine's as an exemplary canonical life; Jacobus writes hagiography and ignores the monastic aspect of Augustine's career in Hippo.⁵² Notably, the first Augustinian to construct one of these foundational stories was an anonymous friar in Santo Spirito, Florence, at some point between 1322 and 1331.⁵³ In 1287, Santo Spirito had been declared a *studium generale* and in 1290, the Florentine general chapter had drawn up its *Constitutiones* which

⁵² Saak, *High Way to Heaven*, pp. 185-86.

⁵³ See Dunlop and Bourdua, (eds), *Art and the Augustinian Order*, pp. 1-17 and Saak, *High Way to Heaven*, pp. 185-90.

had prescribed the study of theology as central to their mission and, in particular, following their great teacher, Giles of Rome (who was himself, ironically, a follower of Aquinas).⁵⁴

The Dominicans in Santa Maria Novella also lived under the Rule of Augustine. Dominic had been a member of the Canons Regular who had adopted the *Regula* in the eleventh century, when the Rule of Benedict had been replaced. The reason for the Dominicans adopting it seems to have been one of pragmatism: the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, explicitly asked new fraternities to adopt an existing rule, in order to maintain some control over the proliferating mendicant orders. It is thus unsurprising that there is a copy of the *Regula* in the library at Santa Maria Novella in Dante's time.⁵⁵

The *Regula* was derived from several of Augustine's texts, but from Letter 211, addressed to a community of nuns, in particular. The scripture at its heart is Acts 4: 32, which suggests shared property as a route to unity and a peaceful community:

multitudinis autem credentium erat cor et anima una nec quisquam eorum quae possidebant aliquid suum esse dicebat sed erant illis omnia communia⁵⁶

There is thus more than one way in which the presence of the Augustinians at Santo Spirito, and the *Regula* (enacted there and at Santa Maria Novella) might have shaped Dante's perception of Augustine, if in a way that diffracts both his texts and his image. Firstly, because of the way in which there is a prescribed focus on theological study in the convent *studium* which the friars carried out under Augustine's name; and secondly because the Letter 211 to the quarrelling nuns, and subsequently the *Regula* on which it is based, so emphasises the peace-maker in Augustine, the leader

⁵⁴ Dunlop and Bourdua, *Art and the Augustinians*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ BNC, Conv. soppr. G.3.451.

⁵⁶ 'And the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul: neither did any one say that aught of the things which he possessed, was his own; but all things were common unto them.'

of an (eventual) order who calls for unified community. What emerges in late-medieval Florence is an image of Augustine as a peace-making monk, and a patron of a community engaged in the study of theology—these two aspects taking up a position alongside the more familiar images of the towering *auctor* and the interpreter of scripture.

2.4 Architecture, Art, Visual Culture

The Florence of Dante's early adulthood was a city of massive architectural endeavour.⁵⁷ Works that were underway during this period included the new city walls (1284-1333), the government buildings of the Bargello (1255), and Palazzo della Signoria (1299), together with its piazza (1299-1362), and further urban space of the piazza around the baptistery (1296). The works on the rebuilding of the cathedral of Santa Reparata began in the last decade of the Duecento, around 1296, and would ultimately see its rededication to Mary in the early fourteenth century. The buildings of the great mendicant churches at Santa Maria Novella (begun in the 1270s) and at Santa Croce (begun in the 1290s) were also well underway by the turn of the century, the latter replacing an earlier Franciscan house.

We have but little information about images, paintings and frescoes depicting the four theologians in Florence during this period, but Bernard does appear in a portrait which survives today, and which dates from 1300, in a Cistercian abbey just outside Florence, at Settimo. It is a painting on wood which faces a similar painting of Saint Benedict on the opposite side of the chapel. Here, Bernard is facing to the front, dressed in a white habit, tonsured and holding a crozier; his name appears in large letters written

⁵⁷ See A. Marina, 'Architecture and Urban Space' in Barański and Pertile (eds), *Dante in Context*, pp. 427-47.

vertically on either side of his figure,⁵⁸ demonstrating the Cistercians' reverence for the erstwhile leader of their order.⁵⁹

The building of the great ecclesiastical centres of Florence brought about commissions for the decoration of the façades of the exteriors, and the chapels within. At Santa Reparata, works on the new sculptures and mosaics for the façade were designed by Arnolfo di Cambio in a classical style. At Santa Maria Novella, the building works of the basilica were underway by 1285, when Duccio completed a painting of Gregory enthroned in the Bardi chapel (then, in fact, the Chapel of Saint Gregory), which belonged, before 1336, to the Compagnia delle Laudi di Santa Maria Novella. The paintings in the chapel are now in a very poor state, but the image of Gregory can still be made out, between two palm-bearers. The size of Gregory's image mirrors Christ's, which faces it.⁶⁰ Duccio's more famous work, the so-called Rucellai Madonna, was also commissioned by the *laudesi* company for this chapel, and there is some debate about where the Madonna was sited—some critics have suggested that it was placed on the wall between the Saint Gregory and Rucellai chapels, which are next to each other.⁶¹

So Dante witnessed the beginnings of an 'artistic revolution in monumental

⁵⁸ See J. France, *Medieval Images of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007) p. 248.

⁵⁹ The Settimo badia is, like most Cistercian communities, beyond the city's walls, and thus highlights the division between urban and rural monastic lives. However, there is evidence that the brothers at Settimo were involved in the fiscal and political management of the commune of Florence: from at least the 1250s, the friars were entrusted to be treasurers of the city's financial records. See W. R. Day Jr., 'The Cistercian Monk and the casting counter' in *Churchmen and Urban Government in Late Medieval Italy c. 1200-1450*, ed. by F. Andrews and M.A. Pincelli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 251-67 (p. 253).

⁶⁰ See L. Bellosi, 'Il percorso di Duccio', in *Duccio. Alle origini della pittura senese*, ed. by A. Bagnoli, R. Bartalini, L. Bellosi and M. Laclotte (Cinisello Balsamo (Milan): Silvana, 2003), pp. 118-45.

⁶¹ See I. Hueck, 'La tavola di Duccio e la compagnia delle Laudi di Santa Maria Novella', *La Maestà di Duccio restaurata: Gli Uffizi, Studi e Ricerche* 6 (Florence: Gli Uffizi, 1990), pp. 33-46.

painting and sculpture'.⁶² Cimabue's huge crucifix for Santa Croce was completed by 1288. Giotto's crucifix was positioned on the rood screen of Santa Maria Novella by 1290. Each showed the crucified Christ in a more realistic mode, such that his body appeared to be really hanging, suspended by nails and tilting forwards, the reality of execution brought home for the congregation of worshippers. Giotto's commission for the Saint Francis cycles in the Bardi chapel at Santa Croce in the 1320s, continued this evolution in the growing realism of the human figure, which he had earlier developed in the frescoes of the Arena Chapel at Padua, works which Dante might well have seen. Dante is sensitive to these artistic developments as they are happening, of course: the lineage of Giotto and Cimabue (and by extension, Duccio) is made explicit in *Purgatorio* XI, 94-96. This 'revolution' of the visual arts has a deep significance for this study – beyond individual images of particular saints – in terms of the move towards a greater realism in the representation of the human body, the representation of encounters between those bodies, and their consequent relations to the viewer.

2.5 Confraternities

The growth in membership of the confraternities within Dante's lifetime is important for understanding the ways in which the laity gained access to a new type of theological education. The companies of confraternities of Florence proliferated in the thirteenth century: twenty new companies were formed between 1224 and the end of the century.⁶³ They were more often than not associated with or sponsored by one of the mendicant orders, and usually based at a chapel within a parish or monastery church (although the company of Orsanmichele met in the *loggia* at the grain market itself). The statutes and surviving records show that the makeup of their

⁶² L. Bourdua, 'Illumination, painting and sculpture', in Barański and Pertile (eds), *Dante in Context*, pp. 401-26, (p. 405).

⁶³ See R.F.E Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood* (New York City, NY: Academic Press, 1982) pp. 43-44.

membership was drawn from a wide section of society and, as such, there could be significant social and commercial, as well as spiritual, benefits in becoming a member. Confraternities were primarily devotional in their function and divided, roughly, into two groups—the *disciplinati* and the *laudesi*; the former practiced self-flagellation as a form of devotion, usually whilst processing through the city. The most significant type of confraternity for my study are the companies of the *laudesi*. These groups sang *laude*, vernacular songs of praise to God, Mary, and the saints, which were performed publicly in procession by the companies once a month, and daily in the chapels of the confraternities of the city.⁶⁴The *laudesi* also performed an important function for their members in funerary arrangements, in accompanying processions of biers, in performances of the Office of the Dead, and in prayers for the souls of the departed. The services of the *laudesi* also provide a locus in which the concept of Purgatory, growing in importance during this period, was worked out and elaborated.⁶⁵

It is important to note that the rise of the *laudesi* coincided with, or indeed, contributed to, an increasing devotion to the cult of the Virgin. One of the largest confraternities of *laudesi*, was the Compagnia delle Laudi di Santa Maria Novella, mentioned above, which was founded by Saint Peter Martyr in 1244. Its foundation was a response, in part, to the heretical theologies promulgated in Northern Italy, whose teachings, it was believed, undermined the Incarnation and the sanctity of the Holy Mother herself.⁶⁶

The *lauda* tradition provides another source whereby a sense of the theologians' personhood might have been transmitted in Florence. Firstly,

⁶⁴ See J. G. W. Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) pp. 79-90.

⁶⁵ Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, p. 163.

⁶⁶ Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, p. 46.

because an element of training was necessary for members to learn the *laude* themselves, an education which would deepen an individual's knowledge of theology and of the saints. Secondly, because the songs, unlike the rest of the liturgy, were sung in the vernacular, and would therefore have been a way for this knowledge to have been transmitted to the general population who heard the *laude* in the streets of Florence.⁶⁷ Singing lessons were held for company members, including children; these lessons would have furnished the members with a level of vernacular theological or doctrinal training—or, perhaps, an education in hagiographical works—which would have been hitherto unavailable for laypeople.⁶⁸ Indeed, John Henderson claims that there is evidence that the confraternities enjoyed a level of theological sophistication which outran the norm for laypeople.⁶⁹

The *laude* were illustrated and compiled in *laudari* belonging to each confraternity. A surviving Florentine *laudario*, now in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence (Banco Rari 18), belonged to the Augustinians of Santo Spirito.⁷⁰ Within it are *laude* dedicated to ninety-six different individuals, among them the confraternity's patron, Augustine, but also one to Bernard of Clairvaux. The *laudario* is illuminated and includes

⁶⁷ The para-liturgical nature of the *laude*—the ways in which vernacular language was incorporated into and around the rest of the mass—offers, perhaps, a way of reading the *Purgatorio* as a mirror-image of the *laudesi*'s activities, where the liturgy itself is incorporated into the vernacular poetry of the *Commedia*. See M. Treherne: 'In his account of Purgatory, the very presence of liturgy marks an innovation with regard to the view of Purgatory that had emerged in late medieval culture. (According to Aquinas, for instance, the souls of Purgatory had no need to pray at all.) This innovation stands alongside a number of other strikingly original aspects of Dante's Purgatory'; 'Liturgical Personhood: Creation, Penitence and Praise in the *Commedia*' in Montemaggi and Treherne (eds), *Dante's 'Commedia': Theology as Poetry*, pp. 131-60 (p. 132).

⁶⁸ Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, p. 83.

⁶⁹ Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, p. 89.

⁷⁰ I am grateful to Matthew Treherne for his help in studying this manuscript at the BNCF. For an English translation and the modern notation of the music of the *lauda*, see: H. J. Grossi (ed) *The Fourteenth Century Florentine Laudario Magliabechiano* (Doctoral thesis, The Catholic University of America, 1979).

musical notation; it may have been carried through the streets as part of the procession. It contains images of both saints: Augustine features in four separate illuminations, one of which occupies a three-quarter page depiction of the saint dressed in red, holding a book and surrounded by smaller figures of tonsured Augustinians in black habits. Augustine, here, is clearly represented as the leader of the order and also the author of important works. The *lauda* which accompanies this image refers to Augustine as ‘sommo doctore’ and the possessor of ‘profunda sapientia’. There is also a notable use of light imagery to designate the knowledge that Augustine fosters in the minds of his readers: ‘specchio e lume della nostre mente’.⁷¹

Guadiamo tucti quanti
Et facciam dolci canti
Al be//ato Augustin sommo doctore.

O alta et profunda sapientia
O specchio et lume della nostre menta,
O tu che se’ doctor per // excellentia,
danne lumera che siam conoscenti
accio che siam ferventi
ad te, padre potente,
al cui fervor siamo ragunati.

A seconda *lauda*, with a smaller image of Augustine, this time dressed in blue, again holding a book, begins with the words, ‘Sancto Agostin doctore’. It goes on to describe the bishop, within a forceful rhyming pattern, as ‘confessor e pastore’, and again, using more metaphors of light, ‘luminatore et doctore’. This *lauda* personalises the seemingly defensive work of Augustine’s oeuvre: it characterises him as someone standing guard over holy doctrine, as defending the faith, and as the destroyer of error.⁷² These images, I suggest, draw attention in particular to Augustine’s exegetical expertise: he is not only expert, he stands as an authority over how doctrine should be read and interpreted.

⁷¹ *Lauda* 71, folios 96^v-97^v.

⁷² *Lauda* 72, folios 98^r-99^r.

Sancto Agostin doctor
Confessor et pastore
Et pien di sapientia si'laudato.

Luminatore et doctore,
della fe' divina difenditore guardatore,
colla sancta doctrina
distrugitore d'ogne errore
facesti gran ruina
tutti di si gram sancto
novel or facciam canto
che nn'e sie degno et a lo ben meritato.

In contrast with the light-bearing, warrior-like figure of Augustine, the *lauda* to the Abbot of Clairvaux's first description of him is as loving ('amoroso'). This *lauda* is also illuminated, with Bernard depicted as an old, bearded man in Cistercian white robes, holding a crozier, and in the other hand, a book. The words of the *lauda* hail him as a 'giglio aulente', an 'aquila contemplativa', and a 'nobile predicatore'. It also refers to the story which we saw above, from the *Vita Prima*, that his career was prefigured whilst in his mother's womb.⁷³

Sancto Bernardo amor[o]so
giglio aulente dilectoso.

Ançi che tuo fosti nato
ti fosti prefigurato
d'amore privilegiato,
nobile predicatore.

O Bernardo, fresc'uliva,
Aquila contemplativa,
della Trinita divina
fosti sommo comprenditore.

In Chapters II and III, I return to some of the images of the saints found within the *laude*, especially the image of Bernard as a loving individual, and

⁷³ *Lauda* 80, 110^r-110^v. I return to the depiction of Bernard as a contemplative eagle in chapters II and IV.

also as an eagle. Both these figurations, I will suggest, are important for Dante, although my claim is not that he was intimately acquainted with this particular *laudario*. Important too is the image of Augustine as an exemplary intellectual; one to whom Christendom is indebted for his ability to shed light on Holy Scripture. That he is also described as 'confessor' underscores the transmission of his image found within the autobiographical *Confessions*. I return to Augustine as a narrator of his own selfhood, in Chapter III. For now, it is important to underline the fact that the existence and growing membership of confraternities in Dante's Florence, demonstrates that the cult of the saint is of such importance that formal, constituted, societies provide the context in which the saints can be venerated and praised by lay people, and in the vernacular, too.

It comes as no surprise that the Florentines, who were deeply self-conscious about all types of inter-personal bonds, tended to conceive of their relations with the divine personages as they conceived of their relations with one another [...] the imagery of patronage lay at the heart of Florentine systems of spiritual exchange.⁷⁴

The praise for these saints is particular to their characters; it is a characterisation which picks out certain qualities for which the saint is remembered. In this way, the relation between saint and singer is drawn in a more personalised mode, a mode which preserves elements of the saint's earthly personhood, but now which looks to him as a heavenly patron.

2.6 The significance of the Florentine context

I have summarised some of the ways that the theologians were known in Dante's Florence. Even this brief and incomplete picture provides a sense of how different aspects of the theologians' works or person might have been foregrounded by diverse mediating forces. As theologian *par excellence* Augustine galvanises universal acclaim, bringing light to an ignorant

⁷⁴ Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood*, p. 47.

world: his texts circulate widely in late-medieval Europe, and are consumed in the *studia* of Florence first hand, certainly, and also second hand, through the likes of Bonaventure and Aquinas (and, of course, many others). Augustine's contribution to the form that biblical exegesis should take—a contribution which would shape the engagement with scripture for centuries—dominates in the Middle Ages, in Florence as much as anywhere, and even seeps into the fibre of literary criticism more generally, as we see in *Convivio* II, i, when Dante uses a fourfold method to (partially) expound his own *canzone*.

We see Augustine the peace-maker emerging from the hagiographic stories of the Augustinians, and yet it is Augustine the intellectual warrior that we hear in the songs of the *laudesi*. These images of the saint tell us much about the orders and organisations that claim him; the transmission of his image must necessarily be shaped by their political and spiritual preoccupations. This distortion, or less dramatically, colouring, of Augustine's character might well have been abundantly transparent, maybe even in some cases comical, to those living in late-medieval Florence; alternatively, it might just as easily have been the case that these particular versions of the saint were taken at face value, as consolidations of the historical theologian's personhood. Aquinas and Bernard, too, are subject to these same forces, so closely associated as they were with the Dominicans and the Cistercians, respectively. Something of the person of Aquinas was found in the daily practices of the order. The articulation of theology, the methods which were employed by the Dominicans both in their preaching and in their teaching, in the disputations and the more public quodlibetal debates, subsume characteristics that are to be found throughout Thomas's written oeuvre: a rigorous examination of scripture, of ideas and of concepts, teasing out at length the ramifications of a particular claim and contrary claim. This is the case before one even considers the *content* of Aquinas' own teaching, transmitted through his texts, and through people such as

Remigio de' Girolami, at Santa Maria Novella.⁷⁵

Gregory's stature as leader of the Church, first monk-Pope, was built into the very fabric of the new Dominican church: a chapel was dedicated to him and decorated by a master painter, depicting the saint almost as a Roman emperor, fanned by palm-bearers. Gregory's authority is further underlined by the holdings in the libraries, where he is well-represented in both the Dominican and Franciscan *studia*.

As for Bernard, his image and authority is important for the Cistercians, and the careful management of his legacy can be read in the biographies and hagiographies that are present in the convent libraries in Florence during this period. The reverence, and glorification, which began in his lifetime is still evident two centuries later, in the artworks commissioned by the Cistercian house at Settimo, where the figure of the wise, elderly pastor resembles the character found in the *Paradiso*. His notoriety as a contemplative theologian and his works on the Song of Songs are read in the words of the *laude* from the Augustinian confraternity. The preservation and circulation of his letters in the convent libraries suggest that something of the voice of the historical Bernard was preserved: more direct access, perhaps, to the personhood of the saint than any representations mediated by the order to which he belonged.

This chapter has introduced the concept of personhood as it emerges in the *Commedia*, by way of examples of characters from the poem itself. My claim

⁷⁵ This format of university debate pre-dates Aquinas, of course. The Arts and Theology faculties of Paris made use of disputations in their courses on Aristotle and Peter Lombard, courses which, in turn, were based on earlier writings in *quaestio* format. My claim — hardly new — is that Thomas's *Summae* present the culmination of such Scholastic practices and crystallises their form. For a fuller discussion of Aquinas and the *Summa*'s relation to Dominican method, see: J. Marenbon, 'Method' in *The Cambridge Companion to the 'Summa Theologiae'*, ed. by P. McCosker and D. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp. 74-84.

is that it is a conception which must necessarily include certain features which Dante goes to some length to highlight: features which retain their significance throughout each *cantica*, and which will obtain even after the Last Judgement. These features, as I will explore in Chapters II-IV, will have deep significance for theology: how we, for Dante, as individuals, understand our place in God's universal order. The second half of this chapter introduced the ways in which the four theologians of this study were found in Dante's Florence, in the last two decades of the thirteenth century. This exploration showed that the works of the theologians, their intellectual inheritance, were traceable in Florence, but so, too, were other characteristics of the theologians' personhoods, transmitted by institutions, teachers, preachers, lay orders and artists or, indeed, by their own hand. I suggested that Dante's reading of the theologians has both a structural and a qualitative significance: structural, because the creation of theological authority is important for Dante as he constructs his own *poema sacro* (*Paradiso* XXV, 1); qualitative, because certain features of personhood that emerge in the image of the theologians contain qualities that Dante will endorse in his poem. In Chapters II and III, I will show how and why some of these characterisations are important for Dante: how he reads the personhood of the theologian and recasts them for his own purpose; and how he constructs for himself an authority learned, in part, from theologians in this study.

CHAPTER II

The Virtuous Theologian

1. Theology emerging from the shadows

This chapter explores some of the sources of Dante's idiosyncratic engagement with theology in the *Commedia*. In *Convivio* II, xiv, the subject of theology is God, which 'non sofferà lite alcuna d'opinioni o di sofistici argomentì'. As we saw in the Introduction, Dante thinks that theology is practiced by everyone who reads and responds to scripture—but it is also practiced in a different sense by those authorities who are divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit when they write their exegeses. What can and cannot be said of God, what can and cannot be understood, is contained within the 'God-speak' of the theologians. And of course, despite Dante's certainty about its subject, arguments raged over the limits of theology's proper range. This chapter, then, examines the characters of Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas in the poem, and deconstructs them in light of their known, historical counterparts, against a background of their theological texts and portraits from elsewhere. It asks how Dante recasts them as characters, and provides readers with further opportunity to read them and their theologies again, backwards this time, from narrative poem to theologian and works. How does Dante's reconstruction of these theologians help us understand the other characters in the poem and, indeed, the poem as a whole and its relation to Dante's own theology?

Dante's imaginative act presses the language and action of the historical theologian into a narrative which enables him to demonstrate something about theology itself. In Giuseppe Mazzotta's words, poetry, for Dante, is 'the necessary presupposition for critical thought', because the poetic imagination is able to provide the ground in order that the 'shadowy discourses of history' coalesce.¹ Below, I show how the person of the

¹ Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision*, p. xi.

historical theologian—the person who appears from the shifting ground of the works, of history and its interpretation— comes to embody their own theology, standing for a set of values and beliefs that are an intellectual shorthand for how both Dante, in the medieval period, and now modern-day readers understand those theologians. By writing poetry Dante enables the characters to emerge from those ‘shadowy discourses’, and transforms them for his own end, his own epic narrative, whilst at the same time transforming that historical discourse itself.

The chapter serves, then, as an answer to questions about theological language, given that written works are mostly what remain of these theologians’ portraits (although, indeed, as we saw in Chapter I, some visual sources will play a minor role). Such language, no matter the topic, fixes within itself keys for deciphering the commitments and beliefs, the judgements of value and orders of priority, the emotional terrain and the moral imagination of the theologians, all of which can unlock something of the virtue and personhood of the writer.

In his essay, ‘Poetry and Theology’, Albert R. Ascoli claims that, ‘Dante repeatedly affirms that theology is, finally, necessarily, poetic’.² Dante’s conception of what theology is, and what poetry is capable of, builds on the work of those authors—poets, theologians, scribes of the Bible—with whom he came into contact: this much at least, is a truism. In this chapter, I show how both Bernard’s and Aquinas’s theologies, each in their particular ways, inform Dante’s conception of what theology is; he endorses, adopts and adapts aspects of what has gone before, whilst at the same time he rejects, replaces or constructs something wholly new, from the vestiges of those theologians’ inheritance. The most obvious rejection—of treatise, of sermon—in favour of poetry, as Ascoli reminds us, is fundamental. It is

² Ascoli, ‘Poetry and Theology’, p. 42.

through the choice of the genre, the epic rather than the lyric, and in writing a poem overflowing with characters, with persons, that Dante's theology emerges.

The chapter then goes on to sketch case studies of virtue, vice and theological language from the *Commedia*, in light of a reading some of Bernard's sermons and, in particular, his letters: Francesca and Ugolino in Hell; Manfred and Buonconte da Montefeltro in Purgatory. This chapter proposes that the *Commedia*—replete as it is with fully-rounded characters, each on their own very personal journeys—has at its core a distillation of a set of values which can be found in a reading of the historical Bernard's personhood, and which is reiterated and repossessed by Dante not only through Bernard the character, but through the characters of other actors in the poem. I argue that Dante finds in his reading of the historical Bernard something that accords with Dante's own view of persons and of God. Indeed, it is a reading that is so central to Dante's conception of theology, that any of the case studies below could very well be replaced by others that would serve to make the point just as well: that persons are key. Understanding God is inseparable from understanding the nature of our own createdness; and that therefore the concept of understanding itself is not an intellectual activity alone but must include within it the notions of being and participation: who we are, how we live, what we do.

But the chapter goes on to complicate this picture by comparing a reading of key texts of Bernard and Aquinas, alongside an analysis of how each of their characters is figured in the poem. This reading takes as its starting point the theological methodologies that each theologian would have been known for in Dante's Florence: Bernard's mystical contemplation and the rather more workaday constructions of Aquinas's rigorous intellectualism. In Bernard's description of the vision of God available on Earth—an experience of love, understood through human love—joy is palpable; in

Aquinas's intellectual zealotry, his hunger for understanding, for clarity, is paramount. Both theologians offer Dante a view on how to approach God and also how to write about that approach; Dante takes these lessons and creates his own unique response. The chapter ends by suggesting that although Bernard's heart beats throughout the poem, and is necessary for any adequate human response to God, it is Aquinas's intellect which, in the end, must complete for Dante, the final vision.

2. Bernard's Authentic Heart

Stephen Botterill suggests that the first *terzina* of *Paradiso* XXXII—lines which introduce Bernard's speech describing the ranks of the blessed—tells us most of what we need to know about why Dante chose St Bernard of Clairvaux as his final guide. According to Botterill, the lines show us:

Bernard as devoted to Mary [...] as contemplative [...] and, for the first but not the last time, as eloquent; and it seems far from unreasonable to conclude that this combination of factors, all three of which the Bernard of Trecento culture and the Bernard of the *Commedia* have in common, goes a very long way indeed towards explaining why Bernard appears in the poem at all, why he appears where he does, and why his words and actions in the text take the form that they do.³

The character we find in the *Commedia* is on this reading fit for purpose for his role in Paradise, given what we know of his historical biography: he is a devotee of Mary; he is known for his affective, contemplative theology, a theology not based on huge written treatises of doctrine, but on an experiential mysticism; and he is remembered for his skills with language, both as a preacher—his medieval moniker was Dr. Mellifluous—but also in his written works, in conveying his experiences of God, for example, in his sermons *super Cantica canticorum*, which are so direct and immediate in their vibrancy that it is almost impossible not to be moved by them. This is

³ Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, p. 93.

the Bernard who seems to fit rather nicely into his role in the last three cantos of *Paradiso*; when Dante-*personaggio*, too, is experiencing God, encountering God through the intercession of both Bernard and Mary and who, like Bernard, must later write those experiences down and communicate them to the world.

Not only is Dante purportedly doing something akin to the historical Bernard, in writing about a personal and direct experience of God, but he is also placing the character of Bernard right in the middle of Dante-pilgrim's experience of the divine. So we are reminded here that others have written about the experience of God too and are left wondering what Dante is asking of us in setting up this juxtaposition between past and present works. Not only this but, as Dante does not give us any of historical Bernard's actual words,⁴ we have the further task of reading the character through the actions and words that Dante *does* give him, set against the backdrop of what we know of him from elsewhere. That tension between the two Bernards, or rather between *multiple* Bernards, opens up rich sources for interpretation.

The first question about Bernard's character, which I address below, connects his mystical experience of God with the language that he is able to use. Within his own lifetime, and certainly by the thirteenth century, Bernard is already famous for his articulacy and eloquence. This eloquence—the beautiful theological language that he uses in order to write and speak about the nature of God—can, I argue, be understood as one product of Bernard's authenticity. It is an authenticity that arises from his complete desire for God, his ardour, his dedication to experiencing God on Earth. It is for this reason, I suggest, among others, that the historical Bernard provides a model for Dante. Bernard writes:

⁴ This is a pattern that is often repeated in the poem with other characters who are based on real people.

Si non desideraveritis, non perfecte amabitis.

*Epistola XVIII to Cardinal Deacon Peter*⁵

Luceat lux vestra coram hominibus, ut tamen et coram Deo ardeat dicaturque etiam de vobis: ille erat lucerna ardens et lucens. Alterum vobis, alterum vestris necessarium est. Bene lucet qui de propria accenditur igne. Quanti non suo lumine lucent; hypocritae lucere cupiunt, ardere nolunt. Expedit autem e duobus ardere sine lumine quam absque igne lucere.

*Epistola DV to Baldwin, Archbishop of Pisa*⁶

Beatum dixerim et sanctum, cui tale aliquid in hac mortali vita raro interdum, aut vel semel, et hoc ipsum raptim, atque unius vix momenti spatio experiri donatum est. Te enim quodammodo perdere, tanquam qui non sis, et omnino non sentire teipsum, et a teipso exinaniri, et pene annullari, coelestis est conversationis, non humanae affectionis.

*De diligendo Deo, X, 27*⁷

This ardour for experiencing God, and the desire to ‘shine’ for those that read his works or hear his sermons, transforms into the eloquence for which he is known. As a preacher on fire for God, he able to convert large numbers of people to the Church. In his sermon on the anniversary of Bernard’s death—a sermon which is found in Santa Croce during Dante’s

⁵ *Sancti Bernardi Opere*, ed. by J. Leclercq and H. Rochais, 8 vols (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957-77), VII, p. 92. ‘If you do not desire God ardently, you will not love him perfectly.’ (19), *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, translated by B. S. James (Stroud: Sutton), 1998, p.53. James’s edition of the letters uses a numbering system that does not correspond to that of the critical edition by J. Leclercq and H. Rochais. The James numbering is indicated in parentheses.

⁶*Bernardi Opere*, VIII, p. 463. ‘For your own good it is necessary that you should burn, and for the good of those that look to you it is necessary that you should shine. He shines well he who is lit by his own fire. Those who do not shine with their own light, shine as hypocrites with a borrowed light, not being on fire themselves.’ (115), *Letters*, p. 172.

⁷ *Bernardi Opere*, III, p. 142. ‘I would count him blessed and holy to whom such rapture has been vouchsafed in this mortal life, for even an instant to lose yourself, as if you were emptied and lost and swallowed up in God, is no human love; it is celestial.’ *On Loving God*, translated by E. Stiegman (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), pp. 29-30.

life there – Geoffrey of Auxerre says of Bernard that ‘Ignitum ejus eloquium vehementer’.⁸ What do they see and hear and respond to, if not that ardour itself: the authenticity of a man who burns day and night for the God that he loves? In eloquence there is power, and it a power that derives from an authentic heart.

When Dante comes to figure Bernard in the *Commedia*, he retains this aspect of Bernard’s character. It is Bernard’s burning desire which we see in Cantos XXXI and XXXIII, in the presence of which, Dante-*personaggio* can learn how to approach the vision of God. Bernard’s fire is for God, but here, in the last canto of *Paradiso*, it also an ardent desire that the pilgrim should experience God’s fullness too. Dante responds to Bernard’s ardour and consequently is able to turn his gaze again towards Mary, and ultimately towards God. We see this with the repeated use of the words *ardere*, *ardente*, and *caldo* which both Bernard and Dante embody. *Paradiso* XXXI, 139-142, shows us Bernard’s desire and Dante-*personaggio*’s response:

Bernardo, come vide li occhi miei
nel caldo suo caler fissi e attenti,
li suoi con tanto affetto volse a lei,
che ' miei di rimirar fé più ardenti.

Paradiso XXXI, 139-142

It makes sense that this ardour motivates Bernard’s actions, and that these, in turn, demonstrate this virtue of authenticity that I am suggesting underpins Bernard’s character, as we perceive it, in his written works. But although we might have a gut feeling about the notion of authenticity – its meaning and its value – it is not by any means conceptually innocent or straightforwardly simple. It is as theoretically difficult and value-laden as the concept of virtue itself – but, I think, that should not make us jettison it as somehow contaminated before we have considered its application here.

⁸ *PL*, CLXXXV, 573.

As a first pass, we might say that being authentic means in some way being *true to oneself*—and immediately, of course, the problems that this definition suggest become clear. There is a long-rehearsed and well-trodden history of questioning what such a virtue might even mean given that it sounds rather suspect that there could be some ontically prior being with which you could act in accordance; whether it has any moral value in and of itself; and if it is still worthy a virtue of defending today. Charles Taylor has in the twentieth century attempted a retrieval of the concept of authenticity from what he has seen as a flattening of the term, a slide to subjectivism in contemporary culture: an ideal that puts self-fulfilment above all else.⁹

I am not suggesting that Bernard's authenticity is motivated by this type of inward turn, to the satisfaction of the self's desires above all else. Quite the contrary. Not only would such a criticism feel anachronistic, but it undermines the essence of what I want to pick out by the term, anyway. The authenticity that the historical Bernard embodies is outward-facing, always beyond himself towards God, and for the glory of God. His actions and his language are determined by a love for God that possesses his heart, such that everything which flows from it has the stamp of a unifying faith and a desire for greater union with his maker. His character, his personhood, is defined by this love and it is in *this* sense that being true to oneself means being authentic. That authentic heart of Bernard's has other products, besides the desire for an immediate experience of God. It is able to see and respond to other human beings, too. As I show below, it values human relationships and is able to understand how and why these are amongst God's most important creations. Where, if anywhere, would a Florentine like Dante find evidence of Bernard's authentic heart?

Botterill notes that there are works of Bernard in the libraries in Dante's Florence, but they are surprisingly thin on the ground, and they are not the

⁹ See, for example, *Sources of the Self*.

works for which he is famed. How he was present, the depth and penetration of his works, how he compares with other theologians or appears in their works, and which aspects of his character were celebrated can be recovered, to some extent, by looking again at the holdings of the convent libraries, as we saw in Chapter I. Santa Croce housed the most works of Bernard in Florence during our period, but even here, those that are considered his major works were missing. The *Sermones super Cantica canticorum* and Bernard's other major treatises, *De diligendo Deo*, *De Consideratione* and *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio* are notable by their absence. Of course, what we have to go on here are the surviving library catalogues, which can only show us what was present, and cannot prove beyond doubt what was not. What *is* present is largely contained within one very interesting codex now at the Laurenziana.¹⁰ We know that this codex was in the keeping of Illuminato Caponsacci, thanks to the *nota di possesso* written inside the front cover, and thus would have been unlikely to have been lent to anyone else. But it at least must have formed part of the story of the cultural transmission of Bernard's character during Dante's lifetime. Within it are Bernard's *Sermones per Annum* and his long sermon-treatise, *De Conversione*. The *Vita Prima* is also present. In addition, there is a sermon by Bernard's biographer on the anniversary of his death, and four letters by Pope Alexander III on Bernard's canonisation. There are also, most interestingly, two hundred and fifty-eight letters by Bernard himself. In Santa Maria Novella, only Bernard's letters are listed in the catalogues from the 1280s and 1290s.¹¹

These letters paint a rich and vivid portrait of the historical Bernard and provide tantalising insights into his life, his works and his character. In total, the surviving letters of Bernard number in their hundreds. Estimates about the actual number that were written do not stop short of thousands.

¹⁰ BML Pl. XXI.

¹¹ BNC, Conv. Soppr. G.1.695.

What do they, available as they were to readers in the thirteenth century, reveal about his character? And how does this knowledge of medieval understandings affect our reading of the last three cantos of the poem, today? The letters themselves give one an idea of the huge weight of responsibility that Bernard bore in his varied and hectic career—as abbot, as preacher, as crusader, and as counsellor to popes and kings. It is thus unsurprising that the tone of the letters is often rushed: time short, work calling. That such a volume of words was written at all is impressive, before one considers the number of different individuals with whom the Abbot of Clairvaux corresponded.

So it is even more striking, then, that although the tone betrays the pressure of his other commitments, the letters are uniformly *personal* in their nature, whatever the situation or the rank of the recipient. Many of the letters are not so much about transacting Church business, but about the state of a person's well-being, usually the state of their soul. Bernard's concern for his fellow man and woman positively leaps from the page: the letters are clearly written in love. Fearful for the soul who does not fully embrace God's Word, Bernard wants his reader to understand the dangers of leaving the path of righteousness. But it is a concern that is for a unique, specific individual, rather than for the situation of souls in general. Even when writing to a stranger, Bernard seems fully apprised of the relevant details of a person's life such that he can write to them with a power, with a force of rhetoric, that cannot have left the recipient unmoved.

Genus clarum, corpus aptum, forma elegans, ingenium velox,
eruditionis utilitas et honestas morum, gloriosa quidem sunt, sed ei
a quo sunt.

*Epistola CIV to Walter of Chaumont*¹²

¹² *Bernardi Opere*, VII, p.261. [N]oble birth, lithe body, comely appearance, a distinguished bearing are great acquisitions, but the credit of them belongs to him who gave them [...] (105) *Letters*, p.152.

The words of his letters are lively, warm, encouraging, humane, poetic, coaxing, at times admonishing, full of scripture—both quotations and with words of scripture enfolded within his own phrases. Always time is pressing: he is concerned about his own business, his works on Earth, and his inability to meet with all the people to whom he is writing (sometimes he sends others in his place—see letter 171 to Richard at Fountains Abbey). But providential history too, is pressing—the thief in the night might be coming tonight—and this urgency is palpable. Run to the light! Take up an attitude, one and all, and direct your actions towards the eternal state of your soul. Bernard’s loving concern is evident even in anger and disappointment when his correspondents’ actions have fallen short of the mark.

Ut quid enim hactenus nonna et sanctimonialis vocitata es, quae sub sanctitatis nomine, tam non sancta conversata es? Cur velum in capite mentiebatur reverentiam, sub velo petulans oculus exhibebat impudentiam? Caput siquidem gerebas velatum, sed elatum; sub signo verecundiae sermo resonabat inverecundus. Risus immoderator, incessus lascivior, vestitus ornator, wimplatae magis quam velatae congruerent...

*Epistola CXIV to a nun*¹³

Elsewhere, he reassures the parents of a young convert who has joined the monastery at Clairvaux, *Epistola CX*: ‘At fortassis metuitis corpori eius vitae asperitatem, quod nimirum tenerum nostis esse ac delicatum.’¹⁴ These letters of love—letters written in love and about Love—contain within them questions about the nature of the written word which Bernard must have found vexed. On the one hand, his huge output demonstrates how

¹³ *Bernardi Opere*, VII, p.293. ‘Why have you been hitherto called ‘nun’? [W]hen under the cover of your holy habit you were living a life that was not holy [...] Why did you feign by the veil on your head a gravity that your impudent glances belied? The veil you wore covered a haughty brow [...] saucy tongue [...] unrestrained giggles [...] wanton bearing [...] (117) *Letters*, p. 179.

¹⁴ *Bernardi Opere*, VII, p.282. ‘[k]nowing that he is tender and delicate, perhaps you are afraid for his health.’ (112) *Letters*, p. 169.

important and powerful he thinks the written word actually is, but at the same time Bernard's repeated refrain is of wanting a personal presence, a face-to-face communion with the individual, rather than having to make do with written correspondence.

Si quae tamen recompensatio est de nobis ad vos, libenter vos legimus, libentius haberemus. Utinam numquam abessemus nobis. Verum id quidem desperatum: utinam vel rarum vestram praesentiam mereremur.

*Epistola CV to Baldwin*¹⁵

This need for close contact speaks, at times, to an out-and-out distrust of the power of the written word, whilst at others to the power of the directly-spoken encounter and the need for human connectedness. His distrust fits within the wider framework of his theological conservatism. He says, in *Epistola IV*, to Arnold, a monk who brought shame on the Cistercian Order for having run away from the monastery: 'Revera autem prae dolore fateor, non potui, cum, etsi pro certo scirem ubi te opportune invenissem, ipse potius venissem quam has misissem, effecturus fortasse per meipsum quod nullis litteris possum.'¹⁶ It is difficult to say whether Bernard's presence for poor Arnold would have been amenable or intimidating, but we see at least that Bernard thinks that his written words alone do not suffice. Elsewhere, in a long letter to Prior Guy (*Epistola XI*), Bernard distances himself from his own verbosity, saying, 'Quia pudet loquacitatis.'¹⁷

When it comes to trusting other people's words, we have a notable and very public example of the way in which words can be dangerous for Bernard. His defence of orthodoxy in the affair with Peter Abelard results in Bernard's feverish letters to fellow monks, bishops and the Pope,

¹⁵ *Bernardi Opere*, VII, p. 462. 'I read your letter [...] and would have had even greater pleasure in your presence [...] I wish that we could always be together [...] or at least [...] we could see each other from time to time.' (115) *Letters*, p. 172.

¹⁶ *Bernardi Opere*, VII, p. 25. 'I would come in person rather than write to you, perhaps to achieve more by my presence than I could by letter.' (4) *Letters*, p. 20.

¹⁷ *Bernardi Opere*, VII, p.60. 'I am ashamed of my wordiness.' (12) *Letters*, p. 48.

beseeking all to read Abelard's writings and join with him in condemning him as a heretic. Bernard writes of Abelard:

Iniquitatem in excelso loquitur; integritatem fidei, castitatem Ecclesiae corrumpit. Transgreditur terminos quos posuerunt Patres nostri, de fide, de sacramentis, de sancta Trinitate disputans et scribens, singula pro sua voluntate mutat, auget et minuit... Homo est egrediens mensuram suam, in sapientia verbi evacuans virtutem crucis Christi.

*Epistola CXCIII*¹⁸

This quote, taken from a letter to Cardinal Ivo, and which is representative of the many letters that Bernard wrote about Abelard, is interesting on two counts: firstly, because Bernard's inherent conservatism is striking. The landmarks placed by our Fathers should not be breached. Theological thought, discussion and writing should be contained within the parameters set out by the Church Fathers. Not only that but, secondly, we hear that clever words are suspicious for Bernard, and not merely because one risks falling in to the sin of pride when over-reaching oneself and moving beyond the sphere of theological discussion laid down by the fathers of the church. It is worse than that: there is serious danger that such clever words may undermine Christ's work on Earth. They are powerful weapons in the wrong hands, as Bernard tells us in the case of Arnold of Brescia, a pupil of Abelard, who also receives his condemnation in a letter to the Bishop of Constance:

Molliti sunt sermones eius super oleum, et ipsi sunt iacula.

*Epistola CXCIV*¹⁹

¹⁸ *Bernardi Opere*, VIII, p. 45. 'He corrupts the integrity of the faith and the chastity of the church. He oversteps the landmarks placed by our Fathers in discussing and writing about faith, the sacraments and the Holy Trinity [...] He is a man who does not know his limitations, making void the virtue of the cross by the cleverness of his words.' (241) *Letters*, p. 321.

¹⁹ *Bernardi Opere*, VIII, p. 50. 'His words are smooth as oil, but they are very weapons of destruction.' (250) *Letters*, p. 330.

A picture of Bernard begins to emerge that enhances and qualifies the portrait of him as the writer of eloquent sermons and powerful letters, and as the monk who desires union with God on Earth, but who wants never to forget his connections with fellow humans. Indeed, Bernard's relationship with language, its power and range of proper use—particularly in reference to theology—is conflicted. He clearly loves language, and sees in it the possibility of communicating God's love; he understands the power that can be deployed through the judicious use of the written and spoken word, whether in letters about earthy human matters, or indeed in sermons about the most mystical: the beatific vision itself. His whole output is possessed by a desire for better communicating what God means. And yet, with this knowledge he worries that words might be put to ill use; that they have the capacity for seduction, for turning souls towards sinfulness. And he can be shamed by his own words, too: verbosity might well be the ground in which pride, or judgement, or anger, can take hold.

This brings us back to the question of what Dante is doing in choosing and using such a theologian to be his final guide. What can we understand when Dante describes Bernard's words and speech in the *Commedia* as *parole sante* (*Paradiso* XXXII, 3) and a *santa orazione* (151), given what we know of historical Bernard's relationship with language? Ultimately, Dante's words (or so he tells us) are unsuccessful in describing the vision that he sees. Historical-Bernard's ardour in life had resulted in a mystical experience of God which he communicated through speech, via his works and sermons. Dante-*poeta* celebrates Bernard's powers by putting the beautiful prayer to Mary in his mouth, and by presenting him as the model by which he and we learn how to gaze at God's light. Dante's self-conscious disavowal of the power of his own speech belies the fact that he has achieved something similar to Bernard: a way of thinking about what our approach to God—and others—should consist in.

3. Bernard's Heart in the *Commedia*: three case studies

In Sermon XXVI of his sermons *super Cantica canticorum*, Bernard laments the death of his dear brother, Gerard. The sermon itself is a powerful piece of prose, and through it we can see, again, the authenticity of Bernard-the-man brought out in eloquent fashion: the strength and the fragility of the human being is communicated directly and speaks to us across centuries. Whether it was delivered as a sermon by Bernard himself, or whether it was created only as a written work for circulation, those who heard or read it cannot fail to have been moved. Grief pours from the page.

Bernard looks to both the Old and New Testaments to help him come to terms with the contradictions of death: how to celebrate a life which is now in Glory, and how to cope with the hopelessness he feels in being bereft. 'Non sum, fateor, insensibilis ad poenas, mortem horreo meam et meorum. Meus Girardus erat, meus plane.'²⁰ The sermon exhorts his congregation to look at Biblical examples of grief for lessons on how to be human: David grieves for Saul and for Absalom, though neither seem particularly worthy. Jesus weeps for Lazarus. Bernard censures himself for not being true to his own feelings immediately following Gerard's death, when he had hidden his anguish from his fellow brethren. It is not weakness to weep: weeping is not a sign of a lack of faith, it indicates the human condition, says Bernard. He highlights Christ's humanity, by reminding us that Jesus was fully human in his grief for his friend, but at the same time urges us to be Christ-like, too, with all else that that entails. The portrait of his much-missed brother—which celebrates Gerard's uniqueness and remembers his individual qualities—is personal and specific.

²⁰ *Bernardi Opere*, I, Sermon XXVI, 9, p.177. 'To think that I shall die, that those who are mine will die, fills me with dread. And Gerard was mine, so utterly mine.' *On the Song of Songs, I-IV* in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. by K. Walsh and I. Edmonds, 4 vols (Kalamazoo, MI: Kalamazoo Publications Inc., 1971-81).

Memories of, and love for, individuals; tears in the face of pain and death; the imitation of Christ: these are all important themes in the *Purgatorio*. The *cantica* is full of characters who are orientated in some way to the virtues that the historical Bernard embodied. As a model of virtue, of authenticity, shall we say, Bernard provides a backdrop against which to read these characters and provides a means for understanding them more fully.

3.1 Buonconte and Manfred's authenticity

In Ante-Purgatory, the preoccupations of Bernard's authentic heart can be seen at play both in the words and actions of named characters and in the behaviour of the anonymous souls who interact with Dante-*personaggio*. Manfred and Buonconte da Montefeltro are two characters, both late repenters, found in *Purgatorio* III and V respectively, who exemplify something of Bernard's authenticity.²¹ We find that memories of their character matter to those they left behind, but also that *being* remembered is important to the shades themselves (*Purgatorio* III, 142; V, 89); that tears are indeed vital, and crucially so (*Purgatorio* III, 120; V, 107); that although their lives may not have been characterised by Bernard's loving desire for God, a re-orientation to the divine is possible even in the final moments of a life (*Purgatorio* III, 121; V, 101; 126-7).

In Canto V, a group of rather startled shades accosts the pilgrim and question him about the shadow that his body casts on the ground. The shades themselves cast no shadow, and will not do so until they are reunited, at the Second Coming, with their now-glorified bodies. The importance of bodies—both their weaknesses, their vulnerabilities, and their demonstrative power—begins here a theme that I wish to return to throughout this section. For, ultimately, the 'vera carne' (*Purgatorio* V, 33)

²¹ For a useful discussion of Buonconte, see: D. Pietropaolo, 'The Figural Context of Buonconte's Salvation', *Dante Studies*, 102 (1984), 123-34.

which Virgil says Dante-*personaggio* is blessed with, invites us to read these episodes in Ante-Purgatory with a Christological lens, and in the light of that other Truth that became flesh.

The shades continue their hectoring of the pilgrim and beseech him to look at them, in lines 49-51, to see if he recognises any individuals amongst them, 'sì che di lui di là novella porti' (50). Dante claims not to see anyone he knows, and so is unable to take up the commission. There are two things that I want to flag up here which Bernard himself might well have endorsed: firstly, the importance of seeing individuals for who they are, or at least, making an attempt to see them. That is, understanding that in God's sight, even after souls have been saved, the importance of the identity—the constitution—of individual human beings, remains intact. Secondly, that the memories of those now-dead individuals are important to the loved ones that they leave behind on Earth, as we saw so movingly with Bernard and his brother, but also, at least according to Dante, to the souls themselves in Purgatory. Prayers and memories for those in the afterlife have real power. As Manfred says, at *Purgatorio* III, 141 and 145, prayers can shorten the length of time that the souls spend on each terrace, or, in his case, in Ante-Purgatory, for having been excommunicated: he wants the pilgrim to take news back to his daughter and ensure that he is remembered as having repented at the last, even though his sins in his life had been 'orribil' (III, 121). Later in the cantica, Forese thanks the prayers of his wife Nella, for his swift progression up the mountain. In Canto V, we find that Buonconte da Montefeltro is downcast because his own wife, Giovanna, has seemingly forgotten him (V, 89).

But Buonconte can seek help elsewhere: he is able to see the pilgrim as an individual, too, just as his own individuality is foregrounded at *Purgatorio* V, 88 ('Io fui di Montefeltro, Io son Bonconte.') and he can recognise in Dante the desire for God that he now feels himself. This, indeed, is his

opening address to Dante and underlines how desire must be at the centre of our relationship with God, just as it was for Bernard. "...[S]e quel disio l si compia che ti tragge a l'alto monte, l con buona pietate aiuta al mio!" (85-87). The shades had already explained to Dante and his guide, that they exited life, with desire in their hearts to see God.

Noi fummo tutti già per forza morti,
e peccatori infino a l'ultima ora;
quivi lume del ciel ne fece accorti,
sì che, pentendo e perdonando, fora
di vita uscimmo a Dio pacificati,
che del disio di sé veder n'accora.

Purgatorio V, 52-57

Buonconte recounts how he was wounded in the throat before he died at the Battle of Campaldino. The report he makes of his violent death shows how his re-orientation to God did not need the eloquent words of a preacher to bring it about, had he even been able to articulate them. One word, spoken by Buonconte himself, is enough to secure his salvation: 'Maria' (101); when language fails him, one tear, 'una lagrimetta' (107), can give voice to a repentant heart; and in his dying body, as his arms become the shape of the cross (126), he can imitate Christ crucified, and show how his desire for God brings with it an understanding of the love that overcomes death.

Buonconte cries out to Mary and she intercedes on his behalf for his eternal salvation. Of course, Bernard, too, was a devotee of Mary and Dante reminds us of this fact at the end of the *Paradiso*, when the Abbot of Clairvaux prays to the Virgin, his sponsor, for Dante-*personaggio's* soul. It is not just any prayer: it is an expression of Dante's own linguistic prowess in recognition of the historical-Bernard's eloquence (and perhaps, as it does not contain any of the saint's actual words, it can even be read as Dante's *repossession* of Bernard's eloquence); it is a celebration of the Virgin's power, as the mother of Christ, to close the wound, 'la piaga' (*Paradiso*

XXXII, 4), of the sin that Eve first brought upon humankind, and as such it is the exposition of a theological position which highlights how Bernard's Marianism brings with it a focus on individuals, on affective rather than an intellectual desire for God, and on the very human virtues which Mary exemplified, and with which Dante illustrates the terraces of Purgatory. Buonconte needs his wounds closing, although his throat is pierced beyond earthly help. His heart turns towards Mary.

And so with one word and with one tear, he repents. Bernard's tears were for his dead brother, and perhaps, for himself: a demonstration of his inability to reconcile the glory which Gerard now enjoys and the misery he experiences at his brother's loss. But this is human, Bernard tells us, and shows how we are imperfect creatures—but creatures who love and who therefore understand, to some extent at least, the wonder of creation. Buonconte's tear is human too: it is the outward sign of a creature who recognises himself before a loving God, and sees that his pride had kept him from enjoying that Love which would have been available to him had he just asked.

Buonconte's conversion at the point of death is dramatic, and even though his body becomes the demonstrative vessel for what his heart now understands, being pierced as it is with desire for God, there is no one here to witness that demonstration, only the angels and demons wrangling over his soul. This is a portrait of a conversion which is utterly personal; Buonconte is entirely alone at his death, and so there is nothing about his utterance or his actions which can be misconstrued: this is an authentic heart.

The words of the Psalmist, which Buonconte sings in Purgatory, describe a similar heart: 'cor mundum crea mihi Deus'.²² Buonconte's bleeding body is

²² Psalms 50:12. 'Create a clean heart in me, O God.'

washed along in the deluge of the Archiano, cleansed and rebaptised too, as the fury of the demon takes hold. Above all, though, Psalm 50 is about one person's relation to God: have mercy on *me*; create a clean heart in *me*; blot out *my* iniquities; cast *me* not away from thy face. The preoccupations of Bernard return: one individual, face-to-face with another, this time the created and Creator. Buonconte's body becomes the shape of the Cross, as he recognises the truth about his createdness. The morphological significance of his body demonstrates the truth that his personhood has changed too: face-to-face with his Creator, he understands now that he is himself part of the love that is God, that his identity must be constituted by a dialogical relationship with God, and that only through the grace of Christ crucified is this now possible.

Manfred is another late repentant, in *Purgatorio* III, whose body becomes Christ-like. His body retains the wounds, in Purgatory, that it suffered during life. Manfred's introduction to Dante-*personaggio* follows the same pattern that we see with Buonconte in *Purgatorio* V: a group of shades is puzzled or afraid by the shadow that Dante's body throws on the ground, and then the pilgrim is asked to look at (one of) the shades to see if he recognises them. It is Manfred who does the asking: and again, he wants Dante to *really* look, even whilst they are walking, 'volgi 'l viso' (104). As in the later episode, Dante denies that he can recognise the face, here the task made more difficult because 'l'un de' cigli un colpo avea diviso' (108). But Manfred is not deterred, and invites Dante-*personaggio* to inspect another wound, *una piaga*, on his chest. Then, seemingly smiling at his own broken body, or perhaps at his now-happy situation, he identifies himself. 'Poi sorridendo disse: Io son Manfredi' (112).

This scene of invitation and of identification, has obvious echoes of the episodes in the Gospels in which the risen Christ appears to his disciples and shows the wounds of his crucifixion. In particular, one is reminded of

John 20:24-9, when Christ invites Thomas to not only look at his wounds, like Manfred, but to touch them as well: 'infer digitum tuum huc et vide manus meas et adfer manum tuam et mitte in latus meum et noli esse incredulus sed fidelis'. So in Manfred's gesture we are reminded of Christ's outstretched arms to Thomas and his command to Thomas to have faith. At line 118, Manfred, like Buonconte, weeps at the moment of his death, and in doing so gives himself up to the God whose arms are so large that they can encompass any wrongdoing, even though:

Orribil furon li peccati miei;
ma la Bontà infinita ha sì gran braccia
che prende ciò che si rivolge a lei

Purgatorio III, 121-123

Manfred is concerned with his memory back on Earth, too. In a reversal of the fate of Buonconte's father, Guido da Montefeltro, in *Inferno* XXVII, it is erroneously believed that Manfred has been damned. He is an excommunicate, and even his family, including his daughter Constance, believes he now resides in Hell. But the poet rectifies this mistaken belief and shows us a Manfred to whom God has given his rightful, eternal salvation. Manfred is keen that the record be set straight: his heart turned, instinctively at the last, and he recognised the risen Christ, like Thomas, almost too late. In Hell, Guido mistakenly thinks that Dante-*personaggio* has no means to return to Earth to tell his loved ones that he is in fact damned. Although he had given the appearance of contrition by changing his life, there had been no authentic conversion to God, and the fact that he was seemingly tricked by Boniface demonstrates that his understanding of God's love and grace was woefully lacking.

3.2 Francesca and her words of love

Much has been written about the forever-tormented figures of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, in *Inferno* V. Restless lovers, swirling amidst a flock of other famously lusty sinners, they are as attractive to us as they are to Dante-*personaggio*. The scene in which they appear opens with pilgrim and guide watching the whirlwind of lovers, Virgil naming particular individuals, and Dante-*poeta* admitting that he is already moved by pity before he even speaks with Francesca. Dante-*personaggio* picks out Francesca and Paolo at line 74, and asks Virgil if he can talk with them. Francesca is happy to oblige: she has the pilgrim in her sights when she uses her seductive language to justify the acts which placed her in Hell. Bernard's warnings about Arnold and Abelard could equally be applied to Francesca, too: her words are indeed smooth as oil, and contain within them the seeds of destruction. As readers of poetry we are susceptible to her language, just as she herself was, and thus, she tells us, we and the pilgrim are right to pity her fate. In being selected by Dante-*personaggio*, Francesca presumes that her story is worthy ('...poi c'hai pietà del nostro mal perverso'; V, 93), that her acts are blameless, even though the evident facts of the matter must speak to the contrary, and that she can, from her place of never-ending pain, explain her way out of Hell. Even now, she says, the king of the universe is unfriendly, as though he has misunderstood something about the nature of love. Thus she betrays her wholesale misunderstanding of the nature of God, starting from the ground up.

It has been noted that the words which Dante gives to Francesca in order to describe her infernal fate, are voiced almost entirely in a passive register, such that all sense of the agency that she had in life falls away. Martha Nussbaum eloquently summarises Francesca and Paolo's problem:

The sense we have is of people who cannot see the individuality and agency in one another, because they have insufficient respect

for their own. They do not regard life as something involving agency or deliberation at all, because they are captivated by the idea of surrender to the forces of passion.²³

There was simply nothing that they could have done to resist love when it seized them. And indeed, for Francesca herself, this fact shows just what a *gentile* heart she must have had: a heart attuned to love, to human emotion, to beauty and literature—all these good things. Francesca seems to believe that she embodied a virtue that now deserves pity, and is confused by the fact of her damnation: her current state of wretchedness must be due to some mistake. Indeed, her gentle heart—seemingly but superficially so like Bernard’s—can extend even to Dante. She wants to pray for his peace, but, she confesses, she has no means at her disposal to do this effectively, being permanently shut out from God’s light.

Francesca’s seeming innocence strikes one as disingenuous, to say the least. The mirror starts to crack at around line 90, where she suggests that her sins have actually stained the world blood-red. So not totally unaware, after all. Of course, what we can see perfectly clearly, and what Francesca only refers to obliquely, is that this is not a love story at all, but one of lust. Hers is a misdirection of the will; reason is abandoned in favour of a capitulation to bodily and aesthetic sensuality.

Submitting the will to reason is just one way you might think to order moral behaviour and, indeed, this method could well prevent one from committing the sin of adultery. But Francesca fails morally, more seriously, in other ways beyond mere governance of her will. Yes, her lust causes her to abandon her marital vows, but it is in her failure to understand what it really means to love another individual that her moral life remains forever and catastrophically impoverished. It is this fact that means she will never

²³ M. C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 566.

know what God is; or understand how her createdness is an expression of His love; or that the Incarnation itself was the ultimate act of love; or that as creatures of God our will and desire should at the last join with his will in praising him. Her language of love is antithetical to what love really is: her theology is wholly absent.

Dante gives us a clue about this failure through Francesca's seeming inability to utter her lover's name. Of course, the naming of individuals is a powerful device which the poet uses deliberately and sometimes devastatingly throughout the narrative, and as I suggested in Chapter I, I think it is integral to understanding Dante's conception of personhood.²⁴ Here, poor Paolo's name is lost in perpetuity. The impression we are left with, as readers, is that it could have been *any* (albeit handsome, book-loving) man that was at the root of Francesca's damnation: his identity, his name, does not matter, because it was not the individual that mattered to Francesca. What matters to Francesca is being caught up, like a generic character in a courtly love poem or in a romance, by blind passion. She does not see and does not love the individual, in the way that Bernard so clearly does. Her unseeing-ness means that she does not understand that Paolo—and, indeed, Francesca herself—are particular expressions of the infinite power of God's love; that in creating unique human individuals with free will, with agency, God's creation reaches its zenith. Nussbaum suggests that understanding this fact fully means that loving an individual requires a 'respect for agency' and a requirement of reciprocity. 'This distinguishes [Christian love] from (mere) erotic, courtly love...' so that:

[o]nly in the context of Christian salvation [...] does the will have full integrity. But this means that it is only in the context of salvation that two people can love one another with full respect for subjecthood and agency.²⁵

²⁴ I return to the theme of the importance of naming in Chapter IV.

²⁵ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 564.

Francesca's proclivity to misconstrue love, to surrender the will to lust, to break a vow, is nurtured by her reading poor literature, poorly. The philosopher, Peter Levine, makes the point succinctly:

[B]ad fiction contains clichés and stereotypes that get in the way of thinking and judging accurately [...] the moral of Canto V is to use stories for moral guidance, but only *good* stories, well and carefully read.²⁶

So with Francesca, Dante not only warns us against the irrevocable dangers of misunderstanding romantic love, and consequently, misunderstanding the nature of God's love itself, but he warns us about literature too. In Dante-*personaggio's* response to the lovers' fate we see that a sympathetic reaction is understandable, and in some senses noble: it is a response to the pathos of a death which was brought about through a lover's heart. We should not be so quick to dismiss Francesca and Paolo's folly because it is a danger that we all might be guilty of. Francesca's so-called *gentile* heart shows her disposition to be attuned towards the good and the beautiful, and yet it is wholly misdirected: she is paying attention to the wrong things, and in the wrong way. She should have been able to see that the type of literature that she had become obsessed with does not provide a model for virtue, and therefore should not be emulated; nor does it allow readers to understand what it means to be human in the light of God's grace. Literature at its best is 'finely aware and richly responsible', in Henry James's words.²⁷ For James, it should be perceptive enough to pick out the concreteness of persons in all of their uniqueness and say something meaningful about them, rather than deal in cliché and in generic stock characters; and it should be responsible to an ideal beyond the merely aesthetic or sensual. On this view, language and literature brings with it a

²⁶ P. Levine, 'Why Dante Damned Francesca da Rimini', *Philosophy and Literature*, 23.2 (1999), 334–50 (p. 349).

²⁷ H. James, *The Art of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 62.

moral responsibility on the part of the author and the reader: it is a lesson that Dante takes seriously.

3.3. Ugolino's silence

For Dante, that lesson requires both an understanding of the potentiality of the language of poetry, and of language itself. As in Bernard's face-to-face encounters, for Dante, language is a means for responding to the needs of another. The dialogical character of language, human to human, is an opportunity to understand what God's love consists in, or, in Vittorio Montemaggi's words, to 'be the love which God is'²⁸ in human relationships:

[T]he *Commedia* [is not] one individual's attempt to understand and conceive of and present an objectively accurate [...] picture of God, or experience of God, or the relationship between humans and God [...] For Dante, a theology so conceived a priori fails to grasp the basic distinction between creature and Creator, between that which can be spoken of and that which is the ground of human speech and existence. Rather [...] truth rests on the ability to recognize that one's understanding of truth is defined and constantly redefined by one's readiness to respond in love to the will and needs of another.²⁹

This readiness to respond, this being alert to the needs and the will of another, is by its very nature a readiness to change and develop one's self. So it is the definition of one's own personhood that is up for grabs, through being open and responsive and ready to love—not in an attempt to gain knowledge, as though by loving one can become a vessel to receive some encyclopaedic theological truth—no, rather, by being ready to 'be the love that God is' one's understanding of truth develops as one's very selfhood develops. In our lives on Earth, just as in Purgatory, it is a learning process which takes time, takes effort and, crucially, takes place in dialogue with

²⁸ V. Montemaggi, 'In Unknowability as Love: The Theology of Dante's '*Commedia*'' in Montemaggi and Treherne (eds), *Dante's '*Commedia*': Theology as Poetry*, pp. 60-94 (p. 62).

²⁹ Montemaggi, 'In Unknowability as Love', p. 87.

other human beings. The culmination of this effort, happily, becomes no effort at all in Paradise; it is the state of being at peace in God's will, as Piccarda (after Augustine) so famously asserts.

When Ugolino introduces himself in *Inferno* XXXIII, through a form of words which deliberately recalls Francesca's speech in Canto V, he says that he will tell his story to the pilgrim in such a way that it will cause him to speak and to weep, 'parlare e lagrimar', if this will bestow further infamy on his traitorous enemy. Speaking and crying frames this pitiable story and, as we shall see, Ugolino's narrative is even more full of the pathos which characterised Francesca's. He tells his tale eloquently, even though his mouth is somewhat occupied in devouring the head of the unfortunate Archbishop Ruggieri, who provides Ugolino with the constant repast for his gnawing revenge. This grisly meal does not seem to inhibit the beautiful way in which he tells his story, and again, as readers, we are susceptible to Ugolino's oily words. Does the poet dare us to remain free from tears, as Ugolino suggests *Dante-personaggio* is (lines 40-43), one wonders? In the face of Ugolino's eloquence—that is, in the face of Dante's literary prowess—how can we be unmoved when we hear things such as 'Quivi morì; e come tu mi vedi/ vid'io cascar li tre ad uno ad uno...' (70-71)?

That speaking and crying should be highlighted at the start of his speech not only connects Ugolino with Francesca, whose misunderstanding of the nature of love we saw above, but further, throws into relief the fact that although the story of his and his family's incarceration and ultimate demise *now* causes him 'disperato dolor' (5), the speaking and weeping were altogether missing within the sad story itself. Ugolino's entire emotional life is caught up in outrage over the treachery that was dealt him and now in the desire for revenge that consumes him, just as he consumes Ruggieri. Such blinkered rage pushes out all understanding of his own sin and speaks of an absolute dereliction of responsibility and duty to his family.

For in the content of his narrative itself, there is no speaking and no weeping, none at all, for his own sons. At every opportunity, Ugolino tells us of his silence in reply to their cries, and his dry-eyed response to their own tear-soaked terror. Ugolino's explanation as to why this is the case remains unconvincing – to save his sons from further pain and the knowledge about their imminent deaths – and so what we are left with is a portrait of a hellish locked chamber in which the sounds of children's cries echo against the stone wall of an impenetrable heart (49).

So the dialogic relationship that Ugolino should have nurtured, through language, with members of his own family, indeed, with his very own sons, is altogether missing. In responding to their needs, their fears, their cries, Ugolino is silent. Dante repeats again and again words describing his silence throughout the narrative, as Ugolino tells it. At line 48, 'sanza far motto'; line 52, 'né rispuos' io'; line 64, 'Queta' mi allor'; line 65, 'stemmo tutti muti'; and then, at line 69, in response to Gaddo's Christ-like wail to his father for help in the face of certain death, there is nothing at all: not even a word to describe Ugolino's unresponsiveness, or an explanation for his silence, just a total absence of words. Such a reaction to those he is supposed to love is shocking, inhuman. That he cries no tears underlines the point. The eloquence that he displays in the afterlife is fuelled by the venom in his heart that he retains for his captors and for those who betrayed him and who caused his death; but within his lifetime, the paucity of his language bespeaks the misunderstanding of the love that might have secured him ever-lasting life. It is a language which contrasts sharply with the eloquent language that Bernard used to preach the Gospel, to reach out in love to those hearing his sermons, or reading his letters.

For Montemaggi, it is clear that it is Ugolino's sons who embody the truth that human personhood is 'ontologically closer to love than death'.³⁰ For

³⁰ V. Montemaggi, 'In Unknowability as Love' p. 90.

they are able to understand that within the essential nature of human relationships there exists the capacity to understand—or be—something of God’s love. Their cries to their father, offering up their own bodies so that he might live (62), demonstrate for Montemaggi that human communication and language cannot possibly be only instrumental in its nature: it is constitutive of what persons are, created in and through love. That same lesson is something that the letters of Bernard so vividly communicate: it is the dialogical, the fraternal—above all else a person embedded in community—that we hear in those letters of love. The historical Bernard responds in love to his own family and his brethren—and with anybody, in fact, who will listen—and so demonstrates in his own life a truth which Dante endorses: that any theological understanding can only be constituted by human creatures as they respond to the will and needs of other humans. It is as the theologian Janet Soskice says, ‘we must ask who we love, what we attend to, in order to know who we are and should be.’³¹

4. Bernard and Aquinas: Loving and Knowing

A more complicated picture of the historical Bernard emerges, however, when one considers not only the letters, and his lament for his brother, but his other sermons and treatises too. We have no record now of copies of the sermons *super Cantica canticorum* or of *De diligendo Deo* being housed in the libraries of Florence (it goes without saying that the record may be incomplete), but Dante undoubtedly would have known something of the Bernard that emerges from those works, if only via other sources, for example, the *Vita Prima* or the unusually long entry on Bernard in Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*, or by the Franciscan textbook of Alexander of Hales, *Summa Theologica*, or by sermons preached in local pulpits by Dante’s contemporaries, or stories simply handed down within a devotional domestic sphere. So if not the letter, then certainly the sense of

³¹ J. M. Soskice, *The Kindness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.

the Bernard of those works might well have been established currency in Dante's Florence. The first line of *Paradiso* XXXII refers, indeed, to 'quel contemplante', a description which points to Bernard's fame as a mystic and echoes the lines of a near-contemporary Florentine *lauda* to Bernard, which described him as an 'Aquila contemplativa'.³²

That sense of flight, of ascent, that is brought to mind by the image of a contemplative eagle, is important for this discussion, I think. Because the ascent to God which Bernard describes—steps and ladders being common tropes within Patristic and medieval writings on theology, of course, and found within Bernard's *De diligendo Deo* and *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*—is a journey which leaves behind the sense of human selves that we find in his letters. Indeed, the cares of daily life, of communicating with brethren, of dealing with the vexations of illness, all seem to have been thrust off in a moment of mystical experience of celestial joy:

Beatum dixerim et sanctum, cui tale aliquid in hac mortali vita raro interdum, aut vel semel, et hoc ipsum raptim, atque unius vix momenti spatio experiri donatum est. Te enim quodammodo perdere, tanquam qui non sis, et omnino non sentire teipsum, et a teipso exinaniri, et pene annullari, coelestis est conversationis, non humanae affectionis. Et si quidem e mortalibus quispiam ad illud raptim interdum ut dictum est et ad momentum admittitur, subito invidet saeculum nequam, perturbat diei malitia, corpus mortis aggravat, sollicitat carnis necessitas, defectus corruptionis non sustinet, quodque his violentius est, fraterna revocat charitas.³³

De diligendo Deo X, 27

³² Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Magliabechiano 11, 1, 122 (Banco Rari. 18) f. 110^r.

³³ *Bernardi Opere*, III, p.142. 'I would count him blessed and holy to whom such rapture has been vouchsafed in this mortal life, for even an instant to lose yourself, as if you were emptied and lost and swallowed up in God, is no human love; it is celestial. But if sometimes a poor mortal feels that heavenly joy for a rapturous moment, then this wretched life envies his happiness, the malice of daily trifles disturbs him, this body of death weighs him down, the needs of the flesh are imperative, the weakness of corruption fails him, and above all brotherly love calls him back to duty.' *On Loving God*, translated by E. Stiegman (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), pp. 29-30.

The movement of the soul upwards towards an experience of God is here described as a loss, as an emptying, as being swallowed up. These are metaphors of rapture where selfhood is subordinated to the experience of the divine and ultimately disappears: lost, emptied, consumed. A similar ecstatic experience is described in the sermons *super Cantica canticorum*, and here, of course, it is couched in the language of the erotic, through the metaphor of the consummation of the Bride and Bridegroom. In Sermon 23, Bernard says:

In hoc arcanum et in hoc sanctuarium Dei si quem forte vestrum aliqua hora sic rapti et sic abscondi contigerit, ut minime avocet aut perturbet vel sensus agens, vel cura pungens, vel culpa mordens, vel ea certe, quae difficilius amoventur, irruentia imaginum corporearum phantasmata; poterit quidem hic, cum ad nos redierit, gloriari et dicere: Introduxit me rex in cubiculum suum (Cant. I, 3).³⁴

Sermon XXIII, 16

In this case, the movement of the soul is less on an upward trajectory, an ascent, but is moving into a secret place, a bedroom, the *cubiculum*, of the Song. Again, and most importantly, it is a place removed from the everyday, from the cares of daily life, and the distractions of the senses and imagination.

Of course, an ascent towards a vision of God, and an experience of the divine, is what the narrative of the *Commedia* most obviously and literally describes. As a poem it necessarily employs the art of metaphor (and all other poetic devices, too), just as the Song does, and just as Bernard does, in an attempt to say something true about a journey toward God. But there are differences in the role of the self for Bernard and Dante, here:

³⁴ *Bernardi Opere*, I, pp. 149-50. 'If it should ever happen to one of you to be enraptured and hidden away in this secret place, this sanctuary of God, safe from the call and concern of the greedy senses, from the pangs of care, the guilt of sin and the obsessive fancies of the imagination so much more difficult to hold at bay — such a man, when he returns to us again, may well boast and tell us: 'The King has brought me into his bedroom'.'

substantive differences about how the self understands itself in relation to God, and therefore what it means for humans to know God, which I take up in my discussion below.

The monastic tradition's preoccupation with the Song of Songs has been well-documented. Denys Turner's study, *Eros and Allegory*, throws light on what might seem strange exegetical territory for supposedly chaste, cloistered men.³⁵ The transformation from the literal love-song—hymn to sensuality and sexuality—to allegory for the love of God, for the potential experience of the divine on Earth, had become in the medieval period uncontroversial. Bernard's many sermons on the Song, like Origen's and Gregory's before him, create a rich and complex lesson in how humans can come to approach God. His choice of the Song as a means to express truths about the nature of God itself suggests a predisposition to favour what might be called an affective theology: an understanding of the nature of the divine that depends upon human affective responses—in this case responses to words of sensuality, sexuality and human ecstasy. Whatever the allegory a theologian might read into the Song, the reader and the congregation hearing the lesson must first know what it means to understand those words literally, in order that they understand well the allegory. It makes no sense to sidestep the fact that the Song of Songs is a work ostensibly about sexual love, even when the sermon that is derived from it replaces the erotic with the divine. In the extract from Sermon 23, above, Bernard suggests that the cubiculum is a place where the imagination no longer holds sway over the soul, but it is, in fact, *indeed* the work of the imagination that Bernard calls upon to understand the allegory he describes. As Marguerite Chiarenza states:

³⁵ See D. Turner, *Eros and Allegory*.

The imagination reaches concretely, personally, historically toward God's love which, without it, can never be conceived except as rational abstraction [...] Senses make it possible for the soul to imagine and thereby desire God.³⁶

This imagination fills out the metaphorical lesson of the sermon with data from its own concrete, personal, historical perspective, and by doing so it can conceive of an experience of God through human sensuality. The ultimate end, for Bernard, is the contemplation of God; the Song of Songs provides an approach that deploys a very human route.

Bernard's description of the experience of God that is possible on Earth—his mystical experience—is, in the sermons on the Song of Songs, couched in the language of the erotic, as we have seen, but also in a language that is provisional and tentative.

Volo dicere, nam et hoc pactus sum, quomodo mecum agitur in vos, meam insipientiam consolabor; si non, meam insipientiam confitebor. Fateor et mihi adventasse Verbum, in insipientia dico, et pluries. Cumque saepius intraverit ad me, non sensi aliquoties cum intravit. Adesse sensi, adfuisse recordor, interdum et praesentire potui introitum ejus, sentire nunquam, sed ne exitum quidem. Nam unde in animam meam venerit, quove abierit denuo eam dimittens; sed et qua vel introierit vel exierit; etiam nunc ignorare me fateor...

Sermon LXXIV, 5³⁷

³⁶ Chiaranza, 'Solomon's Song', p. 204.

³⁷ *Bernardi Opere*, II, p. 242. 'I want to tell you of my own experience, as I promised. Not that it is of any importance [...] I admit that the Word has also come to me—I speak as a fool—and has come many times—But although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived his presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me; sometimes I had a presentiment that he would come, but I was never conscious of his coming or his going. And where he comes from when he visits my soul, and where he goes, and by what means he enters and goes out, I admit that I do not know even now...'

Earlier in Sermon XXIII, 9, Bernard had said, 'Iam ad cubiculum veniamus. Quid et istud? Et id me praesumo scire quid sit?'.³⁸ He thus casts into some doubt what he had already confirmed to be the case—that is, it is in the bedroom, in the *cubiculum*, that the Bride and the Bridegroom can finally find peace in their consummated love. The account that Bernard provides of his own mystical experience, then, is at times tentative, and its claims to knowledge are seemingly hesitant or provisional. What we are left with is an understanding of the saint's theology that relegates intellectual knowledge of God to an experience of God that is open to interpretation. There are echoes here of the epistemological hesitancy of Saint Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, concerning his rapture to the third Heaven:

scio hominem in Christo ante annos quattuordecim sive in corpore nescio sive extra corpus nescio Deus scit raptum eiusmodi usque ad tertium caelum.³⁹

But as we have seen, Bernard's account, whilst suggesting an experience of God, at the same time describes a loss of selfhood. Bernard's wish that he were emptied and lost and swallowed up in God does not speak of man becoming one with God (that way heresy lies), but rather of the self somehow dissolving into the Divine experience. This dual experience, of finding God but losing self—of presence and absence—seems *prima facie* full of contradictions.⁴⁰ The presence of God is experienced as a kind of ecstasy, the ecstasy of an experiencing selfhood complete with an imagination capable of understanding the metaphors of human sensuality.

³⁸ *Bernardi Opere*, I, p. 144. 'Do I presume to know what it means to advance to the bedroom?'

³⁹ II Corinthians 12. 2 'I know a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not, or out of the body, I know not; God knoweth), such a one caught up to the third heaven.'

⁴⁰ 'The paradoxical necessity of both presence and absence is one of the most important of all the verbal strategies by means of which mystical transformation has been symbolized'. McGinn, *The Presence of God*, p. xviii.

And yet that selfhood is lost in God itself. This absence of self, the absence of being able to experience anything but God, lends force to the argument that intellectual knowledge of God is not what Bernard's theology is ultimately concerned with. Both he and Paul write as 'fools': they make only provisional claims to knowledge. Bernard's knowledge, such that it is, seems framed as affective experience, rather than intellectual understanding.

However, despite this language of loss, and the language of provisionality, this is, indeed, a way of describing an encounter with God which is *cataphatic* in nature. That is, for Bernard, the language of ecstasy — of *eros*, of affective experience — which he finds in contemplation, succeeds in saying something true about God. This is a fact that must underpin all else in Bernard's theology. Loving God in contemplation can mean knowing something of God, even whilst still on Earth. What does Dante make of Bernard's cataphatism? Is this the kind of theology that Dante endorses in the *Commedia*?

My contention, which I argue for below,⁴¹ is that Dante's final vision of God is an ineffable one; indeed, 'lo primo e ineffabile Valore' is how God is described at *Paradiso* X, 3. Dante's is a thorough-going apophatic theology, in contrast to Bernard's cataphatic one. What is strange and tantalising, though, given this substantive difference, is that the two share similarities in how they write about their respective approaches to God (Bernard's non-fictional one, and Dante's supposedly-non-fictional one). Because, like Bernard, Dante-*personaggio*, too, seems somehow to dissolve in the final lines of the poem, taking up his place in the divine universal order. The ardour for experiencing God is the same for theologian and for Dante. As we have seen, the character of Bernard burns for the sake of the pilgrim's soul, at *Paradiso* XXXIII, 28-36, when he prays to the Virgin that Dante

⁴¹ See, especially, Chapter IV and Conclusion.

receive the ‘*sommo piacer*’ — which sounds very much like something from his own oeuvre—the affective, ecstatic rapture that we saw in *De diligendo Deo*, above. And the curious lines which follow, asking Mary to preserve the vision and its affects, in order that the pilgrim can tell of them, offers another correspondence with the historical Bernard: for is not this exactly what the Abbot of Clairvaux has done, too, in his own written works?

Ancor ti priego, regina, che puoi
ciò che tu vuoi, che conserve sani,
dopo tanto veder, li affetti suoi.

Paradiso XXXIII, 34-36

The delicate balancing act which Dante must pull off is one in which he must tell enough about his own ascent as a pilgrim: tell enough to do justice to the job that he wants to do, as prophet and poet, as *scriba Dei*, that is, in telling those on Earth just what he has seen on his journey through the afterlife, and what he has learned, whilst at the same time retaining his commitment to the ineffability—the apophaticism—of the Godhead. There is a similarity which is misleading, then, because what the rest of the poem teaches is that what is required in the face of eternity is not a negation of self, a loss of self in an ecstatic moment, but rather a fully-elaborated personhood. A self that is ‘selfed’ to the maximum; that is, understanding, in the light of God’s grace, what createdness means for humans: for oneself in particular, in relation to other human persons, and in relation to God. It is an intellectual knowledge, but it is a knowledge that springs from a type of participation in being-human. The example *par excellence*, of course, is Christ.

Christ’s human perfection, and Dante’s portrayal of the supposed author of the Song of Song himself, King Solomon, are linked in the Heaven of the Sun. Because it is somewhat surprising to find Solomon, in amongst the

theologians, described in terms that one might expect (as does the pilgrim) to be more fitting of the second person of the Trinity. Dante's representation of Solomon places front and centre the issue of the sinfulness of all that carnal enjoyment in the Song of Songs, the uxoriousness for which he had become known, and the question mark which hung, in the Middle Ages, over his salvation.⁴² Importantly, it is the character of Thomas Aquinas, at *Paradiso X*, 109, who identifies the king of Israel for the pilgrim, confirming his salvation, and further explaining that Solomon is in fact the light 'più bella' among the dancing theologians. Three cantos later (XIII, 46-111), Aquinas explains to a puzzled Dante-*personaggio* why it is the case that Solomon is so venerated, 'come costui fu senza pare...' (89). For Pamela Williams, the portrayal of the wisdom of the Solomon who appears here concerns 'the interdependence of loving and knowing [...] two essential and complementary aspects underlying [...] the Heaven of the Sun'.⁴³ For Peter Dronke, Solomon is 'the peerless embodiment of the unity of love and knowledge'.⁴⁴

Of course it is no coincidence that it is Thomas Aquinas, that paragon of knowing, who introduces Solomon the lover, Solomon the poet, Solomon the wise. In a typically Thomist way, indeed, using a scholastic vocabulary and latinisms throughout, he puts to bed the questions the pilgrim might have had over the use of such exalted language about the king. When Aquinas finishes his lesson with a warning to Dante-*personaggio* about how to proceed with rational enquiry—slowly and with leaden feet—(112), the poet shows us a Thomas that reaches almost caricature proportions. And yet, whilst in some senses the style of his overt scholasticism verges on the comical here, what, in fact, does the character of Aquinas say of Solomon's

⁴² For explorations of the character of Solomon, his significance, and the Song of Songs, see: Nasti, *Favole d'Amore*; Pertile, *La punta del disio*.

⁴³ P. Williams, 'Dante's Heaven of the Sun and the Wisdom of Solomon', *Italica*, 82 (2005), 165–79 (p. 165).

⁴⁴ P. Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 94.

wisdom? Close attention to his words shows us a character that is at odds with such a cartoonish version of Thomism:

entro v'è l'alta mente u' sì profondo
saver fu messo che, se 'l vero è vero,
a veder tanto non surse il secondo.

Paradiso X, 112-114

Se 'l vero è vero, then of course no wiser king than Solomon rose up. *Se 'l vero è vero*, then there is no question that such a soul would now reside in Heaven. The commentary tradition has, on the whole, read this line as a reference to God's words to Solomon, in I Kings 3:12, when He says, 'ecce feci tibi secundum sermones tuos et dedi tibi cor sapiens et intellegens in tantum ut nullus ante te similis tui fuerit nec post te surrecturus sit.' 'Il vero', then, refers to the Bible, and specifically to God's word. But why frame the phrase as a conditional statement, when all of God's word, all of the Bible, must be unconditionally true—must be Truth—by its very nature? One reason might be that this line can be read in two ways: the first, yes, calling to mind the fact that God has already pronounced Solomon as wise and unsurpassed. But an alternative interpretation, in light of who is speaking the phrase here, might help alert readers to the fact that Dante's is a peculiar characterisation of Thomas Aquinas, peculiar for reasons that I shall explore below. So, begins Aquinas, the arch-rationalist, the maker of water-tight syllogisms, ratiocinator-extraordinaire, if truth be true...surely this is the strangest form of words from someone so committed to the logical demonstration of truth?

Is truth true? Is this the level at which Dante the poet wants (some of) us to interrogate our use of language? Are we to question whether Solomon is indeed saved, is indeed wisest amongst kings, and the *più bella* of the Heaven of the Sun? Must we further ask in what ways are the Heaven of the Sun, and the *Commedia* as a whole, themselves a kind of make-believe?

Must we subject the knowledge that we think we have about God, the Truth, to the same scrutiny? We surely must, but, as Dante warns us in his address to the reader at the beginning of *Paradiso* II, it is not an undertaking to take lightly. What can we rely on, and where is our solid ground, as readers, as creatures, if we are to start worrying about the entire edifice of language and rational enquiry, of faith and reason, which the historical Aquinas helped to shore up?

And where does that leave our interpretation of the writer of the Song of Songs in the poem? On the one hand, there is high praise here for Solomon-the-king—and it would not be unreasonable to think that such praise would extend to his purported written works too. On the other hand, there is anxiety over poetic meaning and, indeed, meaning itself. I would suggest, then, that what is represented by this odd-speaking Aquinas, is not only a qualified endorsement of the Solomon of the Bible; what is presented, is an opportunity to question the limits of poetic endeavour, and ask how in creating characters like Aquinas, who both fulfil and challenge our expectations, Dante can create a mode of language in which the ‘interdependence of loving and knowing’ can be adequately expressed.

Because the theological argument about the primacy of the intellect, which is what the episode in the Heaven of the Sun raises, is one key to understanding how Dante is closer in crucial respects to the historical Aquinas, than he is to Bernard. That it is the character of Aquinas who introduces the supposed author of the Song—Aquinas, who, for all we know, did not write a commentary on the canticles, although his other exegetical works are indeed important—shows that Dante wants us to be thinking about ‘loving and knowing’ at the same time: that one without the other will get us nowhere in our search for meaning. It might be the case that the intellect is able, through God’s grace, to have a taste of that angelic bread that the *Convivio* attempts to describe so vividly, (I, i, 7-8), but it is in

loving too that we come to fulfil our promise as persons. The symbols of Saints Dominic and Francis, cherubic in wisdom and seraphic in love, (*Paradiso XI*, 37-39) respectively, embody Dante's demonstration of this interdependence; but it is through the speaking presence of the characters like Thomas and Bernard, real persons in Dante-*personaggio's* journey into the afterlife, that theories of loving and knowing must be brought together. 'All this', says Kenelm Foster, 'takes place against the backcloth of the sun, both light *and* fire', both intellect and love.⁴⁵

Those strange words about Solomon in line 113 of *Paradiso X* are far from the only unexpected utterances that issue from the character of Aquinas. His first words in that canto predict the pilgrim's now near-guaranteed salvation, but employ the metaphorical language of ascent and mystical contemplation. The pilgrim, says Aquinas, must climb 'quella scala' (line 86): an ascent which has led, and which will lead, God-willing, to the court of Heaven. The language of stairs and of ascent mirrors the imagery found in Bernard's four-fold progression in *De diligendo Deo*. Echoes of the Song of Songs and its commentaries resound here too. Now there are two female lover figures: *la sposa*, the Bride of Christ, at X, 140 (and also in *Paradiso XI*, 31) and Beatrice, whom Aquinas describes as 'la bella donna' (93): she who gives the pilgrim the strength to climb the stair.

In contrast to this upward trajectory, flawed philosophical arguments will only make your wings flap downwards, 'quei che ti fanno in basso batter l'ali!' (XI, 3). Moreover, these words could be read as explicitly critical of the type of philosopho-theology that the historical Aquinas had helped to reinvigorate. When Thomas himself speaks of Solomon in *Paradiso XIII*, he says that in order to be the wisest of kings, there was no need for Solomon

⁴⁵ K. Foster, 'The Celebration of Order: *Paradiso X*', in *The Two Dantes*, pp. 120-36 (p. 122). My italics.

to know the answers to questions about, for example, the *Primum Mobile* and first causes, or ‘*se necesse | con contingente mai necesse fenno...*’ (98-99). But as we know, such questions fulfil absolutely critical logical and substantial functions within the works of the historical Aquinas.

So the portrait of Saint Thomas that begins to emerge in the *Heaven of the Sun*, even in just the few lines that we have seen above, which calls to mind the works of other theologians and other traditions, challenges the expectations that readers may have had of the character. Of course there is little value—none at all, really—in saying, for example, that ‘Dante was a Thomist’ or ‘Dante was a mystic’. That drive towards over-simplification must be avoided in order to do justice to the richness and subtlety of the poem; such binary thinking, so easy and attractive, must be held at bay in order to be able to get a grasp of the ‘intellectual eclecticism’⁴⁶ of the poet. But in any case, even before we fall prey to those easy labels, here in the case of the character of Thomas, Dante has already begun to upset them.

For as readers—both medieval and modern—we might have expected certain hallmarks of a Thomist scholasticism to be present in any representation of Aquinas, particularly in the style of the words that he uses. It might have been reasonable to expect a commitment to clarity in the use of language; a careful, modest and methodical approach in drawing distinctions; perhaps a propensity to use example and counterexample, argument and counter-argument, rebuttal and rejoinder; above all, a type of language that removes any sense of the author or speaker: a depersonalised language, a language that seems to arrive at its audience as if from no-where and from no-one. Denys Turner says that in Aquinas there is an ‘almost ruthless literary self-denial’: Thomas’s is a disappearing

⁴⁶ Gilson, ‘Dante and Christian Aristotelianism’ p. 72.

act.⁴⁷ In his two great *Summae*, at least, he could not be farther from Bernard's beautifully eloquent, loving, and personal writing.

A negation of the self, then, occurs in both Bernard and Thomas, in two very different ways: Bernard narrates his loss of selfhood within a body of work which contains an *abundance* of selves, a preoccupation with person-to-person interaction, and a very personal relationship with the Divine. Bernard, as we have seen, burns with an ardour for God that transmits, in the writing, his authentic self, just as he writes of losing it. Aquinas's loss is at the level of the textual: an authorial effacement. This writing is no less dramatic and no less authentic, in its way, than the mystical story that Bernard tells, and it has, inherent its very structure, an absolute dedication to unveiling the truth that is available to creatures on Earth. Thomas's authenticity can be read in his disappearing: he is not present in his text, and yet this absence of self belies his own very personal, very humane, dedication to unclouding the minds of sinners, and to equipping those of his order to preach to that end too. In his measured way he lays out the argument in the workaday constructions of his architectonic, such that any person, schooled in Latin, should be able to follow: it is a body of work into which any self can be inserted.

Both these disappearances have consequences for how we think about Dante's writing, about his project, and about his claims for what the pilgrim-poet experiences in the *Paradiso*. Because, what this chapter has attempted to show, is that at on some level, Dante's writing has all the appearance of a Bernard-style personality, the same commitments to persons and their relationships, an eloquence and beauty in language seemingly capable of unlocking or revealing something true about humanity and its relationship with the Creator. But Dante-*personaggio's* journey to God is not a journey towards loss; in the *Commedia*, it is a

⁴⁷ Turner, 'How to do things with words' p. 294.

journey towards a finding of self, and understanding what it means, truly, to *be*. In the final lines of the poem, we are not given knowledge about what God's nature consists in—this is still beyond our ability to express—but Dante's journey teaches us, at least, that as creatures we can participate in the eternal universal order. Dante's didactic commitment, then, is also Thomas's, although they employ very different genres and registers. The range of their vision is delimited by the same insight: that God must remain unknowable. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas famously makes the point explicit:

Est igitur triplex cognitio hominis de divinis. Quarum prima est secundum quod homo naturali lumine rationis, per creaturas in Dei cognitionem ascendit. Secunda est prout divina veritas, intellectum humanum excedens, per modum revelationis in nos descendit, non tamen quasi demonstrata ad videndum, sed quasi sermone prolata ad credendum. Tertia est secundum quod mens humana elevabitur ad ea quae sunt revelata perfecte intuenda.⁴⁸

As I showed above, Dante *does*, in fact, at times, give us the type of a Thomas that we might have expected. At *Paradiso* XIII, 88-90, Aquinas seems to want to prompt Dante-*personaggio* to configure his questions into the format found within the *Summa*:

Or s'ì non procedesse avanti piùe,
'Dunque, come costui fu senza pare?'
comincerebber le parole tue.

This lesson in how to construct a sound methodology in thinking, seems to bring us back to a figuration of Aquinas which is familiar to any reader of the theologian's works, because raising questions and suggesting responses

⁴⁸ SCG IV, 1.5. 'There is, then, in man a threefold knowledge of things divine. Of these, the first is that in which man, by the natural light of reason, ascends to a knowledge of God through creatures. The second is that by which the divine truth—exceeding the human intellect—descends on us in the manner of revelation, not, however, as something made clear to be seen, but as something spoken in words to be believed. The third is that by which the human mind will be elevated to gaze perfectly upon the things revealed.'

is exactly what the saint does throughout his oeuvre. What is interesting, and somewhat amusing, in this scene, is that Aquinas raises the objections on the pilgrim's behalf. The tenor of this exchange seems to be, *let me order your thoughts in a more rational way, Dante, so that the truth that I (Thomas) am telling you, will be self-evident.*

Our difficulty as readers when we encounter the character of Thomas Aquinas in the poem is to reflect on our expectations of what we think Aquinas would do and say, whilst responding to Dante's own creation. In actual fact, of course, Dante uses the characterisation of Thomas in the poem to critique Thomism itself, in both positive and negative ways, and further, sets up a dialectic between the theologian's position and his own, via back-and-forth intellectual play, first satisfying and then confounding our expectations about the character. Our reading is never divorced from the theoretical assumptions that we have already made and applied: the interpretive act that we attempt both endows the poet and poem with a supposed theoretical position prior to attempting to extract it from any particular character. The background beliefs, about Aquinas or about Dante's apparent Thomism, that the reader brings, allow access only through a prism, as it does in all hermeneutical or intellectual activity, which might be more or less transparent to the reader themselves. Dronke describes the difficult intellectual task of interpreting Dante's poetry beyond that which he has 'supplied us' as 'a matter of colouring our own Dante-portrait [...] The colours we bring to it are primarily our own intellectual and moral preconceptions'.⁴⁹

With that methodological hazard in mind, I sketch, below, a very brief overview of the critical terrain germane to the question of Aquinas's intellectualism, as it contrasts with Bernard's affective theology: some of the currents and trends in how Dante studies have responded to Dante's

⁴⁹ Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, p. 79.

relationship with the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Simon Gilson has asked whether there is a 'systematic oppositional structure in the poem', and in doing so reminds us that Dante does not just appropriate theory from elsewhere, he constructs his own trenchant responses to these theological debates, in new and dazzling ways.

In the early twentieth century, for scholars such as Mandonnet, Busnelli and Vandelli, Dante was clearly, obviously, a Thomist, 'delighting to reason, even in verse, about form and matter, act and potency.'⁵⁰ The philosophical content for these critics, that is, the substance of Dante's theoretical position in the *Commedia*, was handed down by the saint, almost unaltered. That picture, of Dante as Aquinas's pupil, has a long history, made explicit in the commentary tradition at least as far back as Jacopo Della Lana, in the 1320s, who writes about the Dominican extensively. Etienne Gilson presented a study of the poet which widened his pool of theological sources beyond only Aquinas, to include especially Albert, and even Siger.⁵¹ Bruno Nardi, too, challenged the earlier one-dimensional reading of the poet, demonstrating the points of difference between Dante and Aquinas, and finding that in significant ways Dante could not be called Thomist in any strict sense; in fact, Nardi can be credited with bringing into focus Dante's distinctive syncretism: 'egli non è averroista e neppure tomista; non esclusivamente aristotelico, né soltanto neoplatonico, o agostiniano puro'.⁵² He particularly emphasised the Neoplatonistic elements in the poet's thought and demonstrated how substantive issues such as the role of angels and the creation of matter, were treated differently by theologian and poet.⁵³ Kenelm Foster, although agreeing

⁵⁰ K. Foster, 'St Thomas and Dante', in *The Two Dantes*, pp. 56-65 (p. 56).

⁵¹ E. Gilson, *Dante et la Philosophie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1939). See especially, pp. 223-79.

⁵² B. Nardi, *Sigieri di Brabante nella Divina Commedia e le fonti della filosofia di Dante* (Spianate: presso l'autore, 1912), p. 69.

⁵³ Nardi's many essays relevant to these topics are collected in *Saggi di filosofia dantesca*, 2nd edn (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1967); *Dal 'Convivio' alla 'Commedia'*

with Nardi's view on most of the substantial points of difference he had highlighted, suggested that a more nuanced way to read Dante and Aquinas together sees them share a commitment to 'discrezione' and 'the need for and the beauty of rational discrimination, measure and sobriety of judgement'.⁵⁴ An important point of agreement in the substance of Dante's and Aquinas's theoretical position concerns, as we have seen above, and as Foster also underlines, the primacy of the intellect over the will. At *Paradiso* XXVIII, 109-111, Dante makes this Thomist point explicit:

Quinci si può veder come di fonda
l'esser beato ne l'atto che vede,
non in quel ch'ama, che poscia seconda.

Angela Meekins has argued that the language that the character of Thomas uses throughout his appearance in the Heaven of the Sun, but especially in his encomium to Saint Francis, is a language that one might expect from his fellow scholastic, and opposite number in the Heaven of the Sun, Bonaventure.⁵⁵ Meekins suggests that the character of Thomas that the poet creates is a 'corrected' one, who 'expresses his thoughts to the pilgrim in the language of *poesia* [and] now favours the intellectual system most compatible with *poesia*: the Christian Neoplatonism of Bonaventure.'⁵⁶ We saw above that there are, indeed, rather unexpected utterances from the Dominican theologian: in particular, I have highlighted the mystical language of ascent at *Paradiso* X, 86, which I suggested echoes the metaphor found within Bernard's oeuvre. In fact, the character of Thomas's language is fully wrought in metaphor: his opening address to the pilgrim, in just the first twelve lines, 82-93, contains a mix of at least six different images and

(Rome: Nella sede dell'Istituto, 1960); *Nel mondo di Dante* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 1944).

⁵⁴ Foster, 'St Thomas and Dante', p. 63. For other important contributions to these debates see: Mazzotta, 'The Heaven of the Sun'; Barolini, *The Undivine 'Comedy'*, pp. 173, 203-06; Moevs, *The Metaphysics, of Dante's 'Comedy'*, pp. 12-13, 86, 108-11.

⁵⁵ A. Meekins, 'Reflecting on the Divine: Notes on Dante's Heaven of the Sun', *The Italianist*, 18 (1998), 28-70.

⁵⁶ Meekins, 'Reflecting', p. 56.

metaphors: the rays of grace; a love which is kindled; the stairs climbed; the wine which slakes the pilgrim's thirst; the water not descending to the sea; the plants in the garland which bloom, and so on. Such flowery language from so sober a theologian is indeed noteworthy.

And so when Zygmunt Barański writes that the character of Thomas 'fails to speak in a manner which is in keeping with his customary style of writing',⁵⁷ it is undoubtedly true. Barański's conclusion is that Thomas's use of language in the *Heaven of the Sun* is a clue in deciphering Dante's doctrinal allegiances, or ways of knowing, which for Barański are inherited from the 'symbolic-exegetical' lineage of Plato, Augustine and Bonaventure, rather than from Aristotle and Aquinas.

[Dante] favoured symbolic-exegetical epistemologies over intellectual systems [and] within symbolism he privileged poetry — his poetry — as the most effective way of catching a glimpse of the divine hidden signs. Knowledge and the means to achieve understanding are key themes [...] Our human limitations and the debts we owe to God make it an absolute necessity [...] that we recognize and follow that epistemology which is most likely to yield a sense of creation and its Maker.⁵⁸

Such a reading seems to make much of the chimeric qualities in the character of Aquinas; I hesitate, along with Simon Gilson, to draw the line so sharply in Dante's supposed theoretical commitments and sources, but it must be the case that in giving Aquinas-the-character an at times distinctively *un*-Thomist voice, Dante makes a comment on the theology itself. Dante may not have had, actually, says Gilson, a 'precise idea of competing ideologies', but the syncretism for which he has now become celebrated does indeed provide rich veins for interpretation, and this is

⁵⁷ Z. G. Barański, 'Dante's Signs' in *Dante and the Middle Ages: Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. by J.C. Barnes and C. Ó Cuilleánáin (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995), pp. 139-180 (p. 158).

⁵⁸ Barański, 'Dante's Signs', p. 167.

what such characterisations highlight. What does it mean, though, when Barański claims we must, with Dante, ‘recognize and follow’ an ‘epistemology’, when the poet is, like Aquinas, committed to God being unutterable, ineffable? All human descriptions of God must fail, no matter if we talk in metaphor or in syllogisms, symbols or formal logic. And thus there is no way for symbols to ‘catch a glimpse of’ God, because all signs are equally blind; when it comes to God-speak, our ways of knowing, our epistemologies, have no way of converting their insights into language. Aquinas’s position is stronger still: God is not only unutterable, or ineffable, for us on Earth, he is fundamentally unknowable too (‘licet per revelationem gratiae in hac vita non cognoscamus de Deo quid est, et sic ei quasi ignoto coniungamur.’)⁵⁹

The ‘customary style’ that we find in the historical Aquinas, the slow and plodding writing, the exhaustive and exhausting question and reply, is significantly different from poetry, of course, significantly different, even—in most places—from the humble metaphor. And there has been some agonising within Dante studies about the status that Aquinas accords to metaphor, and by extension, poetry, as ‘infima inter omnes doctrinas’,⁶⁰ whether something like the *Commedia* can ever, according to his lights, be called a *doctrina*, let alone the *poema sacro*, as Dante would have us believe it.⁶¹ This is the debate which Denys Turner resuscitates in his essay, ‘How to do things with words’, concluding that, in fact, for Thomas, metaphor might be considered ‘one of the ways of talking truthfully about real events’. Turner’s point is that metaphor—and hence also poetry—is lowly only in the sense that it is demotic, and thus, ‘closest to our ordinary ways of groping towards the unutterable’.⁶²

⁵⁹ ST Ia.xii.13.ad1: ‘In this life we do not know what God is, even by the grace of faith. Hence, by grace we are made one with God as to somewhat unknown to us.’

⁶⁰ ST Ia.i.9.1. [‘[...] the least of all sciences.’]

⁶¹ See T. Barolini, *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the ‘Comedy’* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 281.

⁶² Turner, ‘How to do things with words’, p. 304.

I gestured, above, to the workaday nature of the historical Aquinas's writing: how it can be read—strangely, in its learned way—as accessible to all rational creatures. We can follow the way along the road that Aquinas treads ahead of us: most are capable, although it is often a hard road and requires intellectual graft. In that sense it is not unlike what Dante demands of (some of) his readers, the ones who follow in the little barks after his ship; the epic tale is a hard one to write and to read, and although Dante's poetry is written in an accessible vernacular, it remains difficult, subtle, even opaque, to readers who do not study well. Dante writes poetry—not, perhaps, 'groping towards'—but nonetheless keenly aware of, the 'unutterable' and the limitations of being human. It appears that what the narrative of the *Commedia* suggests—if readers are to take seriously Dante's claims to truth—and what the audacity of his poetry seems to evoke, is that an encounter with the Divine really did happen and, as in Bernard's case, it gave rise to an unrivalled eloquence capable of capturing something truly other-worldly. Robin Kirkpatrick notes that this is a familiar and yet perhaps misguided characterisation of the nature of poetry, or artistic endeavor more generally. Poetry is not suited uniquely to giving us the 'world transfigured' in epiphanic moments, 'when the lighting-effects of eternity seem to break through our temporal gloom'. Such epiphanies, both in life and in poetry, might not be what they seem:

[T]here 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 [...] Dante [...] 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.⁶³

⁶³ R. Kirkpatrick, 'Polemics as Praise' in Montemaggi and Treherne (eds) *Dante's 'Commedia' Theology as Poetry*, pp. 14-35 (p. 18).

Kirkpatrick's point is that Dante's poetry, as well as leading us upwards, with Bernard, towards a vision of God, indeed, through an 'incandescent swoop of lyrical vision', can also lead us back to ourselves, to the comedy of our ordinary lives, to a better knowledge of our 'human lineaments'. Poetry can encompass this too and demonstrate the wonder and the awe in the prosaic, the everyday, revealed through hard work, perhaps, or by simply connecting with other human individuals. And that is an insight which Thomas can offer too: we must work with what we have, and strive to know more and to know better, in our earthly life. Our limitations and errors—and our capacity to understand them—is a theme that I take up in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III Narrating Turning Points

1. Changing personhood

This chapter considers the nature of error for the theologians in this study—Augustine, Gregory, Bernard and Aquinas—and shows how turning points structure either their historical lives, or their significance in the *Commedia*. In the case of each of the four theologians, turning points are present either in their biographies, or in the poem: Augustine’s conversion, communicated so vividly in the *Confessions*; Gregory’s error concerning angelology in the *Commedia*; Bernard’s experience of the beatific vision; and Aquinas’s vision and subsequent re-evaluation of his scholastic method. The chapter will focus especially on Augustine in Part One, and Gregory and Aquinas in Part Two. A consideration of analogous errors for Dante-pilgrim will be considered alongside the theme of error more generally and its importance for the conception of personhood within the poet’s theology.

1.1 ‘Birth into the light of time...born into the light of eternity’¹

The souls the pilgrim meets in Purgatory, of all the characters in the *Commedia*, are those which are undergoing change. Purgatory is the *cantica* of the death of vice, and the birth of virtue, a turning point which allows, through the formation of character—through learning, through habituation, in time, in place, and in community—the entrance of the souls to communion with God in Paradise. The process of purgation corrects the errors with which the souls were afflicted when they lived on Earth. In Virgil’s words, sin and error are the result of ‘amore [...] d’animo’, which results in human love being directed at the wrong object—some evil—or at

¹ *Confessions*, IX, viii (17). All quotations in Latin from the *Confessions* are taken from the critical edition of the text by J.J. O’Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). All English translations of the *Confessions* are quoted from the edition by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Both use the same chapter and paragraph numbers.

the right object, but in the wrong degree, either with an excess of vigour, or lack thereof:

‘Né creator né creatura mai’,
cominciò el, ‘figliuol, fu senza amore,
naturale o d’animo; e tu ’l sai.

Lo naturale è sempre senza errore,
ma l’altro puote errar per malo obietto
o per troppo o per poco di vigore.’

Purgatorio XVII, 91-96

The liminal spaces and time of Purgatory present theological questions about salvation and virtue more generally, questions whose answers have consequences for the status of error amongst the saved. This is the case because confession of sin, and conversion through Christ, are not yet enough for these individuals to enter the kingdom of Heaven, even though they have already been granted the grace of salvation. And so they find themselves caught on the terraces of vice that defined them as persons on Earth; caught here, seemingly, for years and years — far longer, in some cases, than the time such vices defined their earthly deficiencies. For example, Statius tells the pilgrim of his five hundred years purging prodigality and his four hundred purging a lack of religious zeal. And here on the mountain the souls replay and replay the corresponding virtue, like good Aristotelians (*EN* 2.1), until those virtues are habituated and become those souls themselves, become their very personhoods.

Such, then, is the nature of Dante’s Purgatory: the replaying of a turning point, over and over; a turning point from vice to virtue which was unrecognised by them on Earth as essential for becoming Christ-like, even though these souls, by necessity, were repentant. Teodolinda Barolini calls *Purgatorio* ‘the most Augustinian’ of Dante’s three *cantiche*, so structured as it is by time, by the focus on replacing desire for certain earthly goods with

desire only for God, by 'recuperating and redeeming the past'.² On the mountain, in real time and in real space, the souls learn about the impact that their vicious characters had in life, and indeed, in the afterlife, and the price that now must be paid in order to correct that vice with virtue.³ It is a price that the souls apparently pay willingly and joyously. For example, at *Purgatorio* XVIII, 115, the penitent slothful say, 'Noi siam di voglia a muoverci sí pieni'. Atop the mountain awaits the Earthly Paradise and their entrance to Heaven.

Indeed, the Mountain of Purgatory literally delivers them up to Heaven, it quakes and cries like a labouring mother. The poet compares the trembling of the mountain to the earthquakes of Delos, where another mythical mother gave birth: 'Latona in lei facesse 'l nido | a parturir li due occhi del cielo' *Purgatorio* XX, 131-32. Earlier in the canto, Dante-*personaggio* hears a shade cry out the name of Mary, 'come fa donna che in parturir sia' (*Purgatorio* XX, 19-21). This shade sounds like a woman giving birth and simultaneously celebrates the Nativity, the Virgin birth, and here in particular, Mary's poverty and lack of avarice. Once the mountain delivers up its soul to Heaven, the audience of penitent souls rejoices at the safe birth by shouting, "*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*", just as 'i pastor che prima udir quel canto' (*Purgatorio* XX.136-40), at Christ's birth.

The fact of the Incarnation, a birth into time—indeed, the 'ontological event'⁴ that structures time itself—provides the ground for any human turning point to take place, through grace. Birth, then, is a fitting metaphor for the journey that the penitent souls and the pilgrim make from Purgatory to Paradise, because they cross from one realm of existence to

² Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, p. 101.

³ Lino Pertile, in *La Punta del disio*, describes the process of purgation thus: 'un processo di rieducazione e conversione del desiderio terrestre in desiderio celeste', p. 37.

⁴ Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, p. 61.

another. Once they have completed their penance and all vices are erased, just as the *Ps* on Dante-*personaggio*'s forehead are erased, their personhood is renewed and ready for the next life. As Peter Hawkins has made explicit, it is also the case that this final turning point has parallels with the turning points—or conversions—on Earth:

Dante draws a connection between two rites of passage: just as on Earth the newly baptized cross over into the Body of Christ, so the souls in Purgatory also move *in exitu*, out of sin's dominion, and across the threshold of their sanctification.⁵

These conversions are, of course, in Christ's very own words, considered to be as births too: 'respondit Iesus amen amen dico tibi nisi quis renatus fuerit ex aqua et Spiritu non potest introire in regnum Dei' (John 3:5),⁶ and conversion as birth is a theme that Augustine takes up and elaborates in narrating the multiple turning points of the *Confessions*. How Dante's conception of personhood is informed by Augustine's narration of his own conversion and, specifically, the Augustinian self that undergoes this journey to rebirth, will form the focus of Part One of this chapter. Augustine's account of conversion, like Dante-*personaggio*'s story, is a journey out of the darkness and into the light; Augustine calls his own earthly birth one 'into the light of time', his conversion to God, a birth 'into the light of eternity'.⁷ On their journeys from the dark wood, or, in Augustine's case, the wooded summit, to the homeland of peace, the kingdom of Heaven, Augustine and Dante are pilgrims beset by ambushes—moral and psychological, from outside of themselves and from within—which they must navigate and then retell, as writers commissioned by God. But it is approaching cliché, now, to claim that Saint Augustine invented, in his *Confessions*, the genre of autobiography. Cliché

⁵ Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, p. 257.

⁶ 'Jesus answered: Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.'

⁷ *Confessions*, IX, viii (17). Chadwick, p. 166.

aside, it is important to have a grasp of the kind of template for life-writing that Augustine created and handed down; the creation, that is, of a 'self' character, and also the creation of a 'self narrator' character, these characters standing apart, one seemingly able to reflect on the state of the other.

Dante the author, of course, uses and adopts this model in his creation of Dante-*personaggio* and Dante-*poeta* in the *Commedia*, essential devices that structure the narrative of the epic poem; that embody its central theological lesson; and that fulfil the prophetic call of the narrator of the *poema sacro*.⁸ At the most fundamental level, in both Augustine and Dante's works, the self entity which these twin characters create, once fused together — developed over time, one giving birth to the other, and vice versa — is at its core the story of an *inner self*; a self which is painfully aware that its will and desire are in dynamic tension with its intellect; a self slowly coming to the knowledge of its createdness and dependency on God, and its salvation through Christ. Augustine as a character is almost entirely missing from the story of the *Commedia*, but as a model for writing about an inner self, a self turned inward in its search for God, he 'functions as an extensive, even an informing presence within the text itself'.⁹

[For Augustine] the goal of human life is defined epistemologically (wisdom and understanding), the road is defined in ethical terms (virtue and purification), and the whole process must be understood psychologically (as a turning and journey of the soul).¹⁰

⁸ 'The stories within Dante's story invite ironic interpretation and critical debate, as do the tales told by prisoners protesting their conviction. But in Dante's autobiographical story, he is at once the prosecution and the defense. There are two Dantes, just as there are two Augustines in the *Confessions*. Italian editors of the latter work take pains to distinguish "Agostino narrato" from "Agostino narratore" in their commentaries. In Dante studies, the distinction between the pilgrim and the poet serves the same purpose. In a conversion narrative, the distinction creates the temporal illusion of an experience retrospectively recounted.' J. Freccero, 'The Portrait of Francesca', p. 13.

⁹ Hawkins, 'Divide and Conquer', p. 472.

¹⁰ Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*, p. 72.

Augustine's so-called inward turn, sketched in Books I-VIII of the *Confessions*, begins as the story of a baby, a child, and then a young man, whose restless soul cannot find satisfaction in earthly desires. The narrator's prayer to God casts the young Augustine, an adolescent seduced by his own sexual appetite, as a wanderer adrift, in exile, (II, ii (4)), another Ulysses, walking the streets of Babylon (II, iii (8)), and at the bottom of the abyss (II, iv (9)). The vice of lust continues to plague Augustine, of course, for years, according to the narrator, and it is the sticking point which his intellect comes up against again and again as he matures.

But in the early years of Augustine's prayer, not only does the narrator consider his physical body the locus of abomination, the life of his mind is similarly error-struck. Book III tells of his noble turn towards philosophy, via the works of Cicero. Augustine the narrator recalls how in youth he longs for wisdom: 'viluit mihi repente omnis vana spes, et immortalitatem sapientiae concupiscebam aestu cordis incredibili, et surgere coeperam, ut ad te redirem' (III, iv (7)).¹¹ This turn towards philosophy is the first step, in the narrator Augustine's mind, towards God: the young Augustine cannot see at this point that it is knowledge of *God* that he desires, but he knows that it is a desire for knowledge nonetheless. A subsequent early re-introduction to the Bible does nothing to impress him, because what began as a noble turn, according to his own lights, transforms into the proud vanity of loquacious men, men who are purporting to teach the truth, but who are peddling falsehoods (III, vi (10)).

Thus the first eight books of the *Confessions* tell of Augustine's slow and painful journey toward Christ. But this is not a story slow in the telling:

¹¹ *Confessions*, p.25. '[I] longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour [...], impressed not by [...] the literary expression but by the content.' Chadwick, p. 39.

indeed, although it contains many digressions along the way—studied, plotted digressions, of course—the tension that builds towards the climactic conversion scene in Turin in Book VIII is paradigmatic of a dramatic narrative. There are recurring tropes within Augustine’s story of self—of slippery words and of longed-for truths; of walks in gardens and of discussions with friends; of lives mirrored in other lives, in books read, or in books heard of read: these combine to create a cohesive whole, a sense that the reader is being moved, ineluctably, toward a glorious end. But what, overwhelmingly, stitches this plot together is the ringing narratorial voice praying to his God, haranguing the younger self; the voice lamenting the time lost, the vices strengthening, the sins committed; the voice that now, years later as venerable bishop, can speak so directly of the agonies of the desiring body, and of the desiring mind.

The young Augustine inches towards a conversion in Christ: first realising that his sexual desire is misplaced and corrupting, and yet unable to control it; later, understanding that his mind needs intellectual and spiritual sustenance. Good fortune brings him towards philosophy and the Platonists, but his spiritual life gets hijacked, seemingly, by the untruths of the Manichees. The story as told, is one of a mind refusing to accept the source of the truth of all the other truths that he has by now accepted. The narrator writes of this as wilful error, until the final relief—the truth of the Word—becomes irresistible.

It is a story of knowing: a self known to itself, and yet refusing to see the truth that is before it. The turn to philosophy is not a wrong turn, indeed, Augustine explicitly states that he could not have become the Christian that he did, without such a grounding in truth-seeking. And that sliver of intellectual knowledge, the Platonist Good, that he enjoys in Book VII—the light of knowledge, indeed—comes, tellingly, *before* his full conversion to Christ: ‘et pervenit ad id quod est in ictu trepidantis aspectus’ (VII, xvii

(23)).¹² Janet Martin Soskice notes that although this is often characterised by critics as a failed conversion, it is nonetheless successful in making clear to Augustine that there is more to see with the intellect than is available through philosophy alone.¹³ The so-called failure of the vision delineates a world of truth, throws it into relief; it will be available to Augustine only through Christ. When he falls back into sin from this heightened state, the pain is even more acute: 'quid patimur?', he cries in desperation, to his friend, Alypius (VIII, viii (19)).¹⁴

So the labour that Augustine must endure is long and hard, the birth pangs difficult to bear, the fight against his own will a struggle: 'quae illa tormenta parturientis cordis mei, qui gemitus, deus meus!'.¹⁵ Augustine is not alone in his agonies. He narrates a story that Ponticianus tells about his friend, who converted to Christianity whilst reading of St Antony: 'dixit hoc, et turbidus parturitione novae vitae reddidit oculos paginis'.¹⁶ These births, these conversions, cause pain and suffering; and they give rise, in the individual, to a seemingly dissociative state.

tu autem, domine, inter verba eius retorquebas me ad me ipsum, auferens me a dorso meo, ubi me posueram, dum nollem me adtendere; et constituebas me ante faciem meam, ut viderem, quam turpis essem, quam distortus et sordidus, maculosus et ulcerosus.¹⁷

¹² *Confessions*, p. 84. '...in the flash of a trembling glance.' Chadwick, p. 127.

¹³ Soskice, 'Monica's Tears: Augustine on Words and Speech', *New Blackfriars*, 83 no. 980 (2002) 446-58.

¹⁴ *Confessions*, p.96. 'What is wrong with us?' Chadwick, p. 146.

¹⁵ *Confessions*, VII, vii (11), p. 79. 'What torments my heart suffered in mental pregnancy, what groans, my God!' Chadwick, pp.119-20.

¹⁶ *Confessions*, VIII, vi (15), p. 95. 'So he spoke, and in pain at the coming to birth of new life, he returned his eyes to the book's pages.' Chadwick, pp. 143-4.

¹⁷ *Confessions*, VIII, vii (16), p. 95. 'Lord, you turned my attention back to myself. You took me up from behind my own back where I had placed myself because I did not wish to observe myself [...] and you set me before my face [...] so that I could see how vile I was.' Chadwick, p. 144.

But—crucially for my discussion of the souls in Dante’s own journey through the afterlife, below—Augustine’s narrator self sees this psychological split as merely the complex of will and intellect that is nothing other than one individual person:

ego cum deliberabam ut iam servirem domino deo meo, sicut diu disposueram, ego eram qui volebam, ego qui nolebam: ego eram.¹⁸

Not only is this akratic self, this divided self, in actual fact one whole self—that is, the sinner in Augustine is no less Augustine than he who wishes to be rid of sin—it is, at this point in the text, identical too with the narrator: the two selves, young Augustine and the narrator bishop, here in this moment of self-proclamation, ‘It was I’, become one. And this is important, because although Augustine’s overall project is to show that what matters is the state of one’s immaterial soul and that soul’s love of God, here we see that the whole person, for Augustine, must be characterised as the one who errs, who wills wrongly, *and* the one who chooses correctly. The person who is converted to Christ remains the same person who erred in his former life: the sinner gives birth to the convert; the convert reclaims that former self, as he writes of his journey. That is, he gives birth to the sinner again, in the writing. Thus the journey itself, all of the journey, is necessary: a person’s life is worthy of the telling. Memories of an earlier self are recuperated and redeemed by the healing work of Christ, but that earlier self is not annihilated, it is transformed.

1.2 Dante’s Augustinian Journey

The echoes with Dante’s biography are obvious, and have been noted by, amongst others, John Freccero:

¹⁸ *Confessions*, VIII, x (22), p. 98. ‘The self which willed to serve was identical with the self which was unwilling. It was I.’ Chadwick, p. 148.

The extraordinary parallelism between [Augustine's] spiritual experience and Dante's, at roughly the same age, even with comparable erotic distractions, would be exact had it been Neoplatonists rather than Aristotelians who led Dante to the overweening confidence in philosophy.¹⁹

In Dante's own telling of his spiritual journey from dark wood to Paradise there is, of course, the surface-level appearance of a coincident authorial development, tracking his writerly journey from youthful love poet, to the auto-critic of the *Vita nova's* prosimetrum and its turn toward praise poetry, to the would-be philosopher of the *Convivio*, to the poet—the *scriba Dei*—of the *Commedia*.²⁰ But there is a gap, of course—a space between the texts and reality, between the word and thing—that must be assessed critically. And indeed that body of criticism, as it grows, inexorably, contains within its limits further texts which recapitulate Dante's interpretation of his own texts, some confounding the story that Dante tells, or otherwise finding reason to believe that *prima facie* reading. In this way, Dante's authorial development and his spiritual journey will remain a forever open-ended question, but it must be true to say that there is no knowing whence the author of the *Commedia* heard the call to write, nor what were his motives: an examination of Dante's heart is forever off-limits. And so when Freccero says of Augustine, that one cannot know 'whether the conversion experience is the cause or the creature of the narrative that we read' the same is true, too, of Dante's works.

That would seem, I would suggest, a rather pessimistic way in which to approach the poem, and risks closing down avenues of interpretation that offer rich possibilities, both for scholarly study and, perhaps, for our own lives (although it is of course misleading to suggest that these two realms are distinct, despite the efforts of years of scientism within some humanities disciplines). The richest and most transformative readings of

¹⁹ Freccero, *In Dante's Wake*, pp. 14-15.

²⁰ See, for example, *Paradiso X*, 27.

the poem as theology in recent years have been grounded on the fact that we should take Dante at his word: that his praxis as poet and his foregrounding of, and preoccupation with, persons, are instantiations on Earth of what he truly believed his call from God to be: that he saw how his own life, and his own words, could be—could *be*—the love which is God. His faith took him that far. Further, Peter Hawkins and Vittorio Montemaggi, amongst others, have argued powerfully that *we* can, in both our encounters with and through the text, and in our encounters with other individuals, embody that same truth.²¹

Augustine prays, 'Domine deus meus, quis ille sinus est alti secreti tui et quam longe inde me proiecerunt consequentia delictorum meorum' (XI, xxxi (41)).²² Both he and Dante present journeys back to God, through Christ, which human sin has made necessary. Augustine's sinners grapple in the dark, surrounded by noise, just as Dante-*personaggio* begins *his* journey in darkness, and onward through the strange noises—the *tumulto*—of Hell (*Inferno* III, 28): 'defluxi ad ista et obscuratus sum, sed hinc, etiam hinc adamavi te [...] audivi vocem tuam post me, ut redirem, et vix audivi propter tumultus impacatorum' (XII, x (10)).²³

For both Augustine and Dante, sins are to be enumerated and personalised. Augustine offers his confessions as praise towards God. The sins he writes about are only ever his own and they are spelled out in meticulous detail, and even in confessing, Augustine is at risk of sinning again through pride (X, xxxviii (63)). The life that Augustine represents in the *Confessions* is

²¹ See P. S. Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) and Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's 'Commedia' as Theology*. Montemaggi's is a book-length demonstration of this transformative and sustaining power.

²² *Confessions*, p.164. 'Lord my God, how deep is your profound mystery, and how far away from it have I been thrust by the consequences of my sin.' Chadwick, p. 245.

²³ *Confessions*, p.168. 'I slipped down to the dark and was plunged into obscurity [...] I heard your voice behind me calling me to return. And I could hardly hear because of the hubbub of people who know no peace.' Chadwick, p. 251.

particular and intimate. It is a book too close for comfort; Augustine himself asks what edification a reader might gain from it. As disingenuous a question as this sounds—here the veneer between narrator and author is apparently at its thinnest—it is a question we might ask anyway, in spite of Augustine’s self-conscious worry. The *Confessions* presents an active, dynamic conversation between Augustine and God, seemingly a personal prayer of offering to a personal redeemer. But is inevitable, too, that we read the *Confessions* as a very public entreaty, a warning even, to members of the flock at Hippo and beyond, to do what Augustine does, and prostrate themselves before God.

Dante casts his pilgrim downward too: in *Purgatorio* XXX and XXXI the author recreates the sinner in Dante-*personaggio*, gives birth to him again—another painful labour. The pilgrim becomes a pitiable, broken and weeping character in confession to his beloved Beatrice, who wields her accusation as a sword that makes him fall back down to the Earth. Dante-*personaggio* has come so far; when he reaches the Earthly Paradise, he is on the threshold of purification and of sanctity: the joy of Heaven awaits. Having completed his journey through Hell and climbed up the terraces of Purgatory, successfully having removed the marks of his sin and vice from his brow, his upward trajectory invites optimism and hope. But now, here in the garden, Dante must confess his sin, and in doing so he is thrown down, no longer in Eden but back down in the dark wood, amongst his ‘*memorie triste*’ (XXXI, 11) and his ‘*errore*’ (44). He gives voice to his errors and hears in her response Beatrice’s own characterisation of Dante-the-sinner, and of his turn to the ‘*via non vera*’ (XXX, 130); the blow of Beatrice’s sword is so painful that it causes Dante to faint.

The scene remains, on each re-reading, so powerfully affecting, so full of pathos—the portrait of the stammering pilgrim so utterly desperate—that the narration of these two turning points, the first one in which Dante-

personaggio tells of his turn towards 'Le presenti cose' (34) after Beatrice died, and the second one in which Dante-*poeta* tells of his turn back towards Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise in the acceptance of her saving grace, cannot be interpreted as anything other than the hinge around which the entire poem turns. The author replays here, again, as he had done in the *Convivio* II, xii, the autobiographical motif of his infidelity with the 'gentil donna' of the *Vita nova* XXIV. 2, who perhaps, after all, was something akin to Boethius's Lady Philosophy.²⁴ Beatrice is at once a spurned lover but also a person who adopts a maternal role, acting on behalf of the holy mother herself.

After her death, Beatrice says, she loses her lover's attention: he turns away from her and finds comfort elsewhere. As a would-be lover, she cannot transform him through love; and as a would-be mother, she cannot deliver him up to God.²⁵ The overt eroticism of the 'adult confrontation'²⁶ between Dante-*personaggio* and Beatrice is made explicit by references to her once 'belle membre' (XXXI, 50); by the potential temptations of other 'serene' (45); by the trembling in his body, and, of course, by the recognition of the 'antica fiamma' (XXX, 47). But Dante's character is a child too, described in infantilising terms: 'quali fanciulli' (64), 'il fantolin' (XXX, 44), a character who says of Beatrice, 'così la madre al figlio par superba | com'ella parve a me' (79-80).²⁷ And it is as a mother and as intercessor that Beatrice's role mirrors that of Monica, Augustine's mother, in the story of his conversion. In light of Beatrice's accusation, however, Dante's turn to philosophy — if

²⁴ For a book-length discussion of Dante's representation of the other women — whether human or allegorical, or both — in his works, see Holmes, *Dante's Two Beloveds*. See also, P. Dronke *Dante's Second Love: The Originality and the Contexts of the Convivio* (Oxford: Routledge, 1997).

²⁵ I return to both of these themes — the maternal and the erotic in Beatrice — in Chapter IV.

²⁶ See the notes in Durling and Martinez (eds), *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, II, p. 540.

²⁷ Beatrice is described as a mother bird at *Paradiso* XXIII, 1-9; by extension, Dante-*personaggio* is one of her 'dolci nati'.

indeed this is what is here being castigated – cannot be considered as a turn to the same fertile intellectual ground that it was for Augustine. He claimed, as we saw above, that it foreshadowed the way to his salvation; Dante cannot do the same, as I explore below, because ultimately the two have different accounts of what an intellectual knowledge of God consists in.

Monica is a teary presence throughout the *Confessions*. In Book IX we get to hear Augustine's potted biography of her, which verges on the hagiographic: of her childhood, and then of her early troubles with alcohol and her ultimate rejection of that vice (IX, viii (18)); of her life with her abusive husband, and his subsequent conversion through her to Christ (IX, ix (22)). Monica had been converted to Christianity before Augustine's birth, and thus as an infant, Augustine says he had imbibed the name of Christ: 'in ipso adhuc lacte matris tenerum cor meum pie biberat et alte retinebat, et quidquid sine hoc nomine fuisset' (III, iv (8)).²⁸ In *Paradiso* XXIII, 121-122, we see the souls flame upwards towards the Virgin mother, 'come fantolin che 'nver' la mamma | tende le braccia poi che 'l latte prese'. In both cases, the sustenance derived from the mother's body is Christ, but Augustine, we hear, does not fully digest it until much later. During Augustine's Manichee period, the narrator claims that Monica wept for Augustine more than mothers grieve for their dead children: 'cum pro me fleret ad te mea mater, fidelis tua, amplius quam flent matres corporea funera.' (III, xi (19)).²⁹ She thus very nearly embodies the Virgin again, as she is depicted at John 19:25.³⁰ As a mother close to losing her son, she is endowed with a power of authorship over his spiritual conversion:

²⁸ *Confessions*, p. 26. '[...] piously drunk in with my mother's milk.' Chadwick, p. 40.

²⁹ *Confessions*, p. 31. '[...] wept for me [...] more than mothers weep lamenting their dead children.' Chadwick, p. 49.

³⁰ 'stabant autem iuxta crucem Iesu mater eius et soror matris eius Maria Cleopae et Maria Magdalene.' 'Now there stood by the cross of Jesus, his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalen.'

sed non praeteribo quidquid mihi anima parturit de illa famula tua, quae me parturivit, et carne, ut in hanc temporalem, et corde, ut in aeternam lucem nascerer.³¹

Confessions, IX, viii (17)

In *Confessions* IX, the narrator tells of another turning point, the peculiar experience that both Monica and Augustine undergo at Ostia—the so-called vision. The narrator describes how, whilst looking down upon yet another garden, mother and son were in conversation about the mysteries of Paradise—specifically, and importantly, I think, what kind of life the saints will enjoy in Heaven—then find themselves rising upwards, past physical objects, climbing upwards past the sun, moon and stars: ‘erigentes nos ardentiore affectu in idipsum, perambulavimus gradatim cuncta corporalia et ipsum caelum, unde sol et luna et stellae lucent super terram.’³² Through internal reflection and dialogue the two enter into their own minds (‘et adhuc ascendebamus interius cogitando et loquendo’³³), but then travel beyond themselves into timelessness, and into an experiential state wherein the soul finds unfailing plenty: ‘venimus in mentes nostras et transcendimus eas, ut attingeremus regionem ubertatis indeficientis’. Such an effort takes all the concentration of the heart (‘modice toto ictu cordis’) (IX, x (24)).³⁴

This vision at Ostia is a description of a soul which desires unmediated access to God, one which wants to know what it means to ‘enter into the joy of the Lord’. But what is notable, of course, is that Augustine narrates this experience as two individuals in dialogue: Monica and the younger

³¹ *Confessions*, p. 110. ‘I shall not pass over whatever my soul may bring to birth concerning your servant, who brought me to birth in her body so that I was born into the light of time, and in her heart so that I was born into the light of eternity.’ Chadwick, p. 166.

³² *Confessions*, p.113.

³³ *Confessions*, p.113.

³⁴ *Confessions*, p.113.

Augustine are side by side, and their attention is turned towards one point, both literally and spiritually. Both, apparently, experience the same thing; they each ascend upwards toward the vision, through inward reflection and dialogue. It is as though their relationship itself, their shared love, their attentiveness to one another, and to God, somehow acts as a spiritual ratchet which propels them upwards. What begins as conversation—in language and in sound—must end in silence, because it is in silence, even unto itself, that the soul, says Augustine, must hear his word (IX, x, (25)).

The episode is framed, in the *Confessions*, by the fact that Monica dies soon after enjoying this mystical experience: Augustine mentions the fact of his mother's death in the paragraph immediately before the vision scene, and then tells of the details of her dying in the four paragraphs which follow it. Thus the author provides a portrayal of his mother's life, and of her death, and also what might be called a portrait of her after-life, given that in authoring this mystical encounter, he effectively writes her into Heaven, into the very joy of the Lord.

It is what Dante does for the now-dead Beatrice, when he writes of her in the *Vita nova* and in the *Commedia*, and what he does for himself—just as Augustine does—by writing of a first-person encounter with the sublime. The narrative that plays out in Dante's account of his climb up the Mountain of Purgatory, his entry into the Earthly Paradise and on into Heaven itself, is an extended version of this Ostia episode: language and dialogue define it until its ultimate end, when language must fail. The ascent of the souls up the mountain, and then metaphorically up through the heavens, past the moon, sun and stars and on towards the Empyrean, track the upward ascent of Augustine and Monica, step by step, past corporeal objects. At each stage of the journey, Dante-*personaggio* is also in dialogue, not just with Virgil, Beatrice and Bernard, but with the gamut of other souls that he comes across in the afterlife, souls who teach him, along

with his guides, how to understand himself, his inner self, in light of his creator. We see that Augustine provides the 'informing presence'³⁵ for Dante: the structural similarities of their narratives are telling.

When the dialogue ends, when sound ends, and when the final procession of images takes over from *Paradiso XXXIII*, 77 onwards, to the end of the poem, the apotheosis for both Dante and Augustine is some kind of experiential flash, 'un fulgore' for Dante,³⁶ the 'rapida cogitatione' for Augustine and Monica, which delivers them to the 'aeternam sapientiam' itself, free of any mediating word, sound or image (IX, x, (25)).³⁷ In Augustine's earlier 'failed' conversion, around the time of his first reading of the Platonists, the weakness of his eyes could not bear strength of God's rays, and he found himself back 'in regione dissimilitudinis'³⁸: still adrift, failing to imitate Christ, in a world which could not express in language what Augustine had the capacity to know in his soul; in a world in which meaning was exiled from language, just as Augustine was exiled, like the Prodigal Son, from his heavenly father (VII, x (16)).³⁹ At Ostia, sighing, mother and son fall back into the world of time and sound and return to human speech, where sentences have beginnings and endings: 'et suspiravimus et reliquimus ibi religatas primitias spiritus et remeavimus ad strepitum oris nostri, ubi verbum et incipitur et finitur' (IX, x, (24)).⁴⁰

Sentences, with their beginnings and endings; language with its finitude and limitation, will form the focus of the second part of this chapter. In this last section of Part One, I return to another question about Augustinian

³⁵ Hawkins, 'Divide and Conquer', p. 472.

³⁶ XXXIII, 141.

³⁷ *Confessions*, p. 114. '[...] flash of mental energy [...] eternal wisdom.' Chadwick, p. 172.

³⁸ *Confessions*, p. 82. '[...] in the region of dissimilarity.' Chadwick, p. 123.

³⁹ See Freccero, *The Poetics of Conversion* and *In Dante's Wake*; Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire*.

⁴⁰ *Confessions*, p. 113. '[...] the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending.' Chadwick, p. 171.

time, its recuperation and redemption, and its consequences for how we think about Dante's Purgatory. The Ostia episode shows vividly that the Heaven which Augustine conceives must be timeless: according to Augustine, this is a product of God's nature itself (XII, xi (13)). That concentration of the heart concentrates time too, to a point of timelessness; *un punto*—for Christian Moevs—is Dante's way of capturing the simplicity of God prior to attributes such as time and extension.⁴¹ Towards the end of the *Confessions*, in Book XI, there is an extended rumination on the nature of time, but before that, in Book X, Augustine grapples with memory:

Magna vis est memoriae, nescio quod horrendum, deus meus, profunda et infinita multiplicitas; et hoc animus est, et hoc ego ipse sum. quid ergo sum, deus meus? quae natura sum? [...] transibo et hanc vim meam, quae memoria vocatur, transibo eam, ut pertendam ad te, dulce lumen. quid dicis mihi? ego ascendens per animum meum ad te, qui desuper mihi manes, transibo et istam vim meam, quae memoria vocatur volens te attingere, unde attingi potes, et inhaerere tibi, unde inhaereri tibi potest. [...] transibo ergo et memoriam, ut attingam eum, qui separavit me a quadrupedibus et volatibus caeli sapientiosem me fecit. transibo et memoriam, ut ubi te inveniam, vere bone et segura suavitas, ut ubi te inveniam? si praeter memoriam meam te invenio, inmemor tui sum. et quomodo iam inveniam te, si memor non sum tui?⁴²

Confessions, X, xvii (26)

The possibility of passing beyond memory in a journey towards God is a critical question in the *Purgatorio* too. The process of purgation, and the

⁴¹ See C. Moevs, 'Il punto che mi vinse: Incarnation, Revelation, and Self-Knowledge in Dante's *Commedia*', in Montemaggi and Treherne (eds), *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, pp. 267–85.

⁴² *Confessions*, p. 129. 'Great is the power of memory, an awe-inspiring mystery, my God, a power of profound and infinite multiplicity. And this is mind, this is I myself. What then am I, my God? What is my nature? [...] I will transcend even this my power which is called memory. I will rise beyond it to move towards you, sweet light. What are you saying to me? Here I am climbing up through my mind towards you who are constant above me. I will pass beyond even that power of mind which is called memory, desiring to reach you by the way in which it is possible to be bonded [...] As I rise above memory, where am I to find you? My true good and gentle source of reassurance, where shall I find you? If I can find you outside my memory, I am not mindful of you. And how shall I find you if I am not mindful of you?' Chadwick, pp.194-5.

action that takes place in the Earthly Paradise, make the nature of error and imperfection in saved human beings a live question, and raises particular theological questions about the nature of personhood. Passage through the Lethe and the Eunoë rivers (*Purgatorio* XXVIII, 127-30; XXXIII, 91-96), first removing memories of sin and then restoring memories of goodness, creates a soul worthy to rise to Heaven. At *Purgatorio* XVI, 31-32, the pilgrim says, 'O creatura che ti mondi | per tornar bella a colui che ti fece.' But what kind of soul, what kind of person, do these cleansings, these baptisms create? Because this is, is it not, a kind of distortion, even if the soul that emerges from the Eunoë imitates Adam and Eve in their prelapsarian state? Such a person has learned to direct her love correctly and has thus changed for the good, has oriented herself away from the evils that bedevilled her earthly life, and curbed her excesses of love or rectified her deficiencies, in light of the examples found on the terraces of the mountain; *and yet*, a psychological or psychical manipulation is still somehow warranted of this person: even the *memory* of sin and vice must be removed; the memory of goodness increased. Any self-knowledge that these souls have acquired through their journey of conversion from sinful to redeemed, and from vice-ridden to 'bella', is surely lost; the image of their own selfhood is seen through a now-distorted mirror. It is a discomfiting thought in some ways: when characters in Paradise speak of their old sinful selves it necessarily sounds odd to readers who do not enjoy that same perspective of eternity. Folco, for example, can smile at the power that brought about his redemption, and does not worry about the sin which 'a mente non torna' (*Paradiso* IX, 104).

In light of this strange set of affairs, Marc Cogan wonders if there is a contradiction implicit in the status of Purgatory itself, as the souls learn the new habits of virtue, in order that they become worthy to ascend to Heaven.⁴³

⁴³ See *Purgatorio* I, 6.

In the course of their purgation, the souls not only lose vices that once enslaved them, they also acquire virtues whose intended operation is not of this world but of the next [...] The soul has always been of the same nature, but it took the regimen of Purgatory to reveal that real nature to us, since that true nature was concealed or obscured by flesh and worldly pursuits.⁴⁴

But in Heaven, the souls have no use of sensitive appetites, which the souls have seemingly trained on the terraces of Purgatory — and not merely for the purpose of directing the glorified bodies after the reunion of soul and bodies at the Last Judgement, ‘the only use that Aquinas sees for the sensitive appetites’.⁴⁵ To be sure, Dante claims something similar,⁴⁶ but he also suggests that the faculties of the soul must be rehabilitated in order that they are capable of rising to Heaven; the virtues which the souls learn in Purgatory are used to bring ‘amor d’animo’ back into line with the love for the Creator, which was present all along. The faculties must be in a ‘perfected state’.⁴⁷ At the end of the *Purgatorio*, Virgil says that Dante-*personaggio*’s will is healthy, upright and free: the souls acquire those qualities which the Beatitudes bless, and as such they are ready to see the Godhead ‘face to face’.⁴⁸

There remains, however, the question which Augustine raises by his paean to the nature of memory, to the substantial work that it does in its creation of the inner self, and his insistence that one must, in fact, pass beyond it in order to find God. This Augustinian question, as it plays out in the *Commedia*, as we have seen above, connects the moral psychology, the virtues, of the penitent souls — who have learned through and because of memory — to the nature of Heaven itself. It is Monica and Augustine’s

⁴⁴ M. Cogan, *The Design in the Wax: The Structure of the Divine Comedy and its Meaning* (Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), p. 146-47.

⁴⁵ Cogan, *Design*, p. 142.

⁴⁶ See *Paradiso* XIV, 37-60.

⁴⁷ Cogan, *Design*, p. 143.

⁴⁸ I Corinthians 13:12.

question at Ostia, about the kind of lives that the saints enjoy in Paradise. Once the mountain delivers the souls in the *Purgatorio* up to God—gives birth to them into the light of eternity—they have become purified and ready, they no longer need the memory of sin to be themselves in their fullest sense: their ‘real’ nature, as Cogan would have it, is ‘revealed’.

2. Persons Vulnerable to Error

Before the souls are ready to rise to Heaven, before the waters of the Lethe and Eunoë have done their work, they are still vulnerable: vulnerable to the vice that cause them as imperfect creatures to misdirect their desires, vulnerable to forgetfulness about where and how their attention and actions should be focused. The lessons on the mountain must correct them and remind them to turn, always, to God, to praise him and to become the perfected beings that His perfection necessitates. On Earth, of course, our vulnerability to error extends in all directions, but especially into the arenas of understanding and love. We are vulnerable to language and its deficiencies: to the misunderstandings to which it inevitably gives rise. And we are vulnerable to each other in love: to regret, to pain, to death. Such vulnerability need not be always wholly negative, indeed it allows spaces for growth and for flourishing. Vulnerability to misunderstanding, allows us to see that humility is required when faced by the eternity of the universe or, if you will, by God. Vulnerability to love, allows us closer and more meaningful human encounters.

2.1 Memory and Particularity

Purgatory is full of souls who remember their loved ones on Earth, and, indeed, their enemies. In some sense the author’s trick is to suppose that they have gone on ahead of their Earth-bound counterparts: that they have moved along some great conveyor belt in time, in history, that they are farther along the road. And yet the families that they appeal to on Earth remember them as persons *in the past*; these family members must both

look backwards to the person that they were, but also imagine them *now* in their current state, in order to pray for them. The souls of Purgatory have by necessity died in the past, and they too must remember how their selves were constituted in an earlier time; their families and loved ones must pray for them in their own present, looking forward to a future fate that ends in the Last Judgement. Souls like Nino Visconti (*Purgatorio* VIII, 47-84), for example, who, like the other souls that we have encountered in earlier chapters, wants to be prayed for and remembered: they are visibly and audibly vulnerable to the pain of being forgotten by the people whom they loved, or who supposedly loved them. Nino wants to be freed from the yoke that he finds himself under on the Mountain, but fears that his loved ones have forgotten him, believes that their attention has been lost: he says, simply, 'Non credo che la sua madre più m'ami' (*Purgatorio* VIII, 73). Nino is here already thrice-removed from his wife: first by death itself; again by his wife's subsequent remarriage; and now, by way of his very own language, in referring to her only via his daughter, in whom his hope to be remembered must now remain.

Nino's wife, he suggests, is fully culpable for no longer loving him, for forgetting her vows. There appears to be no failing on his part, no reason to suggest that his actions on Earth would not secure the loyalty of a wife in perpetuity, beyond the threshold of the grave. The portrait is entirely Nino's own and as such is partial and perhaps error-laden. In Ante-Purgatory, Nino is no perfected creature: indeed, he seems to take a cruel relish in the fact that his wife might be repaid in an unhappy future for her new marriage. What can he, in his vulnerability, in his error, teach the pilgrim?

Dante knows that 'imperfection is inherent in the human condition', but at the same time knows the importance of the truth that this 'does not make

life unliveable or words unsayable'.⁴⁹ We live most fully when we connect with human beings, in community, in friendship and love, in family, even when our language is sometimes inadequate to our meaning. But because language is operative only relationally, attentiveness is required; it becomes vulnerable to error when meaning breaks down across the interstices between individuals. So language, too, then, is vulnerable when it fails to mean. When we attend to other people; when we see them in all their contingency and particularity; when we see them defined by time and place, by good fortune or bad; when we see them trying and failing, stained by sin and damaged by error, we see what it means to be so far removed from a timeless, eternal, perfectly meaningful creator. Communicating within that imperfection requires attention: it requires shared connection, love and humility. For Dante it is the same love that gave the world the Incarnation, the same humility that said, 'ecce ancilla Domini'.⁵⁰ Indeed, the Annunciation provides a paradigmatic response of one human being to another individual's presence and, therefore, to the call of God. In his commentary on the terrace of pride, Robin Kirkpatrick underlines this necessary condition for meaningful language when he says that '[h]umility is not humiliation, but a rediscovery of our human interdependency.'⁵¹

The lessons of the *Purgatorio* are built, in large part, around the ways in which Mary embodies virtue.⁵² From the humility that she demonstrates at the Annunciation onward, scenes from the Holy Mother's life provide opportunities for the souls, and at one pace removed, the pilgrim, to learn how their own language, and their attentiveness to each other and to God, should be directed. And yet, although the Virgin's humane response never seems to fall below the mark that the Divine will requires, for both Dante

⁴⁹ Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, pp. 251-52.

⁵⁰ Luke 1:38; *Purgatorio* X, 44.

⁵¹ *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri 2: Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 372.

⁵² Mary's example is found throughout the second cantica, at: X, 34-35; XIII, 28; XV, 85-93; XVIII, 100; XX, 1-24; XXII, 142-44; XXV, 128.

and Augustine, it is clear that error and imperfection are no barrier for learning what God is, or how to participate in his glory:

Augustine, at the outset of the *Confessions* makes a remarkable observation—the gift of faith is breathed into us not only by the humanity of the Son but by other people, by the ministry of preachers [...] God revealed through other people, in all their peculiarities and contingencies, even their failings.⁵³

Janet Soskice reminds us that Augustine says it need not only be Christ, or the saints, who can provide the gift of faith: instances of his charity are all around us, if we would only look. It is worth, I think, repeating Soskice's words that I quoted in the last chapter: 'we must ask who we love, what we attend to, in order to know who we are and should be'.⁵⁴

Human beings with their 'peculiarities and contingencies' might be the subtitle of the *Purgatorio*, because if it is anything that the pilgrim finds there, it is humanity in its particularity and multiplicity: a dazzling display of errors—failings in glorious Technicolor, imperfections writ large. As individuals in the process of learning, they must ask what to attend to, in order to know who they are and what they should be, in order that they can direct their love, in order that they can understand themselves and that love, as part of God's *caritas*. This is no small undertaking for either the souls or for the pilgrim, and indeed for him the effort is at times dizzying. Heather Webb describes the *cantica's* programme of rehabilitation in terms of a double aspect—the 'close-up' encounters of an individual's situation made sense of by the 'widescreen' of humanity's place *sub specie aeternitatis*, and vice versa:

⁵³ Soskice, 'Monica's Tears', p. 449.

⁵⁴ Soskice, *The Kindness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.

The *Purgatorio* calls upon us, as readers, to view both a widescreen vision of the human condition and a series of close-ups of individual persons, often in deliberately vertiginous alternation.⁵⁵

Indeed we may well find ourselves dizzyed by this 'vertiginous alternation': too much to comprehend at one time within our imperfect heads. But the double aspect is absolutely necessary for Dante to perform his educative programme, which depends upon our responses as humans, vulnerable to the pain of love and death, and to the errors of an inadequate understanding.

The character of Gregory the Great, as he is presented in the *Commedia*, connects these themes: he embodies what it means to love attentively; what it means to be pained by death; and further how, on Earth, our intellects are inadequate to the task of understanding God. Although Gregory's smile has been a topic of some discussion in Dante studies, his figure more generally has been, according to Vittorio Montemaggi, rather neglected,⁵⁶ largely due, no doubt, to the paucity of references to him in the text itself. As I noted in my introduction, Gregory's name appears only twice in the

⁵⁵ H. Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) p. 89.

⁵⁶ See Montemaggi, 'Dante and Gregory the Great'. For discussions about the smile, see: Jacoff, 'The Post-Palinodic Smile'; Kirkpatrick, *Dante's 'Paradiso' and the Limits of Modern Criticism*, pp. 166-68. Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, pp. 17-18. I have sympathies with Montemaggi's position on Gregory's smile, but also Barolini's, which is suspicious of Dante's motives. Indeed, it does seem like some kind of vanity for a poet-theologian to pass over what he perceives as his own earlier mistake (in the *Convivio*), by a creative sleight of hand — by creating in his text the conditions in which a theological authority claims for himself an error instead. Further, to make that theologian smile at this error could be read as a double conceit: the character of a theological heavyweight reduced to a smiling clown, perhaps. (If any relation between author and his creation exemplifies Dante's own definition of the proud, as 'È chi, per esser suo vicin soppresso, | spera eccellenza, e sol per questo brama | ch'el sia di sua grandezza in basso messo' (*Purg.* XVII, 115-18) then this, it could be argued, might be it.) Montemaggi's, on the other hand, is a more charitable reading of the author's intention, but runs the risk, as Barolini is always at pains to point out with other critics, of succumbing to Dante's own all-controlling grasp of the text and its interpretation.

entire poem, at *Purgatorio* X, 75,⁵⁷ and at *Paradiso* XXVIII, 133.⁵⁸ In Purgatory he is remembered as the intercessor who prayed for Emperor Trajan's soul. In Paradise he is found encountering the orders of the angelic intelligences. The third, implicit, reference to Gregory at *Paradiso* XX, 109,⁵⁹ also refers to the story of Trajan, a myth which by Dante's time had become commonplace in medieval culture.

On the terrace of Pride, the pilgrim sees the story of Trajan and the widow in one of the incredible marble reliefs: the figures seem to move and speak. The scene in which Trajan helps the grieving woman is the same scene in which Gregory purportedly saw the emperor represented in art (perhaps carved on Trajan's column), and which moved Gregory to pray for him. Gregory sees a portrait of Trajan's humility — an example of human-to-human attentiveness — wherein inequalities of status and power are set aside and an individual is seen as a person, suffering and in need of recognition. Trajan responds to the person and the suffering, and Gregory responds to it too: their attention is directed towards the same need. But

⁵⁷ Quiv' era storiata l'alta Gloria
del roman principato, il cui valore
mosse Gregorio a la sua gran vittoria;
 i' dico di Traiano imperadore;
e una vedovella li era al freno,
di lagrime atteggiata e di dolore.

Purg. X, 73-79.

⁵⁸ E Dionisio con tanto disio
a contemplar questi ordini si mise,
che li nomò e distinse com' io.
Ma Gregorio da lui poi si divise;
onde, sì tosto come li occhi aperse
in questo ciel, di sé medesmo rise.

Par. XXVIII, 130-35.

⁵⁹ Ché l'una de lo 'nferno, u' non si riede
già mai a buon voler, tornò a l'ossa;
e ciò di viva spene fu mercede:
di viva spene, che mise la possa
ne' prieghi fatti a Dio per suscitarla,
sì che potesse sua voglia esser mossa.

Par. XX, 106-11

Gregory sees also that Trajan is in need — despite being long dead — because as a pagan he has missed out on the love that would secure him an eternal life. Gregory's loving attention towards Trajan and — in turn — to Trajan's own loving attention, his response to his death, and his faith in the power of Christ, give rise to the hope which causes him to pray for a miraculous end.

Gregory's hope transcends the limitations of time, of a before and after, of alive and dead, of saved and damned: his great victory is great because he saw this as no impediment but rather understood something of God's eternity, of his limitlessness. That is worthy of celebration, certainly, and speaks to a good man with a strong faith. But I also suggest that it is in the attention itself, in the close attention which both Gregory and Trajan display, that Dante gives us the means through which we can learn to participate in God's love. The pilgrim examines the bas-reliefs on the terrace of Pride in the same way that Gregory must have attended to the carvings on Trajan's column. Dante-*personaggio* has an easier task in deciphering the messages that he is shown: these are God's own artworks which have supernatural visual and auditory properties.⁶⁰ Even so, the pilgrim moves his feet in order to pay closer attention: 'I' mossi i piè del loco dov' io stava, | per avvisar da presso un'altra istoria' (70-71). Gregory's task, I argue, required even closer attention. It required the summoning of human personhood out of a representation in blocks of inanimate marble. This re-creation of a human-to-human encounter, of two lives from the long-past, was rendered by Gregory in such high-definition that he was moved to pray for Trajan's damned soul.⁶¹

⁶⁰ See Vickers 'Seeing Is Believing'. Vickers also explores the possibility raised by several of the *vitae* of Gregory, that he was punished by God for his presumption or, indeed, pride.

⁶¹ Of course, characterised in this way, one wonders about the fate of the poor widow herself, and why she was deserving of only Trajan's and not Gregory's pity. But the salvation of other pagans, including the man on the banks of the

In the *Paradiso*, rather than hearing of his actions via another person's salvific journey, we get a glimpse of Gregory himself. In canto XXVIII, the pilgrim is in the final Heaven, the Primum Mobile, and Beatrice here explains the order of the angelic hierarchies which the pilgrim can see wheeling around the central 'favilla pura' (38). The author lets Beatrice describe the scene, and in so doing attempts a textual representation of a 'vision' which he is well aware defies description: articulating in language something which he believed was necessarily beyond language. It is a topic which theologians had long grappled with, not least because one of the problems that they encountered was how to integrate seemingly non-convergent systems of thought, of natural philosophy, with the Bible. It is a problem that still, for some, seems intractable. So, in this canto, the controversy, such that it was, over the angelic hierarchies, is given another airing, perhaps because the author wanted to revisit and retract his earlier position of the *Convivio*, perhaps for other, more noble reasons. At any rate, it is Gregory to whom an error is given, Gregory who is given 'correction', and the opportunity to respond to that error. The author and Dante-poeta remain entirely silent about any such errors that they may have made.

Read in a more positive light, Gregory's response to his own intellectual error in Heaven demonstrates how such error is, thankfully, no impediment to salvation. More than this, though: my claim is that Gregory's example can show how individual souls can retain a level of particularity in Dante's Paradise that otherwise might have seemed at risk. It seemed at risk given the function of the rivers in the Earthly Paradise, as we saw above, when souls seemingly forget their sins, lose their memory, and perhaps, too, the persons that they were, as they pass through this turning point, the threshold, from Purgatory to Paradise. My argument will

Indus (*Par.* XIX, 71), and the Ethiopian (*Par.* XIX, 109), is a topic that extends beyond the scope of this present study.

be that Gregory demonstrates, as he smiles in acceptance at his error, an affirmation of his own personhood. He performs his particularity: he memorialises the person that he was on Earth *and who he still remains*, and this fact makes him recognisable to the loved-ones that he will meet in Heaven, and to himself.⁶²

The smile can be read as an acceptance of his own limitation: arriving in Heaven perfected, and now enjoying an understanding which was unavailable on Earth, here is a moment of quasi-remembering and enlightenment. He knows that his intellect was mistaken on Earth, and the new-found knowledge is a moment for joy, for pleasure in truth and beauty. But it could also be a moment for smiling at the person he *was*: a fallible, error-struck person—someone, indeed, who claimed for himself an authority on theological matters such as these. This vignette is a portrait of a theologian at the very moment of transition from *before* to *eternity*: on the very threshold of fully becoming. And yet the smile is a gesture that must look backwards in time as well as forwards, and is thereby a way in which the author can retain the qualities of the earthly person: Gregory's smile is acceptance of the limitation of his intellect in life, yes, but it is *also* an affirmation of the fact that he was this *particular* person, with these *particular* failings.

Gregory's smile is a bodily gesture demonstrated by a person who has no body. Such contradictions need not worry readers too much, now that we are accustomed, thanks to Beatrice's instruction, to adjusting our thinking about how the heavens have been arranged for the pilgrim's—and our—benefit. Dante knows too well that the only way for poetry to mean anything at all is via the meaning-making bodies that we are clothed in on Earth, and via a language that is necessarily temporal. So it is a puckishness on the part of the author to write this moment of transition in a timeless,

⁶² For more on this theme, see: See Gagnolati, 'Nostalgia in Heaven'.

placeless place, in an eternal present where there is no need for learning, because there are no new things to be known, and signalled by a gesture which has no attendant body, no place at all.⁶³ It introduces the theme which we return to again, of how to write Paradise out of time; how to speak of God meaningfully, without falling, ourselves, into error. I introduced this section by claiming that language can fail, importantly, for Dante, in two ways: firstly, it can fail to mean *something* between individuals, when we fail to attend to one another in love. Secondly, language fails to mean *everything*: it does not have within its capacity the ability to gather the totality of being and give it expression. As a consequence, understanding, predicated as it is upon language, must fail too. Gregory exemplifies just one way in which intellectual understanding about God might fail. But we each share, as humans, this more general failing: our cognitive capacity is simply not up to the task. Like Gregory, we need not see this failure as purely negative: we should remember again Botterill's words, which celebrate Dante's own linguistic virtuosity, in showing us that even amid such failure it 'does not make life unliveable or words unsayable'.⁶⁴ Dante's cannot ever be construed as a pessimistic position about the nature of language—this would make no sense for the author of such dazzling work as the *Commedia*. And yet, he is well aware of its limitations, and of the richness that an apophatic silence contains. Before we attend to that silence and the meaning that might arise from it, I first consider those words which are indeed sayable, and which are indeed meaningful, from a particular and temporal point of view. For Dante—and, of course, for the other theologians within this study—the ultimate exemplar of meaningful, particular and temporal matter is the person of Christ, the Word himself.

⁶³ On God and memory, see *Purgatorio* X, 94: 'Colui che mai non vide cosa nova'; on angels and memory, see *Paradiso* XXIX, 79-81: '[...]però non hanno vedere interciso | da novo obietto, e però non bisogna | rememorar per concetto diviso'.

⁶⁴ Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, pp. 251-52.

2.3 Language as peculiarly human

In the last chapter we saw how Bernard and Dante share a 'rejoicing' in language, which might not be what we think of when we read, for example, Thomas Aquinas. And yet Thomas's choice of rigid style and torpid prose also betrays an authentic commitment to loving God and to converting souls through Christ. Via Aquinas, I suggest, we can better understand Dante's own depiction of humans as embodied creatures, defined by space and time, by the 'comically small scale, within the limits of [...] human lineaments',⁶⁵ and by the vulnerability to love and death that is also embodied in Christ. In Aquinas we find the means to understand something of Dante's commitment to persons and the way in which (my reading of) personhood in the poet's work is construed. In order to see this more clearly, one must first see what Aquinas's commitment to embodiment reveals and, further, what repercussions it has for his understanding of God's ineffability.

One critical point of departure between Aquinas and Augustine concerns the nature of ineffability, because it rests on very different assumptions for each theologian. For Aquinas, the fact of ineffability signifies that the Godhead remains unintelligible to us whilst we are still on Earth. What God is cannot be expressed, because it cannot be understood: there is no way that our human capacity can encompass God's totality. Aquinas's point is, I think, easier for us to understand in the modern age, because the nature of the conundrum works in two directions, and fits with a modern view of mental capacity and language: we cannot express, or put into language, what is unintelligible; at the same time, and in the opposite direction, if concepts are impenetrable to language, then they are by definition unintelligible, or meaningless, nonsense. Ineffability equals unintelligibility, and vice versa. Aquinas's position is accessible for a modern reader, in a way, perhaps, that differs from Augustine's. For

⁶⁵ Kirkpatrick, 'Polemics as Praise', p. 18.

Augustine agrees that God is, indeed, ineffable, but makes no claim for his being unknowable. That God remains ineffable is not due to our incapacity to understand; indeed, we *can* understand God, it is just that language fails in expressing his intelligibility. We need to know God, if at least imperfectly on Earth, in order that we can love him. In the closing prayer of *De Trinitate*, he says, 'Meminerem tui, intelligam te, diligam te. Auge in me ista, donec me reformes ad integrum.'⁶⁶ According to Phillip Cary, this idiosyncratic position sets Augustine '[...] apart from the rest of the Nicene or orthodox traditions, which unanimously affirm the incomprehensibility of the divine nature'.⁶⁷

Augustine's doctrine of intelligibility with its heterodox peculiarity, brings with it the epistemological upshot that the powers of language and intellect come apart when we think about God. Words are sensible things, and may not 'give adequate expression to intelligible things',⁶⁸ and thus because we are, for the Neoplatonist Augustine, ultimately intelligent souls, we are able to understand things which might remain inexpressible. Aquinas, of course, is fully committed to persons as embodied creatures, persons who will become fully realised only at the Last Judgement when bodies are resurrected:

Alio modo quia constat quod homo naturaliter desiderat salutem sui ipsius, anima autem cum sit pars corporis hominis, non est totus homo, et anima mea non est ego; unde licet anima consequatur salutem in alia vita, non tamen ego vel quilibet homo.⁶⁹

Super I ad Corinthios, 15, 2.

⁶⁶ *De Trinitate*, ed. by W.J. Mountain, F. Glorie in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina LA* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), p. 534. 'Grant the power of finding you to the one you have created to find you. May I remember you, understand you, love you. Increase all these things in me until you reform me fully.'

⁶⁷ Cary, *Augustine's Invention*, p. 45.

⁶⁸ Cary, *Augustine's Invention*, p. 58.

⁶⁹ 'A human being naturally desires the survival of his or her selfhood. [E]ven were the soul to survive into another life, [that surviving soul] would be neither I nor any other person.'

The upshot of Aquinas's position on bodies and souls for the ineffability *topos* is that whilst on Earth, meaningful discourse between human beings is possible because matter itself can be meaningful, as Denys Turner notes:

What exists is a person; what makes me a person is my possessing an intellectual soul, and that one and only soul runs *all the way down* through my animal and vegetative life [...] Thus [...] my vegetative and animal life (eating, having sex) can bear *sense*, carry meanings, become a discourse [...] [W]hat else is language but the material world replete with the human meanings that it bears, what else are human beings but matter articulate?⁷⁰

Our real self, for Aquinas, our personhood—the one that will be glorified, God willing, at the Last Judgement—is no rarified intellectual soul but, rather, a creature who lives and breathes, who eats and has sex, who loves and grieves, and who feels regret and joy, and who feels, bodily, the entire spectrum of human emotion.⁷¹ This in itself allows us access to something

⁷⁰ Turner, *Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 95-96.

⁷¹ *ST*, I^a q. 75 a. 4 co: Respondeo dicendum quod animam esse hominem dupliciter potest intelligi. Uno modo, quod homo sit anima, sed hic homo non sit anima, sed compositum ex anima et corpore, puta Socrates. Quod ideo dico, quia quidam posuerunt solam formam esse de ratione speciei, materiam vero esse partem individui, et non speciei. Quod quidem non potest esse verum. Nam ad naturam speciei pertinet id quod significat definitio. Definitio autem in rebus naturalibus non significat formam tantum, sed formam et materiam. Unde materia est pars speciei in rebus naturalibus, non quidem materia signata, quae est principium individuationis; sed materia communis. Sicut enim de ratione huius hominis est quod sit ex hac anima et his carnibus et his ossibus; ita de ratione hominis est quod sit ex anima et carnibus et ossibus. Oportet enim de substantia speciei esse quidquid est communiter de substantia omnium individuorum sub specie contentorum. Alio vero modo potest intelligi sic, quod etiam haec anima sit hic homo. Et hoc quidem sustineri posset, si poneretur quod animae sensitivae operatio esset eius propria sine corpore, quia omnes operationes quae attribuuntur homini, convenirent soli animae; illud autem est unaquaeque res, quod operatur operationes illius rei. Unde illud est homo, quod operatur operationes hominis. Ostensum est autem quod sentire non est operatio animae tantum. Cum igitur sentire sit quaedam operatio hominis, licet non propria, manifestum est quod homo non est anima tantum, sed est aliquid compositum ex anima et corpore. Plato vero, ponens sentire esse proprium animae, ponere potuit quod homo esset anima utens corpore. 'It may also be understood in this sense, that this soul is this man; and this could be held if it were supposed that the operation of the sensitive soul were proper to it, apart from the body; because in that case all the operations which are attributed to man would belong to the soul only; and whatever performs the operations proper to a thing, is that thing; wherefore that which performs the

of the mystery of the Incarnation.⁷² How, aware of our own createdness, of our contingency, of our imperfection and of our particularity, we understand, if only through a glass darkly, what it might mean for a Creator—necessary, perfect and eternal—to become man, one tempted by sin, and one fearful of death.

Respondeo dicendum quod Christus tentari voluit, primo quidem, ut nobis contra tentationes auxilium ferret. Unde Gregorius dicit, in homilia, non erat indignum redemptori nostro quod tentari voluit, qui venerat et occidi, ut sic tentationes nostras suis tentationibus vinceret, sicut mortem nostram sua morte superavit [...] Unde dicitur Heb. IV, non habemus pontificem qui non possit compati infirmitatibus nostris, tentatum autem per omnia, pro similitudine, absque peccato.⁷³

ST, III^a q. 41 a. 1 co.

operations of a man is man. But it has been shown above (Article 3) that sensation is not the operation of the soul only. Since, then, sensation is an operation of man, but not proper to him, it is clear that man is not a soul only, but something composed of soul and body. Plato, through supposing that sensation was proper to the soul, could maintain man to be a soul making use of the body.'

⁷² *ST, III^a q. 2 a. 5 co:* Respondeo dicendum quod Christus dicitur homo univoce cum hominibus aliis, utpote eiusdem speciei existens, secundum illud apostoli, Philipp. II, in similitudinem hominum factus. Pertinet autem ad rationem speciei humanae quod anima corpori uniatur, non enim forma constituit speciem nisi per hoc quod sit actus materiae; et hoc est ad quod generatio terminatur, per quam natura speciem intendit. Unde necesse est dicere quod in Christo fuerit anima unita corpori, et contrarium est haereticum, utpote derogans veritati humanitatis Christi. 'I answer that, Christ is called a man univocally with other men, as being of the same species, according to the Apostle (Philippians 2:7), "being made in the likeness of a man." Now it belongs essentially to the human species that the soul be united to the body, for the form does not constitute the species, except inasmuch as it becomes the act of matter, and this is the terminus of generation through which nature intends the species. Hence it must be said that in Christ the soul was united to the body; and the contrary is heretical, since it destroys the truth of Christ's humanity.'

⁷³ *ST, III^a q. 41 a. 1 co:* 'I answer that, Christ wished to be tempted; first that He might strengthen us against temptations. Hence Gregory says in a homily (xvi in Evang.): "It was not unworthy of our Redeemer to wish to be tempted, who came also to be slain; in order that by His temptations He might conquer our temptations, just as by His death He overcame our death". [...] Hence it is written (Hebrews 4:15): "We have not a high-priest, who cannot have compassion on our infirmities, but one tempted in all things like as we are, without sin".'

Further, only such a conception of matter and soul, of embodied persons, can make sense of the sublimity of the Eucharist, and of human persons becoming part of God's Church:

[It is] the mystery of how the lowest and most material of all forms of human life [...] carries the weight of an utterly transcendent meaning [...] of the Cross, the resurrection and ascension. If ever there was a case of matter making sense, of material life becoming Word—indeed the very Word of God—then the Eucharist is it.⁷⁴

That mystery of the Incarnation, and that sublime transcendence of the Eucharist, has purchase on us because of our embodiedness, and because of our very imperfection. The human questions of life and action which so preoccupy us should be the terrain of both poetry and theology: in learning what we are and what we can be; in knowing what is beyond us; in considering the nature of language itself; in, perhaps, becoming critics of poetry, we increase our understanding of what it means to be created.

The ultimate bearer of meaning, for Christians, must be the person of Christ. When human language, whether vernacular or no, cannot contain the plenitude of the Godhead, we can see God when we see Christ; we can read truth when we read the Word; and in becoming the Church, the body of Christ, we can participate in God through the Eucharist; in loving neighbours and enemies alike, in forgiveness and in charity, we become like him and know him better.

For Dante, as meaning-making creatures we can become intoxicated by our own ability to mean: we run the risk of falling into pride because of the brute fact of language and our apparent manipulation of it. But it is the pride of the orator (perhaps a Bernard), of the rhetorician (an Augustine), of the philosopher (an Aquinas), and of the theologian (a Gregory), and, of

⁷⁴ Turner, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 98.

course, the pride of the poet, which has the potential to obscure the limitations of language: language does not have the power within itself to mean everything. For Augustine, despite casting off the role of professional rhetorician with such determination, the choice of linguistic style remains important. As Erich Auerbach has shown, Augustine recommends that the work of those preaching to convert a congregation incorporate sublime, intermediate or lowly styles. Christian discourse, or so Augustine says in *De doctrina christiana*, and in particular, instruction and exegesis, can be written in the low style, because 'a Christian's [...] subject matter is always sublime'.⁷⁵ This is one example in which theological language and its interpretation becomes what Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt calls a 'totalizing discourse'. It is 'totalizing' because it gives the impression that within its very own limits, God's truth might be articulated; that through and within language we might make progress towards understanding; that had we but world enough and time, we could contain the Godhead and its meaning in our discourse. According to Bauerschmidt, the tyranny of such a metaphysics will only be disrupted by something totally Other:

Only a divine discourse that breaks into and breaks apart human speech can in fact rupture the totalizing discourse of metaphysics; it is only such a claim that can in fact confront us with a God who is truly Other, without delivering that Other to us as an effect of our consciousness.⁷⁶

One way in which to end such a discourse, might be to stop altogether, to break off, to leave room for silence. In allowing for an apophatic silence, one might be able to understand how language is 'iconic of humanity's difference from God's eternity'.⁷⁷ This suggestion brings us back to Augustine and Monica at Ostia, returning to Earth from their shared

⁷⁵ Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public*, p. 37.

⁷⁶ F. C. Bauerschmidt, 'Aesthetics: The Theological Sublime', in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. by J. Millbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 215.

⁷⁷ Morgan, *The Incarnation of the Word*, p. 38.

mystical vision, back into the world and ‘to the noise of [...] human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending’ (IX, x, (24)).⁷⁸ As Elena Lombardi has shown, syntax *itself* demonstrates that language desires its own end: a desire, that is, for the resolution and satisfaction of the meaning-making form that is found within sentences, with their beginnings and endings.⁷⁹ The limitedness of language, even when taken as a whole— as a system, as an entity— is radically contingent and dependent on human creatures, in a particular space and in a particular time, as Dante has the character of Adam make explicit to the pilgrim in *Paradiso* XXVI:

‘La lingua ch’io parlai fu tutta spenta
 innanzi che a l’ovra inconsumabile
 fosse la gente di Nembròt attenta:
 ché nullo effetto mai razionabile,
 per lo piacere uman che rinovella
 seguendo il cielo, sempre fu durabile.
 Opera naturale è ch’uom favella;
 ma così o così, natura lascia
 poi fare a voi secondo che v’abbella.’

Paradiso XXVI, 124-32

One might find the prospect of a silence, the end of language, unbearably nihilistic: what can one learn, what can one even think, with silence? It is here that the stranglehold that language has on us seems at its most powerful. And yet, Aquinas saw that there was a power in the disappearing word, there is meaning in things that are left unarticulated. At the end of his career, famously, and perhaps mythically, before the great *summa* is completed, he says to Brother Reginald, ‘I can write no more. I have seen things which make all my writing like straw.’⁸⁰ And if Thomas’s vast output is mere straw, then what hope the rest of us for making sense of reality through language? In my last chapter I considered how Aquinas

⁷⁸ Chadwick, p. 171.

⁷⁹ Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire*, especially, pp. 47-66.

⁸⁰ G.K. Chesterton recounts this episode in *Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox* (New York City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p. 116.

conceals the person of Thomas within his own writing: how the text gives up nothing of the man, except what we read into the negative space which surrounds it. Here the task is greater still: the negative space is now blanketing, blinding and perhaps suffocating too. What can we see and understand with no language? What templates do we have for negotiating such a disappearance?

The disappearances, contained within the Gospels, of Jesus Christ: his death, his bodily removal from the tomb, his vanishing from Emmaus – these disappearances help us to understand, literally, the death of the W/word. Witnesses to those disappearances were left without the ability to make sense of them, their meaning seemed utterly lost. Without knowing that Christ had risen from the dead, absence was interpreted as some kind of abandonment and meaninglessness. The tears of those at the foot of the Cross; the tears of Mary Magdalene; the confusion of the disciples on the road to Emmaus ('nos autem sperabamus quia ipse esset redempturus Israel'⁸¹): these are outward signs of a loss of meaning. In his analysis of these disappearances, Bauerschmidt goes further, and shows that the vanishings themselves contain within them the meaningfulness of the particularity of Jesus Christ.

The cross, the tomb, the way to Emmaus: all places of negation, of vanishing. At the same time, the transparency of the sign does not make it [...] nugatory. For it is this *particular* negation (cross and resurrection) of this *particular* sign (Jesus of Nazareth) that moves us beyond mere negation of meaning to an excess of meaning.⁸²

That particular absence, that particular silence, might well be the same silence that rings out at the end of the *Commedia*: the beat that Dante deliberately constructs and asks us to attend to as the poem ends. For Aquinas, 'silence is not the absence of speech. It is what the fullness of

⁸¹ Luke 24:21.

⁸² Bauerschmidt, 'Aesthetics: the Theological Sublime', p. 210.

speech demonstrates [...] speech falls short.⁸³ An excess of meaning cannot be contained within language itself, the vision that Dante-*poeta* participates in cannot be articulated in words. And so the 'fullness of speech' in the *Commedia*, the virtuosity of Dante's language, does not contain within it the totality which is God, but, rather, as it falls into silence, shows us humanity's 'iconic [...] difference' from God. It shows us that difference, through characters like Gregory—who is both vulnerable to the love between humans and vulnerable to language's misunderstandings, as it draws us into the 'totalizing' discourse of theology. For Dante, there is a requirement upon us to recognise our createdness as humans—and language as being definitive of this—in the light of a Creator who is perfectly meaningful and suffers no such vulnerability; whose Son once and for all rescued meaning from the meaninglessness that the 'grande errore' (*Paradiso* VII, 29) of original sin had so threatened.

⁸³ Turner, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 42.

CHAPTER IV

Beatrice as Theologian

Ending the last chapter, I considered what can be gained by accepting the finitude of language, by the appreciation of an apophatic silence. It is a question which must have preoccupied Dante, even as he dealt in words, their craft and their power. This final chapter considers what Dante is able to do in light of his commitment to an apophatic God, given Dante-*poeta's* self-declared calling as *scriba Dei*: how he can write powerfully and meaningfully about God and our approach to Him. The focus of this chapter will be the character of Beatrice: I propose that of any of the characters who appear in the poem, it is Beatrice who fulfils the role of theologian most effectively, because of, rather than in spite of, the role she plays in Dante's own biography and poetic career. It is Beatrice who 'grounds and humanizes a poem that could otherwise fall into silence or abstraction'.¹ As we saw in the previous chapter, that silence may well be necessary at the last, but in order for us to see this fact clearly, Dante first offers up a literary production in Beatrice, 'a radically alien construct',² who is able to up-end our expectations about theological authority, and who embodies in her own unique personhood a means for understanding something about the Godhead itself. How Dante achieves this, and why, I explore below.

And so in this chapter I read Beatrice among my chosen theologians: how she shares some of their qualities—indeed the qualities through which their authority as theologians is constructed, either historically, or by Dante, in the poem. It is, necessarily, a somewhat contrived reading, because of course the qualities that I pick out here are not the only ones for which these theologians are known, and conversely, they are not the only ones

¹ T. Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption: Eros, Salvation, Vernacular Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 80.

² Barolini, *Dante and the Origins*, p. 366.

which are important in the character of Beatrice. But there are indeed important ways in which by comparing them, or setting them alongside each other, we can see that what is absolutely necessary and sufficient for the pilgrim to arrive at the vision of God at the end of the poem, can only be provided by the person of Beatrice, and not by any other person. What that fact means for readers more generally, I take up in the conclusion to the thesis.

1. Interpreting Beatrice through Augustine

It is my suggestion that any interpretation of Beatrice necessarily reads her personhood under the Augustinian rubric that Dante outlines in the second chapter of the *Convivio* – that is, in the autobiographical mode of talking of oneself, authorised by Augustine himself in the *Confessions*:

L'altra è quando, per ragionare di sé, grandissima utilidade ne segue altrui per via di dottrina; e questa ragione mosse Agustino ne le sue Confessioni a parlare di sé, ché per lo processo de la sua vita, lo quale fu di [non] buono in buono, e di buono in migliore, e di migliore in ottimo, ne diede essempro e dottrina, la quale per sì vero testimonio ricevere non si potea.

Convivio I, ii, 14

Here in the *Convivio*, Dante claims Augustine was justified in writing about himself, because his life proceeded from '[non] buono in buono, e di buono in migliore, e di migliore in ottimo'. No other testimony could have provided so powerful a lesson. In the *Commedia*, these words are echoed in a description of Dante-*personaggio*'s journey. Tellingly, it is Beatrice herself who picks out the way for the pilgrim, such that it is: 'Bëatrice quella che sì scorge di bene in meglio' (*Paradiso* X, 38). The echoes of the *Convivio* passage are apparent, and here in the Heaven of the Sun, Dante authorises again his own autobiographical project, placing it alongside the reasons that he claimed authorised Augustine's own life-writing. But the additional datum in this example, of course, is that it is Beatrice who sees for the pilgrim in which direction one's life moves from good to better: Beatrice is

necessary for the pilgrim to become what is worthy of writing. And as such, the author pairs the two inextricably together: Dante's own conception of himself, transmitted in all of his works, but reaching an apotheosis in the *Commedia*, is only understood, through and because of, his relationship with Beatrice.

Dante continued his career, after a disruption, by returning to the figure of Beatrice. Her life and death provided both the *prima facie* motivation for writing the *Vita nova* and the impetus for Dante's self-proclaimed change in poetic direction which ends it. But far from seeing the *Commedia* as a kind of continuation of the lovers' story of the *Vita nova*, Zygmunt G. Barański suggests that even though the later poem calls forth the *Vita nova* in both narrative content and explicit stylistic references, this 'is not really to celebrate it, but to take over and rewrite its concerns'. At a fundamental level, the *Commedia* resurrects Beatrice from the death she reportedly suffers in the *Vita nova* and of course, reunites her with Dante in a most dramatic way. According to Barański:

The *Commedia* openly overturns and supersedes the pivotal and determining event of the *Vita nova*, thereby restoring a moral order to the character's life which Beatrice's death had severely undermined.³

The fissures between the two texts are made clearer still in the portrayal of Beatrice's character. In the *Commedia*, Barański hears a 'psychologically complex [...] voice',⁴ which was not present at all in the *Vita nova*. This voice, of course, is the subject of much discussion in the literature. Barolini's now famous description of Dante's heroine as *Beatrix loquax*⁵ is important, and I return to it in the discussion below, but Barolini also suggests, in seeming opposition to Barański, that the Beatrice of the *Commedia* is far from a complex character with a recognisable subjectivity.

³ Barański, 'New Life', p. 286.

⁴ Barański, 'New Life', p. 286.

⁵ Barolini, *Dante and the Origins*, p. 360.

Indeed, she says, in Beatrice, Dante seems to have ‘failed to create [a cohesive] character’.⁶ For Barolini, the various symbols which Beatrice embodies undermine the characterisation of any particular personhood.

So it is impossible to consider the role of the character of Beatrice in the *Commedia* without considering her appearance in the *Vita nova*, and the type of poetic production that Dante was engaged in in his earlier life. Barański’s concern that we do not read the journey from *Vita nova* to *Commedia* as a straightforward continuation of the poet’s biography, must also be squared with a consideration of the choice of genre, style, and language—but also narrative content—which the earlier work exhibited, and how in the *Commedia* this choice was rejected, recapitulated or refined.

Even if we agree with Barański, that the *Commedia* supersedes the *Vita nova* and reappraises its significance and worth, what we must see is that Dante’s choice of Beatrice as sometime subject of the *Vita nova* and as character in the *Commedia*, means that we can only understand the driving force of the latter as a journey toward, and motivated by, love. Indeed, Beatrice is identified as Dante’s beloved early in the poem, at *Inferno* II, when we hear Lucy, via Virgil, implore Beatrice to act on behalf of Dante-*personaggio*: to help ‘*quei che t’amò tanto*’ (*Inferno* II, 104). Whether the love referred to here is an erotic love brings with it a host of questions, and complications, which some critics have tried to side-step through employing only allegorical interpretations for the lovers’ story—mirroring those Biblical love stories which theologians have for centuries used to illustrate the love between humanity and God. That is certainly one explanatory route to take, but it is not the only one, and it leaves aside rich interpretive possibilities.

In Book II of the *Convivio*, Dante describes the Empyrean as resembling the ‘*divina scienza*’, or theology, because within it all is peace: it suffers no

⁶ Barolini, *Dante and the Origins*, p. 363.

diversity of opinion or sophistical reasoning because of the certainty of its subject, which is God:

[L]o Cielo empireo per la sua pace simiglia la divina scienza, che piena è di tutta pace; la quale non sofferà lite alcuna d'oppinioni o di sofistici argomenti, per la eccellentissima certezza del suo subietto, lo quale è Dio. E di questa dice esso a li suoi discepoli: 'La pace mia do a voi, la pace mia lascio a voi', dando e lasciando a loro la sua dottrina, che è questa scienza di cu' io parlo. Di costei dice Salomone: 'Sessanta sono le regine, e ottanta l'amiche concubine; e de le ancille adolescenti non è numero: una è la colomba mia e la perfetta mia'.

Convivio, II, xiv, 19-20

I touched on the idiosyncratic nature of this particular conception of theology within the Introduction, and it is important to reconsider it here, because what it means to be a theologian must of course depend on what is understood by the term theology itself. Beatrice's theologising, her 'God-speak', dissolves both conflict and misguided desire, it is not subject to contradiction ('non sofferà lite alcuna d'oppinioni o di sofistici argomenti'), and as such it can in fact reassert peace. It is Beatrice in the *Commedia* who can direct Dante-*personaggio's* eyes to the truth, even though in the poem the other theologians who appear, explicitly or implicitly, retain at least some authority.

It is as authorities that the theologians are venerated, for their ability to illuminate the truths of the Bible: Dante calls theology perfect because it enables us to see the truth, but, of course, theology is everywhere practised differently, it has different methodologies and theoretical commitments. As we have seen in Chapter I, even in Dante's relatively recent past, Thomas Aquinas had already accrued to himself if not an established authority then certainly a celebrated notoriety, which reverberated from Paris throughout thirteenth-century Europe. Indeed his canonisation in 1323, so soon after his death in 1274, bespeaks the influence and penetration of his works.

Bernard, we know, was remembered and celebrated for his preaching and his affective theology, even though he was concerned to retain what he viewed as a wholly orthodox type of Christianity: in Dante's Florence his image appears in the church of the Badia at Settimo, and *laude* were sung in his honour in the streets by members of the confraternities, and a considerable number of his works were housed in the convent libraries. Augustine and Gregory, by Dante's time, are towering authorities, however they are named among the Church Fathers who go unread, in Dante's letters to the Italian cardinals and Cangrande.⁷ The character Folco, at *Paradiso* IX, 133-4, reiterates this same lament, when he says that 'i dottor magni | son derelitti'.

Beatrice differs from these theologian-characters, of course. Even though she may well have been a real person who lived in Florence, and whom the author had seen or met, the reality of Beatrice, such that it is, is brought to us only by the mediation of Dante himself.

In the *Vita nova*, then, Beatrice is a living woman from the reality of Dante's experience—and in the Comedy she is no *intellectus separatus*, no angel, but a blessed human being who will rise again in the flesh at the Last Judgement.⁸

The historical theologians have their texts and their reputations—their hagiographies, iconographies—that provide multi-layered and multi-authored texture to their saintly personalities. This texture has been the focus of the previous chapters, and part of my purpose has been to show

⁷ *Epistola* XI, 16: 'Iacet Gregorius tuus in telis aranearum; iacet Ambrosius in neglectis clericorum latibulis; iacet Augustinus abiectus, Dionysius, Damascenus et Beda.'; *Epistola*, XIII, 80: 'Et hoc est insinuatam nobis in Matheo, ubi tres discipuli ceciderunt in faciem suam, nihil postea recitantes, quasi oblitii. Et in Ezechiele scribitur: "Vidi. et cecidi in faciem meam". Et ubi ista invidis non sufficient, legant Richardum de Sancto Victore in libro De Contemplatione, legant Bernardum in libro De Consideratione, legant Augustinum in libro De Quantitate Anime, et non invidibunt'.

⁸ E. Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian Books Inc., 1959), p. 74.

how Dante the author incorporated or rejected the characterisations that had been handed down. But Beatrice's representation in the *Vita nova* is authored by only Dante, and its characterisation of her person is, at best, shadowy and enigmatic, at worst, two-dimensional.

And so the author of the *Commedia* writes anew about his beloved and, of course, about a gamut of other characters—some of whom are the theologians that I consider in this study. A template he has at his disposal, which plays with the auto-citation that he began in *Vita nova* and continued throughout his oeuvre, and which Erich Auerbach has helpfully brought into focus, is one inaugurated by Augustine himself: the one that uses the figural mode of scriptural interpretation; the one, that is, which reads earlier selves as pre-figuring ultimate selves, ultimate realities. It is indeed playful on Dante's part, as he makes use of that earlier Beatrice of the *Vita nova*, and responds to it in the *Commedia* by representing his beloved, now, as a culmination of that underdetermined, pasty figure. For Auerbach, 'theological interpretation [...] does not compel us to abandon the historical reality of Beatrice—on the contrary'.⁹ The conceit, of course, is that the Beatrice of the *Commedia* is the one which could not be any more Beatrice: she has reached a fulfilment of her person—she is the most she can possibly be in Heaven. Happily for Dante-*personaggio*, that person retains a love and commitment to him, despite his inconstancy, which moves her even to the threshold of the damned. Thus the autobiography that Dante writes, sanctioned by Augustine's own model in the *Confessions*, and concerning a story of a life that moves 'di bene in meglio' (*Paradiso* X, 38), in fact becomes 'migliore' only under the condition of understanding that Beatrice's personhood provides. In life, she withheld her salutation from

⁹ Auerbach, *Scenes*, p. 76.

Dante; in Glory she provides salvific power: these two facts are inexorable in a *poema sacra* and its precursors, figurally interpreted.¹⁰

2. Beatrice and Bernard

Below, I read Beatrice alongside Bernard of Clairvaux, and in so doing, I look again at some of the qualities that I discussed in Chapter II, regarding Bernard's personhood. My claim there was that the person who emerges from his texts is one whose theological authority is underpinned by an authentic desire for God. This desire is heard in his affective language about experiencing the divine, an experience framed as an erotic encounter, and secondly, in his prioritisation of person-to-person communication, that is, in his loving attention for individuals. Lastly in this chapter, I also consider how the significance in the poem of the Veronica veil unites Bernard and Beatrice and brings into focus the importance of names and naming.

That person-to-person embodiment of the love of the Creator can be heard in the voice of Bernard's works, and in the words which Dante gives him in the poem. Bernard's outpouring of his love of God and his love of humanity, apparent, in particular, in his letters—and his lack of a systematic theology elsewhere in his writing— helps to create an authenticity which is defined by its personal nature: Bernard's concern is for particular individuals, the state of their souls, and their vulnerability to the corruption of sin. And it is this personal concern, and the love of God

¹⁰ It is impossible to pass over in this discussion Dante's choice of salvific language in Book II, chapter xiv, of the *Convivio*, which celebrates the gifts of Lady Philosophy, handed to him by Boethius, but which echoes the words that he reserves for Beatrice in the *Commedia*: 'O dolcissimi e ineffabili sembianti, e rubatori subitani de la mente umana, che ne le mostrazioni de li occhi de la Filosofia apparite, quando essa con li suoi drudi ragiona! Veramente in voi è la salute, per la quale si fa beato chi vi guarda, e salvo da la morte de la ignoranza e da li vizii'. How Beatrice assumes and replaces Lady Philosophy is a question that I consider below.

that is realised in the person-to-person encounter, that is the defining feature of the relationship between the pilgrim and Beatrice.

A figural interpretation, as we saw above with Beatrice, might also be applied to the other characters within the poem. In Chapter II we saw how Bernard's burning love transmits itself through the language of his written works, his sermons and letters. In the poem, the character of Bernard is written with this same burning desire, which now extends to an ardour for the salvation of the pilgrim's soul. Beatrice, too, embodies this ardour, and in important ways she has things in common with Bernard, both the character as he appears in the poem, and with the historical Bernard: his way of being in the world that emerges from his works. Placing Beatrice at the centre of his poem, Dante fuels the pilgrim's desire, and provides the hunger for satisfaction which drives him onward, through the fire of the terrace of lust, in *Purgatorio* XXVII, which curbs excess desire but does not remove desire entirely. Beatrice and Bernard both display an ardour in their eyes, for God, or for Mary, and in doing so are able to direct the pilgrim's eyes too. In *Paradiso* XXXI, through word and gesture, Bernard encourages Dante-*personaggio* to look again at the Virgin enthroned:

Bernardo, come vide li occhi miei
nel caldo suo caler fissi e attenti,
li suoi con tanto affetto volse a lei,
che ' miei di rimirar fé più ardenti.

Paradiso XXXI, 139-42

This passage recalls the fourteenth-century Florentine *lauda* to Bernard, in which he is called an *aquila contemplativa*.¹¹ The eagle was a common symbol for clear-sightedness in the Middle Ages; indeed, there is reference

¹¹ Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Magliabechiano 11, 1, 122 (Banco Rari 18) f. 110^r.

in a thirteenth-century sermon, by the Franciscan preacher Saint Anthony of Padua to a capacity of eagles which extends the metaphor further:

[T]he eagle has keen eyesight- 'eagle-eyed', we say- and can gaze at the sun without flinching. Natural History teaches us that it has extremely keen sight, and makes its young look at the sun before their wings are fully-fledged. It strikes them, and turns them to face the sun [...] The eagle is a symbol of the saints' keen understanding, and their sublime contemplation, which directs their children (their works) towards the true sun and light of wisdom, so that any hidden impurity, or anything foreign to its nature, may be revealed in the sun's brightness.¹²

So Bernard is known in Dante's Florence as a contemplative Eagle and in medieval Italy saints were venerated for their eagle-like eye-sight, their 'sublime contemplation' and understanding, the product of which is their works, their children. It would not be too far a stretch to suggest that those reading their works, or hearing their sermons, are also directed to the sun and benefit from the wisdom that shines there: are also, that is, the children of the saints. Dante-*personaggio* certainly has the appearance of a child, even a grandchild, of the venerable *sene*, Bernard. And this parental relation he shares with Beatrice, the mother bird of *Paradiso XXIII*,¹³ who 'con ardente affetto il sole aspetta | fiso guardando' (8-9), and who in *Paradiso I*, 46-48 looks towards the sun:

quando Beatrice in sul sinistro fianco
vidi rivolta e riguardar nel sole:
aquila sì non li s'affisse unquanco.

¹² *The Sermons Of Saint Antony Of Padua*, translated into English by P. Spilsbury from the critical Latin edition of the Centro Studi Antoniani, Padova, Italia (1979). This quote is from the Sermon on the Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/23435333/Sermons-of-St-Anthony-of-Padua> [Accessed 1 August 2017]. I have been unable to access the Latin critical edition in the UK.

¹³ Beatrice as mother bird also echoes Christ in Matthew 23:37 when he says he would nurture the children of Jerusalem, like a hen under its wing: 'Hierusalem Hierusalem quae occidis prophetas et lapidas eos qui ad te missi sunt quotiens volui congregare filios tuos quemadmodum gallina congregat pullos suos sub alas et noluiti'.

The effect of Beatrice's looking, like the eagle in Saint Anthony's sermon, is to turn Dante-*personaggio*'s gaze towards the sun too, beyond his usual capacity, in lines 52-54:

così de l'atto suo, per li occhi infuso
ne l'immagine mia, il mio si fece,
e fissi li occhi al sole oltre nostr' uso.

This early in the *cantica* he is unable to sustain the sight for long, but instead reverts to looking at Beatrice herself. Both Bernard and Beatrice compel the pilgrim to look; something of their desire for God transmits to Dante-*personaggio*. This looking is literal: Beatrice turns ('*revolta*') towards the light (*Paradiso* XXIII, 11) and at lines 28-29, the pilgrim sees Christ in Triumph, Christ as 'un sol'. Theologians furnish their readers with understanding; they direct their readers and their congregations; they teach them how to see the theological truth of the scriptures, or so they should, according to the *Convivio*—and the light of the sun, of Christ, reveals the truth that the theologians help to uncover.¹⁴

The maternal in Beatrice—the mother bird who looks to the sun and who helps her offspring to do the same—can be read as an important element of her personhood. In *Purgatorio* XXX, Dante-*personaggio*'s response to Beatrice's arrival in the poem reduces him to a boy running to his *mamma*, even though it is to the now-disappeared Virgil that the pilgrim has turned (43); a little later, the pilgrim is still the child, but now Beatrice, after she has delivered her first rebuke, has become like a scolding mother (79). In Chapter III we saw that Beatrice also shares some of the maternal qualities of Monica, who in her way enables Augustine to 'see' the truth. And both these literary productions inevitably draw comparisons with the mother of

¹⁴ In *Paradiso* V, 27, Beatrice herself recommends that the pilgrim to start with biblical exegesis rather than be swept up by the words of preachers or by the sophistry of the philosophers, a point I return to below, in a discussion about her own particular discourse.

Christ, who in the same canto, *Paradiso* XXIII, 121, the pilgrim sees desired by an array of souls, reaching upward 'come fantolin'. Teodolinda Barolini reorients us to the main theme of the *Commedia*, however, when she says:

[I]t is certainly true that Dante invests his Beatrice with maternal energy [but] the dominant register in Dante's portrayal of Beatrice is erotic. The interpretative challenge is that she is both 'good' and not desexualized.¹⁵

The maternal and erotic are forms of human love that can only be understood in each case as *particular*: one cannot be in love with just anyone; not everyone can be one's own child, unless, in beautiful paradox, one is the Virgin herself. If Beatrice is a mother bird in *Paradiso* XXIII, then elsewhere she is like the dove of the Song of Songs—the beloved One: 'una è la colomba mia e la perfetta mia' (*Convivio*, II, xiv, 20). Among queens, handmaids and concubines, theology is the one love, just as Beatrice is the one, among the other women, of both Dante's love- and intellectual life.

The integration of theological truth with erotic love within the person of Beatrice has of course been the preoccupation of many of the responses to the *Commedia*, both in the academic sphere and the wider cultural milieu.¹⁶ We saw above that Beatrice shares with Bernard the same desire for seeing God, and it is Bernard, of course, who uses the language of *eros* to describe his desire to experience God on Earth, and also the fruits of that desire. But Beatrice's desire is double-sighted: it looks at God, and it looks at Dante-*personaggio* too, and not only because she desires his salvation. The pilgrim's encounter with Beatrice is remarkable for the complex interplay of looking-at and looking-away-from that goes on between the two characters. They are each intent upon this lovers' dance of the eyes: desiring to look; looking; fainting; turning away from; returning the gaze;

¹⁵ Barolini, *Origins*, p. 366.

¹⁶ For a scholarly discussion beyond the sphere of traditional Dante studies, see Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, pp. 557-77.

commanding the other to look. It is an almost entirely erotic interplay, even though at the same time, Beatrice is teaching the pilgrim to look *beyond* her, by looking *at* her. Only after the pilgrim has seen the light of Christ in triumph approaching, has he, according to Beatrice, gained enough strength to look at her unveiled face and behold her smile, to see what she really is ('*riguarda qual son io*', *Paradiso*, XXIII, 46). Peter S. Hawkins notes that, 'it is to the sign of her face that he will continually turn his gaze, as if pulled by her beauty to the mark of his greater desire [...] and therefore to a reality that lies beyond her'.¹⁷

The eroticism of the encounter between the two characters—and the whole of the pilgrim's journey is an encounter, inaugurated as it is by the sound of Beatrice's name in *Inferno* II and spurred on again in Purgatory on the terrace of lust, when *Dante-personaggio* responds again to the sound of her name—can be illuminated by considering the recurring metaphor of the arrow, from a poem replete with such imagery, which builds an erotic intensity: the shiver of a sexual spark between the two. Of no greater or lesser importance, this metaphor also stands for the dawning of intellectual insight, and thus we see again, just as we saw in Chapter II, when I considered Bernard's language of love, that the affective and the intellectual modes of thought are forever tied together by Dante, integrated into a picture that would otherwise be incomplete.¹⁸

The image itself is important—the arrowshot—but its arrangement in the poem also deserves attention. In *Paradiso* II, *Dante-personaggio* and Beatrice have moved to a new location, the Heaven of the Moon: '*forse in tanto in quanto un quadrel posa | e vola e da la noce si dischiava*' (23-24). The rapid transferral is quickly followed by the pilgrim's new awareness—he reaches

¹⁷ Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, p. 141.

¹⁸ The primacy of the intellect over the will is a question I return to in the conclusion to this chapter.

a place where he can 'see', and this knowledge dawns only after looking at Beatrice herself (22). Here, then, the looking, and the movement through the heavens, and the new knowledge belonging to the pilgrim, become phases of an integrated action, just as the arrow's hitting the target, its flight, and its release from the bow are part of the same. But this beautiful tercet not only gives a sense of rapid movement, and of knowledge dawning—the target is hit—it simultaneously brings us back to the ways in which Dante-*personaggio* is tethered to Beatrice.¹⁹ The formulation of the flying arrow is here presented to us backwards: we hear of it hitting its target before it has left the bow—and in crafting his imagery in this way, the poet achieves something all the more powerful.

In *Purgatorio* XXXI, 55-63, Beatrice describes lofted arrows which have the power to kill the pilgrim: he might not make it to maturity, and yet fully-fledged birds are evidence alone that some survive the hunt, that death need not be the inevitable conclusion for Dante, even though, after Beatrice's death, he failed to lift up his wings to avoid those darts. The barb from Beatrice is double-edged: are these arrows deceptive ideas, or deceptive lovers? By *Paradiso* II the pilgrim is no longer the target; in fact he might even be the originator of the arrow itself, one that ends, teleologically and necessarily, given his location, in knowledge.²⁰ And yet there remains an erotic reading of the arrow: it hits a target before one is even aware it has left the bow; it looses its catch as though there is no way of controlling it, a body directed by *eros*: Eros the bowman, Dante the bowman. Beatrice is the target, the locus of a lover's attention. And how are we to understand, from our Earthly perspective, just how the heavens are arranged, how bodies can penetrate bodies, 'se corpo in corpo repe'

¹⁹ The image is repeated at *Paradiso* V, 91-92, where the target is hit whilst the cord is still vibrating, from the release of the arrow.

²⁰ For a discussion about the connection between Dante's teleology and his early love poetry, see R. Durling and R. Martinez, *Time and the Crystal* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 185-91.

(*Paradiso* II, 39)? How can we understand the ways in which God exists? Such affective language about Beatrice provides a means, just as Bernard had provided a way to talk about God, through his exegesis on the Song of Songs and his sermons, such as *De diligendo Deo*, where, as we saw in Chapter II, he described his experience of God as being lost in Him. Desire to know, desire to see, desire to experience: Dante-*personaggio* first has to learn that all these desires, begun as they are in Beatrice (who is also the originator of her own arrow at *Purgatorio* XXXI, 117) must end, necessarily, in God. The target remains steadfast, permanent, necessary: it is the archer who is wavering, inconstant and contingent.

The final way in which I read Beatrice alongside Bernard is through the image of the Veronica veil that appears in both the *Commedia* and the *Vita nova*. It is significant because it focuses attention on two things: on the necessity of Beatrice's disappearance from the pilgrim's side, and the appearance of Bernard; and the importance that the poet attaches to names and to naming: at its heart the essential character of the particular and personal relationships which Dante and Beatrice embody and which provide the ground for approaching the final vision of the poem.

On the sounding of Bernard's name at *Paradiso* XXXI, 102, the poet begins a description of a (perhaps) Croatian pilgrim, viewing the veil of Saint Veronica, a veil believed to show the image of Christ's face. The Croatian pilgrim asks, 'Segnor mio Iesù Cristo, Dio verace, l' or fu sì fatta la sembianza vostra?' (107-08). Dante-*personaggio* is confronted by Bernard, face to face, just as the Croatian is brought face to 'face' with the image of Christ, a vestige of God on Earth. The image on the veil stands in relation to something real, something *verace*, just as Bernard's name picks out him as a person, the real historical person, who is also—if we read the poem figuratively as a *poema sacro*—the fully elaborated and glorified Bernard of the *Paradiso*.

And so the Croatian's question is a double one, because Dante is responding to Bernard, his name and his life, and his response is like that of another pilgrim moved to ask questions about semblances—seemingness and reality. Bernard's name is an earthly sign, just as the image of the Veronica is an earthly sign, and they now stand in relation to something heavenly. Dante is meeting the person of Bernard, recognisable through this sign—and through the attributes he exemplified in his life—in a place the very opposite of earthly.

Of course, we are being asked to read the Croatian's question not just in relation to Dante's recognition of Bernard, but of Dante's experiencing God's presence in the Empyrean. And in being a question it throws this episode into tension with those earlier pilgrim images in which awe and wonder prevailed, problematising the notion of pilgrimage itself, and of Dante's pilgrimage in particular. In the earlier moments, in *Paradiso XXXI*, 31-58, the poet first compares himself, and his experience of seeing the souls in the Empyrean, with northern savages coming to Rome and seeing the Lateran, towering above all mortal things, and being stunned to silence. If even these savages are stupefied, can we wonder at Dante-*personaggio* being glad to stay 'muto'? The second image of a pilgrim, which follows straight on from the first, from line 43, moves from the overwhelming stupefaction of seeing the Lateran, to that of a pilgrim reaching his destination at a temple. Whilst still experiencing the site of the pilgrimage, he 'spera già ridir com' ello stea'. This more positive image of a pilgrimage, setting up a comparison with Dante's experience of the Empyrean and his writing of it—a moment of being moved to tell—is part of the same dramatic moment in which Beatrice disappears and Bernard arrives on the scene. The shock of losing her—back to her rightful place—is palpable and moving; the introduction of Bernard is painful. But the tension raised in the questions that Dante asks about Beatrice's seeming disappearance, and in

the tension raised by the questions asked by the Croatian pilgrim, provide part of the necessary conditions for Dante's movement towards the divine.

Because the pilgrim cannot understand what Beatrice means fully, until he has lost her one more time. This time, unlike in the *Vita nova*, his shock does not give way to mourning: it cannot, because to lose her to Heaven is of course no loss at all. Dante-*personaggio* cannot possess Beatrice as a lover, even though it is through the words of lovers that he understands his relation to her, and consequently, it turns out, to God. With Bernard, the pilgrim is now in the company of someone who caught the taste of the divine on Earth, 'contemplando, gustò di quella pace' (*Paradiso XXXI*, 111). And as we have seen, some of Bernard's most powerful writing about his mystical experiences of God are in his *Sermones super Cantica canticorum*, where 'taste' is just right: 'osculetur me osculo oris sui quia meliora sunt ubera tua vino'²¹, writes the author of the Song, a passage which Bernard uses to describe the mystical union with God, through the primacy of the Incarnation. An experience of God on Earth is made possible through bodies, both through the contemplative himself, who desires the experience, akin to erotic desire, but also through the body of Christ in the Incarnation. The experience is sensual like a kiss, a taste of God, something to be desired, bodily. But Christ is also the event of the kiss itself—the mediator between two lovers, man and God.

So Bernard and Beatrice are linked by the Veronica in more than one way: firstly, because the loss of Beatrice and then the sound of Bernard's name initiate the image of the Croatian's pilgrimage, which in turn recalls the Veronica in the *Vita nova*, when Dante mourned another disappearance of Beatrice—in fact, her death. In *Vita nova* XL, 9-14, Dante composes a sonnet addressed to the pilgrims on their way to Rome to see the Veronica: they

²¹ Song of Solomon 1. 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth: for thy breasts are better than wine.'

do not understand, he thinks, that the city is desolated to have lost its blessedness, its Beatrice:

Se voi restaste per volerlo audire,
certo lo cor de' sospiri mi dice che lagrimando n'uscireste pui.
Ell'ha perduta la sua beatrice;
e le parole ch'om di lei pò dire
hanno virtù di far piangere altrui.

The naming of Bernard and the almost-naming of Beatrice in the *Vita nova*, each coincide with the mention of the Veronica. The sounding of Bernard's name brings forth questions about semblance and reality: about *figurae* and elaboration. Beatrice's emphatic and terrifying sounding of her own name in the *Commedia* at *Purgatorio XXX, 73*, and her calling Dante by *his* name in the garden of the Earthly Paradise (55) creates an irresistible connection between the two as lovers. It is an anchor: an event which pairs them forever together, and it brings in to focus the necessity of particular commitments to particular persons. The theologian Janet Soskice has said it this way:²² that we need names in order to be in relation to someone; and the relation between the pilgrim and Beatrice, although at this moment in the poem seems precarious, is of course beyond doubt, even though the pilgrim may as yet be unaware of his ultimate destination.

The second way in which Bernard and Beatrice are linked through the Veronica is because Beatrice, as she appears in the *Vita nova*, might be understood as a Veronica, a true icon, herself, as Robert Pogue Harrison has suggested in his nuanced study. For Harrison, the fact that the veil bears the figure of Christ is less important than the fact that it was created directly by Christ's face itself. It is not, above all, a representation of Christ, but rather a creation *of* Christ, an *acheiropoieta*. For Harrison, the Veronica 'must be seen as a figure for an authentic language of representation with

²² Soskice, 'Creation and Naming', a seminar given at Notre Dame Summer Seminar Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem, June 27, 2013.

regard to Beatrice',²³ because she creates Dante's career directly, in both the *Vita nova* and for his character in the *Commedia*—where 'career' means something like the work of finding himself in God, and God in himself, and then his writing of it. No one else besides Beatrice could have made Dante's career, just as nothing other than the Christ could have made the image on the Veronica veil. The pilgrim has in Beatrice a concrete vestige of God's love: she herself is an *acheiropoieta* of the Creator, and only in and through her—in and through a particular, personal love relationship, rather than through the teaching of abstract or formal treatise of a theologian—can he come to understand his place amongst creation. Understanding what Beatrice's death really means, not a tragedy for Dante, but an instance of creation, fully elaborated and glorified, moves Dante from being able to understand both her death and his own personhood from the perspective of eternity, and returns us again to Auerbach's claim that 'theological interpretation [...] does not compel us to abandon the historical reality of Beatrice—on the contrary.'²⁴

Is the lovers' discourse in the *Paradiso* only meaningful through 'theological interpretation'? In the Heaven of Venus, where Dante-*personaggio* is particularly keen to find answers to his questions, the poet describes how Beatrice becomes the conduit through which the pilgrim can receive knowledge from the souls he meets (in this case, Cunizza):

Li occhi di Beatrice, ch'eran fermi
 sovra me, come pria, di caro assenso
 al mio disio certificato fermi.
 'Deh, metti al mio voler tosto compenso,
 beato spirto', dissi, 'e fammi prova
 ch'í possa in te refletter quel ch'io penso!'

Paradiso IX, 16-24

²³ Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, p. 127.

²⁴ Auerbach, *Scenes*, p. 76.

Beatrice's face— her eyes, her mouth, indeed, her whole person—is the target of a lover's gaze. The lover-speak which continues throughout the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* weaves its way into the truth-speak that is there too: it becomes, that is, part of the theology. Beatrice's face and truth become one, for example, at *Paradiso* III, 1-3, when the poet writes:

Quel sol che pria d'amor mi scaldò 'l petto,
di bella verità m'avea scoperto,
provando e riprovando, il dolce aspetto.

Bernard delights in the language of *eros*, these words, he thinks—their overflowing abundance—will enable one to understand God: they are able to capture something of the divine presence, which he reports as having personally experienced. That language of ecstasy is found in the pilgrim's desire for Beatrice too, but Dante stops short of Bernard's commitment to a cataphatic, affective theology. One cannot experience God, know God, through desire alone, and anyway one could not write accurately of such an experience, no matter how many beautiful words were at your disposal. If the fiction of the poem were played out for real, and a person—perhaps like Saint Paul, or like Bernard, or like Catherine of Siena or Teresa of Avila—experienced some divine ecstasy, some *raptus*, then any words would be insufficient to the task of telling it. The Croatian pilgrim can tell of what he has seen; but Dante-pilgrim cannot and does not. Tristan Kay captures this paradox: 'the poem does not fashion itself as a model to be emulated but rather, like Beatrice herself, as a unique and unrepeatable poetic event.'²⁵

The pilgrim's love for Beatrice as a unique and unrepeatable event, contains within it the truth of God's creative power and love. Once he is able to understand what this means, he is able to see the face of God itself, because his love for her has been transfigured: the truths contained in

²⁵ Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption*, p. 248.

Beatrice are in fact God's own truths. Bernard's love manifests itself at an individual level too—for his congregation and those who receive his letters—but his love is for everyone, it is global, and as such it is not an erotic love. A commitment to a particular person is one of the hallmarks of personhood: erotic love tethers two separate individuals together, the arrowshot pierces and unites two hearts. And in love, from the limited perspective of human personhood and consciousness, one draws closest to understanding the possibility of being Other, of being created otherwise, because the desire for union with the beloved—for their presence, their touch, and the loving preoccupation for their person—only throws into relief the ways in which they are not one's own self, the ways in which they are not *I*.

3. Beatrice and Gregory

In Chapter III, we saw that Janet Soskice draws attention to the fact that Augustine, in the *Confessions*, claims that God can be 'revealed through other people, in all their peculiarities and contingencies, even their failings'.²⁶ In the *Commedia*, the person most at risk from his failings is the pilgrim himself, all other individuals within the drama of the poem already accounted for, eschatologically. My claim in the previous chapter was that the failings, the errors, that characterise our earthly lives become for Dante in the second and third *cantiche* a way of maintaining the *particularity* of persons: Gregory the Great, smiling in Heaven at his own error, in fact memorialises the person he was on Earth, and the intellectual error to which he was subject. The pilgrim is still subject to a raft of errors—not all of them intellectual—and the correction he receives hardly ever engenders a smiling response, like Gregory's. Shame ('*tanta vergogna*' in *Purgatorio* XXX, 78), that powerful indicator of an internal, cognitive affirmation of culpability, accompanies many of Dante-*personaggio*'s lessons in error, but it

²⁶ Soskice, 'Monica's Tears', p. 449.

remains the case that the pilgrim's particular ways of erring are his alone, they constitute who he is and what he is able to learn.

Beatrice provides the most powerful corrective for the pilgrim, in her reproach in the Earthly Paradise, at *Purgatorio* XXX-XXXI. As we saw in Chapter III, Dante-*personaggio*'s response to Beatrice's rebuke is an emotional breakdown, followed by a confession. After verbalising his confession the pilgrim's own self-indictment causes him to faint:

Tanta riconoscenza il cor mi morse,
ch'io caddi vinto; e quale allora femmi,
salsi colei che la cagion mi porse.

Purgatorio XXXI, 88-90

The episode highlights the importance of shame as a response to error, and the power that it can effect over one's person. The philosopher Bernard Williams described this power, in his typically elegant way, in the book, *Shame and Necessity*:

[T]he most primitive experiences of shame are connected with sight and being seen [...]. In the experience of shame, one's whole being seems diminished or lessened. In my experience of shame, the other sees all of me and all through me [...] It is not even the wish, as people say, to sink through the floor, but rather the wish that the space occupied by me should be instantaneously empty.²⁷

The pilgrim's response might be seen as the same wish: as an annihilation of self, of wanting to be immediately unseen. This fainting response, the loss of all bodily and mental control—temporarily—annihilates the person of the pilgrim altogether. It requires a renewed strength to see himself and his particular error as worthy of being restored and rehabilitated, through the confession that Beatrice demands (*Purgatorio* XXXI, 5-6). In the final

²⁷ B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 89.

canto of the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice tells the pilgrim to free himself from the shame that overcomes him: 'Da tema e da vergogna | voglio che tu omai ti disviluppe.'

For Vittorio Montemaggi, as I noted in the Introduction, the pilgrim's response to another one of his own errors, in *Paradiso XXI*, demonstrates a fundamental theme of the *Commedia*.²⁸ In this episode, Beatrice is present again, but it is not through her voice that the Dante-*personaggio* receives a reoriented understanding, but through the character of the Benedictine monk Saint Peter Damian. Here, Peter Damian is a contemplative in the Heaven of Saturn but the pilgrim does not understand why it should be him who greets Beatrice and Dante on their arrival. The pilgrim asks his presumptuous question of Peter Damian, and even before he does so, sees that Beatrice thinks it better if he did not:

Ma quella ond' io aspetto il come e 'l quando
del dire e del tacer, si sta; ond' io,
contra 'l disio, fo ben ch'io non dimando'.

Paradiso XXI, 46-48

Beatrice knows the reason for the pilgrim's hesitation, because, the poet says, she sees Him who sees all ('veder di colui che tutto vede', *Paradiso*, XXI, 50). But Beatrice gives permission for the pilgrim to ask his question *anyway* ('Solvi il tuo caldo disio', 51), knowing that his question cannot be answered in a way that Dante will find satisfactory. Beatrice's role in the interlude—causing a hiatus in the dialogue between the pilgrim and the saint, and then allowing Dante to continue—draws attention to the importance of the episode and, indeed, the importance of the pilgrim's failing, of his error.

²⁸ Montemaggi, 'Dante and Gregory the Great'.

Peter Damian's response—that he moves in response to the divine will—is not satisfactory to the pilgrim because it does not answer his question as to why it should be Peter Damian rather than any other of the souls (50-78) who greets the visitors. As Montemaggi shows, Dante's question is error-struck, because it trades on false assumptions about the capability of creatures. Human individuals, even beatified, cannot comprehend the divine will 'not because of a weakness of intellect [...] but because of the creature's dependence on God.'²⁹ In realisation of this error, the pilgrim retreats to the best type of understanding available to him, that which is realised in the encounter with another person:

Sì mi prescrisser le parole sue,
ch'io lasciai la quistione e mi ritrassi
a dimandarla umilmente chi fue.

Paradiso, XXI. 103–05

Montemaggi suggests this episode is one of the most important in the poem. He is undoubtedly right that the pilgrim's error and consequent reorientation draws into ever greater focus the importance of the encounters between two individuals, and the opportunity for love and knowledge to which these give rise. As Montemaggi says:

Progress in theological understanding is, ultimately, not made through accuracy of theological proposition but in and through the humility and love required fully to encounter another human being.³⁰

This *must* be true; it makes sense of the personal encounters that we find throughout the *Commedia*, and in particular, as we have seen above, in the person-to-person relationship between Dante and Beatrice. But reading the *Commedia* only in this way leaves unanswered questions about the primacy of the intellect over love, a question which Beatrice herself makes explicit at

²⁹ Montemaggi, 'Dante and Gregory the Great', p. 234.

³⁰ Montemaggi, 'Dante and Gregory the Great', p. 235.

Paradiso XXVIII, 111.³¹ Further, it makes it difficult to explain why the author does in fact include so many overtly ‘theological proposition[s]’ in the poem, when, on this reading, there was no such need, theologically speaking. The question of the need for theological discourse, and the primary vehicle of that discourse—Beatrice herself—is the theme to which I now turn.

4. Beatrice, Aquinas and Theological Discourse

This section examines the nature and mode of Beatrice’s theological discourse—what she says about theology, and the manner in which she says it—and asks what these two questions mean for the characterisation of her personhood in the *Commedia*. I suggest that the poem invites us to compare Beatrice directly with Thomas Aquinas, again, both in the form and the content of their teaching, and in so doing, it is possible to question whether Beatrice’s discourse can be straightforwardly understood as a mouthpiece for Dante’s own theological position.

It is Bernard, ‘quel contemplante’ (*Paradiso* XXXII, 1), rather than Thomas, who is called to mind by Beatrice’s seated location in the celestial rose, next to Rachel, (*Inferno* II, 102). Indeed, Rachel Jacoff notes that the commentary tradition has long drawn attention to this particular detail; for Jacoff, the commentaries show ‘either Beatrice [...] seen as a type of contemplation or she is seen as a type of theology, seated next to [Rachel] and thus paired with contemplation’.³² But if she is contemplative in the Empyrean, elsewhere in the poem she is active, and her speech is demonstrative. It is this active, dynamic demonstration, characteristic of so much scholastic theology in general and Thomist philosophy in particular, at its apogee, that Beatrice’s discourse becomes the primary conduit of Dante-

³¹ See Robert Durling’s commentary ‘The Primacy of the Intellect, the Sun, and the Circling Theologians’, in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, ed. by R. M. Durling and R. L. Martinez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), III, pp. 708–14.

³² Jacoff, ‘The Tears of Beatrice’, p. 5.

personaggio's theological learning. As Dante's teacher, she becomes a theologian in her own right, correcting points of doctrine and contradicting some of the teaching of the Fathers of the Church who accompany her in Paradise. Ferrante suggests that

[p]erhaps because Dante did not agree entirely with any of the theologians he respected enough to place in paradise, perhaps because he wished to emphasize the distance between God's realm and the earthly church, Dante gives the office of major theologian in his heaven to someone whose sex would have shocked virtually all of the doctors of the church there. And he does not hesitate to have her correct them or other great thinkers, some of them by name, beginning with Plato.³³

Ferrante goes on to point out the ways in which Beatrice disagrees on points of doctrine with Gregory (on angels); Jerome; Thomas Aquinas (on moon spots); and Aquinas again on causation and secondary causes; and with both Aquinas and Augustine on whether angels have memory. On other theological debates such as free will and vows, she 'teaches like a professor of philosophy, getting the pilgrim to give his answer, then correcting it'.³⁴ The creation of a female character who speaks with such authority over a range of subjects, traditionally properly defined as male, is startling. Even our modern ears can hear in that voice the sounding of a new clarion, a wake-up call to reconsider our relationships with God, with knowledge, and our understanding of theology.

The range of subjects that Beatrice expounds upon is vast and, on the face of it, she deserves the moniker of *Beatrix loquax* that Teodolinda Barolini famously bestowed upon her.³⁵ From free will to vows; from angels to moon spots; causation, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the role of the Church—her 'infallibile' knowledge (*Paradiso* VII, 19) is clearly limitless, and her willingness to express it, very nearly the same. It should be

³³ Ferrante, 'Dante's Beatrice', pp. 195-96.

³⁴ Ferrante, 'Dante's Beatrice', p. 199.

³⁵ Barolini, *Origins*, p. 360.

unsurprising to us that as an inhabitant of Paradise she should now have an understanding beyond that of her earthly life: souls in Heaven have direct access to God's knowledge and, as she points out to Dante, the ignorance on Earth that is corrected in Heaven is a cause for joy, as we saw in the case of Gregory's error, at *Paradiso XXVIII*, 133.

A demonstration of that understanding can be found in Beatrice's lecture of *Paradiso II*, which illustrates to Dante-*personaggio* and to the reader early on in their journey together, just how far her encyclopaedic knowledge extends: the entire cosmology of the universe from the Empyrean downwards is spelled out and its workings explained (lines 112-48). As an example of the kind of the theological discourse that Beatrice expounds, and that Dante-*personaggio* must hear and comprehend before he is able to reach the final vision, it is a good one, and one that will only be extended and elaborated upon on their journey through the celestial spheres (for example, see *Paradiso XXVIII*, 40-78; *Paradiso XXIX*, 13-48). Here, the fundamental metaphysical makeup of the universe, beginning with the 'Heaven of God's peace' or the Empyrean, is outlined by Beatrice, and includes the principles by which each of the nine subsequent heavens is created and put in motion.

Dentro dal cielo de la divina pace
si gira un corpo ne la cui virtute
l'esser di tutto suo contento giace.

Lo ciel seguente, c'ha tante vedute,
quell' esser parte per diverse essenze,
da lui distratte e da lui contenute.

Li altri giron per varie differenze
le distinzion che dentro da sé hanno
dispongono a lor fini e lor semenze.

Questi organi del mondo così vanno,
come tu vedi omai, di grado in grado,
che di sù prendono e di sotto fanno.

Paradiso II, 112-23

Such a Christianised account of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic system — the complex genesis of which has been traced by critics via the many tributaries of antique and early medieval influences, including those from both European and Arab sources— was widely discussed in medieval theological and philosophical debates. However, the cosmology found here in *Paradiso* II is by no means an agreed doctrine of the Church: it is peculiarly Dante’s own. It is an account which departs from many of his contemporaries’, insisting as it does on the uncreated, and immaterial nature of the Empyrean and, as such, positions itself alongside Aristotle’s description of the Unmoved Mover: the pure intellect which is the ground of all being, which does not exist in space or time. Étienne Gilson³⁶ and Christian Moevs³⁷ have underlined the fact that the Empyrean, tellingly, is only named as such once in the entire *Commedia*, at *Inferno* II, 21, adding further grist to the intellectual mill regarding the question of the status and function of the Empyrean in Christian cosmology.

For it is a hugely vexed question in the Middle Ages, debated at length by all major theologian-philosophers. Indeed, Aquinas’s final position on the nature of the Empyrean and its ability to cause motion in the first heaven, was outlined in a retraction found in his *Questiones Quodlibetales* 6.11.19 (c.1272), which serves to show that even in the most lucid and definitive of medieval thinkers the question was in no sense straightforward. In the end, Aquinas’s account describes the power of the Empyrean as a power of conservation or causation. In this canto, Dante suggests that the Empyrean, as the being of all it contains is indeed a type of causal power – although not as we moderns have now come to think of causality—but rather, that it is the ground of existence, without which there would be nothing at all. The author has the character of Aquinas make reference to the same

³⁶ E. Gilson, ‘À la recherche de l’Empyrée’, *Revue des études italiennes*, 11 (1965), 145-61 (p. 160.)

³⁷ Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy*, p. 23.

cosmological question concerning the Primum Mobile and its undifferentiated nature in *Paradiso* XIII, 100. It is notable that Aquinas points out to Dante-*personaggio* that Solomon did *not* seek to know answers to questions such as these, but, rather, concerned himself with how to be a worthy and wise ruler. Again, as we saw in Chapter II, Dante's disruption of our expectations about what Aquinas might do or say in the poem should make us pause over his characterisation, and therefore his representation as a theological authority, more generally.

Beatrice's own authority, by comparison, is never in question. Peter S. Hawkins says:

Throughout Beatrice's discourse in *Paradiso* 28 [which also concerns the Primum Mobile], there is no sense of the tentative 'forse' 'perhaps' that elsewhere in the *Commedia* indicates we are in the realm of surmise. Dante's personal *angelic doctor* tells us what is.³⁸

That the author of the *Commedia* chooses Beatrice to lecture upon the subject, indeed, to be the mouthpiece for this type of exposition at all, is a theme which underpins this entire chapter, but here, for now, suffice to say that from the perspective of the reader, medieval or modern-day, the content of Beatrice's speech is intellectually rich, theologically challenging and in dialogue both with centuries of philosophy that have gone on before, and with the debates raging within Dante's lifetime. In this case, it is a theological position which does not take up with any particular school of thought, but sets out its own stall. The fact that this should be so is made all the more surprising given that it is Beatrice who says it—not an authority, not a theologian, not even a man. But beyond merely startling the reader, in giving Beatrice the voice of a teacher Dante provides a means by which his own theological position can be understood on its own terms, and can be distanced from other louder voices, the loudest, perhaps, being that of the original *angelic doctor* himself.

³⁸ Hawkins, 'All Smiles', pp. 38-39. My emphasis.

This is a pattern found throughout *Paradiso*, as more thorny problems of contentious theological debate arise. In *Paradiso XXIX*, to take another example, Beatrice expounds on the creation of angels, including the fall of the rebel angels and beatitude of the loyal angels—and further, puts to bed an old argument about whether angels have memories, a question discussed by, amongst others, Augustine and Aquinas. This specific question serves to validate Dante’s wider argument concerning the timing of the creation of angels in general, refuting Jerome’s interpretation.

Queste sustanze, poi che fur gioconde
de la faccia di Dio, non volser viso
da essa, da cui nulla si nasconde:
però non hanno vedere interciso
da novo obietto, e però non bisogna
rememorar per concetto diviso

Paradiso XXIX, 76-81

In addition to her contributions to the finer points of theological debate, Beatrice also has words to say about those who engage in the debates themselves, and those who supposedly preach the Word of God, yet fail to engage with scripture.

Ma perché ’n terra per le vostre scole
si legge che l’angelica natura
è tal, che ’ntende e si ricorda e vole,
ancor dirò, perché tu veggi pura
la verità che là giù si confonde,
equivocando in sì fatta lettura [...]
sì che là giù, non dormendo, si sogna,
credendo e non credendo dicer vero;
ma ne l’uno è più colpa e più vergogna.
Voi non andate giù per un sentiero
filosofando: tanto vi trasporta
l’amor de l’apparenza e ’l suo pensiero!
E ancor questo qua sù si comporta
con men disdegno che quando è posposta
la divina Scrittura o quando è torta.

Non vi si pensa quanto sangue costa
seminarla nel mondo e quanto piace
chi umilmente con essa s'accosta.

Per apparer ciascun s'ingegna e face
sue invenzioni; e quelle son trascorse
da' predicanti e 'l Vangelo si tace.

Paradiso XXIX, 70-75; 85-96.

The theologians, she warns, in the schools, are both believing and unbelieving, that is, they are either ignorant *or* deliberately misleading in their lessons (*Paradiso XXIX, 70-84*), the latter occasioning more guilt and more shame. Her disapprobation seems to be for a type of intellectual play that does not take seriously the task of the theologian: that is, for illuminating the truths of the Bible. The theologians—for example, the professional university teachers in Paris or Bologna, or indeed, in the Florentine centres of learning, the *studia* of the convents of Santa Maria Novella, Santa Croce and Santo Spirito —engage in philosophical games and disputations which have no inherent value, but indeed have the power to mislead.³⁹ Preachers, too, are silent about the Gospel, and are more concerned with their own celebrity and inventions (95-96). Beatrice advises Dante-*personaggio* to take more heed of the Bible, in *Paradiso V, 76-78*: 'Avete il novo e 'l vecchio Testamento, | e 'l pastor de la Chiesa che vi guida; | questo vi basti a vostro salvamento'. Later in this canto she warns against leaving the mother's milk of the Bible and even 'warring' with one's self:⁴⁰ her concern, again, appears to be with the type of theological discourse practiced in the universities and found too in the quodlibetal

³⁹ Dante, as we saw in Chapter I, records his own learning in *Convivio II, xii,7*, 'ne le scuole de li religiosi e a le disputazioni de li filosofanti'.

⁴⁰ Non fate com' agnel che lascia il latte
de la sua madre, e semplice e lascivo
seco medesimo a suo piacer combatte.

Paradiso V, 82-84.

debates and disputations of the more public arenas of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce.⁴¹

Indeed, one could claim that Aquinas's own theological discourse might itself be read as 'warring' in its very structure.⁴² In the Heaven of the Sun, Dante has Thomas dancing in harmony with other theologians with whom he disagreed—dancing, no less, like a woman (*Paradiso* X, 76-81). But in his *summae*, at least, the rhetoric is combative: propositions presented and defeated; objections defended; replies devastating, and these all internal to the text itself: warring, in some cases, with only himself. Although the aim of Thomas's arguments may well have been to reach a position of 'rest'—a position from which it is possible to be content in the knowledge that reason has supplied—the discourse which he employs to get there is far from peaceful and harmonising: it is divisive. So when, in reply to Beatrice, in *Paradiso* I, 97-98, the pilgrim uses the technical scholastic term for 'resting content' ('Già contento *requievi* | di grande ammirazion', *Paradiso* I, 97-98) we are alerted to the fact that Beatrice might not be quite the anti-theologian that she later claims. She on the one hand rejects the methodologies employed by the theologians in the schools, and yet deploys a series of devastating explanatory missiles herself.

⁴¹For an account of Florentine quodlibetal debates and their significance in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, see M. Treherne, 'Reading Dante's Heaven of the Fixed Stars (*Paradiso* XXII-XXVII): Declaration, Pleasure and Praise', in Honess and Treherne (eds) *Se mai continga*, pp. 11-26. For other explorations of these types of practices in Florence, see N. Maldina and A. Pegoretti, and the outputs of the University of Leeds/Warwick University AHRC project, 'Dante and Late Medieval Florence: Theology in Poetry, Practice and Society'.

https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125117/dante_and_late_medieval_florence

⁴²Mark Wynn suggests an alternative, perhaps more forgiving, characterisation of Aquinas's methodological style. See 'Charity and Human Flourishing: Some Reflections Drawn from Thomas Aquinas', in *Theology and Human Flourishing: Essays in Honour of Timothy J. Gorringer*, ed. by M. Higon, J. Law and C. Rowland (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), pp. 224-37.

It is thus hard to ignore the fact that the author is content to have a character expound at length on so much philosophy and doctrine—engaging as it does with centuries of theological discussion and argument—and at the same time urge readers to rely on Biblical exegesis for their understanding and salvation. The seeming conservatism inherent in such a position recalls the debate between the Biblical exegetes and the scholastics, and in particular, the twelfth-century Victorines, who restored a new impulse to look at Biblical interpretation, opposing the ‘abstract, formal problematics of logicians and theologians’.⁴³ This, perhaps, mirrors the concerns made explicit in the addresses to the reader at *Paradiso* II, 1-18, X, 22-26 and XXIII, 64-69, when Dante-*poeta* suggests that the reader might not be equipped to engage in depth with the intellectual debate that he presents. But by drawing on the methods of both the theologians and the exegetes—the Victorines themselves were inspired by the symbolic, imaginative and affective theology of Augustine, in addition to calling for a ‘return to examine the philological and grammatical integrity of the Bible’⁴⁴—Dante, through Beatrice, expands the purview of the theological rather than limits it.

Yet it does appear to be the case that in having Beatrice lecture on a particular subject, Dante effectively closes the book on those debates altogether: the character of Beatrice is, as he has her say, infallible. All knowledge she conveys comes directly from the mind of God, as it does for all of the blessed in Paradise, and so as a mouthpiece for a theology she is an extremely powerful one. But even though much of her discourse mimics that of historical theologians, and as such seems to derive an intellectual authority from the same sources as theirs, my claim is that this authority is in actual fact established in life: it is a power that is already there. Her authority over the pilgrim is fuelled by her very earthly personhood, and

⁴³ G. Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge*. p. 34.

⁴⁴ Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision*, p. 35.

the relationship to which their love gave rise. From the perspective of Dante-*personaggio* at least, there is no need to construct her authority anew in Heaven. In Paradise, she has the additional qualities that other theologians demonstrate on Earth: she elucidates; she teaches; she answers and calms a questioning mind—all these qualities I explore in greater detail below. But even though she can only be a theologian in Heaven, she authors the pilgrim's journey before we even hear anything of that infallible voice. In Paradise, Beatrice becomes Minerva, wreathed in olive, or the Wisdom of the Old Testament, or even revealed Truth.⁴⁵ And yet it is her relationship with Dante-*personaggio*, built, in the fiction, upon years of human love—that forces a reappraisal of what understanding the nature of God consists in.

Early in the final *cantica* the author tells us the pilgrim's gaze is unable to sustain the beauty of Beatrice's face. Dante had claimed this before in his youth, in 'Donne ch'avete', lines 55-56, where he says, 'Voi le vedete Amor pinto nel viso, | là 've non pote alcun mirarla fiso'. By *Paradiso* XXIII Dante-*personaggio* beholds her, but the poet is unable to capture her smile in poetry—that leap that his *sacrato poema* must make⁴⁶—becomes, according to Vittorio Montemaggi, 'paradigmatic of what writing about paradise in a "sacred poem" is, in fact, all about'.⁴⁷ That Beatrice herself has become ineffable, that an absence of words, a failure of human language, has come to define her being, foreshadows the apophatic silence of the last canto of the poem.

⁴⁵ In his *Soliloquia*, Augustine, somewhat uncharacteristically, employs the metaphor of a female lover as embodying Wisdom. 'What kind of lover of Wisdom are you who longs to see and to hold naked in a perfectly pure gaze and to embrace her with nothing in between?' Augustine, *Soliloquia* I, 13, 22, in *Augustine's Soliloquies*, Library of Christian Classics, 6, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1953).

⁴⁶ *Paradiso* XXIII, 62.

⁴⁷ V. Montemaggi, 'The Theology of Dante's *Commedia* as seen in the light of the cantos of the Heaven of the Fixed Stars', in Honess and Treherne (eds), *Se Mai Continga*, pp. 45-61 (p. 45).

Barolini suggests that Beatrice loses all trace of a recognisable subjectivity. Indeed, she says, in Beatrice, Dante seems to have ‘failed to create [a cohesive] character’,⁴⁸ even though in making Beatrice speak he has ‘explode[d] the courtly code’,⁴⁹ and pushed at the limits of what had been a restricted and passive model for female characters in courtly and *stilnovist* poetry. Does Beatrice lose her subjectivity by virtue of the content of her speech? Certainly, the Beatrice of the *Commedia* is profoundly different from the character we find in Dante’s earlier works. The fact that she seems, on the face of it, to be merely a puppet for Dante’s theology or, at other times, a symbol standing for a particular concept, creates a tension between a recognisable personhood and a mere cipher for exposition.

Robert Pogue Harrison calls Beatrice’s speechifying ‘cantankerous’.⁵⁰ That she is at times forceful in her arguments is certainly the case. She often addresses Dante-*personaggio* as a not-particularly-able student and, according to Ferrante, she ‘teaches like a professor of philosophy, getting Dante to give his answer, then correct[ing] it’.⁵¹ Robin Kirkpatrick has a rather more positive spin on her lecture-style: ‘Beatrice’s words [...] throughout the *Paradiso* reflect a delight in the processes of teaching and learning and a lyrical involvement in the lessons she is enunciating’, as opposed to Virgil’s lessons which he thinks are rather more ‘tight-lipped’.⁵² But Virgil, of course, is not party, as an inhabitant of Limbo, to the bounty of knowledge that Beatrice enjoys: he does not understand the causes of things and counsels the pilgrim, too, in *Purgatorio* III, 37, to be content with *quia*.

⁴⁸ Barolini, *Origins*, p. 363.

⁴⁹ Barolini, *Origins*, p. 374.

⁵⁰ Harrison, *Body*, p. 19.

⁵¹ Ferrante, ‘Dante’s Beatrice’, p. 199.

⁵² See Kirkpatrick’s commentary on *Paradiso* II, p. 336.

Beatrice is interested in 'whys', and, as a teacher at work in *Paradiso* II, her lengthy lecture on the spots of the Moon causes Dante-*personaggio*'s ignorance to melt like snow (lines 106-07) under the light of her instruction. Beatrice begins with a *reductio ad absurdum*, attacking Dante-*personaggio*'s reply to her question about the causes of dark spots on the Moon (lines 64-82); she then appeals to empirical evidence supplied by the senses, and goes on to outline an elaborate thought experiment to show why the pilgrim's explanation cannot be the correct one (lines 83-105). Such a combination of logical, empirical and experimental reasoning demonstrates a methodological approach straight out of classical philosophy, indebted in particular to Aristotle and, of course, to the medieval scholastic heirs of his intellectual fortune. So Beatrice's style of argumentation, here, echoes that found in the works of medieval philosopher-theologians, not least among them, Aquinas. At *Paradiso* XIV, 1-9, Dante-*poeta* compares Thomas and Beatrice directly, noting that their explanations share the same lucidity: underlining again her heavyweight methodological inheritance.

Dal centro al cerchio, e sì dal cerchio al centro
 movesi l'acqua in un ritondo vaso,
 secondo ch'è percosso fuori o dentro:
 ne la mia mente fé subito caso
 questo ch'io dico, sì come si tacque
 la gloriosa vita di Tommaso,
 per la similitudine che nacque
 del suo parlare e di quel di Beatrice,
 a cui sì cominciar, dopo lui, piacque.

In *Paradiso* V, on the nature of vows, we see more of the same type of argumentative style. But here Beatrice's tone takes on rhetorical devices that would make any quodlibetal debater proud. Below, I trace in detail the instances in her speech which demonstrate her skill in the formal construction of philosophical debate, including the persuasive techniques that she utilises to convince Dante-*personaggio* of her position. But first I analyse a strange *terzina* at the beginning of the canto, which many

commentators have considered almost empty of all meaning, but which helps to construct Beatrice's authority all the more. It begins at line 16, just after she has introduced the canto and her intention to spell out to Dante-*personaggio* the repercussions of unfulfilled vows:

Sì cominciò Beatrice questo canto;
e sì com' uom che suo parlar non spezza,
continùò così 'l processo santo:

As a comment on the nature of Beatrice's speech it serves to highlight that she talks, 'com' uom che suo parlar non spezza', and yet, at the same time, does precisely that: her spoken discourse is cut in two by the poet's interjection. In his commentary on the canto, Hollander puts this down to mere playfulness of the author, but I suggest that there is more at work here than first meets the eye.

Commentator Niccolò Tommaseo, in 1837, says that this is a 'terzina che pare inutile',⁵³ but which, perhaps, serves to prepare the reader for the importance of what is to come in the exposition on vows. Tommaseo was the first commentator to link the *spezza/non spezza* theme to the *Aeneid* when, in Book IV, line 388, Dido interrupts her excoriation of Aeneas and departs the scene, knowing that he is about to leave her. That Dido's and Aeneas' relationship is called to mind in a canto about broken vows makes perfect sense: perhaps Dido believes that Aeneas has broken an implicit vow to her, in the marriage that she presumed to be tacit. More likely, we should consider Dido's own broken vow to her dead husband, which a 'vertical' reading of this canto with *Inferno* V, 62, illuminates: Dido 'ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo'. The comparison between Beatrice and Dido is set up nicely here, and in fact, is made almost explicit by Beatrice's very first

⁵³ From the commentary to *Paradiso* V, 16-19 by Niccolò Tommaseo in 1837, as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project, <http://Dante.Dartmouth.EDU>. [Accessed: 4 July 2016].

words of the canto, 'S'io ti fiammeggio nel caldo d'amore...' (1): Dido being the bearer of the original 'antica fiamma' (*Purgatorio* XXX, 48) or, rather, the 'veteris vestigia flammae' (*Aeneid* IV, 23).⁵⁴

So, the *terzina* that breaks Beatrice's speech on the one hand compares her to a man who does not interrupt his speech, and on the other, to a woman—and, indeed, a lover—who does. What are we to make of this? To what, specifically, does the 'uom' of line 17 refer? I propose that it refers to a type of man, a person who for reasons beyond his personality—professional reasons, maybe—who must be someone who does not interrupt his speech, or whose speech must not be interrupted. My contention is that, in the context of her sermonising, and in particular, given the extraordinary example of the rhetoric which follows immediately after, this *terzina* compares Beatrice to a category—those, such as priests, preachers, public debaters, and philosophers—who, because of their trades, must be the kind of people whose speech goes uninterrupted; these kinds of people, of course, who would have been necessarily male.⁵⁵

So, Dante underlines here, again, the masculinity of Beatrice's enterprise but then, in the same breath, reminds us that Beatrice is also the protagonist of a lover/beloved narrative that burns with the heat of Dido's spurned love. We must not forget, he seems to suggest, that Beatrice is not merely spokesperson for his dry exposition—she is not just a caricature theologian or a sort of heavenly, jobbing street-preacher—she has a back-story, a character, as Dante's beloved, which must be borne in mind throughout her speech.

⁵⁴ For an extended analysis of Dante's co-opting of Virgil's words, see Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, pp.125-42. For a series of lectures that employ a vertical reading of the *Commedia*, see *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, ed. by G. Corbett and H. Webb, 3 vols (Cambridge: Open Book Publishing, 2015-17).

⁵⁵ In a telling reversal, the poet's song, he says, is broken or interrupted by the loveliness of Beatrice's face, which he cannot write, at *Paradiso* XXX, 28-33.

In my brief analysis of that speech, below, I draw out her peculiar mode of address to the pilgrim. From line 19, Beatrice begins expounding on the difficult nature of vows, and seeks to answer Dante's questions which were first raised by the presence of Piccarda and Costanza, who were met in canto III. For now, I set aside the content of that answer and focus, instead, on the architecture of her argumentation.

Lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza
fesse creando, e a la sua bontate
più conformato, e quel ch'è più apprezza,
fu de la volontà la libertate;
di che le creature intelligenti,
e tutte e sole, fuoro e son dotate.
Or ti parrà, se tu quinci argomenti,
l'alto valor del voto, s'è sì fatto
che Dio consenta quando tu consenti;
ché, nel fermar tra Dio e l'omo il patto,
vittima fassi di questo tesoro,
tal quale io dico; e fassi col suo atto.
Dunque che render puossi per ristoro?
Se credi bene usar quel c'hai offerto,
di maltolletto vuo' far buon lavoro.
Tu se' omai del maggior punto certo;
ma perché Santa Chiesa in ciò dispensa,
che par contra lo ver ch'i' t'ho scoperto

Lines 19-24 begin with an opening statement from Beatrice about the freedom of the will, which Dante-*personaggio* is asked to take as fact. She goes on, in line 25: 'Or ti parrà, se tu quinci argomenti...', using what can only be read as the rigorous argument of a philosopher, guiding a pupil in the logic of her argument. Beatrice then continues, confident that the pilgrim has followed her reasoning, at line 34: 'Tu se' omai del maggior punto certo...', a point which seems to contradict what Dante-*personaggio* had understood to be the case. But Beatrice has uncovered the truth for him: 't'ho scoperto' (line 36). These difficult questions require step-by-step explanations from Beatrice, and she therefore suggests in lines 37-39 that her pupil requires 'aiuto' to digest the 'cibo rigido' that she serves. That he must sit a little longer at the table is an image which illustrates the

gastronomic metaphor, but also anticipates the address to the reader at *Paradiso* X, 22, when we, as pupils at our benches, are asked to consider the tastes of knowledge that we have enjoyed already and the feast that is to come.

Her teacherly style continues in the next *terzina*, when she coaches Dante-*personaggio* in holding on to the ‘scienza’ that she has revealed to him: ‘Apri la mente a quel ch’io ti paleso | fermalvi entro; ché non fa scienza, | sanza lo ritenere, avere inteso’. Moving towards her concluding remarks in this section, she provides Biblical (lines 49-50, 63-68) and classical examples (69-72) to make her points, marshalling the argument—and the pilgrim—along the way (68).

Her countenance remains that of a teacher right up until she finishes her lesson at line 84, but by the end of her speech, indeed from as early in the canto as line 55, a shift takes place in her mode of address: she is less the public orator—the philosopher of the quodlibetal trying out her syllogisms—she has become a preacher, explaining the import of her conclusions for the benefit of the erring souls on Earth: ‘Siate, Cristiani, a muovervi più gravi’ (73). She is preaching here to the whole of Christendom, and the sounding of authority, now, to all who might hear her, is absolute.

Throughout the *cantica*, we can see how Beatrice provides Dante-*personaggio* with the means to understand truths which had previously been beyond his comprehension, and make sense of the sights and sounds with which he is presented. At *Paradiso* VII, 123, Beatrice clarifies her key point, in order that the pilgrim, if he heeds her words, will understand things as well as she does (‘perché tu veggi lì così com’ io’)—in this particular case, the apparent contradictions of the Incarnation. The overriding tenor of many of her lessons is combative and forceful; they are

'la quale non sofferia lite alcuna d'opinioni o di sofistici argomenti'; they are not tempered or softened by being delivered by a woman, if anything, her sex only makes the opposite true.⁵⁶ And so, as I suggested above, what can be seen throughout Aquinas's oeuvre—in his style of explanation and the structure of his discourse—so too with Beatrice: if there is peace to be had here, as Dante claims is definitive of theology in the *Convivio*, if one can 'rest content' in the wake of her argument, it is a peace brought about by the hammer-blow of a single, unyielding voice.

5. The *I am* of Beatrice: Beatrice as herself—and with Christ

The theologian, then, following Dante's own idiosyncratic definition, will be a conduit of peace. In the *Commedia*, this peace is found from intellectual insight, in the knowledge that a sound argument secures; Beatrice, as we have seen, delivers this type of knowledge to Dante-*personaggio* in her extensive theological discourse which incorporates the trappings and argumentative devices of the academy. But as Peter S. Hawkins has highlighted, her insight itself comes from her personal experience, of seeing directly the truth of the Empyrean. The trope of intellectual understanding framed as dawning light, sight, and visibility recurs throughout the poet's narration in response to Beatrice's spoken words, for example, at *Paradiso* XXVIII, 87: 'come stella in cielo il ver si vide.' And so when she holds forth on the question of the angelic hierarchies, Beatrice does not agree with Dionysius over Gregory because of any particular argument, but because she has seen the truth in Heaven herself. Thus, as Hawkins says, Dionysius gets to agree with *her*, and not the other way around.

[...] Dante is contrasting his certain vision of truth with the theologians' mere speculation about it. Like him, they have scripture and tradition as their authorities; but Dante—like Paul—sees for himself. Theologians do their best with their *summas*, with

⁵⁶ One might think that as a twenty-first century readers, our responses to Beatrice as authority would be charitable, or, even better, neutral, compared with medieval readers; I am not at all confident that this is indeed the case.

their careful winnowing of tradition, but the poet beholds the
'secret truth' of the angels and in the vernacular lines of his
Commedia discloses 'that and other truths about these circles'.⁵⁷

Beatrice's knowledge and the blessedness it endows is based on the act of
seeing the truth of God directly, not in an act of love, as she makes explicit
at *Paradiso* XXVIII, 109-11:

Quinci si può veder come si fonda
l'esser beato ne l'atto che vede,
non in quell ch'ama, che poscia seconda

The questing intellect will see and find rest, and this knowledge will give
rise to love. Hence blessedness enacts the eternal return of desire for God;
perfectly satisfied in Heaven, yet still perfectly desirous as creatures for the
Creator. Seeing is knowing, and in knowing one can rest, but this rest does
not extinguish love and desire, indeed it spurs it on and maintains it in the
perpetual praise of the blessed for God, as his limitlessness deserves.⁵⁸

Lume è là sù che visibile face
Lo creatore a quella creatura
che solo in lui vedere ha la sua pace.

Paradiso XXX, 100-102

Dante-*personaggio* has seen and known *his* beloved before the story of the
Commedia begins; theirs is a love story of retrieval. Along the way the pilgrim
has lost what it was he knew in Beatrice, lost what seeing her as his beloved,
and as part of God's creation, really meant. And thus the *Commedia* is a
positive re-writing of the *Aeneid*, because the pilgrim's journey is a divinely-
willed mission, but Beatrice, unlike Dido, is absolutely necessary to its
fulfilment. Beatrice's knowing Dante, and being known by him, is the
foundation stone on which his journey rests. And although the poet claims,

⁵⁷ Hawkins, 'All Smiles', p. 43.

⁵⁸ For example, see Psalm 145.

'Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono' (*Inferno* II, 32), it is indeed Saint Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians, who provides the template for Dante to construct a way of knowing God 'face to face' and, in turn, of being known.⁵⁹

Being known, as a particular, concrete human individual, is a prerequisite for being loved, and being known by Beatrice, the pilgrim can come to know himself too: what is required of him in his approach to the face of God. In *Paradiso* I, 85, by way, almost, of an aside, the poet refers to Beatrice as someone who sees right in to him: 'Ond' ella, che vedea me sì com' io...'. It is a profoundly intimate moment wherein Beatrice explains to the pilgrim that he is muddled and confused in his interpretation—even before he has had opportunity to articulate it—of the new sights of Heaven that he is witnessing. She is able to inhabit his perspective—she sees the pilgrim as he sees himself—still limited and prone to error, and through smiling words ('per le sorrise parolette brevi' (95) is able to help him see the truth. It is the realisation of a divine truth within a face-to-face human encounter, an encounter which remains human despite Beatrice's beatitude and limitless knowledge.

The pilgrim is able to see what *Beatrice* is ('qual son io', *Paradiso*, XXIII, 46) at her invitation, only after his mind experiences a kind of *raptus* upon seeing a vision of Christ at *Paradiso* XXIII, 43-44: 'la mente mia [...] fatta più grande, di se stessa uscìo'. And so one 'seeing' quickly follows another. Christ is followed by Beatrice, although, given Beatrice's instruction to open his eyes, the first does not require the power of sight as we ordinarily conceive it. These seeings are punctuated by the pilgrim's experience of an almost dissociative state (although he claims an inability to narrate it, of course), reminiscent of both Augustine's Ostia 'vision' in *Confessions* IX,

⁵⁹ 1 Corinthians 13: 12 'videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate tunc autem facie ad faciem nunc cognosco ex parte tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum.' 'We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known.'

and Bernard's description of his taste of the Divine in *De diligendo Deo*. What does this mean? Dante-*personaggio* has known Beatrice since youth, but his retrieval of her actual meaning can only occur now, once he has taken up a perspective beyond only his own. His own mind, exiting itself ('di se stessa uscìo'), is able to see what Beatrice really is.

This retrieval of knowing what Beatrice is began in the dark wood, but when he finally meets her again in the Earthly Paradise, he still lacks the capacity for knowing, even though, like Paul, he himself is known: 'Dante' says Beatrice, at line 55, and by naming him, as we saw above, she claims him for her own knowledge, and cements the reciprocal erotic relationship. But there is no peace to be found, yet, in the pilgrim's trembling mind or shaking body (*Purgatorio* XXX, 47). Her words, which invite him for the first time to see and to know who she is, who she really is, emphasised in the repetition at line 73, ('Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice'), cannot be met in reply with a truly face-to-face encounter: she remains veiled to him. Dante-*personaggio* can only let his eyes fall downwards and so, literally, shame-filled, sees only himself, and the limited perspective he occupies, Narcissus-like, in the reflection of a stream (76-78).

She tells him not to weep at Virgil's disappearance. In doing so the episode mirrors the events in that other garden, in John 20, when the risen Christ appears to a weeping Mary Magdalene, who also mourns a disappearance.⁶⁰ From the mouth of the empty tomb, she turns her face to Christ but does not know him—he is veiled to her—even though she knew him and loved him

⁶⁰ John 20: 15-16. 'dicit ei Iesus mulier quid ploras quem quaeris illa existimans quia hortulanus esset dicit ei domine si tu sustulisti eum dicito mihi ubi posuisti eum et ego eum tollam. dicit ei Iesus Maria conversa illa dicit ei rabboni quod dicitur magister.' 'Jesus saith to her: Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, thinking it was the gardener, saith to him: Sir, if thou hast taken him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith to her: Mary. She turning, saith to him: Rabboni (which is to say, Master).'

in his old life; she does not know who he really is now, or what he means, not until, that is, he speaks her name, 'Mary'. With this new knowledge comes the peace that Christ gives: he gives it three times, at John 20:19, 21 and 26.

The resemblances between these two episodes remind us that Beatrice will also confer a peace: not because she is the Christ, but because she is a theologian, and thus peace-giving is within her purview. In the introduction to his translation of the *Paradiso*, Robin Kirkpatrick says that 'Beatrice is not Christ. Nor would Dante propose that she is. She is [...] what Christ makes it possible for humans to be'.⁶¹ She directs the pilgrim toward blessedness, through the lessons she bestows in her theologically rigorous lessons, but also through her very person: she is the embodiment, for Dante, of the power of the Creator and his love. Without these two lessons—of intellect and of love—the pilgrim cannot hope to see the Godhead face-to-face.

Desire for Beatrice ends not in the peaceful consummation of *eros* but in the eternal return of desire and satisfaction in God. This has only been possible through his particular relation to Beatrice: love for her has provided the conditions under which he can see his own place in the universe—see himself as part of God's created order—and the participation that is required of him. Truth is found from considering the perspective beyond only his, but it has been a necessarily perspectival, particular journey: the one unrepeatable event of the poem; the one unrepeatable event of Beatrice—like the 'ontological event' of the second person of the Trinity becoming man—an encounter with her person, and her face, has led the way to an encounter with the face of the Trinity itself. The *I am* of Jesus Christ (John 8: 58), of the

⁶¹ *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri 3: Paradiso*, ed. and trans. by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Books, 200t), p. liii.

Incarnation, becomes visible to the pilgrim once he sees what Beatrice is, what *I am* truly means.⁶²

Beatrice is never completely divested of her role of the beloved — we can continue to read her relationship with Dante-*personaggio* in these terms until well after her removal to the heavenly rose. We saw one example, above, in my analysis of that strange *terzina* of *Paradiso* V (16-19), how Dante is at pains to remind of us of Beatrice's role as his beloved, setting up a comparison between her and Dido, that hot-blooded lover. The *Commedia* is replete with reminders that Dante is in the presence of his beloved and that '[m]ille disiri più che fiamma caldi' draw his eyes to her eyes (*Purgatorio* XXXI, 118). Just the sound of her name causes a reaction in him (*Paradiso* VII, 13). We cannot take away from Beatrice the historical situatedness of her character like we can, perhaps, with the lovers of the Song of Songs, for example. Her personhood is never entirely erased, even though there is inevitably a tension between Barolini's 'radically alien construct'⁶³ of her role as teacher, preacher and Christ-figure, and the person that the author supposedly saw walking in the streets of Florence.

And so I suggest that instead of Beatrice merely standing for theology *personified*, which has been the suggestion of many critics — the walking, talking encyclopedia of heavenly knowledge — we should consider that in her relationship with Dante, theology becomes, instead, *personalised*, requiring of a person-to-person realisation. Indeed, the importance of human relationships, the face-to-face meetings of the pilgrim with the souls in the afterlife, and his growing understanding about his place in God's universal order as a result of those meetings, is obviously one of the author's primary themes. But in the characterisation of the relationship

⁶² 'dixit eis Iesus amen amen dico vobis antequam Abraham fieret ego sum'. 'Jesus said to them: Amen, amen I say to you, before Abraham was made, I am.'

⁶³ Barolini, *Origins*, p. 366.

with Beatrice, Dante enables us to see beyond mere encounters: he draws us closer to an understanding of the nature of human love and createdness, and he also voices in Beatrice, and demonstrates in her very personhood, the Divine love whose munificence is the ground of our being.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested that the historical theologians provide authoritative sources which Dante puts to use in the *Commedia*: they provide both structural and qualitative ways in which to read the narrative of the poem. Chapter I introduced some aspects of the theologians, and also some of the modes through which they might have been known in Dante's Florence, in the last two decades of the thirteenth century. The transmission of the theologians' work, image and personhood took multifaceted form: textual, visual, oral, institutional. These portraits would have been diffused via similarly diverse media: libraries, artworks, sermons, debates, teaching. My discussion of the theologians' in Florence built upon a more general discussion of the type of personhood that emerges from Dante's poem. The aspects of personhood that I suggested Dante prioritises were: names and naming; embodiment; memory; language; interpersonal relationships and the values and commitments which are necessary for their survival. Over the course of the next three chapters, I explored the ways in which these aspects of personhood are brought into focus by a reading of the theologians in the *Commedia*, and how in different ways they undergird Dante's conception of humanity's place in the divine order, that is, in his theology.

In Chapter II, I sketched ways in which Bernard and Aquinas provide models of virtue: how Bernard's authenticity transmits his ardour for God in his eloquent sermons; how this same authenticity resounds in his evident prioritisation of the language of love, person-to-person, in his letters, but how language has also the power to seduce. The examples in Chapter II of Francesca, Ugolino, Manfred and Buonconte showed that Dante shares some of the concerns of Bernard's authentic heart. Aquinas's authority is transmitted in a different register altogether; the textual effacement of his own personhood from his written works belies a personal mission to advance the work of his order, to enlighten the souls of the

world in peril who are at risk from sin—but also from muddled thinking. Through Thomas’s character in the *Commedia*, Dante is able to play with our expectations about Aquinas: in some ways the character conforms to our preconceptions of him, and the preconceptions which might have been had in Dante’s Florence. Aquinas’s methodological rigour was a currency potently deployed in the debates within the mendicant *studia*, and, as we saw in Chapter I, his written works would have been essential sources for the preachers and teachers in Santa Maria Novella. But Dante’s portrayal of Thomas subverts expectations too: the encomium to Saint Francis is an obvious example of one such surprise, but there are other ways, as I have shown, through which the character’s speech complicates a one-dimensional engagement with the historical saint and his oeuvre.

In Chapter III, I showed how error occupies an important place in Dante’s conception of personhood: failures of language constitute breakdowns in relationships, both human-to-human, and human-to-God. But error also has the capacity to maintain the particularity of persons, a particularity that is preserved in memory—in our own and in our loved ones’. In the example of the character of Gregory the Great in the *Commedia*, I showed how human vulnerability to error provides the means for persons to retain their selfhood in the *aldilà*, when this may have seemed at risk, given the work of the waters of the Eunoë in the Earthly Paradise. Gregory’s smile at the heavens in recognition of his error, reclaims his earthly person: someone who will be remembered and recognised by those who loved him, after the Last Judgement. His error draws attention to the ways in which humans are vulnerable to intellectual misunderstanding, and highlights just one of the ways in which we might fail in our understanding of God. The ways are legion. I made a case that, for Dante, a failure to understand the limitations of language means that humans err in love and err in knowledge—with consequences for our relationships, earthly and divine.

Augustine's turning away from error, his conversion, I examined at length in Chapter III, where I compared it with the turning point that Dante-*personaggio* must navigate from Purgatory to Paradise. Here I suggested that the conversion story within the *Confessions*, and in particular, Augustine's so-called vision at Ostia, together with his relationship with Monica, can provide a useful way to read Dante-*personaggio*'s confession to Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise. Augustine not only provides a framework in the *Confessions*, but, as Dante notes in the *Convivio*, he provides an authority, too. But why, then—given that here and elsewhere in Dante's works—for example, in his letters—Augustine appears to be exactly the *auctor* that one might expect—why is he so notable by his *absence* in the *Commedia*? It is clear that I have not provided any answer to this question during the course of this study; and I am not at all confident that a definitive answer will ever be excavated from the poem itself. What I have tried to show is that the authority that Dante co-opts from Augustine derives from a reading of his personhood, that may well have been visible in some of the sources of Duecento Florence, especially, but not exclusively, from the *Confessions*.

Augustine provides a structural, 'informing presence'¹ in the *Commedia*: a way of writing about an individual's own approach to God, from the standpoint of an (almost) redeemed narrator. This narrator expounds and comments upon the moral and intellectual failings, the precarity, of his earlier sinful self and his journey towards redemption. This narrative reclaims the sinner and places his story in the context of providential history, but it does so on a radically personal plane. I have suggested that in creating the narrator-Augustine and the young-Augustine character, the author Augustine provides a useful model for Dante to adopt: these two characters stand apart but they are equally necessary for understanding the

¹ Hawkins, 'Divide and Conquer', p. 472.

inward, personal and particular forces at work which colour the self's engagement with its own desire and intellect.

In constructing the characters of his theologians as he does, and immersing them in the narrative of a poem, Dante creates a way of thinking about theology which incorporates their authority; comments and critiques upon the form and content of their works; rejects a sterile treatise in favour of a poetic language which is able to distil and communicate something about both divine and earthly love with unprecedented power. Even as modern-day critics, who by necessity do not share the same moral sources or publicly-shared religious beliefs as medieval readers, we can understand how Dante's theological message might exert a force, because it activates something in us which is personal. In Chapter IV, I suggested a response to a story of a personal love and a personal rehabilitation discharges an empathic, affective response that might be missing from any reading of a more straightforward piece of theological prose treatise. That this fact is built into the fabric of Dante's work means that there must be an engagement with it, even if that engagement is sublimated into a type of textual criticism that erases talk of a personal response in favour, perhaps, of only allegorical readings, or under other rubrics of interpretation—psychoanalytic, poststructural—or what you will.

Indeed, there is an even deeper significance at play here, given the argument that I have developed over the course of this study, and it is this: there is a type of mirror-image relation, or perhaps an isomorphism, between the form of poetry itself, and what this poem in particular succeeds in doing. By this I mean that Dante-*personaggio* is only able to approach the face of God via a journey which is necessarily perspectival, and particular; it is contingent upon the dark wood being Dante-*personaggio*'s very own personal crisis of identity. The pilgrim must ask—to paraphrase Janet Soskice one last time—who he loves, and what he attends

to, in order to know who he is, and what he should be.² By loving Beatrice and attending to her, he can understand how she embodies the miracle of human creation and how the memory of her life and death can hold meaning beyond mere earthly love and grief. As this understanding develops, so too does the knowledge of how he should orient the values that constitute his own personhood, such that his renewed virtue can bring his love 'd'animo' back into line with the love 'naturale' (*Purgatorio* XVII, 93)—the love that he had for his Creator, which was there all along. By loving and attending to the particular in Beatrice, by seeing her, hearing her, and ultimately knowing her, he is ready to turn towards the face of God himself.

The narrative of the poem, and the lesson which I am claiming for it—that which understands the essential person-to person relationship between Dante and Beatrice as theologian, as the embodiment of what God's love is, and how Dante should take up his position to both her and hence to God—exerts a pull on us to read the poem through our own unique histories of love and error—the vulnerabilities that make up our own personhoods. As Dante knows full well, this pull is not exerted—at least not in the same way—by the theological treatise. Thus any reading of the theological lesson of the poem must itself, like the narrative which gives rise to it, be defined by a personal engagement with love.

But there is a danger, as Barolini has pointed out,³ that we read Dante only as he wishes to be read, that his grasp on his own text is all-controlling. We risk being swept up by the majesty of his poetic prowess, by the audacity of his creative achievement, and find ourselves unable to untangle a legitimate critical response from the response that is the author's own creation. As critics operating in (possibly, after) a postmodern era, we are

² Soskice, *The Kindness of God*. p. 8.

³ Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, pp. 17-18.

naturally defensive about analyses which fixate on authors, when we know that they should by now, perhaps, be dead (Barthes), or that by privileging their status we are in fact applying principles that unify only our own psychological preoccupations (Foucault): that our analyses are 'projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice.'⁴

The danger seems especially acute with Dante, because the nature of his oeuvre has all the appearance of a developing sense of self in many respects; it seems a construction of a personal world-view in process—a textual demonstration of his own values and commitments, so to speak—but this is only if we take him at his word; at the word that he presents in the voice of *Dante-poeta*, which of course, is only one of the author's voices and not an imprint of the author's personhood (as if such a thing could ever exist). Dante seems to delight in the dance of the veils of textual interpretation, his early works make this explicit: hiding himself and then revealing and then hiding again; layers of text seemingly translucent at first, but perhaps either impenetrable or, indeed, veiling nothing at all. And it is of course as modern and postmodern readers that we attempt to find meaning: at times there seems like a tug of war between reading the text as Dante wants it read, and what we in our particular place and time can make of it, both benefiting from and beholden to our particular hermeneutical horizons. And that brings with it those methodological and theoretical assumptions that preclude us from approaching the works in quite the way that the author may have anticipated.

That is of course, by necessity, unavoidable, as I alluded to in the Introduction, by way of my brief digression on Gadamer. But regarding the risks of reading an 'author-function' (as Foucault would have it) into

⁴ M. Foucault, 'What is an Author?', p. 127.

Dante's text which claims for him too much or too little, then I would suggest that this study, if it is at risk here, is so in the first sense: that my analysis of Dante's construction of theology via his encounters with personhood, and in particular the theologians on which this study trains its focus, privileges the sense of a vision, wrought from of our own unifying psychological tendencies, which Dante may not have shared. And even if we credit him with a vision that begins simply and gradually deepens and complicates over a lifetime as he tells it, then our own unifying narrative still applies and, indeed, ever more strongly.

One way, perhaps, to read Dante as he wants to be read, in a way in which Foucault would no doubt question, is to say, that this narrative of redemption and rehabilitation can be best understood only through the relationships in which *we* as readers are already immersed: that we can build out of these relationships something which transcends time and death and meaninglessness, just as Dante has done in the creation of his fiction. That is the ultimate therapy, and we must surely ask if we are playing the same game as Dante by creating our own analyses in this way. But perhaps Dante's game is *the* game; perhaps there is no other way that we should be construing our own personhoods, our own redemptions. Without this game must there only be irony, or worse, nihilism? The nihilist's silence might well sound the same as the silence containing the plenitude of meaning.

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