



La Nostra Effige

Dante and the Symbolism of the Human Form

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La Nostra Effigie – Dante and the Symbolism of the Human Form

Submitted by

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SUMMARY

It has long been recognised that Dante's *Divine Comedy* is worthy of the most exalted rank in world literature. There are many reasons for this, foremost of which is that the book successfully attempts to gather into itself the entire sum of human experience. In its cosmology, morality, encyclopaedic knowledge, deep concern with human history, and detailed spiritual explorations, the *Commedia* contains *everything*. It can therefore be regarded as a 'world unto itself', or, indeed, a *microcosmos*, in ways that no other work, except perhaps Holy Scripture, had merited before, or since. This development of microcosmic thinking can be traced throughout a long history of literary works known to Dante, and in his minor works, demonstrating that the *Commedia*, a work established as summative of an entire culture, is the final, full flowering of this tradition.

Furthermore, Dante successfully incorporates the human body, in traditional thinking the most primal and complete of all forms, as the essential, central symbol around which he constructs an elaborate series of schemas within the poem. In short, at both a *micro* and *macro* level, the poem can be re-interpreted as being an analogous journey through the human body. Specific textual references, overarching themes, and explicit yet previously unexamined architectonic structures within the poem illustrate that the tripartite division of the work are strongly paralleled to the three divisions of the human form.

In support of this reading, I show that Dante is concerned to reinstate and uphold the human body as the supreme element of creation; that the *Commedia* explicitly parallels the central story of Christian history – the events of Eastertide – that centres on *the* body of Christ; and that the *Commedia*, as a self-declared allegory, can (and even should) be rigorously re-examined for analogous readings since its universality and limitlessness invites such examination.

Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

INTRODUCTION

Dante's phrase "*la nostra effige*" ("our human form") appears at the climax of his great work, the *Divina Commedia*, where it is used to suggest that within the poet's final, long-anticipated vision of divinity we might see something surprising yet familiar – an image of ourselves. What can this mean? It is a reminder that for Dante, despite his highly intellectualised and philosophical life, and his deep interest in mysticism and metaphysical speculation, the purpose and meaning of the human body is central to his theological and poetical concerns. Indeed, it is remarkable that the *Commedia*, though purporting to be an account of a spiritual journey through the afterlife, is nevertheless an explicitly bodily and sensory experience for the pilgrim who makes and describes the journey; and that the poem maintains a consistent and detailed attention to the nature and behaviour of human bodies. Dante is profoundly interested in the meanings that can be derived from every gesture of human physicality. He is also deeply involved in exploring the meanings of how the often baffling experience of human embodiment can be understood in terms of key Christian theological elements that specifically involve *bodiliness* – primarily the incarnation of God in human form, and the complex issues that surround the corporeal punishment of souls in the after-life and the resurrection of the body at last judgement. In his treatment of body and soul, Dante is also strictly non-dualist: that is, he consistently affirms that the human creature is a body animated by a soul, and that identity is firmly located in the distinctly psychosomatic nature of human behaviour. He clearly rejects any notions that threaten orthodox views of the body-soul relationship (Epicurean "death of the soul" for example, or neoplatonic views of the incarnation of the soul as "imprisonment" in the body, or some strands of early Christian asceticism that displayed hatred for the body). Following the established Pauline and Augustinian traditions, Dante consistently upholds the divinity, imperishability, centrality and nobility of the human form.

There is, however, significant and seemingly adequate attention given to these questions within the corpus of Dantean scholarship, and I do not propose to delve into them beyond what is necessary for a proper grounding for my enquiries. The particular purpose of this work will be to examine how Dante uses the human form as a *symbol*, indeed *the symbol*, of his poetic, moral and even cosmological concerns. The esteemed Dante scholar Robert

Durling has recently observed that, in relation to the analogical possibilities available in reading the *Commedia* through the matrix of the human body as primary symbol:

...it has long been recognized that the *Comedy* is a little model of the universe, but it has not been adequately recognized that it is also a model of the human body, ascending through its powers and processes and in the *Paradiso* finally reaching the sovereign head.¹

The primary objective of this work is to provide at least a significant advance towards such an adequate recognition.

Following Dante's own predilection for tripartite division, this thesis will be divided into three sections. In the first section, chapters one and two, the necessary conceptual groundwork will be laid. Here, it will be shown that Dante seeks to confirm and celebrate one of the key elements of Christian theology that set it apart from the world of classical thought in which it was born – the essential goodness and imperishability of the human body. It will also be demonstrated that the *Commedia*, for all its grandeur and innovation as poetry, uses a well-established device – the so-called “allegory of the theologians” – to produce a work of *moral* teaching that is built, structurally and narratively, upon the established events of Eastertide. It is framed upon *the* body, in Christian terms. Dante's achievement therefore is to dare to take upon himself a divine mission and write a “second scripture” in which he himself is both narrator and chief protagonist of a story that explicitly parallels *the* story of the Christian tradition. It will also be demonstrated that an explicitly allegorical reading of the *Commedia* can be justified by both the author's own avowed intent that various levels of meaning should be drawn from the text in precisely such a fashion, and by his obvious attachment to allegory as a literary device. I will also show that, far from being radically inventive, Dante draws upon a long tradition of literary representations of “microcosmic man” for his symbolic imagery. Such images of microcosmic representation are, for Dante, also paralleled in the way the medieval mind understood the structures of human existence – church, city, and empire – as well as the symbolic arrangement of the Christian temple itself, as being modelled on the structure of the human form. Throughout his minor works we see an emergent interest in such representations, one which finds its full development in what is arguably the greatest expression of such a theme in the entire western canon – the epic poem that is the *Commedia*.

¹ Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, trans. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 761n.

The second section of this thesis, chapters three to five, proposes that the *Commedia*, read with particular attention to Dante's use of the human body as a storehouse of metaphor, can be understood as a journey through the human body, and that the work constitutes a deliberate attempt to extend to its furthest limits the image of "microcosmic man". It will be demonstrated that a symbolic relationship exists between the tripartite nature of the human body and the three-fold division of the poem, so that the narrative takes on the form of a lowest-to-highest journey, from naked bodiliness and bodily distortion (an image of sin), to the "straightening of the body" (repentance), to the body's perfection in glory (salvation). To quote Durling again: "There is thus a certain continuity among the various versions of the body analogy in the three *cantiche* of the poem."²

In this analogy, it can be broadly stated that in structure and function the *Inferno* is comparable to the human abdomen, *Purgatorio* to the torso, and *Paradiso* to the human head. The *Inferno* is a journey into and through the lower realm of the human form, the belly. It is a tuneless, ironic symphony of the body broken, disturbed or distorted, conducted in a mock city-state alienated from the true source of its existence. The *Inferno* is an inverted human body, where the lowest forms of human function have been placed foremost, and the highest of human pursuits, the exercise of intellect, has been forever sundered. In an intermediate position between these extremes, the sins of the passions have an appropriate mid-point but also demonstrate, overflowingly, their distorted means and ends. The *Purgatorio* is an expression of the body being "turned". It becomes reorientated, reordered, but not yet perfected. It is the reaffirmation of the earthly possibilities of the body, and by analogy the city-state in which men live, when it is reconnected to its proper spiritual sources. It is also a hymn to the re-energising and sustaining rhythms of human existence that are shown in both the operations of the body and the rituals of the temple. In its central position, and acute focus on the themes of rhythm and emotion, it is an exploration of the symbolism of the human chest. The *Paradiso*, in this reading, portrays the body and the community of mankind perfected, when all is properly reordered and proportioned. The *Paradiso* is an exact reversal, and therefore a correction, of the distortions and imbalances of the *Inferno*. It is explicitly structured on the form of the human head, and is a contemplation of the human body's highest operations, the workings of *mente* – mind. The *Commedia*, understood in this

² Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 2 - Purgatorio*, ed. Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, trans. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 491n.

analogous way, is also a subtly microcosmic-macrocosmic journey through the human body; for as well as providing a self-contained contribution to the greater analogy of the entire poem, each *cantica* of the poem can be understood to contain its own miniaturised version of the overall scheme, since a schematic arrangement of Dante's various realms of the after-life can also be interpreted as being based on the tripartite construction of the human form.³

In this reading, the human form becomes the essential frame upon which Dante constructs both the moral imperative and narrative structure of the poem. The full harnessing of Dante's literary influences, and the final development in a steady progression of experiments, finds its form in the architectural structure of the *Commedia*, and a principal feature of the work, the arrangement of the poem along anatomical analogies, is one important way in which Dante underlines the tradition to which he is heir, while also providing a symbolic confirmation of the fundamental importance – theologically, morally, in every way – that he places upon a proper understanding of the human body and all its meanings.

In the third and final section, a short conclusion, I will outline the limitations of this thesis, point the reader towards adjunct questions or themes, and consider how a re-reading of Dante in the terms of this thesis might redirect us towards a new and revitalised understanding of what his work can offer us.

There is a mountain of scholarship on Dante in general and on the *Commedia* in particular. It has been estimated that there are more published books on Dante than on any other writer in the western tradition, covering an almost unimaginable range of questions and themes. How then is it possible to justify another attempt at a scholarly interpretation of the *Commedia*? The simplest answer lies in the obvious profundity of the work itself. In pondering the place of Dante's epic within the western canon, I am mindful of a proposal made by a modern Italian author, Italo Calvino, who listed the characteristics that define "classic" literature. One of these key qualities is that a true classic (as opposed, we might think, from the merely conventional "classic") is that the work *never exhausts everything it has to say to its*

³ The concept that the human form is essentially tripartite, or can be best understood as being divisible according to three different types of cavity within the body – digestive, respiratory, cranial – is an ancient one that stretches back to at least the *Timaeus* of Plato, and needs no further elaboration here other than to say that an established tradition of tripartite representations of the human form in the literature of the West survived intact until Dante's time. See, as a formative milestone in this tradition, Plato's treatment of the theme in the *Timaeus*, particularly 45-47, 70-73.

audience.⁴ That is, the work itself is of such complexity and depth that it steps beyond its context of place and time to present itself as a voice that is capable of speaking, and forever speaking anew, to people of all nations and ages. Its depths can never be satisfactorily plumbed, and in our attempts to do so we are commonly reduced to agreeing with one critic's contention that "We shall not exhaust the mystery of it for all our scrutiny."⁵ There are only a few works in the history of our culture that can meet this criterion, and surely the *Commedia* is one of them. Its influence on the subsequent literature of Europe; its role in defining the new language of the Italian people; its function as a wellspring of inspiration for the visual arts; and its long history of translation, interpretation and re-interpretation, comprise just some of the evidence for its power. How should we account for these enduring qualities of influence and fascination? In any traditional understanding of the nature of truly great works of art, they can only be satisfactorily comprehended if we see that human artefacts such as the *Commedia* are of supra-human origin. Such works clearly emerge from a source that is beyond the human artist who brought it into being. In short, it is "written" by God, and in the case of the *Commedia* we have the special circumstance of having the human author himself attest to the divine inspiration that precipitated and sustained his task. If this is the case, then we should expect that the truly greatest works of the human spirit, such as the *Commedia*, are the fruits of an inexhaustible energy. Human understanding can therefore never be fully sated when placed before such manifestations of divine powers, while simultaneously the attraction to these works is as universal as it is limitless.

However, there is a special sense in which the *Commedia* meets this criterion of limitlessness. As attentive scholarship has demonstrated, Dante has deliberately imitated the structure and nature of the Holy Scriptures in composing his great poem. While the purposes involved in this are many, a consequence has been a trail of scholarship that treats the *Commedia* as a "second scripture" that imitates "God's way of writing."⁶ In accord with this, the poem presents as an illimitable fund of human experience, a "voice" that is designed to declare a universal message for all mankind. Furthermore, if we extend this comparison we can note that according to the methods of traditional exegesis of scriptural texts, the role

⁴ Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 5.

⁵ Charles Southward Singleton, *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 13

⁶ Ibid, p. 15: "A poet has not God's power and may not presume to write as He can. But he may *imitate* God's way of writing. He may construct a literal historic sense, a journey beyond..." For an analysis of Singleton's approach, see John Freccero, "Introduction to *Inferno*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 184-187.

of the exegete himself was considered to be part of the providential plan of God for the revealing of his meaning through those texts, a project well entrenched, yet by no means complete, in Dante's time. Hence, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the poet saw the method by which he could write an epic work of universal appeal that contained levels of supra-human complexity, *and* have the deepest meanings of that work discovered and explicated by future "exegetes". If we accept this to be the case, how can we be certain that the collective task of interpretation is now, or ever will be, complete? If the profundity of holy texts can never be completely mastered by limited human understandings, then the *Commedia* bears comparison to them in this crucial respect. In addition, the limitless nature of the work means that it is always capable of exciting and enlightening new audiences. The universality of the great works ensures, in this sense, their very survival, even while generally the study of the humanities, in the face of the many pressures placed upon it by modernity, continues to atrophy.

In particular regard to my thesis, I argue there is yet a place for an analysis of Dante's deliberate use of an organic metaphor – that of the human body – as a symbolic frame on which to arrange the entire project of the *Commedia*. Its use of symbol and allegory, its ingenious cosmology, its moral component, its employment of pilgrimage and conversion as overarching themes, its attentions to the central theological elements of Christianity, its poetic patterns, and even its physical impact on both author and reader, can be bound together and re-understood through the matrix of the traditional understanding of the tripartite nature of "*la nostra effige*" – "*our human form*". And it is particularly with a mind to "re-looking" that I approach the subject material herein, for a traditional understanding of matters such as allegory, symbolism and cosmology will yield the better results when applied to the work of Dante, whose intellectual outlook and "ways of seeing" stand much closer to those of the ancient world than to our own. That is to say, a writer whose times are so different from our own will reveal more to us when approached specifically on his own terms, and where due attention is paid to the streams of literary and intellectual traditions in which he stood. While within existing scholarship there are pointers towards the possibility of constructing such a reading as will be found here, and indeed these in part develop particular aspects of my proposed approach, I proceed on the understanding that, in agreement with the earlier quote from Durling, a comprehensive account remains unformulated. It is my task to show where such niches of interpretation remain unexplored; or, where such explorations do exist, that they can be met with a satisfactory counter-argument or given further development.

John Ruskin once called Dante “the central man of all the world, as representing in perfect balance the imaginative, moral and intellectual faculties, all at their highest.”⁷ I concur with this assessment, and profess that the initial impulse to undertake this project sprung from my long attraction to the perceived greatness of Dante’s vision. Moreover, while not downplaying the value of uncovering artistic or intellectual obscurities, I argue that the scholar’s attentions are best directed at the great works that stand in plain sight – those works that present as supreme examples of the engagement between divine inspiration and the most concentrated human energies; however the depth of these works may elude or confound us. A scholar’s attention to duty can perpetuate the objects of study, and, as well as revealing something new, perhaps recover that which may have been forgotten. Or, as it was once put before the scholars of an ancient tradition: “It is not your duty to complete the work, yet neither are you at liberty to desist from it.”

In the seven centuries since his lifetime there has been a vast and diverse accumulation of scholarly commentary on the work and thought of Dante. The *Commedia*, in particular, has become one of the foundation texts of the western tradition, one of the most studied, and, for English-speaking audiences, easily one of the most translated. It has enjoyed a reputation and influence almost beyond measure. The name of Dante is learnt at an early age by every Italian school-child, and is famous throughout the world. Scholarly interest in all things Dantean has only accelerated in recent decades and, after many centuries of neglect or disregard in the English-speaking world, Dante has, just as he forecast in the Limbo scene of the *Inferno*, come to assume a deserved pre-eminence amongst the writers of the western tradition. It is within this history of prodigious activity, which itself has become a body of study, that any new enquiry must be placed. However, the student of literature is always rewarded by consulting primary texts primarily, and while one must acknowledge the significant, contemporary body of supporting material on the question of Dante and the human form, any evaluation of such sources can only be a secondary endeavour trailing behind direct engagement with the principal works. It is in this spirit of participation that I have undertaken my research.

⁷ Ruskin, quoted in William Anderson, *Dante the Maker* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1980), p. 3.

CHAPTER ONE

LA NOSTRA EFFIGE – DANTE’S USE OF THE HUMAN FORM AND
BODILY RESURRECTION AS CENTRAL MOTIFS OF THE *COMMEDIA*.

*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.
Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

1 Corinthians 13:12

In the final, climactic moments of the *Commedia* Dante provides us with an image of “the face of God”. In the act of constructing such an image, he contemplates perhaps the highest question available to the human mind – what would it be like to come face to face with the Divine? How might we envisage this most unearthly experience in human terms, and how might we even attempt to describe this, the most indescribable of sights, to others? These questions confronted Dante as he sought a precise completion to the long and complicated odyssey of the *Commedia*. This meeting between God and pilgrim is the goal of both the poem and the poet’s spiritual journey – a moment of pure vision, a glimpse of the ineffable. Dante understood that he was approaching new and difficult ground, both poetically and theologically. There was no clear literary or artistic precedent for an image of the Divine face.¹ Doubtless he knew of the biblical admonition that a direct and clear sight of God was forbidden to mortal men.² Yet his artistic and spiritual yearnings would be unconsummated, and his unique cosmological construction incomplete, without a final delineation of the Godhead. Employing Dante’s own preference for tripartite division, we can approach the penultimate scene of the *Paradiso* in the following way.

Firstly, we have the description of the image itself:

*Ne la profunda e chiara sussistenza
de l’alto lume parvermi tre giri
di tre colori e d’una contenenza;*

¹ It is notable that in all the many attempts to represent the imagery of the *Commedia* in a visual form, no artist has provided us with a satisfactory rendering of this vision. It also remains a matter of speculation as to whether Dante himself imagined or sketched illustrations of his own poetic universe.

² Ex. 33:20 – “And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.”

*e l'un da l'altro come iri da iri
 pareo riflesso, e 'l terzo pareo foco
 che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri.*

Within the being – lucid, bright and deep –
 of that high brilliance, there appeared to me
 three circling spheres, three-coloured, one in span.
 And one, it seemed, was mirrored by the next
 twin rainbows, arc to arc. The third seemed fire,
 and breathed to first and second equally.

(*Par.* XXXIII, 115-120).³

Here is a picture of ultimate reality as consisting of the purest, finest elements of the created world, mere light and color. It is self-contained and perfect. It incorporates standard features of Dantean imagery: the employment of astronomical phenomena, his love of geometry and symmetry, his use of Biblical allusion.

Secondly, we see Dante's employment of the so-called *inexpressibility topos*, a literary device commonly used throughout the *Paradiso*, particularly in the later cantos, to convince his audience that, despite his best efforts at producing a faithful depiction of his vision, what he presents to them is but a pale imitation:

*Oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco
 al mio concetto! e questo, a quel ch' i' vidi,
 e tanto, che non basta a dicer 'poco'.
 O luce etterna che sola in te sidi,
 sola t' intendi, e da te intelletta
 e intendente tea mi e arridi!*

How short mere speaking falls, how faint against
 my own idea. And this idea, compared
 to what I saw...well, 'little' hardly squares.
 Eternal light, you sojourn in yourself alone.
 Alone, you know yourself. Known to yourself,
 you, knowing, love and smile on your own being.

(*Par.* XXXIII, 121-126).

³ All direct references from the *Commedia* are drawn from the recent Penguin Classics editions, translated by Robin Kirkpatrick, as listed in the bibliography.

Dante's typically threefold division of this experience into perception-conception-articulation provides us with an alarming paradox: that as he approaches the ultimate vision of truth, his ability to truthfully articulate this experience is at a further remove than ever from the reality of the moment. Setting aside the important poetic ironies implicit in such an exercise, we are left with the author's admission that his mental representation of the vision is far short of the truth, and his verbal mimesis of his mental conception is that much shorter again. Finally, it seems, the ineffable remains just that, and in the face of such incomprehensibility our best response can only be a humanly adequate approximation, or a retreat into defeated silence.

However, this may not be entirely so, for Dante goes on to claim that beyond his initial bafflement lies a reward for "re-looking" – the image redevelops, upon further examination, to reveal *more than was first perceived*:

*Quella circolazion che sì concetta
pareva in te come lume riflesso,
da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,
dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.*

An inter-circulation, thus conceived,
appears in you like mirrored brilliancy.
but when a while my eyes had looked this round,
deep in itself, it seemed – as painted now,
in those same hues – to show our human form.
At which, my sight was set entirely there.

(*Par. XXXIII, 127-132*).

This moment, deep into the final act of Dante's great drama, is a complete and perfected form of that which the poet has been endeavouring to perform from the very beginning – the looking at, then the looking *into*, the essential nature of Being. For Dante, the goal of every human life is to reach such a vision of the divine, which is in reality a reawakening of the divine within us, so that this vision is both a looking into another which is like no other, and a return to the source of all being that resides within ourselves.⁴

⁴ Christian Moevs, "Il Punto Che Mi Vinse" - Incarnation, Revelation, and Self-Knowledge in Dante's *Commedia*" in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, eds. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 271.

The Dantean scholar is similarly challenged to imitate this act by undertaking their own re-looking into the depths and complexities of a composition that is the work of human hands yet contains the marks of divine inspiration and purpose. What might be seen, what could be recognised, when a sustained examination is brought to bear upon the remarkable artefact we call the *Divine Comedy*? The poem can be read as a series of personal recognitions, where Dante sets before us a sequence of meetings between himself (as “pilgrim in the story”) and the various characters that populate his imaginary world. Many of these recognitions are confronting or perplexing (and some, we might think, are wholly expected). Yet here in this final moment of identification, Dante invites the reader to consider the possibility that, granted the privilege to stare deeply within the sheer “otherness” of the face of God, we will see, as a correction to our human misconceptions, a return to something familiar: an image of *la nostra effige* – our human form. Within the ineffable countenance of the Divine Being lies something as everyday as the face of another, and, by extension, Dante would have us reflect upon the possibility that in every other is an image of the Divine. In this final image Dante seals his consistent demonstration of his ethical and poetic commitment to upholding and celebrating the essential unity, centrality and immortality of the human being. This thesis will propose a new way of reading and understanding the *Commedia*, using the poet’s declared commitment to *la nostra effige* as a controlling and centralising image upon which an entire schema of interpretation can be constructed. The reader is here invited to see *la nostra effige*, and specifically the traditional tripartite arrangement of the human body, as an allegorical motif that underpins a reading of the *Commedia* as a journey through the human body.

The appearance of a human image within Dante’s arrangement of triune circles of light is a reflection of the incarnate Christ, the Second Person of the Christian trinity. In following established Christian doctrine, Dante presents a symbolic confirmation of the Incarnation – God entering the temporal world in a human embodiment – as the central fact of Christianity and “the pivotal concept around which Christian theology is organized.”⁵ At no point in his work do we find Dante undertaking any extensive or systematic treatment of the formal doctrine of the Incarnation (since, generally speaking, the poem is not an overtly theological work), yet there is little doubt that his “christological vision of the world and history, which places Christ at the center of time” serves as a regular pointer to the importance of the

⁵ Richard H. Lansing and Teodolinda Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 2000), p. 508.

Incarnation to his many poetic and philosophical projects.⁶ While taking centuries to develop, by the Middle Ages the formal doctrine of the Incarnation was established as a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith. Orthodox belief held that Christ, as second person of the Godhead, possessed two natures, divine and human; entered into a temporal existence; experienced a mortal death; and was resurrected and ascended in a bodily form that was essentially that into which he was incarnated. These central facts of the faith resulted in new conceptions of human experience – a reaffirmation of the essential goodness of the human body and the created order in which it existed. In this way, the body of Christ became *the body* by which all other bodies were to be understood. In his reinstatement of the human body to its proper supremacy in the arrangement of a divinely-ordained order, Dante was following a long tradition that upheld the centrality of human embodiment, despite the fact that the Catholic Church, following the Orthodox and Judaic traditions before it, had yet to produce a defined doctrine on the nature of the human person.⁷

Although the new tenets of the Christian faith proposed a radical move away from classical Greek thought on the nature of the human body-soul complex, there were within the Greek world two important ideas which the Christian worldview came to incorporate in its understanding of the human form. These ideas found their fullest expression in the cosmological dialogue of Plato, the *Timaeus*, a work which was highly influential not only in the Greek world but also (possibly because it was the only work of Plato's available, in an abridged Latin translation, within the developing world of western Christendom) came to be regarded as largely representative of Greek thought.⁸ As shall be later examined, both these concepts underpin Dante's construction of the *Commedia* in regard to two key elements: the architectural structure of the poem and the symbolic representations of the human form that serve to complement that architecture.

The first of these ideas was that the best understanding of the cosmos could be attained by seeing it as an enlarged image of the human form, and, conversely, that the human form is a miniaturised version of the cosmos. The cosmos is a living being, endowed by its creator

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Kallistos Ware, "My Helper and My Enemy": The Body in Greek Christianity" in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 90-91.

⁸ Andrew Louth, "the Body in Western Catholic Christianity" in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 111.

with soul and intelligence.⁹ Man is both a part of the cosmos and an encapsulation of it. Man is within the universe, but the universe is also contained within Man. The Platonic cosmological model also proposed that the visible world must be constructed after an invisible pattern that existed in the mind of its divine maker. This found easy accord in Christian cosmologies, insofar as the account of creation as recorded in Genesis also demonstrates a divine originator who creates “in his own image”.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Platonic model also emphasised that Man is a composite entity. He is possessed of an animal embodiment like all other living things, but also capable of rational operations that set him apart from creation generally.¹¹ In a Christian interpretation, man is also a composite being, in that he is composed of all the various “elements” of the universe in his physical embodiment, but also possesses the rationality and immortality that belongs to the angels. Possessed of both forms of existence, he is a “cross-section of being.”¹²

The second idea drawn from the *Timaeus* was that the cosmos, and therefore the human body, was constructed of four basic elements (and a fifth, mysterious element, the *quintessence*) which were designed to exist in harmonious proportion to one another. It was a simple step for the Christian thinker to assimilate this idea from Plato’s work, since the Genesis account of creation seemed to confirm that the basic “stuff” of the universe was also the material by which God created Man. The notion of rightness in the physical world, and particularly the issue of the physical health of the human body, was best understood as a matter of balance between the constituent elements of creation, and their counterparts – the four “humours” of the body, which had their own forces and domains within the body. These humours, the balance of each and the interplay between them, gave medieval Man his “complexion” or “temperament”.¹³ This schema became commonplace throughout the Latin Middle Ages, and provided people with an accessible means by which they might understand the workings

⁹ See Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Henry Desmond Pritchard Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 30-31, pp. 42-43.

¹⁰ Gen. 1:27.

¹¹ See Plato, *Timaeus*, 40, pp. 55-56.

¹² Clive Staples Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 153. These ideas found their finest Christian formulation in the neoplatonist work of the 7th century theologian, Maximus the Confessor. Maximus constructed an understanding of man as a microcosm who contained and thereby reflected the order and workings of the created universe. But he also added a Christological element by declaring that man, having two natures and two wills, was called on to be a mediator, made in God’s image, whose task and responsibility it is to reconcile the spiritual and the material into a homogenous unity within our own person. In this view, then, the body was seen as highly symbolic yet also carrying an important practical function. See *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003). For a contemplation of the possible links between the thought of Maximus and the work of Dante, see Appendix, pp. 259-264.

¹³ Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, pp. 170-171.

of their own bodies; and it survived, in its various forms, until the arrival of modern medicine in the West.¹⁴

There were, however, two important points on which Christian scholars could find no point of agreement with Plato's cosmology – the eternal status of the Universe, since the scriptures explicitly describe both the deliberate creation and destruction of the physical world; and the notion of the transmigration of souls, since the promise of eternal salvation (or, indeed, damnation) is based on the continuance of the individual soul in the afterlife and its eventual reunification with its earthly body.

To return to the Christian perspective, it can be seen that Dante inherits long-standing scriptural and theological traditions concerning the proper use for, and understanding of, the human body. A short survey of these traditions indicates that he stood squarely within their transmission. The Christian scriptures do not offer us any instance of a human being existing in anything other than an embodied form, even in the afterlife.¹⁵ The writings of the Old Testament consistently affirm the notion that the human complex is strictly non-dualist. That is, there is no sense of a joining of two separate and distinct entities, body and soul, but a complete form that is both body and soul, and is clearly psychosomatic in behaviour. In later writings, the tentative approaches to the idea of the resurrection of the human person are described in terms of the physical re-birth of the body, not an "escape" of the immortal soul into an ethereal realm.¹⁶ Further, there is no sense of the pre-existence of human souls, or the transmigration of them from one human body to another.¹⁷

In the New Testament, the unified, non-dualist view of the human person is re-affirmed, extended, and completed, although there are moments that suggest a clearer distinction in the nature and operation of the two basic constituents of the person.¹⁸ However, the core message of Christianity is that of a new understanding of God and man, based on the idea of

¹⁴ Louth, "the Body in Western Catholic Christianity" in *Religion and the Body*, p. 112.

¹⁵ But note a certain ambiguity in Paul's description of his vision in 2 Cor. 12:2, which Dante will appear to imitate in the opening canto of the *Paradiso*.

¹⁶ See, for example Is. 26:19 – "Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise"; Dan. 12:2 – "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

¹⁷ Ware, "My Helper and My Enemy": The Body in Greek Christianity" in *Religion and the Body*, p. 91.

¹⁸ See Mt. 10:28 – "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot fill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." 1 Thess. 5.23 – "...May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

physical embodiment. The undeniable value of the human body is underscored by the central fact on which the new faith was grounded – God presenting himself to mankind in the incarnation, human life, and bodily resurrection of the person of Christ. The narratives of the gospel consistently remark upon the real, human, earthly physicality of Christ's life. He was brought into the world through a real human mother, he experienced the sensations of the human body, he suffered real pain and died a human death. Further, the gospels claim that Christ's resurrection was not into some apparitional form, but into that of a tangible body. Salvation, far from being an intellectual exercise or an escape into immateriality, is made visible in the historical reality of a real human life, fully embodied, and declared to be both fully human and yet, mysteriously, fully divine.¹⁹ The New Testament also re-affirms the principle that one can sin with the body. Christ's teachings, and the pastoral admonitions of St. Paul, both reprove against particularly "bodily" transgressions such as gluttony, homosexuality and fornication.

The writings of St. Paul continue to emphasise the essential unity, divinity and goodness of the human person. The body, according to Paul, is not to be despised but is worthy of our high regard, and should be maintained as a vehicle for holiness. Paul develops a theology which is strongly unitary, and in which the body is to be offered as part of the believer's discipleship.²⁰ In his first epistle to the church at Corinth he brings to the human body generally, and to the body of Christ in particular, a new, multi-dimensional meaning. Firstly, he exhorts believers to forsake sexual immorality by inviting them to see their own bodies as being comparable to a temple, which should be sanctified.²¹ The analogy, however obvious, is apt, for the temple is constructed in imitation of the cosmos and contains within it a representation of the "body" of the created order, which in itself is essentially good. Likewise, the body is to be regarded as good and holy, and should be reserved for the purposes for which it is especially created. Paul then goes on to develop the imagery of the "body of Christ". This phrase has firstly a literal meaning, as it applies to the actual bodily person of Jesus Christ as declared by the gospels, and Paul reiterates these claims (with an

¹⁹ Ware, "'My Helper and My Enemy': The Body in Greek Christianity" in *Religion and the Body*, p. 92.

²⁰ See Romans 12:1-2 – "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will."

²¹ 1 Cor 6:19-20 – "Do you now know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honour God with your body."

added personal element) as the foreground for his declaration of the resurrection of the dead.²² He also extends the meaning of this term “body of Christ” to include both the bread received in the Eucharistic rite, and the gathering of the believers into an ecclesial group. He refers to the Eucharist in this way: “And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?”²³, in a direct repetition of Christ’s own declaration at the Last Supper.²⁴ He employs the physical characteristics of the human body, in an analogy of diversity contained within unified harmony, when describing the many “members” of the church as a social unit.²⁵ These three uses of the term “body” are operative at differing levels, yet are interconnected in Paul’s theology. It is through the bringing of our own bodies to the communal gathering of believers that they are enjoined, through the centralising and unifying ritual of a communal meal which is itself a “body”, that allows the individual to belong to a new corporate entity.²⁶

In addition to this imagery, the practice of worship in Christianity, as with other traditions, consistently involved the use of one’s body. A range of bodily actions are routinely involved in expressing the inner, spiritual state of the believer. The position of body in prayer; the marking of the body with the sign of the cross; the rituals of baptism and anointing; the participation in the Eucharist; the laying on of hands; prostrations; fasting; sexual abstinence – all these were the outward expressions by which an individual could express and make known their adherence to the faith.²⁷ Thus the body, with all its many postures and nuanced gestures, became a symbolic entity, or key, in which the mysteries of the faith, as well as its many practicalities, could find their expression and meaning.

Finally, in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul sets out the fundamental doctrine of bodily resurrection, which is the foundation for the believer’s hope of eternal life enjoyed in a fully restored but also completely transfigured physical form designed for a new kind of post-mortem

²² 1 Cor. 15:3-8 – “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

²³ 1 Cor. 10:16.

²⁴ See Mt. 26:26.

²⁵ See 1 Cor. 12:12-31.

²⁶ Ware, “My Helper and My Enemy’: The Body in Greek Christianity” in *Religion and the Body*, p. 94.

²⁷ Note for example Dante’s interest in the ritualised orientation and movement of the body in prayer, at *Pur.* 8:10-12 – “*Ella guinse e levò ambo le palme, / ficcando li occhi verso l’oriente, / come dicesse a Dio: ‘D’altro non calme.’*” (“This soul, first, joined his palms then lifted them, / eyes fixed towards the orient, as though / to say to God: ‘For nothing else I care’”).

existence, based on the historical evidence of the bodily resurrection of Christ. If there was in fact no rising from the grave, Paul says to his brethren, then he can have no assurance that his, or our, salvation has been accomplished, and he is left to face both the futility of his own preaching and the apparent hopelessness of the body's mortality. It is this remarkable and distinctive idea that set the early church apart from the world of Greek thought in which it arose. Indeed, the radicalism of bodily resurrection quickly became a subject of contempt within the world of Greek thought into which it was introduced.²⁸ For the pagan, the body was generally regarded as a hindrance to the pursuit of true goods, spiritual and intellectual, and they looked for a life after death in terms of the immortality only of the soul, rejecting the notions of embodiment or reunification.

In all of this we can see the origins of Dante's treatment of the human form. Specifically, it can be shown that Dante holds firmly to the orthodox doctrine, instituted by St. Paul, of the transformative resurrection of the human body as the foundation on which the architectural and moral landscape of his poetic experimentations are grounded, particularly in the *Commedia*. The human body is the central fact of Dante's theological and poetic world, and is the prime metaphor by which he would seek to measure the nature of all things. For this poet, the broken, inverted or incomplete body always symbolises a distortion of the divinely-created order. Conversely, the body kept whole and upright, whether the earthly human form or the heavenly body, is the primary image of rightness manifested. Dante is committed to the preservation of *unity* in all its manifestations and meanings, and his work demonstrates a commitment to the idea of the complete indestructibility of the human complex. In the more theological elements of his poetic creation, this commitment to unity overcomes the legacy of knotty practical considerations surrounding the concept of resurrection that Dante had inherited from the scholastic tradition.²⁹ Traditional arguments regarding the doctrine of resurrection focussed on matters of materiality and vocabulary, so that images of resurrection tended towards reconstitution rather than transcendence. Dante moves away from this stream of thinking, preferring to focus on issues surrounding the resurrection of the body in terms of wholeness, completeness and reintegration.³⁰ It can be fairly stated that one of Dante's crucial projects within the *Commedia* was to take the question of the body's permanence well

²⁸ Note the mockery of Paul's preaching on the subject before the Areopagus in Athens, in Acts 17:16-34.

²⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, Lectures on the History of Religions New Ser., No. 15 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 298-309.

³⁰ Rachel Jacoff, "'Our Bodies, Our Selves': The Body in the *Commedia*" in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and Its Aftermath: Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, eds. John Freccero, Dana E. Stewart, and Alison Cornish (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), pp. 119-121.

beyond mere intellectual argument. By force of imagery and, I will say, a distinct allegorical architecture, he elevates the issue to that of metaphysical speculation and poetic wonderment.

It is remarkable that in what purports to be an account of an otherworldly journey, the *Commedia* is consistently attentive to the bodiliness of its characters. The souls are still somehow embodied in the shade-bodies granted to them as part of their post-earthly continuance. They have sensate bodies that experience real pain: the punishments in Hell, and penances in Purgatory, while having strong psychological components, are never merely so. All in Hell are physically tortured or tormented, while all in Purgatory are made to physically labour or otherwise subject their bodies to a regime of purgation.³¹ Only in the *Paradiso* does Dante suggest that the human forms we “see” have approached a rarefied version of their former selves. Yet there remains a pressing tension throughout the *Commedia*, brought about by the representational finesse with which Dante chooses to portray the dead. The author’s own claim is that “the subject, then, of the whole work, taken according to the letter alone, is simply a consideration of the state of souls after death; for from and around this the action of the whole work turneth.”³² The Dantean scholar John Freccero has called this a “dazzling reversibility”: the apparent inseparability of body and soul, theologically speaking, is given an exact reversal in Dante’s poetics - “if one wishes to represent a soul, one has no choice but to represent it as a body, while a body, if it is alive, must be represented by some principle of animation which is indistinguishable from what we mean by the soul.”³³

In addition, Dante is concerned to assert an understanding of human personhood as being fundamentally grounded in its earthly embodiment. Any intellectual construct of the human form must, at some point, decide upon taking either a generally dualist or generally hylomorphic approach. Such a decision will prove highly influential in our attitude towards, and interpretation of, poetic or theological texts, as well as our overall ethical position and

³¹ It is these “punishments” and “labours” that often provoke such fascination and disgust in contemporary readers, since in our own time corporeal punishment has been eliminated from our systems of personal correction. See John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 105-106.

³² Dante’s letter to Lord Can Grande della Scala, para. 8, in Charles Sterrett Latham, ed. *A Translation of Dante’s Eleven Letters* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), p. 195.

³³ John Freccero, “Infernal Irony” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 102.

personal modes of behaviour.³⁴ Dante is clearly non-dualist in his approach to matters of human corporeality (despite the often strong neoplatonist strains that inform much of the structure and symbolism of the *Paradiso*), and he is prepared to stake out his position on such issues, often in unanticipated ways, as being central to his theological and creative claims. He endeavours to move away from the theological controversies and uncertainties of the past to produce a statement of renewed confidence in the essential unity and indestructibility of the human complex, body and soul, while simultaneously signalling a new way of looking at what we now regard as the “psychological” aspects of the human person. To Dante, the body *is* the person, for he follows the broadly Aristotelian model which proposes that the body does not “contain” a soul, with the two entities in tension with one another, but that the soul is the omnipresent animating force that operates upon, and is in its turn affected by, the workings of the body.³⁵ To Dante, it simply made no sense to conceive of the human person as either a disembodied soul or a soulless body. Body and soul are designed for, and cannot be said to properly exist without, the other. Dante’s human form, then, is best understood as a subtle and complex entity of psychosomatic interplays and responses. With a foundation of Christian theology, derived from the essential unity of the human being as evinced in the examples of holy scripture, Dante completes his model of the human body as a form that has divine origins and in which its essential spirit is, in its natural state, inextricable from its matter. It may surprise Dante’s modern audiences, influenced by contemporary, secular models of human existence, that even in the blissful realms of the saved in the *Paradiso*, the state of being eternally and perfectly beatified as a disembodied soul is not enough for its denizens – as shall be seen, they demonstrate an urgent and intense longing for the return of their earthly bodies as necessary for their final consummation.³⁶

Further, Dante demonstrates a profound and sustained interest in the subtle, symbolic meanings that can be drawn from the bodies of individual human beings. The study of Man is a legitimate area of enquiry, perfectly concomitant with his science – that is, his desire for rational investigation into the workings of the natural order. The *Commedia* is marked, at almost every moment, by Dante’s concentrated attention upon the multitudinous appearances, behaviours, and symbolic possibilities of the human form. He is deeply concerned with the

³⁴ Robin Kirkpatrick, “Dante and the Body” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 239

³⁵ For a detailed assessment of Dante’s ideas of the operational relationship between body and soul, see Patrick Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante’s Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), passim.

³⁶ See *Par.* 14:34-66.

particularity of the person, developing a sense of the self in each finely drawn character that has led him to be described as the first modern author. His great poem teems with references to bodily movement, gesture, and expression; and the poet shows an intense interest in the subtly psychosomatic relationships that can be deftly elicited between the external aspect and the inward condition of the individual. To Dante, the perceptible workings of body and soul are inextricably linked – the exterior particularities of the body give expression to the inner person.

Dante also clearly withdraws from the negative ideals of the Christian hermetic tradition, or those who advocated extreme asceticism. He shows little regard for those streams of Christianity that sought to despise or maltreat the human body, or to close oneself off from the world. The human life is to be lived through the body, and should seek its fullest expression in proper and meaningful exchanges with the bodies of others. In Dante's view of paradise the joy of looking upon the joyful faces of others will be an essential element of one's beatific experience. Here he follows the Augustinian tradition that sought to move away from the concept of the world as inherently evil, and restated the essential goodness of the natural order. Dante upholds the body not only as the form in which God chose to incarnate himself but as the very paragon of that natural order. A traditionalist commentator confirms this idea in stating: "The form of Man, made in the image of God, exhibits something unlimited and perfect."³⁷ The human body, in this traditional understanding, is the best physical form that there could be (or "the finest expression of the material world"³⁸), the primary and supreme means by which the rational order of the physical universe could be understood, and, as this thesis will demonstrate, the best metaphor by which man may ingather images of the world unto himself. The human body is the most complete and primal of all symbols.³⁹ The human form alone is granted the special privileges of both rationality and immortality, and its beauty is derived from the especial nature of its form.⁴⁰

Whilst this analysis of Dante's thought concentrates upon his *Commedia*, it is worth noting briefly how his attitudes towards the human body are prefaced in his minor works. In the third treatise of the *Convivio* Dante is building a commentary on the arrangement and purpose

³⁷ Frithjof Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human: Survey of Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1982), p. 87.

³⁸ Robin Kirkpatrick, introduction to *Inferno*, (London: Penguin, 2006), p. xxxi.

³⁹ Rodney Blackhurst, *Primordial Alchemy & Modern Religion: Essays on Traditional Cosmology* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2008), p. 65.

⁴⁰ Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human: Survey of Metaphysics and Epistemology*, p. 92.

of the various faculties of the human complex, when he compares man's natural tendency to desire its native "soil" to the behaviour of plants:

Because of the second nature, of the mixed body, it loves the place of its generation, and even the time; and therefore each one naturally is of more power in his own place and in his own time than in any other.⁴¹

That is, despite being incarnated souls we are nevertheless inextricably bound to the condition of earthly embodiment, and humans are designed for, indeed are innately driven towards, seeking out the best conditions in which to fulfil their potentialities. The good things of the created order, and the inherent goodness of the human body, invite us (within properly ordered and appropriate limits) to fully participate in and enjoy such goods. The approach to such participation, Dante claims, is best made, or perhaps can *only* be made, through those established means – lineage, liturgy, citizenship, language – which are already prepared for us. In practical terms this equates to remaining in the native city-state, and culture, into which one is born.⁴² The body is constructed of that which also constitutes the living cosmos in which it lives and moves, and therefore right living in an embodied form is a matter of correct internal balance, and harmonisation with what we commonly label our "environment". Therefore the body finds its most natural, and consequently its best, operation when it discovers the particular fulfilment that accords with its nature, when it accomplishes the unique possibilities granted by the time and place into which it is born.⁴³

⁴¹ *Convivio*, 3.3.

⁴² These sentiments will find a later echo in the *Paradiso*, Canto VIII, where Dante meets the French prince Charles Martel. Amid a general discussion of the nature of providence as it may affect the patterns of noble heredity, Charles states that a limited realisation of one's human possibilities will be the inevitable outcome of personal displacement. See *Par.* 8:138-141 – "*un corollario voglio che t'ammanti. / Sempre natura, se fortuna trova / discorde a sé, com' ogne altra semente / fuor di sua region, fa mala prova.*" ("I'd have you robed in this corollary: / Like any seed not sown in native soil, / nature, on finding fortune out of tune, / will always give poor proof of what it is.")

⁴³ We should recall that the name of Florence means "the flowering place", and Dante as political exile is like a plant that, deprived of its native conditions, is struggling to fulfil his potential as a human being. With this symbolism in mind, it is apposite that Dante should depict the Empyrean, the seat of the blessed where all human potentials are fully realised, as an enormous rose. Dante gives this broadly Aristotelian idea of *telos* a particular Christian overlay – it is the workings of Divine providence that drive the natural processes of the material world; and God, through such providence, desires that the goodness inherent in existence should be pursued by those he has created. In *Inferno* XIII, Dante demonstrates his belief in the essential goodness of the material world, and the human body within it, by bracketing together in one circle of punishment, as sinners against nature, both the suicides (wasters of human life) and the profligates (wasters of the world's material goods). Of course, such a view of the relationship between Man and Nature adds a particularly galling flavour to Dante's experience as a political exile, as though he was a plant uprooted and derived of its requisite nutriment. In all of this Dante may have been mindful of the Platonic idea of *autochthony*, in which a right ordering of society, and thereby the maximisation of man's ultimate good, may be derived from both the cultivation of religious practice that attends to the rhythm of the cosmos as it surrounds us, and the proper ordering of the procedures for human procreation so that all childbirth aligns with the cyclical patterns of the

In the *Convivio*, in a digression amid a longer discussion of the state of his own soul as it was affected by a vision of Beatrice, Dante affirms his abhorrence for any notions of a non-unified, perishable human complex, particularly as it may involve denial of the immortality of the soul. He says:

For proposition I say that, amongst all the bestialities, that is the most foolish, the most vile, and most damnable which believes no other life to be after this life; wherefore, if we turn over all books, whether of philosophers or of the other wise writers, all agree in this, that in us there is some everlasting principle...This each of the Poets who have spoken according to the faith of the Gentiles seems to desire; this the law seems to desire, among Jews, Saracens, and Tartars, and all other people who live according to some civil law.⁴⁴

That there is some indestructible but non-corporeal component of the person, Dante declares, is so strongly imbedded in our understanding of ourselves that it exists as a universal principle across all cultures and religions. But moments in the *Inferno* make evident that Dante was not given over to any intimations of the unity of religions. Yet despite introducing his adherence to Christian doctrine as perhaps a step back from any accusation of religious universalism, he fails to mention the very thing that distinguishes the Christian ideal of immortality from its pagan influences – namely, the complete resurrection of the body at the Last Judgement. The target of this refutation is the pagan philosophical school of Epicureanism, which held among its tenets a denial of the immortality of the soul. Later in the *Convivio* Dante gives a neutral summary of Epicurus' philosophy as it pertains to the pursuit of happiness as the end goal of human existence,⁴⁵ and goes on to dismiss as false these opinions in preference to those of the Aristotelian conceptions of *telos*, the true end of

seasons. (For the idea of Man as a "man-plant" see *Timaeus* 91E.) In his extended meeting with Cacciaguida, which not coincidentally occurs in the "middle" of the *Paradiso*, Dante draws upon the simile of the "natural man" as being akin to a native plant. See *Par.* 15:48, 88-89; 16:22. That Dante sees love of native land as one of the strongest of human emotions is evinced even in *Inferno*. In the case of the gluttonous Ciacco in Canto VI, this cold and unfeeling mass of a person who has now been "unmade" can still give voice to his longings for home. Cf. *Inf.* 6:88-90. See also the extended speech of Sordello of Mantua, in *Pur.* 7:87-136, in which he uses the analogy of the man-plant. Dante is clearly no world-hater, and no despiser of the body: the things of this world are inherently good and worthy of our attention and nurturance, and the right use of our physical gifts will produce much pleasure and satisfaction. Indeed, it is his minutely focussed observance of the physical, the "ordinariness" of the everyday, as it were, that often propels his intellectual concerns. When Dante is granted a description of the "perfect city" by his ancestor Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* XVI it is not some idealised utopia, but the peaceful city of Florence, where the citizenry are free to participate in the ordinary but completely satisfying communal rituals of work, home and family. (See *Par.* 15:97-132).

⁴⁴ *Convivio*, 2.9.

⁴⁵ *Convivio*, 4.6: "Other philosophers there were who saw and believed otherwise; and of these the first and chief was a philosopher, who was named Epicurus, who, seeing that each animal as soon as it is born is as it were directed by Nature to its right end, which shuns pain and seeks for pleasure, said that this end or aim of ours was enjoyment."

man.⁴⁶ However, these minor criticisms of Epicureanism's denial of immortality are but a preview of the full condemnatory treatment he delivers in *Inferno*.

In *De Monarchia*, Dante makes another philosophical “move” in allowing the structure and purpose of human corporeality to take on a deliberately political purpose. The foundational idea of this work was that political justice was best served when man was placed under two distinct rulers, the Pontiff and the Prince, each with its own particular and mutually exclusive sphere of power and responsibility. Dante again turns to the unicity of the human form as a potent wellspring of metaphor, and it provides him with an allegorical model of civic and religious organisation, as set out in Book Three of the work.⁴⁷ Man has two components, body and soul, and is therefore destined to experience two modes of life – the earthly and the eternal. That he should find the highest happiness in both depends upon the just and proper execution of power by both the temporal and spiritual authority. Dante's argument, however, rests not merely upon a simple analogy based on the arrangement of the human constitution, but on the divine origins of this arrangement. Since God created man to be an intermediate being composed of two natures, in Dante's concluding argument he can appeal to the highest authority of all.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Convivio*, 4.22: “Wherefore, since it is our final rest for which we live and labour as we can, most useful and most necessary it is to see this mark in order to aim at it the bow of this our work. And it is most essential to make it inviting to those who do not see the mark when simply pointed out. Leaving alone, then, the opinion which Epicurus the philosopher had concerning it, and that which Zeno likewise had, I intend to come summarily to the true opinion of Aristotle and of the other Peripatetics.”

⁴⁷ *De Monarchia*, 3.16: “In order to grasp this it must be realized that man is unique amongst all beings in linking corruptible things with those that are incorruptible; hence the philosophers rightly liken him to the line of the horizon which is the meeting-place of two hemispheres. For if man is considered according to his essential constituents, that is, his soul and body, he is corruptible in respect of one, the body, but incorruptible in respect of the other, the soul. Thus in the second book of the *De Anima* the Philosopher rightly says of the incorruptible constituent of man: “and this alone, being eternal, is capable of separating itself from the corruptible world.” Therefore man is, so to say, a middle-term between corruptible and incorruptible things, and since every middle-term participates in the nature of the extremes which it unites, man must participate in these two natures. And since every nature is ordered towards some ultimate goal, it follows that man's ultimate goal is twofold – because since man is the only being sharing in both corruptibility and incorruptibility he is the only being who is ordered towards two ultimate goals. One of these constitutes his goal in so far as he is corruptible and the other in so far as he is incorruptible.”

⁴⁸ *De Monarchia*, 3.16: “This explains why two guides have been appointed for man to lead him to his twofold goal: there is the Supreme Pontiff who is to lead mankind to eternal life in accordance with revelation; and there is the Emperor who, in accordance with philosophical teaching, is to lead mankind to temporal happiness...Furthermore, since the condition of this world has to harmonize with the movements of the heavens, it is necessary for the protector of this world to receive knowledge of the appropriate conditions directly from the One who sees the whole course of the heavens at a glance; only then can he apply the principles of liberty and peace at the appropriate times and places...If this is so, then God alone elects and confirms the Emperor, since God has no superior.”

These excerpts from Dante's minor works demonstrate a consistency of approach to these matters, yet it is, as always, in the *Commedia* that we may ultimately locate the fully developed expressions of the poet's intellectual pursuits. At one level the entire poem can be read as a testament to the miraculous nature of man's indestructibility, since it purports to show nothing less than the state human beings will inhabit in eternity. Despite the multiplicity of forms in which Dante chooses to portray the individual in the afterworld as an essential expression of their spiritual state and hence the workings of Divine justice, they are, except in one particular instance which will be later considered, nevertheless a recognisable, substantial continuation of their earthly selves. It is a feature of Dante's imaginary world that he should choose to populate it not with the archetypal figures of existent medieval allegories, such as the immensely popular and influential *Roman de la Rose*, but with an extensive catalogue of real, historical figures, many of whom were known personally to the author and his contemporary audience.⁴⁹ This emphasis on the particularity of individual persons has the effect of making real an imaginary world, but also attests to the enduring nature of its inhabitants. Indeed, though the actual, historical personages that Dante describes are dead, such are the author's powers of poetic representation that the reader is at once confounded and impressed at their unmistakeable "aliveness". It is as though a journey through the portal of death serves to amplify their essential human qualities, not deaden them, as we might expect. Dante's work affirms that the human form, and an individual life, has a perpetual value that even death cannot efface. He persistently emphasises that the human form is essentially indestructible by creating poetic representations of individuals who survive in full individuation beyond the grave to show an unmistakeable "continuity of self."⁵⁰

As a primary example, his presentation of the shade-bodies in the *Purgatorio* shows that they are clearly a recognisable, individual continuance of the earthly person.⁵¹ The journey through the realms of Purgatory is marked by an increasing interest in the true nature of the

⁴⁹ It should be noted that Dante also places within his world a selection of famous fictional characters, but does so only in the *Inferno*, as if it was simpler to provide representative figures for vice rather than virtue. In any case, these references are made with such assuredness and brevity that the reader barely has need to stop and consider such inclusions. As a point of distinction, they do not engage with Dante-pilgrim as he makes his journey through *Inferno* but stand as indicative figures that assist in "filling out" the respective circles of Hell. The one striking exception to this is Ulysses, as portrayed in *Inferno* XXVI, whose presence and interaction with Dante carries deliberate significance.

⁵⁰ Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, pp. 307-308.

⁵¹ See *Pur.* 25:88-90 – "*Tosto che loco lì la circunscrive, / la virtù formativa raggia intorno / così e quanto ne le membra vive.*" ("As soon as it is circumscribed by place, / the power that forms it radiates around / in size and shape as in its living limbs.")

shade-bodies, in Dante's own earthly corporeality as it compares with those around him, and in the ways in which the bodily experiences of the penitents shape their inner state. *Purgatorio* contains a series of what have been called "body-stories" – representative bodies, such as the wounded body of Manfred in Canto III, and the rigid body of Bonconte da Montefeltro in Canto IV, are used by Dante to illustrate the relationship between exterior appearance and inner conviction.⁵² Furthermore, the body of Dante as pilgrim is progressively shaped and transformed, inscribed and purified, and finally perfected, so that the entire middle part of the poem can be read as a hymn to the perfectability of the human body as it may be made so by the workings of divine grace.⁵³ Here Dante makes plain his belief in the irreducibility of the human form, and confirms the positive nature of physical embodiment as a means by which the soul can fully express itself. Far from being a prison, the body is, in this reading, the proper home of the soul. Nor, in this understanding, is soul to be seen as a stripping away or refinement of "person" to purest elements, but a guarantor of individuality.

This argument for the nobility of the body as the house of the soul is allowed a final example in the *Purgatorio*. In Canto XXXI Dante is forced into a bitter confession before his beloved, Beatrice. He endures further castigation, downcast and dumb, until finally being asked to raise his eyes unto her. When he does so, the result is thus:

...e le mie luci, ancor poco sicure,
vider Beatrice volta in su la fiera

⁵² See Freccero, "Manfred's Wounds and the Poetics of the *Purgatorio*" in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 195-208; Kirkpatrick, "Dante and the Body" in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, 246-248.

⁵³ This concern over the bodiliness of human experience finds its doctrinal high point in the famous "embryology lesson" in *Purgatorio* XXV. The context for this set-piece is, as in the *Inferno*, the circle of the gluttonous, and is precipitated by a question concerning the corporeal sensations, or otherwise, as they might be experienced by the shade-bodies in Purgatory: how can people who have no apparent need of physical nourishment yet experience the pains of hunger? (*Pur.* 25:34-108.) The answer, delivered by the Roman poet Statius, sets forth Dante's essentially Galenic physiology of the creation of human creatures. The mixing of male and female sperm begets the generation of a human foetus, into which Gods breathes a uniquely created, rational soul, that will govern the other spirits, sensitive and vegetative, of its corporeal nature. To illustrate his argument, Dante employs the metaphor of the heat of the sun forming the vital and irreducible part of wine, when joined with the base material of the juice of the grape. This passage goes on to explain that at the expiration of the physical body, the soul irradiates the air around it and thus creates a "shade-body" that in almost all respects resembles that of the earthly body (see *Pur.* 25:34-108). The soul, then, is "body-shaped" and serves as an "index of its affective life" (Jacoff, "'Our Bodies, Our Selves': The Body in the *Commedia*" in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and Its Aftermath: Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, p. 130.) See *Pur.* 25: 103-108 – "*Quindi parliamo e quindi ridiam noi; / quindi facciam le lagrime e 'sospiri / che per lo monte aver sentiti puoi. / Secondo che ci affliggono I disiri / e li altri affetti, l'ombra si figura, / e quest' é la cagion di che tu miri.*" ("And that is how we speak and how we laugh, / and how we form our tears and all those sighs / that you may well have heard around this hill. / As our desires and other feelings form, / the shade accordingly configures them, / and that's the cause of what you wonder at.")

*ch'è sola una persona in due nature.
Sotto 'l suo velo e oltre la rivera
vincer pariemi più sé stessa antica,
vincer che l'altre qui, quand' ella c'era.*

Those lights of mine, still very far from sure,
Saw Beatrice turn towards the beast,
being two natures and, in person, one.
Beneath her veil, beyond the flowing stream,
she overcame, it seemed, what once she'd been,
when once, as here, she overcame all women.

(*Pur. XXXI, 79-84*).

The telescoping effect of Dante's description is to place his beloved at a point well beyond the usual range of observation, and thereby memory, and therefore beyond the reach of language. This placing of a great remove between the poet and his subject looks forward to, and will form the basis of, Dante's apologetic disclaimer at the opening of *Paradiso*, where he freely admits to a compounded failing of perception, memory and language before the intense, otherworldly experiences of the celestial spheres.⁵⁴ This moment in the *Purgatorio* also specifically previews the theme, explored to its full extent in *Paradiso*, of the perfection of the human person when completely transformed by divine grace. For Dante claims that in this new vision of Beatrice, a woman he has previously regarded as more beautiful than all other women, she is that much more beautiful again than she appeared in her earthly embodiment. That is, the resurrected body of this already "perfect" person is now supra-perfected in Heaven, for Beatrice is a resident of the celestial realm and has descended to Purgatory specifically to reveal herself to Dante in this way. This new image of perfection beyond earthly imagining indicates the nature of embodiment in the Heaven to which Dante and Beatrice will soon enter, and it will be fully developed by Dante in the heavenly court of the wise philosophers. But here Dante allows a further development by framing this moment in terms of Beatrice's own line of vision, for she looks not at Dante but the mythological griffin which forms part of the divine procession in the Earthly Paradise. Dante allows us to imagine that he sees the griffin reflected in Beatrice's eyes, as though in this looking the true nature of Beatrice's re-incarnated form can be glimpsed. The purpose of the griffin, a creature "being two natures and, in person, one" is to represent in Christian eschatology the figure of the ascended, triumphant Christ, and in Dante's repetition of the word "*vincer*" –

⁵⁴ *Par. 1:7-12* – "*perché appressando sé al suo disire, / nostro intelletto sì profonda tanto, / che dietro la memoria non può ire.*" ("For, drawing near to what it most desires, / our intellect so sinks into the deep / no memory can follow it that far.")

“overcame”, at the commencement of consecutive lines, he purposefully draws the parallel between the perfect, resurrected being of Beatrice with the resurrected Christ as triumphant over the mortality of the body. With his emphasis on the “two natures” Dante moves away from any suggestion that a purely spiritual state is achievable, or even desirable. Rather, like light that is intensified and concentrated by reflection, the re-unification of body to soul will serve to heighten the powers of each, which in their turn magnify the perfection of the other. It is this emphasis on the perfected form of the bodies of the blessed in the *Paradiso* to which we now turn.

In Canto VII of the *Paradiso*, the voice of Beatrice, a figure of the truth of the resurrection towards which Dante is continually reaching, now articulates a further particularity of the human complex. Amid the general discussion of the nature of the Christian doctrine of Atonement, Beatrice makes a distinction between the physical makeup of the human being and that of the rest of creation:

*Ciò che da lei senza mezza distilla
non ha poi fine, perché non si move
la sua impronta quand' ella sigilla.*

Whatever – without a second cause – distils
directly from the source of good can have
no end. Stamped thus by good, the print won't move.

(*Par.* VII, 67-69).

A distinction is made here between the two types of creation. Strictly speaking, the living things of this world are generated by the procreative acts of their progenitors, and can be understood as merely the reorganising of the already extant materials of the physical world, which are bound by immutable laws of generation, growth, decay and death. The eternal elements of the world – the angels, the heavenly spheres, and the soul of man – are created *ex nihilo*. They are made “*senza mezza*” – “without second cause”. The consequence of this, according to Dante, is that a fundamental tension exists between the immortality of the soul and the corruptibility of the decaying body, since according to Christian doctrine the mortality of the body was not a natural inevitability but a universal and irredeemable consequence of man's fall from a state of perfection. The meaning of Atonement, as Dante expresses it here, is partly a promise that the restorative nature of a resurrected Saviour will return to us the body that belongs to the eternal soul. It is a return to that primal state of

unsullied human existence to which Beatrice alludes at the conclusion of the canto. She elaborates thus:

*E quinci puoi argomentare ancora
vostra resurrezion, se tu ripensi
come l'umana carne fessi allora
che li primi parenti intrambo fensi.'*

And from this principle you may infer
the resurrection you yourselves will have.
Return and think how human flesh was made
when our first parents were themselves made live.'

(*Par.* VII, 145-148).

Given the centrality of the theme of resurrection to the narrative structure and moral impetus of the *Commedia*, it is surprising that this passage contains the only direct use of “*resurrezion*” in the entire poem. The explicit use of the term here focuses our attention on Beatrice’s nature as an already fully restored and perfected member of the Empyrean; and upon her new, elevated claim that since God has directly created the perfect bodies of “our first parents”, the bodies of the blessed, of all the created things in this world, are not bound for disintegration or even decay, but have been given assurance of perfect wholeness and perpetuity. Beatrice’s speech affirms that only the physical matter of the human being is destined to immortality. All other material in the universe enjoys no such privilege, and is bound not only to perpetual cycles of re-integration, but also to final elimination.

Dante’s attention to the possibilities inherent in the doctrine of physical resurrection reaches its theological and poetic climax in *Paradiso* XIV. Here, in the circle of the Sun reserved for the wise theologians and teachers, the inhabitants, many of whom were formative influences on Dante’s own intellectual development, form a double circle of dancing, spinning lights. Before this assembly Beatrice declares that Dante-pilgrim still requires a question to be answered: even here, in the joyous state of beatitude, can it be that the inhabitant’s clothing of dazzling light will remain so even after the restoration of their earthly bodies? And so what part, if any, does the body play in such beatitude? The answer comes from an unexpected source – the Hebrew King, Solomon. His response is, in effect, Dante’s climactic, triumphant declaration of the glory of the human form:

*‘Come la carne gloriosa e santa
 fia rivestita, la nostra persona
 più grata fia per esser tutta quanta;
 per che s’accrescera ciò che ne dona
 di gratuito lume il sommo bene,
 lume ch’a lui veder ne condiziona;
 onde la vision crescer convene,
 crescer l’ardor che di quella s’accende,
 crescer lo raggio che da esso vene.
 Ma sì come carbon che fiamma rende,
 e per vivo candor quella soverchia,
 sì che la sua parvenza si difende;
 così questo folgór che già ne cerchia
 fia vinto in apparenza da la carne
 che tutto dî la terra ricoperchia;
 né potrà tanta luce affaticarne:
 ché li organi del corpo saran forti
 a tutto ciò che potrà dilettarne.’*

‘But when the glorious and sacred flesh
 is clothing us once more, our person then
 will be – complete and whole – more pleasing still.
 For then whatever has been granted us,
 by utmost good, of free and gracious light
 (the light through which we see Him) will increase.
 Hence, as must be, our seeing will increase,
 increasing, too, the fire that vision lights,
 the ray increasing that proceeds from that.
 But just as burning coal may give out flames,
 yet overcome these with its own white light,
 keeping, within, its shape and semblance whole,
 so, too, the shining-out that rings us round
 will, in appearance, be surpassed by flesh
 which all day long the earth now covers up.
 Nor can I be that so much light will tire.
 Our organs, physically, will have the strength
 for every pleasure that can come to us.’

(Par. XIV, 43-60).

We might imagine that the wise teachers and theologians would rejoice in the condition of being disembodied lights of pure intelligence, since their earthly preoccupation was to set aside, where possible, the concerns of the material world for the pursuit of intellectual and spiritual goods. Yet Solomon’s proclamation, made in the modest voice of an announcing angel, affirms the very opposite: just as the inner heat of a burning coal will overcome the radiance of its surrounding flame, so too the perfect beatitude of being “*sempiternae fiamme*”

– “sempiternal flames”⁵⁵ will somehow be surpassed in the reunification of one’s body. In a figure of escalation and repetition, Solomon states that the experience of re-embodiment will be a perpetual increase in our human faculties and powers, which will in turn increase the very radiance of our being, like a self-feeding fire. Heaven, it is said, will be hotter than Hell, for one will be so much the nearer to the sources of divine power. The body, says Dante, will be able to welcome this, since the body that is transformed by the power of resurrection will be eternally strengthened to accommodate the full power of its new surrounds. Solomon’s declaration makes it clear that with a reunited and restored body we will see more, and be seen as more, than we do even as glorified shade-bodies. More than this, the re-united body will take on a form even greater, more whole, more powerful, more blessed, than we ever experienced in the “earth-bodies” of our mortal lives. This is the highest state to which human identity may ascend.

And what of the choice of Solomon as the mouthpiece for Dante’s greatest statement on the poem’s pre-eminent theme? Among the many theologians and philosophers from whom to select, Dante calls forth a man who sought wisdom that he might provide temporal justice for his people; who was reputed to have constructed a temple whose architecture represented a microcosmic version of the universe; and who created the Scriptures’ greatest testament to the glory of the human body in the Song of Solomon, which stood as a pre-eminent text among medieval thinkers for its presentation of an allegorical expression of metaphysical truths. Solomon is thus an emblematic, triune figure – ruler, builder and poet – and in these three guises we can read Dante’s presentation of Solomon as an expression of his own self-assuredness, for Dante also consistently demonstrates an integrated concern with these three themes: political justice, the microcosmic-macrocosmic view of the human form as it exists within a divine order, and divinely-inspired and deeply allegorical poetry that celebrates the beauty and goodness of the body.

Dante completes this set-piece with a concise depiction of the other inhabitants’ unanimous *reaction* to Solomon’s declaration. While the usual response of such men to any doctrinal statement may have been, on earth, a tendency towards argumentation or clarification, Dante would have us see that the proper reaction to such an expression of yearning for one’s restored body is in fact a simple and concise affirmation. The disembodied souls respond

⁵⁵ *Par.* 14:66.

with a concerted “Amen”, as if adding an exclamation mark to Solomon’s song of longing – “*che ben mostrar disio d’I corpi morti*” (“they showed their keen desire for long dead bones”).⁵⁶ This then, is the surprise for which Dante has long been preparing his audience in the various discursions on the themes of embodiment and resurrection – disappearance of physical human form in beatitude stimulates an intense longing for its return. Yet it does not quite end there, for Dante demonstrates that in accordance with the completely communal and harmonious nature of beatitude, solitary bliss is not the final goal of spiritual ascent. Rather, it is the regathering of souls into a perfected form of their earthly relationships. The wise philosophers, many of whom had devoted themselves to the immaterial goods of this world, and were accustomed to long periods of solitary industry, are shown to long not only for the return of their bodies, but those of their families and “*li altri che fuor cari*” (“others dear to them”).⁵⁷ In one of the most evocative rhymes in the *Commedia*, Dante links the exultant expectation of the “*Amme!*” (“amen”) to the meaning of the current existence of the souls, “*fiamme*” (“flames”), in that it promises a return to the fold of the “*mamme*” (“mums”).⁵⁸ The completion of resurrection, then, is not a solitary ecstasy or impersonal rarefaction, but a return to the fundamental experiences that guarantee our human identity, and provides the conditions in which human existence may flourish. Resurrection means a complete re-entry into the mystical “body” of the elect.

With a purely theological outlook, the *Commedia* can be read as a testimony to the certainty of man’s imperishability, with the doctrine of bodily resurrection acting as a footing on which such certainty rests. However, merely reflecting upon the theological content of the poem would be to overlook the significant structural and symbolic elements of the work that serve to strongly underpin this content.

The overarching narrative structure of the work, and some its key uses of specific symbolism, are deliberately constructed on the motif of bodily resurrection. This applies to both Dante as the story’s author and main protagonist, and, by extension of the author’s declared intent, for his readership.⁵⁹ The desire for bodily continuance beyond death, and all that such an

⁵⁶ *Par.* 14:63.

⁵⁷ *Par.* 14:65.

⁵⁸ *Par.* 14:62-66.

⁵⁹ Since the author claims that the primary purpose of the poem is *moral*. It has also been argued that a satisfactory allegorical model, paralleling many of the resurrection themes explicated here, is to conceive of Dante the pilgrim’s journey through the narrative of the *Commedia* as being imitative of Christ’s *transfiguration*. See Oliver Davies, “Dante’s *Commedia* and the Body of Christ” in *Dante’s Commedia*:

existence may involve, is never merely a topic for intellectual investigation, but is a key thread in Dante's imaginative explorations.⁶⁰ We might expect such explorations to fit within the beatific atmosphere and intellectual mood of the *Paradiso*, where those who accepted the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection await their reward. Yet Dante demonstrates that even in the earliest stages of the *Inferno* such matters are foremost in his thinking.

John Freccero has shown that the theme of resurrection is clearly intimated by the topographical symbolism described within the opening scenes of the *Inferno*, and that by doing so Dante is laying the foundations of a "structural principle" upon which the *Commedia* should be read and interpreted.⁶¹ This principle involves the deliberate embedding of higher or alternate meaning within the literal events of a given narrative, which can typically be properly understood only from the viewpoint of those who stand on the "other side" of such events. The standard example of such "figurative" principles within Christendom was the story of the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt as a symbolic adumbration of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ, and it was this particular example that Dante employed in the epistle to Can Grande della Scalla, in which he sets out the ways in which the *Commedia* was meant to be interpreted.⁶² Freccero summarises thus: "We may take it as established by Dante's own words...that the outlines of the poetic journey are essentially those of exodus, the figure of conversion."⁶³ He points to key expressions within the first two cantos that allude to the events of the Book of Exodus, and elucidates their meaning as it relates to the figure of Old Testament exodus as it was understood by medieval exegetes to be a precursor to the New Testament figure of resurrection. There is, appropriately, a trilogy of key elements that define the narrative of the Exodus: the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites; their crossing of the desert under the leadership of Moses; and finally the crossing of the flooded Jordan River under the guidance of Joshua. In each element the primary experience is that of a "crossing over", or a kind of death to one's former

Theology as Poetry, eds. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 173-178.

⁶⁰ It has also been argued that Dante's concern with the various meanings possible in poetic representations of bodily resurrection initiated a decisive turning point in the depiction of post-mortem bodies in the visual arts. See Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, pp. 307-308; Alison Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 40.

⁶¹ Freccero, "The River of Death: Inferno II, 108" in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 55-69.

⁶² See Latham, ed. *A Translation of Dante's Eleven Letters*, pp. 193-194.

⁶³ Freccero, "The River of Death: Inferno II, 108" in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 56.

life and emergence into newness, so that the symbolism of the expedition of the Jews naturally lent itself to the key Christian doctrines of baptism and resurrection.

These three elements all have their subtle parallels in the opening scenes of the *Inferno*. The experience of emerging safely from the “*selva selvaggia*” – “savage wood” – in which Dante is lost in the opening lines of Canto I is described thus:

*E come quei che con lena affannata,
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,
si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata:*

And then, like someone labouring for breath
who, safely reaching shore from open sea,
still turns and stares across those perilous waves,

(*Inf.* I, 22-24).

The sea crossing is easily analogous to the opening phase of Exodus. Next, the new terrain in which he finds himself is “*la spiaggia diserta*” – “the lonely scree”⁶⁴, that is, an uninhabited desert. The association of this landscape with the wilderness of Sinai is not unreasonable, yet the third part of this referential schema presents a more complicated scenario. Towards the end of Canto II, Virgil is describing to Dante the chain of communications that resulted in him coming to Dante’s aid. Part of this multi-voiced dialogue is an exchange in Heaven between St. Lucia and Beatrice, in which the former says of Dante:

*Non odi tu la pietta del suo pianto,
non vedi tu la morte che ‘l combatte
su la fiumana ove ‘l mar non ha vanto?’*

Can you not hear the pity of his tears?
Do you not see the death that beats him down,
swirling in torrents that no sea could boast?

(*Inf.* II, 106-108).

Through an ingenious chain of connections, Freccero argues that the oblique reference to a swirling body of water over which “no sea could boast” in this passage, in keeping with the previous references to the Exodus narrative, is in fact an allusion to the Jordan River as it appears in the events of Joshua 3-5. Here, the wandering Israelites are confronted by a

⁶⁴ *Inf.* 1:29.

swollen, impassable river, and can only complete the desired crossing with the aid of divine intervention. This is precisely paralleled in the events of Canto II, in that the “court of heaven” has passed judgement upon Dante, who has already completed the first two stages of his own personal exodus, as worthy of receiving special aid to make his crossing to the Promised Land. Thus the three-fold sequence of references is completed, and the foundational theme of resurrection is established. On a moral level, this motif of resurrection is not merely symbolic, but deeply personal. Dante’s depiction of his own helplessness before an uncrossable river, even one that is metaphoric, indicates a belief in the necessity of both the death of the self for the preparation of receiving divine grace; and likewise an ultimate recognition that the accomplishment of resurrection is wholly dependent upon the free granting of such grace. The fear that a travelling pilgrim may feel before an impassable barrier, or in the confusion of disorientation, becomes the necessary preparatory state by which they may make their resurrection, their recovery unto a state of restoration, at all possible.⁶⁵

Yet there is more to be said here, for Dante continues to build upon this foundational metaphor of the death and resurrection of the self, as the poem develops. Most clearly, the structure of the penitent’s experience in the temporal setting of Mount Purgatory mirrors the pattern of exodus as identified in the opening sequence of the *Inferno*. The second canto of *Purgatorio* describes how the shades of the about-to-be penitents arrive at the shore of the mountain on an oarless and sail-less boat, piloted by a brilliant angel. Their relief at having survived such a crossing speaks of the miraculous nature of their deliverance:

*Poi fece il segno lor di santa croce,
ond’ ei si gittar tutti in su la spiaggia:
ed el sen giù, come venne, veloce.*

Then, over them, he made the holy cross,
at which they flung themselves upon the shore.
And he, as fast as he had come, went off.

(*Pur.* II, 49-51).

The parallels with the Exodus story are clear: the new arrivals are safely escorted through an otherwise impossible sea crossing by a divine agency; their experience of reaching land is precisely that of the intensely grateful shipwreck or sea-peril survivor, just as we have

⁶⁵ Freccero, “The River of Death: Inferno II, 108” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 68-69.

previously seen Dante describe his own deliverance in such terms; and the supernatural speed and motion of the angelic pilot is the equivalent, in this set-piece, of the abrupt parting and reforming of the sea that allowed for the crossing of the Israelites. But the subsequent reaction to such survival, after that of relief, turns out to be further confusion:

*La turba che rimase lì, selvaggia
parea del loco, rimirando intorno
come colui che nove cose assaggia.*

The crowd that now remained, it seemed, was strange,
astray there, wondering, looking all around,
as people do, assessing what is new.

(*Pur.* II, 52-54).

The disorientation and uncertainty of this group, who immediately seek the assumed authority of Virgil's leadership, points to the themes of wilderness and transient exile that pervade the second *cantica* of the poem. These souls are archetypal "wanderers in the wilderness", who comprehend the goal of such wayfaring – "*mostratene la via di gire al monte*" ("point us the way to go towards the Mount")⁶⁶ – but nevertheless require an external guide. In this introductory meeting of the two parties, it is significant that Dante should employ the term "*peregrin*" – "pilgrim" – for the first time in the poem, as befitting the travellers in Purgatory who are moving towards a Promised Land. The narrative of the ascent of the mountain of Purgatory will produce poignant similes of the very personal experience of pilgrimage.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *Pur.* 2:60.

⁶⁷ *Pur.* 8:1-9 – "*Era già l'ora che volge il disio / ai navicanti e 'ntenerisce il core, / lo dì c'han ditto ai dolci amici addio, / e che lo novo peregrin d'amore / punge, se ode squilla di lontano / che paia il giorno pianger che si more, / quand' io incominciai a render vano / l'udire e a mirare una de l'alme / surta, che l'ascoltar chiedea con mano.*" ("It was, by now, the hours that turns to home / the longing thoughts of seamen, melting hearts / the day they've said goodbye to dearest friends, / and when by love the pilgrim, new to this, / is pierced to hear, far off, the evening bell / that seems to mourn the dying of the day, / as I began to blank my hearing out, / and gaze in wonder at a single soul / who, risen up, hand raised, asked all to hear."); *Pur.* 23:16-21 – "*Sì come i peregrin pensosi fanno, / giugnendo per cammin gente non nota, / che si volgono ad essa e non restanno: / così de retro a noi, più tosto mota, / venendo e trapassando ci ammirava / d'anime turba tacita e devota.*" ("As pilgrims do when, deep in thought, they meet / a group along their path that they don't know / and, though they turn towards it, still don't stop, / so, now, behind us, moving with more speed, / a throng of spirits, silent and devout, / reaching and overtaking us, gazed back."); *Pur.* 27:109-114 – "*E già per li splendori antelucani, / che tanto a' pellegrin surgon più grati / quanto, tornando, albergan men lontani, le tenebrae fuggian da tutti lati, e 'l sonno mio con esse: ond' io leva'mi, / veggendo I gran maestri già levati.*" ("Driven before bright antelucan rays / (which pilgrims, in returning, welcome more / since now they've lodged one night less far from home), / shadowy dark now fled on every side / and, with these shades, my sleep. At which I rose, / and saw my masters were already up.")

Finally, the closing scenes of *Purgatorio* present us with a recapitulation of the last phase of the exodus topos. At the conclusion to Canto XXX we read of Beatrice's condemnatory remarks regarding Dante's straying into errant avenues of intellectual enquiry after her physical death. This includes a reference to the "court of heaven" scene in which Dante is helpless before the metaphorical "river over which no sea could boast", as given in the account offered by Virgil in *Inferno* II. Canto XXXI begins with a continuation of Beatrice's speech, but in abrupt fashion her attention is now turned directly upon Dante, in order to emphasise the still-exiled nature of his status in Purgatory: "*O tu che se' di là dal fiume sacro*" – ("You on the far side of the sacred stream").⁶⁸ Dante remains in view of the Earthly Paradise, yet barred from entry and participation in its blessings until he fully repents and is baptised by Matelda in the river Lethe. This is the culminating moment of the entire *Purgatorio*, and the goal toward which all past progression was directed – the complete overthrowing of the "old man", a wanderer in a strange land, who will "cross over" the threshold of the sacred river to be completely cleansed and transformed. And this moment has been long-looked for, since Dante first enquires of it to Virgil in the circle of the blasphemers in *Inferno* XIV.⁶⁹ And when it is reached, Dante describes the river with a detailed fascination rarely matched in the poem, using it as the centrepiece of the Earthly Paradise topography, and referring to it no less than twenty-four times throughout the final eight cantos of the *Purgatorio*.⁷⁰

These are the key moments in *Purgatorio* that constitute Dante's metaphor of exodus as a prefigurement of resurrection, yet a further examination of the initial element of his metaphorical construction demonstrates the centrality of this theme. In Canto II Dante describes the rapid appearance of a boat:

*Da poppa stava il celestial nocchiero,
tal che pareva beato per descripto;*

⁶⁸ *Pur.* 31:1.

⁶⁹ See *Inf.* 14:130-138.

⁷⁰ See for example *Pur.* 26:108, 28:130, 30:143, 33:96,123. Rivers have previously found a prominent place in Dante's imagined landscape, serving in the *Inferno* as boundaries among the hierarchy of punishments, for example. The discussion regarding the origin of Hell's rivers in *Inferno* XI triggers Virgil's explanation of the geographical arrangement of the infernal realm, and later in *Paradiso* XXX Dante will bring his depiction of imaginary rivers to a stunning climax as he immerses his whole being in the river of dazzling light that circles within the Empyrean. (See *Par.* 30:55-93). But here in the Earthly Paradise the river Lethe is specifically introduced as a barrier that separated Dante from that which he desires: "*più andar mi tolse un rio*" – "A brook held back my onward pace." (*Pur.* 28:25.) These moments of symbolic "crossing-over" combine to build a thematic framework of personal transformation within the poem, and all point towards the most crucial crossing of all – the passing from the grave into resurrection, from death into new life.

*e più di cento spirti entro sediero.
 'In exitu Israel de Aegypto'
 cantavan tutti insieme ad una voce
 con quanto di quel salmo è poscia scripto.*

Celestial, at the stern, the pilot stood –
 beatitude, it seemed, inscribed on him –
 and, ranged within, a hundred spirits more.
 'In exitu Israel de Aegypto':
 they sang this all together, in one voice,
 with all the psalm that's written after this.

(*Pur.* II, 43-48).

The new mood of co-operation and mutual purpose is demonstrated in the hundred-strong choir “in one voice”, as though singing was a natural physical expression of voicing one’s individuality whilst also submitting to the commitment of greater good. This new, polyphonic nature of existence in Purgatory serves as a prelude to the communal nature of existence in Paradise, where the glory of individual blessedness is subsumed into, but never lessened by, hierarchical arrangements or dynamic configurations. The song to which the new arrivals give voice, *In exitu Israel de Aegypto*, is a rendering of Psalm 114, which commemorates the miracles of the communal survival as told in Exodus:

When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of
 strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion.
 The sea saw it, and fled: Jordan was driven back. The mountains
 skipped like rams and the little hills like lambs...⁷¹

Thus the first expressive utterance on Purgatory is a joyous remembrance of the role that divine providence may have in determining the course of human history. This is Dante’s most famous use of scriptural quotation, in typological terms an expression of the individual penitent’s salvation from sin, in poetic terms an indication of the contribution that human artistic endeavours may play in furthering one’s faith. As the first song of the entire *Commedia*, rich in allusion and meaning, it becomes Dante’s “theme song” by which we may recall the biblical foundation of his artistic enterprise, and the tropological means by which he may re-inforce the primary purpose of the work.⁷² Yet the full purpose of this allusion is realised in the hymn’s standing as a prime example for the proper application of the four-fold

⁷¹ Ps. 114:1-4.

⁷² Peter S Hawkins, *Dante’s Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 43-45.

interpretation of allegorical texts, particularly in regard to holy writ. In Dante's letter to Can Grande della Scala, he sets out the terms by which such interpretations may be properly conducted, and uses the multiple meanings latent in the psalm as his definitive example.⁷³ Thus the *In exitu Israel de Aegypto* refers back to the primary text by which the value of the four-fold interpretation of texts can be demonstrated.⁷⁴

The *Commedia* starts with a concentrated use of exodus-resurrection simile, which is replicated in the second *cantiche*, and concludes with a strongly affirmative statement on bodily resurrection as the primary element of communal beatitude. Yet there are key

⁷³ See Dante's letter to Lord Can Grande della Scala in Latham, ed. *A Translation of Dante's Eleven Letters*, pp. 193-194. cf. *Convivio* 2.1.

⁷⁴ There remains a further possibility within this passage. In Canto II Dante introduces the idea that human art may have a part to play in one's spiritual praxis and development. The singing of the *In exitu Israel de Aegypto* is the first instance in the *Commedia* of human creative energies at play. Communal singing is a means by which multiple voices may retain their distinct individuality yet contribute to a greater purpose, and Dante has specifically allocated various thematic psalms to the penitents on Mt Purgatory as a means of expressing the particular virtue that each terrace is designed to cultivate in its visitors. What distinguishes the recital of the *In exitu Israel de Aegypto* is that it occurs while the participants are yet to set foot on the mountain. The text of *Purgatorio* II makes it clear that the singing of the hymn takes place while this new choir are still passengers on this strange, angel-captained boat. Further, Dante gives a numerical approximation for the number of souls on board – “*e più di cento spirit entro sediero*” (“and, ranges within, a hundred spirits more.”) (*Pur.* 2:45.) This figure, which may seem a way of providing a rounded estimate, is highly suggestive, when one considers that the image of a boat containing a hundred singing souls is clearly intimated in the opening image of the *Purgatorio*. (See *Pur.* 1:1-6). The poem is a “ship of mind”, of which Dante, who is frequently fond of nautical metaphors, depicts himself as both author and helmsman. The future tense of his newly-declared purpose – “I'll sing” – speaks of the new outlook that will characterise the mood of Purgatory, and the declaration of song as a medium of this new attitude defines it as a central component of the penitent's experience. This reference to a ship upon which his song will take place prepares us for the arrival of the angel-driven boat of *Purgatorio* II, and the parallels which may be drawn are intriguing. The “hundred spirits” of the penitential choir directly suggest the one hundred cantos which comprise the *Commedia*, in that they “sang all this together”. That is, they all hold an authoritative “voice”, and thematic and poetic individuality, while contributing to the essential unity of the poem. Each part of the *Commedia* is a Canto, a “song”, and the “individuality” of each canto in the *Commedia* is one of its notable features. Almost without exception, each canto in the poem is a self-contained episode with its particular mood and colouration. See Joan Ferrante, “A Poetics of Chaos and Harmony” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 153-171. Further, comparisons may be made to Dante as author of the poem, and the angel that appears to “pilot” the boat to the shore of Mt. Purgatory – we are told that this angel has beatitude “inscribed on him”, a clear preview of the way in which Dante himself will soon be literally “inscribed” as an initiate to Purgatory, by the sword-strokes of an angel. The descriptions of the boat's motion, which appears to occur without the normal forces of sea-faring, are a veiled reference to what Dante has already declared to be the supernatural inspiration for the undertaking of his poetic “voyage”, and will later declare as the clearly divine nature of its construction. This boat is like no other, just as Dante's poem is to be regarded as beyond the normal workings and limitations of human operation. He is both the author and pilot of, yet is not solely responsible for, the “ship-poem”. The image of the “ship song” is completed later in the *Purgatorio* II, when an associate of Dante's, Casella, steps forward to converse with him, and commences to sing the opening lines of one of Dante's own lyrics, the “*Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*” (“Love that speaks reasons in my mind to me”) from his *Convivio*. The introduction of a previous poetic work, at such a crucial juncture in the narrative of *this* poem, points to Dante's confidence in the artistic achievements of his past, while also signalling a renewed passion for a “crossing over” into new areas of philosophical enquiry. This association of the *In exitu Israel de Aegypto* with Dante's own poem provides a further emphasis of the themes of exodus and resurrection to his poetic and moral project.

sequences in which Dante undertakes a more detailed exploration of the meaning of resurrection as an essential element of bodily unity and perpetuity.

In Canto VI of *Inferno* Dante passes through the circle of the gluttons, and engages in a misdirected conversation with a fellow Florentine, Ciaccio, a figure whose voracious living has now “unmade” him. Significantly it is in this canto, addressing the question of bodily appetites, that we find the *Commedia*’s first doctrinal argument and its first reference to Dante’s own status as a political exile, and it is also here that Dante brings together three related themes – the disfigurement of the human form as an image of appropriate punishment; the corruption of the body politic of the Florentine city-state; and the resurrection of the body.⁷⁵ The chain of reasoning that connects these themes may be understood in this way: the gluttonous live for an unrelieved and monotonous fulfilling of a single desire, that of the gullet, and thus distort the variety of attentions and interests that the created order requires of the individual. Moreover, their excessive indulgence in one part of the world’s material goods produces a gross distortion that, at least, deforms the proper balance and proportion of a healthy human body.⁷⁶ Dante would say that at its core gluttony is simply a form of greed, and greed, in all its manifestations, is the essential antithesis of justice. Where a misdirected attention on the fascinating but ultimately unsatisfying goods of this world comes to dominate, there can be no justice, and no satisfactory application of the intellectual and spiritual principles that produce both civic order and individual righteousness. And in Dante’s schema of divine will it is ultimately justice that determines the individual’s fate, and, we are made to suppose, the corporeal form that such a fate might assume.

At the conclusion to the canto’s main exchange, Virgil intercedes to declare that:

...Più non si desta
di qua dal suon de l’angelica tromba,
quando verra la nimica podesta:
Ciascun rivedera la trista tomba,
ripiglierà sua carna e sua figura,
udirà quel ch’in eterna rimbomba.’

⁷⁵ *Inferno* VI is also the shortest canto in the entire *Commedia*, surely a pointed counter to the “excessiveness” of the gluttony to which it turns its attention. Dante’s own commitment to sober living, and physically lean appearance (established by his first biographer, Boccaccio, and perpetuated in all known portraiture of him) is ironically manifested in the very “abstemiousness” of the canto itself.

⁷⁶ This idea may be behind Dante’s inability to recognise Ciaccio. The bloated form, pressed to the ground by a battering rain, has lost all semblance of its original state. See *Inf.* 6:43 – “*L’angoscia che tu hai / forse ti tira fuor de la mia mente*” (“The awful pain you feel / perhaps has cancelled you from memory.”)

...He'll not stir
 until the trumpets of the angel sound,
 at which his enemy, true Power, will come.
 Then each will see once more his own sad tomb,
 and each, once more, assume its flesh and figure,
 each hear the rumbling thunder roll for ever.'

(*Inf.* VI, 94-99).

This initial reference to the resurrection of the body in the next world may contain a surprise for the reader, for Dante declares that even the damned will experience a restoration of their physical forms. Thus the vision here is of resurrection as judgement and punishment, as though it were merely an extension of the *contrapasso* schema of transgression and penalty that underpins the imagery of the *Inferno*. Being re-united with one's body, then, serves as mere confirmation of one's sinfulness.⁷⁷ *Carna* and *figura* remain as essential elements of human identity, even for the damned. But Dante also claims that the punishments meted out to the shade bodies, as painful and disgusting as they may be, are only a part-measure of the full weight of justice that awaits them in a fully embodied form subsequent to the Last Judgement. In response to a question from Dante on the nature of embodiment as it affects sentience, it is Virgil who answers, drawing not upon Christian revelation, but the precise logic of classical philosophy:

*Ed elli a me: 'Ritorna a tua scienza,
 che vuol, quanto la cosa e più perfetta,
 più senta il bene, é così la doglienza.
 Tutto che questa gente maladetta
 in vera perfezion già mai non vada,
 di la più che di qua essere aspetta*

'Return,' he said, 'to your first principles:
 when anything (these state) becomes more perfect,
 then all the more it feels both good and pain.
 Albeit these accursed men will not
 achieve perfection full and true, they still,
 beyond that Day, will come to sharper life.'

(*Inf.* VI, 106-111).

⁷⁷ Jacoff, "'Our Bodies, Our Selves': The Body in the Commedia" in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and Its Aftermath: Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, p. 126.

The gluttons, and all the damned, “will not achieve perfection” because they have been forever sundered from the vision of God for which they have been created. Yet Dante’s incorporation of the teleology of Aristotelian philosophy is potentially problematic, since it suggests that the re-uniting of the damned with their bodies is, at one level, purely the fulfilment of natural processes that lie beyond human control; or, it is as if the intervention of divine justice is set aside to allow the forces of a simple, natural justice to develop – the bodies of the gluttons, as for many of the damned, merely experience the logical consequences of their actions repeated back to them and magnified.

This negative interpretation of resurrection relies on the remorseless logic of the so-called *contrapasso*, yet Dante goes on to investigate the possible implications for such a reading, in his treatment of two particularly divisive categories of sinners – the heresiarchs and the suicides. Dante’s conceives of the ring of heresiarchs as an empty, silent plain that is filled with half-opened tombs encased in fire. This first scene inside the City of Dis, is, in effect, a “City of the Dead”. The fundamental error of these sinners, according to Dante, was to follow the Epicurean fallacy of mistaking the soul for body; that is, to think that the soul perishes with the body into an eternal oblivion. For this confusion of relationship, and denial of immortality, Dante condemns such heretics to a condition that befits them – they are bound eternally in death in a corpse-like state that parodies the reductionism they espoused in life. Partly enclosed in fiery tombs of agony, they will be re-united with their bodies only in such a way that their eternal state will be a solitary burial of both body and soul.⁷⁸ A philosophy that denied both the role of an omnipotent God in the affairs of human history, and the perpetuity of life, in any form, beyond the grave, was clearly detestable to a poet who claimed to deal in the matters of the life to come, and for whom the divine ordering of all created matter was a fundamental tenet. Yet for Dante, the exercise of reason demands that it

⁷⁸ *Inf.* 10:10-15 – “*E quelli a me: ‘Tutti saran serrati / quando di Iosafat qui torneranno / coi corpi che là sù hanno lasciati. / Suo cimitero da questa parte hanno / con Epicuro tutti suoi seguaci, / che l’anima col corpo morta fanno.’*” (“‘These tombs,’ he said, ‘will finally be shut / when, from Jehoshaphat on Judgement Day, / sinners bring back their bodies left above. / This circle is the cemetery for all / disciples of the Epicurus school, / who say the body dies, so too the soul.’”) Dante says little of the finer theological distinctions that mark out heresy as a sin, instead choosing to see how the obstinacy and divisiveness of errant thinking plays out in the political arena. This may be an admission that pre-Christian thinkers can hardly be considered heretical in a strictly Catholic sense, given that the pagan philosophers knew nothing of the doctrines that they are here assumed to offend. But Dante will choose to condemn his contemporaries who display those qualities that characterise the atomistic philosophy of Epicurus. Dante’s animosity towards the Epicurean approach to metaphysics was certainly genuine, and was grounded in the Church’s strong opposition to any teachings that threatened its own reason to exist, namely, the role it might play in the affairs of men beyond this life; in Epicureanism the Catholic Church found the one pagan philosophical system to which it stood in diametric, unresolvable opposition.

recognise the eternal value, and indeed the origin, of its own existence. To deny such eternalness is “an absurdity, denying the perpetual existence of the very faculty which conceives that denial.”⁷⁹ But he extends this view to stress that a devotion to the truth of Christian revelation demands that we accept that Love, not Chaos, brings into being and sustains the entire created order and, within it, each individual human person. Thus we are only fully human when we turn our rational attentions to the acknowledgement of this source of our being. In civic terms, the recognition of the value of human identity is the foundation on which communal harmony and order must be built.⁸⁰ Without such an understanding, Dante claims, the passions of family lineage and political patriotism can only turn to the destruction of the very thing they pretend to serve.⁸¹ These concerns are undercut, Dante says, by the neglect of the fundamental truths of doctrine that underpin all other truths. In this Dante demonstrates heresy as an obstinacy – a refusal to properly perceive, a kind of intellectual suicide.

It is, however, the physical suicides to which Dante devotes his most intensive treatment of the resurrection as it may negatively affect the damned, and I take his depiction of the suicides as a representative type of “negative resurrection” that underpins the entire schema of punishments throughout *Inferno*. There is no doubt as to why Dante should regard suicide – violence against oneself – as a sin. From a Christian viewpoint, human life is a divine gift, which is neither our private creation nor ours to dispense with at will. Yet the necessity of human free will demands that we are free to destroy, as well as free to generate. Dante sees suicide as the ultimate negation – the ending of one’s very physical existence. It is a disturbing phenomenon that the body should turn against itself, for this is in effect a complete breakdown of the essential unity of body and soul that Dante upholds as the proper state of the human form. It is fundamentally illogical, strictly speaking, that the human mind should have the power to convince the body to end that very unity by which both parts of the human composite are sustained. If the human body is the supreme physical entity, then the suicide is

⁷⁹ Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante’s Inferno: Difficulty and Dead Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 144.

⁸⁰ Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2006), notes, p. 353.

⁸¹ Thus his representative figures in Canto X are two heterodox thinkers – the Ghibelline politician Farinata degli Uberti, and the Guelf aristocrat Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti. The physical presence of these two main characters says more than any philosophical discourse is likely to have done – both are occupied with concerns for those matters which sustain the civic stability in which humanity may flourish, namely the continuation of lineage and the defence of the city-state through patriotic action. They show no regard for Dante or each other, but remain essentially “closed off” in their perceptions and judgements, metaphorically expressed by their entombed posture, and defiant body language.

guilty of the grossest destruction, that of self-destruction of the highest corporeal possibilities. If being allowed a human form is the greatest gift, then denying that form is the ultimate negation – an act that is absurd, false, and tragically irredeemable. In his condemnation of suicide as a serious sin, Dante again underlines his commitment to the value and dignity of the human body.

But it is Dante's striking construction of the man-plant as a metaphor for suicide in *Inferno* XIII that has special significance for his symbolism of the resurrection of the body. The full measure of Dante's symbolic language in this intricate and complex Canto cannot be fully explicated here. However, the central image of this episode is that the suicides are the first sinners we meet in Hell who are depicted in a form *other than their own bodies*. Dante imagines the suicides as stunted and barren trees. They are continually hacked at by pestilent Harpies, which causes the suicides considerable pain but also allows them to speak. These tree-bodies in turn recover and regrow, only to be redestroyed in an endless cycle of fruitless regeneration. This image, drawn from Book Three of Virgil's *Aeneid*, reduces the suicides to a form of embodiment at the lowest possible level of existence, the merely vegetative, where they are denied the essential human experience of free movement. As freedom of movement is the physical expression of free will, the denial of such movement is an appropriate punishment for those who forsook the proper purpose of their own freedom.

This imagery concerns itself with resurrection in two ways. Firstly, as Rachel Jacoff has demonstrated,⁸² the description of the origins and growth of the suicide-trees can be construed as an inverted parody of Paul's account of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, the key scriptural passage for the doctrine of the resurrection of the body:

*Quando si parte l'anima feroce
dal corpo ond' ella stessa s'è disvelta,
Minos la manda a la settima foce.
Cade in la selva, e non l'è parte scelta,
ma là dove fortuna la balestra,
quivi germoglia come gran di spelta.
Surge in vermena e in pianta silvestra;
l'Arpie, pascendo poi de le sue foglie,
fanno dolore e al dolor fenestra.*

⁸² See Jacoff, "Our Bodies, Our Selves": The Body in the *Commedia*" in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and Its Aftermath: Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, pp. 127-128.

When any soul abandons savagely
 its body, rending self by self away,
 Minos consigns it to the seventh gulf.
 Falling, it finds this copse. Yet no one place
 is chosen as its plot. Where fortune slings it,
 there (as spelt grains might) it germinates.
 A sapling sprouts, grows ligneous, and then
 the Harpies, grazing on its foliage,
 fashion sharp pain and windows for that pain.

(*Inf.* XIII, 94-102)

In comparison, at verses 36-38 of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes:

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow,
 you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of
 wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has
 determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.

Thus Paul imagines the resurrection body as a developed seed that reincarnates the soul in a new state of complete freedom. The *Inferno* account can only envision the tragic reversal of this: the soul, separated unnaturally from its proper home, can only be reborn into a stunted and disgusting thorn-tree that is its own semi-living prison.⁸³ Yet immediately following this passage is the crux of Dante's *contrapasso* for the suicides. The representative suicide, Pier della Vigne, tells us that:

*'Come l'altre verrem per nostre spoglie,
 ma non pero ch'alcuna sen rivesta,
 chè non è giusto aver cio ch'om si toglie.
 Qui le strascineremo, e per la mesta
 selva saranno I nostril corpi appesi,
 ciascuno al prun de l'ombra sua molesta.'*

'We (as shall all), come Judgement Day, shall seek
 our cast-off spoil, yet not put on this vestment.
 keeping what we tore off would not be fair.
 Our bodies we shall drag back here; and all
 around this melancholy grove they'll swing,
 each on the thorn of shades that wrought them harm.'

(*Inf.* XIII, 103-108).

⁸³ Ibid., p. 127.

The meaning here is unmistakable. The human composite was created to be eternally united, so that the divorce of body and soul at death was an unnatural intrusion into the divinely-instituted, cosmic order. For this reason, it is right that we should fear death. The suicides, hastening their own deaths unnaturally, voluntarily chose to separate that which was designed never to be disunited. Their punishment therefore involves a tantalising near-restoration of their earthly bodies – their body-skins *will* hang, swinging, on their stunted vegetative forms in an eternal mockery of their final, tragic transgression.⁸⁴

These are the various elements of the poem's content that comprise its *topos* of resurrection. Yet in metaphorical terms, there are two further ways in which Dante's commitment to the idea of bodily resurrection, or, we may say, restoration, is demonstrated – in the basic chronology that underpins the narrative structure of the *Commedia*; and in the way in which Dante elects to include the personal circumstances that he endured while composing this work as a defining element of its content and structure.

Dante would have us understand that the chronology of the *Commedia* follows closely to that of Holy Week, and specifically that of the year 1300. However, in typically Dantean fashion he does not make this explicit at the outset, but relies on his audience correctly interpreting a somewhat obscure reference that occurs well into the narrative, and is delivered by a most unlikely source. In Canto XXI of the *Inferno* Dante-pilgrim has reached the circle of the barrators, and is informed by the devil Malacoda that one of the stone bridges over the ditch has been in ruins for many years:

*Ier, più oltre cinqu' ore che quest' otta,
mille dugento con sessanta sei
anni compìe che qui la via fu rotta.*

Just yesterday (five hours ahead of now),
a thousand years, two centuries and sixty-six
from when the path was cut had then elapsed.

(*Inf.* XXI, 112-114).

⁸⁴ This image was regarded as near-heresy by some of Dante's earliest commentators who, quite correctly, pointed out the doctrinal certainty of the restoration of the body to the soul. The poetic reading of this image is that Dante consciously adds to the mood of tension and separation that define this episode, in order to heighten the sense of absurdity that underlines his view of suicide as the ultimate sundering of the human complex.

From this we are meant to recall Virgil's earlier statement in which he says that Christ's Harrowing of Hell was followed by a great earthquake which brought to ruin much of the "architecture" of the infernal realm.⁸⁵ Following the traditional understanding that Christ was crucified on Good Friday in the year 34, the meeting between pilgrim and devil is thus occurring five hours behind, but a whole day ahead, of the hour of Christ's death. That is, it is now 7am on Easter Saturday, 1300.⁸⁶ There are political implications for why Dante should choose this year as the chronological setting for the narrative. It would provide something of a rebuttal to his arch-enemy, Pope Boniface VIII, who had declared the first Papal Jubilee in Rome for that year. Dante also saw the potent personal symbolism of 1300 as marking the crux or high point of his own life, and therefore the perfect timing for the "mid-life crisis" with which the *Commedia* is commenced, since he had previously declared in the *Convivio* that in temporal terms the human life was comparable to the projection of an arch that reached its apex in its thirty-fifth year, as we shall later examine in Chapter Four.⁸⁷ Dante may also have simply viewed 1300 as the beginning of a new century and therefore the appropriate setting for a narrative that proposed a political and moral re-awakening. Whatever value we may place on these correspondences, the broader symbolic meaning of the poem's temporal setting is unmistakable – the author intends that his own journey through the story will run parallel to the key events of Easter.

Tradition attests that Christ died in his thirty-fourth year, and Dante was 34 at the time of the poem's action, so that Dante's own moment of crisis and descent into Hell mirrors the death and burial of the Saviour. Likewise, Dante's escape from Hell to the shores of Mt. Purgatory, an earthly realm marked by themes of regeneration and renewal, is a form of resurrection from the living death that constitutes existence in Hell. It is notable that the opening scene of the *Purgatorio* takes place at dawn on Easter Sunday, and that Dante's first astronomical

⁸⁵ See *Inf.* 12:28-45.

⁸⁶ There is some conjecture over the exact chronology here, which largely hinges on interpreting the meaning of gospel references to the precise timing of the crucifixion. Cf. Lk. 23:44, Mt. 27:45-46. For a discussion of possible renderings of Dante's reference here, see D. Sayers' translation of *Inferno*, Penguin, 1949, pp. 297-298.

⁸⁷ *Convivio*, 4.23.6: "Wherefore, since our life, as has been said, and also the life of every living creature here below, is caused by Heaven, Heaven is revealed in all such effects as these, not, indeed, with the complete circle, but with part of it, in them. Thus its movement must be not only with them, but beyond them, and as one arch of life retains (and I say retains, not only of them, but also of other living creatures) almost all the lives, ascending and descending, they must be, as it were, similar in appearance to the form of the arch...Where the top of this arch may be, it is difficult to know, on account of the inequality which had been spoken of above, but for the most part I believe between the thirtieth and fortieth year, and I believe that in the perfectly natural man it is the thirty-fifth year." The full meaning of this geometric metaphor will be discussed in Chapter Four – *Purgatorio and the Symbolism of the Human Chest*.

reference in this *cantica* involves a reference to “*lo bel pianeta*” – “the lovely planet”⁸⁸. This is Venus, a planet which is “lovely” in that it is both pleasant in appearance, but also the planet “of love”, and Love, in its capacity to transform and renew, is the controlling power that will revive the souls of its penitential visitors and fit them for ascension to Heaven.⁸⁹ But Venus here is rising as the Morning Star, and we know that “bright Morning Star” is one of the titles the risen Christ assigns to himself in the Book of Revelation.⁹⁰ At the summit of Mt Purgatory, after three days and nights in a temporal realm, Dante is effectively “re-baptised” and transfigured into a pure physical state so that he is ready for his own ascension.⁹¹ Finally, the poet’s flight through the heavenly realms is in imitation of the bodily ascension of Christ as suggested by the biblical narrative,⁹² and Dante makes it plain that he is somehow still in a version of his mortal, earthly form when undertaking this journey.⁹³ While the astronomical references in Dante’s text are not always strictly accurate, and may invite differing interpretations, the general intent of the narrative is nonetheless clear: the journey of the pilgrim *in the story* is designed to explicitly parallel the crucifixion, descent, resurrection and ascension of Christ.⁹⁴ Read retrospectively, the success of the work as a literary and cultural landmark may in part give force to this parallel, so that Dante is now regarded as a crucial figure in the transmission of western culture. He is now viewed as a “crux” figure who stood at the intersection of cultures and political energies and who brought to summation the virtues of antiquity while ushering in the first steps towards modernity.⁹⁵ Or, to repeat John Ruskin’s famous quote, Dante was “the central man in all the world” in which all of the very best attributes and qualities of man were brought together in harmonious accord: as if, in one person was to be seen the very high point of human attainment.⁹⁶

⁸⁸ *Pur.* 1:19.

⁸⁹ *Pur.* 1:4-6 – “*e canterò di quel secondo regno / dove l’umano spirito si purga / e di salire al ciel diventa degno.*” (“And I’ll sing, now, about that second realm / where human spirits purge themselves from stain, / becoming worthy to ascend to Heaven.”)

⁹⁰ *Rev.* 22:16.

⁹¹ *Pur.* 33:142-145 – “*Io ritornai da la santissima onda / rifatto sì come piante novella / rinovellate di novella fronda, puro e disposto a salire a le stelle.*” (“I came back from that holiest of waves / remade, refreshed as any new tree is, / renewed, refreshed with foliage anew, pure and prepared to ride towards the stars.”)

⁹² Cf. Lk 24:50-51, Mk 16:19.

⁹³ *Par.* 1:73-75 – “*S’i’ era sol di me quel che creasti / novellamente, amor che ‘l ciel governi, / tu ‘l sai, che col tuo lume mi levasti.*” (“Whether I was no more than soul (which love, / in governing the spheres, made lastly new), You know, who raised me up through Your pure light.”)

⁹⁴ For a discussion of Dante’s astronomy as it relates to the setting of the “ideal Easter” in the *Commedia*, see Patrick Boyde, *Dante, Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 163-165.

⁹⁵ Kirkpatrick, “Dante and the Body” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, p. 236.

⁹⁶ R. W. B. Lewis, *Dante* (New York: Lipper/Viking, 2001), p. 191.

The complicated political circumstances in which Dante suddenly found himself as poet-in-exile are well known, and lie beyond the scope of this discussion. Yet it is important to recognise that political justice has a place in Dante's symbolic representations of the human body.⁹⁷ For the purposes of this argument, it is enough to read Dante's wholly shocking and unjust predicament as a kind of death, or, at least, a form of spiritual and cultural *disembodiment*.⁹⁸ To Dante, as to all residents of medieval Italian city-states, life *was* the existence conducted in the self-contained and ordered microcosm of the city-state. The nexus between an individual citizen and their home city existed to a degree almost unimaginable in our own time, when large-scale migration and global transportation have become commonplace. It is a measure of the difference between Dante's time and ours that the *Commedia* should be considered as belonging to the oeuvre of "prison literature", produced within what has called "the invisible walls of exile."⁹⁹ For the medieval walled city was the "inside" in which all desired to find their security and identity. The city was inextricably bound with one's lineage, connections, religious practice, political allegiances, and cultural heritage. To live outside of this enduring and supporting structure was a kind of half-life; and at worse, as Dante found, to be an exile, separated from everything that made one's life purposeful and meaningful, was to be *persona non grata*. To live outside the recognition and identity that came with being a member of a city was, quite literally, to be nobody: "Florence was not merely his birthplace, it was the very context of his being."¹⁰⁰ Thus for Dante the plea for personal justice is deeply personal but not only so. If living in a well-governed and spiritually orientated city-state is the ideal forum for human existence, then the loss of such existence is all the more difficult to endure – that we should be cut off from the wellspring of our very being is among the most wretched of experiences. In accord with his representation of himself as the archetypal pilgrim and exile *in the story*, Dante fuses poetic narrative and personal circumstances to present his claim for personal restoration as an image of the restoration required for his society as a whole. In parallel to another of our themes – the

⁹⁷ For a detailed study of the circumstances which led to Dante's political banishment from Florence, see Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, pp. 145-147; Lewis, *Dante*, pp. 71-84.

⁹⁸ It should be recalled that the proposed punishment should he ever unlawfully venture within the precinct of Florence was to be burnt alive at the stake, a cruel and painful death in which the body suffered something close to total obliteration. Dante would not have had to exercise his imagination in order to sense the extreme intensity of this bodily experience. A snippet in *Purgatorio* provides evidence that he had witnessed people being burned, possibly at the famous battle of Campaldino of 1289, notable for its bloodiness, in which Dante had been a participant. *Pur.* 27:17-18: "*imaginando forte / umani corpi già veduta accesi.*" ("...imagining / bodies of human beings I'd seen burn.") See also Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p. 136; Lewis, *Dante*, pp. 39-42.

⁹⁹ Kirkpatrick, "Dante and the Body" in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, p. 241.

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, *Dante*, p. 2.

microcosmic nature of Man in the universe – Dante’s plea for personal reinstatement is a microcosmic representation of his call for universal justice.

It is this sense of isolated disembodiment that informs much of Dante’s treatment of the damned in the *Inferno*.¹⁰¹ The residents of Hell represent an otherworldly vision of the ultimate exile, being cut off from the knowledge of, and being unknown by, the presence of God. But Dante suffers in his earthly life a version of “death” that is a reversal of that which we should rightly fear – namely, the separation of soul *from* the body. The literal death that involves the separation of body and soul, and the ending of the body’s physical operations, was naturally conceived of as “the soul fleeing the body”. The continuing presence of the inanimate corpse after death naturally led to conceptions of the soul leaving the body to further its existence in the realms of the other-world, whatever they might be. Dante’s exile, and plaintive expression of hope for return, is an inversion of this. He has a body which has left his “soul”.

It can also be seen how the poet’s political circumstances and the poem itself are related to each other in a curiously symbiotic fashion. For while it is likely that the original inspiration for the composition of the *Commedia* came to Dante while he was still a secure citizen of Florence, it is arguable that the circumstance of his nineteen-year political exile itself provided him with the opportunity, and, it can be argued, the motivation, for writing the poem. It hardly escapes notice that throughout the *Commedia*, even in the higher reaches of the *Paradiso*, Dante launches bitter and passionate invectives against those who conspired to banish him from his native city. And, of course, one of the earliest criticisms of the work was that Dante had constructed an imaginary world, and enacted final judgment over its inhabitants, so that he could reward his allies and condemn his opponents.¹⁰² What can be safely said is that at least part of Dante’s commitment to the ideals of universal political justice is an attempt to bring attention to, and potentially redress, his own cruel circumstances. It remains an open question, however, as to whether the *Commedia* would have been composed if Dante had merely continued into comfortable old age, undisturbed by political events. Certainly it would have taken on a less political flavour.

¹⁰¹ Robin Kirkpatrick, introduction to *Inferno*, p. xiii.

¹⁰² While there is some weight to this argument, detailed analysis of his concepts of justice have revealed that his scheme of punishments and rewards contains far more subtlety and complexity than a simple ledger of measure for measure. See Kirkpatrick, “Dante and the Body” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, pp. 244-245.

What Dante's own hand clearly declares is that he saw the *Commedia* as the means by which his personal injustice might be righted. Indeed, it became, in the end, the *only* possible means by which he might achieve restoration, given the failure of his long-held dreams for a political solution. Remarkably, after almost two decades of an isolation that was tantamount to a personal disembodiment, Dante places hope in the sheer power of his own poetic genius. At the beginning of *Paradiso* XXV Dante famously declares his hope for a return to Florence in these terms:

*Se mai continga che 'l poema sacro
 al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
 sì che m'ha fatto per molti anni macro,
 vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
 del bello ovile ov' io dormi' agnello,
 nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra;
 con altra voce omai, con altro vello
 ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte
 del mio battesimo prenderò 'l cappello;
 però che ne la fede, che fa conte
 l'anime a Dio, quivi intra' io, e poi
 Pietro per lei sì mi girò la fronte.*

If ever it should happen that this sacred work,
 to which both Earth and heaven have set their hands,
 (making me over many years grow gaunt)
 might overcome the cruelty that locks me out
 from where I slept, a lamb in that fine fold,
 the enemy of wolves that war on it,
 with altered fleece, with altered voice, I shall
 return as poet, taking, at my fount
 of baptism, the laurel for my crown.
 For I first entered there within the faith
 that makes us known, in soul, to God, and then,
 for that same faith, Saint Peter ringed my brow.

(*Par.* XXV, 1-12).

Here, Dante poignantly voices the faint, human hope (“if ever it should happen” / “might overcome”) that his *poetry alone* will prove sufficient to persuade the Florentine authorities to offer him that for which he has longed – an unconditional return to the status of full citizen. This return from exile is envisaged as a form of re-birth, or “resurrection”, in that it might include a public acknowledgement of his artistic achievements in the baptistery of San Giovanni, the civic and religious heart of the city. Dante softens his usual condemnation of

the city here, to reflect upon it as a safe and welcoming place – “that fine fold” – in which he was born, baptised, and grew to full citizenship. A return to this secure space is a form of re-baptism, and re-naming, whence he can be fully restored as both artist and citizen. The sacrament of baptism contains much symbolism that is analogous to resurrection, and Dante would have us envisage his return to Florence as a kind of bodily resurrection, an imitation of his original baptism in its alternate form. He emphasises that the experience of banishment has been quite literally a form of disembodiment, in the wasting away of his very flesh – “making me over many years grow gaunt.” Significantly, this is also the only moment in the *Commedia* in which Dante refers to himself as *poeta*. It is the granting of the laurel crown, the traditional award for poetic excellence, which will mark the new man. In this way Dante can be seen as endeavouring to “write his own resurrection.”

In Canto XIV of the *Paradiso* Dante contemplates the nature of the resurrected bodies of the blessed, where King Solomon, the biblical epitome of worldly wisdom, is moved to declare that the souls of the heavenly realms not only long for their earthly bodies, but that they will only become truly and fully human when they are re-united to their bodies. In an ascending, three-fold use of “*crescer*” (“increase”), Solomon maintains that the reunited human form will be more, far more, in all respects, than the earthly body alone, or the beatified soul alone. He says that just as the goodness of God’s glory will increase in the unified human form, so too that form’s ability to comprehend such glory will increase, which will only add to the divine “fire” that produces such, which will again increase the beatitude of the form, and so on in an ever-escalating scale of bliss. Like two mirrors that eternally reflect and amplify each other’s image, the re-unified form and its creator are coupled in a perfect twinning. To Dante, this is the destination of both the poem that he writes and the human life that his poem is intended to direct – the final perfection of “*la carne gloriosa e santa*” (“glorious and sacred flesh”)¹⁰³.

At the commencement of the *Paradiso* Dante tells us how the story will end – he will reach the sphere of the Empyrean to behold He who:

...*tutto move*
per l’universo penetra, e risplende
in una parte più e meno altrove.

¹⁰³ *Par.* 14:43.

...moves all things that are,
penetrates the universe and then shines back,
reflected more in one part, less elsewhere.

(*Par. I*, 1-2).

“All things that are”, in their own way, bear witness to the glory of their maker. The universal order is expressed in the relationships of quantity and quality, between emanation and reflection. All things are purposeful and meaningful, and all things are literally, for Dante, *risplende* – “shining”. Everything carries within it, by mere fact of its existence, the reflected splendour of the divine. In the *Convivio* Dante defines the nature of splendour as the state in which all things display their full potential and show the glory of their maker: “They speak of it as a ray of light while it passes through the medium from its source into the first body in which it has its end; they call it Splendour where it is reflected back from some part that has received illumination.”¹⁰⁴ Everything, in this understanding, is splendid. But the most splendid thing of all creation is the form of the human being, who is the summit and the primary symbol of creation. As we come to know, the scriptures told Dante, so too *will* we be known. Finally, Dante says, when we truly see we will also be seen as we truly are. The highest reaches of poetry might show us that witnessing the ultimate nature of reality is like looking into another, eye to eye, face to face.

¹⁰⁴ *Convivio*, 3.14.

CHAPTER TWO

A CONSIDERATION OF DANTE'S USE OF ALLEGORY, AND HIS USE OF THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPT OF "MAN AS MICROCOSM"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he spoke of the temple of his body.

John 2:19-22.

The project at hand offers an alternative, allegorical reading of the symbolism of the human body as expressed in Dante's work, with particular emphasis on how the structural architecture of the *Commedia* may be understood as a testament to the imperishability and centrality of the human form. A reading of this nature requires a contextual and theoretical base regarding the poem's allegorical form and basic architectonic structure, and the establishment of such a base will comprise the content of this chapter. Two key ideas are pertinent here. Firstly, that it is perfectly in accord with Dantean scholarly tradition to construct a thematically-arranged, allegorical reading of the *Commedia*; and that in this particular instance it is appropriate to argue that Dante's employment of a specific form of allegory, namely the so-called "allegory of the scriptures", neatly accords with two crucial components of the poem previously considered: his central concerns over the nature and purpose of the human form, and his employment of the resurrection topos as a fundamental element of the poem's narrative structure. Secondly, that the poet has chosen to employ the human form as the primary natural symbol by which he underpins the entire topographical and moral structure of the poem; and that in doing so he fully incorporates, and brings to an unprecedented summation, the ancient tradition of literary representations of man as a microcosmic representation of the world. It has been established that of supreme importance to Dante's work is the doctrine of the Incarnation, and that equally vital is the centrality of the resurrection of *the body*, the body of the incarnate Christ, to both the narrative structure and chronology of the *Commedia* and the author's personal circumstances that surrounded the composition of the poem. It can now be shown how the *Commedia* might be viewed as an attempt to compose a symbolic object, which, constructed along a broad analogy with the

tripartite arrangement of the human form, is imitative of both the cosmos as a whole and the human body that was perceived as a miniaturised representation of that cosmos.

To modern readers the allegorical form presents some difficulties, not least because the proper context or background for the reading of Christian medieval allegory is the (now largely overlooked) ritualised practice of the liturgy, in which all the available signs and texts of the visible world “could be converted from their immediate meaning and thus contribute to the enactment of the story of divine creation.”¹ God, it was understood, had created a universe in which everything was a reflection of the divine nature, and could point to a higher meaning beyond the merely physical properties of the object. In a universe of multiple levels and layers of meaning, all things can be signs that point to the Divine Intelligence that underpins the created world. To the medieval thinker the meanings contained within allegory were immediately intelligible because they were immersed in a world that was “read” in such a way that is no longer natural to modern audiences. For them, “allegory meant something more real than it does for us; in allegory people saw a concrete realisation of thought, an enrichment of possibilities of expression.”² Additionally, allegory, in its disposition towards systemisation, was well suited to the intellectual climate of medieval Christendom. Here is an instinctively bookish culture that prized order and organisation; universally acknowledged a divine creator who was author of, and presided over, a universe so ordered and organised; and participated in a body of knowledge, still human in scale and readily accessible to an individual thinker, which could be contained within a single artistic or intellectual endeavour.³ The longing inherent in such endeavours, in an era that preceded the explosions of scientific knowledge and geographical exploration that would later emerge, is characterised by the desire to incorporate, to bring into a single “body”, or a single book, all that was known or could be immediately read in the natural world. However, we no longer share these experiences. A gulf exists between Dante’s world and our own, over which the common contemporary reader, sharing little or none of Dante’s theology, religious conviction or geocentric cosmology, can reach only by granting at least a notional and temporary assent

¹ Robin Kirkpatrick, introduction to *Inferno*, p. lxxv. For treatment of Dante’s use of the Christian liturgy within the *Commedia*, see John C Barnes, “Vestiges of the Liturgy in Dante’s Verse” in *Dante and the Middle Ages - Literary and Historical Essays*, eds. John C Barnes and Cormac O’ Cuilleainain (Chippenham: Antony Rowe Ltd., 1995), pp. 231-270; Matthew Treherne, “Liturgical Personhood: Creation, Penitence, and Praise in the *Commedia*” in *Dante’s Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, eds. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 131-160.

² Erich Auerbach, “St. Francis of Assisi in Dante’s *Commedia*” in *Dante*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 35.

³ Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, pp. 10-11.

to these ways of seeing. Indeed, a major shift has occurred in the relationship between Dante and his audience, in that common understandings on the supreme matters of human existence, once shared, are no longer so. Likewise, Dante's use of images to produce a figurative meaning has tended to become obscured or forgotten over the passing of the centuries between his time and ours, resulting in a loss of the immediate transference of meaning from artist to audience. It is an indicator of how far we have removed ourselves from these understandings that contemporary editions of the great works of the medieval mind require introductions designed to briefly re-educate us in such matters.

Few aspects of Dante's work have attracted as much interest as his employment of allegorical forms in the composition of the *Commedia*, an issue that occupied commentators since the beginning of scholarly attention to the poem.⁴ This is not unexpected, since the work's obvious features include its highly structured arrangement, its frequent use of allusions and symbolic references, and its pervasive sense of *intimation*. That is, the alert reader is frequently mindful of "something else going on" beyond or behind the surface of the text. This has been a standard response to the poem throughout the entire history of its reception, and stands as a seemingly indisputable pillar of the Dantean interpretive method:

There is a pervasive belief, supported by a consensus that begins with the earliest commentators and still flourishes today, that the most fitting approach to the *Commedia* lies in attempting a predominantly allegorical reading. Many elements of allegorical explanation have become so firmly, almost unanimously established that it may seem foolhardy to even question them.⁵

While Dante's particular gift for dramatic interplay or detailed, realistic representation invites a high level of engagement with the literal level of the poem, the primary sense of the narrative seems ever ready to yield to higher or more complex modes of understanding. A highly distinctive feature of the poem, evidenced by its overwhelmingly positive reception and continued interest to scholars and readers over the spread of seven centuries, is its accessibility across a wide spectrum of reading experiences. The lay reader may participate in the dynamic, immediate thrills of Dante's fantastical narrative (and certainly the poem can be adequately enjoyed at a literal level without the reader having to engage in the search for

⁴ Peter S. Hawkins, "Dante and the Bible" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 133.

⁵ Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. vii.

higher meaning)⁶, just as the scholar may labour to elucidate its myriad cultural references, or the linguist investigate the intricacies of the author's poetics. The multivalent nature of the work, seemingly inexhaustible, continues to inspire various interpretive efforts from within the field of Dantean scholarship, such that a substantial range of allegorical readings of Dante's work have now been, according to one commentator, "...contrived by the subtle minds of his interpreters..."⁷

The variety of available responses suggests that any detailed reading of the work will be largely determined by our understanding of the allegorical nature of the poem; or, indeed, whether we feel justified in regarding it as an allegory at all.⁸ For an alternate perception is that Dante is often careful to direct his audience to the particular, literal level of the poem's text.⁹ Though allegory was a pervasive form throughout the literary canon upon which Dante drew, it is noticeable that the word *allegorica* is absent from the *Commedia* itself. Significantly, however, when Dante does refer to his own creation within the text, it is always its archetypal structure and its divisibility into *canzone*, or its quasi-sacred nature as a *Commedia*, that he emphasises.¹⁰ It should also be noted that Dante himself attests that the

⁶ Michele Barbi, *Life of Dante* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), p. 85.

⁷ Ibid. For an example of variant allegorical readings of various part of the *Commedia*, see Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, p. 65.

⁸ For an historical overview of the scholarship of Dante's allegorical methods, see Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 227-233.

⁹ Robin Kirkpatrick, introduction to *Inferno*, pp. lxii-lxiii. It is not appropriate to seek at every point in the poem an allegorical meaning hidden behind the literal sense of the text. And yet set-pieces often have the effect of 'alerting' the reader to a heightened state of examination, and can therefore make such 'hidden' meanings less difficult to detect than otherwise. A moderately versed reader will be able to identify allegorical references in the great pageant that concludes the *Purgatorio*, for example, but only the highly-skilled can reveal allusions buried with great subtlety under the surface of the text. See also Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, pp. 5-7.

¹⁰ See *Inf.* 16:127-129 – "*ma qui tacer nol posso, e per le note / di questa comedia, lettore, ti guiro, / s'elle non sien di lunga grazia vote,*" ("I cannot, though, be silent here. Reader, / I swear by every rhyme this comedy / has caused to chime (may it not lack long favour)"; *Inf.* 20:2-3 – "*e dar materia al ventesimo canto / de la prima canzon, ch'e d'I sommersi.*" ("and give some substance to this twentieth chant / that deals (*Cantica I*) with sunken souls."; *Inf.* 21:1-2 – "*altro parlando / che la mia comedia cantar non cura,*" ("speaking / of things that I shan't, in this comedy, / commit to song."; *Pur.* 33:139-141 – "*ma perchè piene son tutte le carte / ordite a questa cantica seconda, non mi lascia più ir lo fren de l'arte.*" ("However, since these pages now are full, / prepared by rights to take the second song, the reins of art won't let me pass beyond."); *Par.* 23:62 – "*convien saltar lo sacro poema*" ("the sacred epic has to make a leap"; *Par.* 25:1-2 – "*che 'l poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra*" ("this sacred work, / to which both Earth and Heaven have set their hands") It should also be noted that the specific "projects" that commingle throughout the text, such as his personal analysis of contemporary politics or his desire to re-assert the value of classical literature and philosophy, demand a focus on what have been called *figural* identities. (Auerbach, "Figural Art in the Middle Ages" in *Dante*, pp. 21-31) Dante's is a new kind of allegory populated almost exclusively by real personages from history, not archetypal literary figures. Where Dante does elect to employ rhetorical types, such as the medieval standard of Fortune in *Inferno VII*, or the new creation of Lady Poverty in *Paradiso XI*, it serves only to highlight the uncommonness of such techniques. The attention to real historical personages as representational

poem itself was not constructed as a deliberate allegory, but as an outpouring of revelation, so that the literal level of the text might engage the reader and provide them with a moral message. The *Commedia*, viewed from this perspective, has a paramount practical end that renders secondary all attempts to devise alternate meanings, even though it is readily apparent that these meanings *are there* for those able to undertake the requisite examinations of the text.¹¹ A useful intermediate position then is to view the poem as a kind of *revelation-allegory* that displays a distinct amalgam of purposes, and in which all things carry, or could be seen to carry, multiple significances.¹²

An abundance of scholarly energy has been expended in constructing, attacking or defending certain viewpoints regarding Dante's use of allegory; the inevitable and perhaps lamentable outcome of which has been to focus attention at an unnecessary remove from the primary issue under consideration.¹³ This appears particularly unfortunate, given that Dante's readers find themselves in a privileged position in regards to *how* to read his *magnum opus*, for, uniquely among medieval texts, the author himself has provided us with such instruction, and it is to this that our attention is best directed. In the famous (and regrettably disputed) letter to his patron, Can Grande della Scala of Verona, Dante sets out for his benefactor (and therefore, by logical extension, his entire future readership) the methods by which his work can, or should, be understood.¹⁴ Chapter six of the epistle prefaces Dante's intent to "write something in the manner of an introduction of the part of the comedy above named..."¹⁵ and clearly establishes that, above all, the poem is to be regarded as a "doctrinal work".¹⁶ That is,

"types", it has been argued, serves as a poetic means to express the dominant view of earthly life in the Middle Ages – that the physical world in which men lived, and into which God chose to enter, was very real; but that it was only an intimation, a *figura* (Dante is fond of the related term *umbra*, or "shadow") of the "authentic, future, ultimate truth, the real reality that will unveil and preserve the *figura*." (ibid., pp. 28-29.) On the other hand, the use of historical figures may appear not to flesh out Dante's allegorical framework as may have been intended; for such is the realism and naturalism of his individual portraiture that it can be seen as tending to obscure the very programme for which it is designed. In this reading, *figura* is "a mode of writing in which signs and their significations are historically true." However, the depiction of individual human persons, indestructible and vibrant, obscures the God-inspired order that is thought to give rise to it. (Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy*, p. 231.)

¹¹ Barbi, *Life of Dante*, p. 87.

¹² Barbara Reynolds, *Dante: The Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2006), p. 73.

¹³ See Freccero, "Introduction to *Inferno*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp. 172-189; Singleton, *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure*, pp. 11-19.

¹⁴ For the sake of simplicity, I proceed on the acceptance of the authenticity of the letter to Can Grande della Scala as being from Dante's hand. There is more than adequate scholarly attention to this issue, such as Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, pp. 103-111, who provides an extensive linguistic analysis of the letter to construct an argument for lack of authenticity.

¹⁵ Dante's letter to Can Grande della Scala, in Latham, ed. *A Translation of Dante's Eleven Letters*, p. 192.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the primary purpose of the work is not aesthetic, or even theological, but *moral*. It is written for the instruction and edification of its readers, a point later reinforced in chapter fifteen, where he declares:

But omitting all subtle investigation, it can be briefly stated that the aim of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery and to guide them to a state of happiness.¹⁷

Dante's letter also carefully elucidates the title of the poem. The form of a *Commedia*, he claims, is that of the "village song", composed in a style "mild and humble".¹⁸ "Comedies" are written in a low language, simple in style so that they may be comprehensible to all men. Dante's decision to compose the *Commedia* in his native Tuscan dialect, over classical Latin, argues for his commitment to extend the reach of the work to the largest audience, in keeping with his avowed apostolic purposes.¹⁹

Chapter seven of Dante's letter commences with the now-famous declaration that the *Paradiso*, and by extension the entire *Commedia*, is a difficult work containing many layers of meaning.²⁰ The author's intent is clear on two main points: the work is deliberately

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 199. Dante's insistence on the moral component as primary in the *Commedia* has a clear precedent. In *Convivio* 2.15 he is building an allegory that equates the various spheres of heaven with the essential human sciences, and he aligns moral philosophy with the Primum Mobile, stating that the study of moral philosophy is the proper preparation for all the other sciences, just as the Primum Mobile was thought to give the primary and unending impetus for the movement of the planetary beings: 'The Crystalline Heaven, which, as the Primum Mobile, has been previously counted, has a sufficiently evident comparison to Moral Philosophy; for Moral Philosophy, according to what Tommaso says upon the second book of the Ethics, teaches us method in the other Sciences...Not otherwise, should Moral Philosophy cease to be, would the other Sciences be hidden for some time, and there would be no generation nor life of happiness, and all books would be in vain, and all discoveries of old. Therefore it is sufficiently evident that there is a comparison between this Heaven and Moral Philosophy.'

¹⁸ Dante's letter to Can Grande della Scala, in *ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁹ The implications of this declared intent cannot be overlooked, for again we are forced to consider the seemingly irreparable separation that exists between Dante's time and our own. For the contemporary reader who takes the text at face value, an unavoidable judgement must be to regard as a failure the author's declared intent to uphold the primary purpose of the work as moral, for how many modern readers claim that a reading of the poem had resulted in their own personal conversion? In fact, the opposite reaction is the more likely. Dante's time is much closer to antiquity than to "modernity", so that his work, with all its medievalism and Catholicism, seen across the chasm that exists between his day and ours, inclines not to convert or even persuade but to reinforce our own prejudices against such qualities. Indeed, forces at play throughout the history of the poem's transmission and analysis have sought to deliberately downplay the Christian meaning of the work, with the effect of placing its true nature at a further remove from its audience. See Charles S. Singleton, "*In Exitu Israel De Aegypto*" in *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Freccero (Galveston: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 111. And yet, undoubtedly the power and fascination of the work endures. Its universalism, its summative nature, seems to carry an innate power that transcends the milieu of its composition.

²⁰ Dante's letter to Can Grande della Scala, in Latham, ed. *A Translation of Dante's Eleven Letters*, pp. 193-194: "For the clearness, therefore, of what I shall say, it must be understood that the meaning of this work is not simple, but rather can be said to be of many significations, that is, of several meanings; for there is one meaning that is derived from the letter, and another that is derived from the things indicated by the letter. The first is

constructed to be read on various levels of interpretation, which presents potential difficulties for the reader as well as opening up multiple opportunities of meaning; and, the famous example of the four-fold method of interpretation as it can be applied to the story of the Jewish Exodus, used to demonstrate such possible meanings, shows that the model upon which the author has chosen to base his entire work is *scriptural*.²¹ Dante proceeds in chapter eight to declare that the *subject* of the work also has a double meaning: literally, the state of souls after death; and allegorically, “man, liable to the reward or punishment of Justice, according as through the freedom of the will he is deserving or undeserving.”²² Thus the earliest readers of the *Commedia* were briefed from the beginning that the reading of the poem was no small undertaking. What confronted them was a new kind of supra-allegory, in which previous forms of narrative were drawn upon but then surpassed, in both the complexity of the arrangement of subject material, and the exalted status to which the work laid claim.²³ Furthermore, the new emphasis on particularity and concreteness in the narrative, what I perceive as the “bodiliness” of the text, extends the work beyond previous

called *literal*, but the second *allegorical* or *mystical*. That this method of expounding may be more clearly set forth, we can consider it in these lines: “When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion.” For if we consider the *letter* alone, the departure of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses is signified; if the *moral meaning*, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace is signified. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they can in general all be said to be allegorical, since they differ from the literal or historic...”

²¹ Dante had previously declared his endorsement of the traditional four-fold method of textual interpretation, in *Convivio*, 2.1 – “I say then, as is narrated in the first chapter, that this exposition must be Literal and Allegorical; and to make this explicit one should know that it is possible to understand a book in four different ways, and that it ought to be explained chiefly in this manner.

The one is termed Literal, and this is that which does not extend beyond the text itself, such as is the fir narration of that thing whereof you are discoursing, an appropriate example of which is the third Song, which discourses of Nobility.

Another is termed Allegorical, and it is that which is concealed under the veil of fables, and is a Truth concealed under a beautiful Untruth;...Verily the theologians take this meaning otherwise that do the poets: but, because my attention here is to follow the way of the poets, I shall take the Allegorical sense according as it is used by the poets.

The third sense is termed Moral; and this is that which the readers ought intently to search for in books, for their own advantage and for that of their descendents; as one can espy in the Gospel, when Christ ascended the Mount for the Transfiguration, that, of the twelve Apostles, He took with Him only three. From which one can understand in the Moral sense that in the most secret things we ought to have but little company.

The fourth sense is termed Mystical, that is, above sense, supernatural; and this it is, when spiritually one expounds a writing which even in the Literal sense by the things signified bears express reference to the Divine things of Eternal Glory...”

²² Dante’s letter to Can Grande della Scala, in Latham, ed. *A Translation of Dante’s Eleven Letters*, p. 195.

²³ “‘The condition of souls after death’ might seem superficially to correspond to the literal subject of the *Commedia* – yet it could apply equally to any of the dozen of medieval visions of the otherworld that were set down in literary form; it in no way indicates that Dante’s poem is radically different from these. The authors of such visions, who claimed to have been shown diverse conditions of souls in the beyond, never made claims as far-reaching as those that Dante makes within the context of his poem. No medieval author before Dante had measured himself against Aeneas and St Paul, as one impelled by divine grace to undertake and otherworld journey for the sake of mankind, in order to right the world’s injustices at a crucial moment of its history.” Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, p. 2

allegorical representations, since these very qualities imbue the work with a sense of reality that was irreducible to the then-existent literary genres.²⁴

Dante elects to employ the so-called “allegory of the theologians”²⁵, or as he himself described it, the “polysemous way”,²⁶ because it allows him to incorporate what he described as “many significations”.²⁷ In this model of interpretation, scripture is, in its first sense, historical and true. It purports to give an account of the unfolding of certain special events, specifically the history of the Jewish race, in an orderly, mostly linear narrative. In holy texts, all other meanings which may be found within and indeed are intended to be found, have been traditionally understood as being placed so by the higher divine author who was directly inspiring the lower human author. Only divinely inspired writings could contain the perfection of unified meaning in this model, and only the theologian was authorised to interpret these meanings; since only the holy texts were thought to hold within them the third and fourth levels of meaning – the moral and anagogical – as God was seen as both the author of all moral law and the architect of heaven. These higher meanings, however, are always dependent upon the veracity of the first, literal meaning. The four-fold method of interpretation became an excellent means for drawing out the subtle or hidden meanings in a text, and consequently the reading of scripture was held to be among the highest of human experiences, since it involved the operation of a man’s intellect on multiple levels and at its loftiest reaches. Each method of interpretation could enhance the others, in a magnifying effect, compounding the understanding and pleasure for the reader. But scripture was also written in such a way that it could never be completely exhausted by human analysis – it would always have something new to say to succeeding generations of scholars and readers.

²⁴ Singleton, *Dante’s Commedia: Elements of Structure*, pp. 12-13: “The whole journey beyond exceeds metaphor. It is irreducible to the kind of allegory in which it had its origin. As this figure of a living man, this whole person body and soul, moves through the doorway to Hell, the poem quite the recognizable and familiar double vision in which it began, to come into single and most singular vision, that is, into single journey; to embodied vision, having a substance and a persuasion that could not have been expected from this beginning. There unfolds the line of a literal journey given as real, and it is the body beyond, the flesh brought into these realms of spirit there, that like a catalyst precipitates everywhere the fleshed, the embodied and incarnate....The particular, the individual, the concrete, the fleshed, the incarnate, is everywhere with the strength of reality and the irreducibility of reality itself. Here is vision truly made flesh. And the possibility of it arose and was born back there in the prologue. We shall not exhaust the mystery of it for all our scrutiny. It is because this is so that we have never before known an allegory like Dante’s allegory...There is no literary allegory to compare with this.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁶ Singleton, “*In Exitu Israel De Aegypto*” in *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 112. For a response to Singleton’s claims for the four-fold method as it may apply to Dante’s work, see Freccero, “Introduction to *Inferno*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, passim.

²⁷ Dante’s letter to Can Grande della Scala, in Latham, ed. *A Translation of Dante’s Eleven Letters*, p. 193.

Dante's work is analogous to scripture in that it accords with one critic's contention that a definitive quality of "classic" literature, within which canon Dante has been afforded a lofty and undisputed status, is "a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers."²⁸

It is important to elaborate on the evidence that argues for Dante electing to employ the "allegory of the theologians". Scripture was always understood as being given for the edification of its audience – specifically, for their salvation – and Dante explicitly claims that the primary purpose of his poem is *moral*. In a parallel with the structure of the work, the figure of conversion as a journey from misery to happiness, the imagined outcome of the work is the redemption and transformation of its audience. In keeping with his quasi-apostolic mission, Dante proclaims that the *Commedia* is being constructed "*in pro del mondo che mal vive*" ("to aid the world that lives all wrong").²⁹ The parallelism of the poem's narrative is that the *example* of the main protagonist being led through a moral maze by a chain of approved guides is, in the reading of the work, mirrored in the author's guidance of his readership. The authority for such moral imperative, however, can rest only on the text's divine authorship. That the Holy Scriptures were the "word of God" was attested by both the texts themselves and the long tradition to which they gave birth. Similarly, Dante lays claim to the divine inspiration of *his* work. At the conclusion of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante says that he is the recipient of a revelatory experience:

After this sonnet there appeared to me a marvellous vision in which I saw things which made me decide to write no more of this blessed one until I could do so more worthily. And to this end I shall apply myself as much as I can, as she indeed knows.³⁰

The key phrase from this passage, in the current context, is "which made me", as if Dante is irresistibly moved by a supra-human force to produce a new kind of vision-literature. It is impossible to see how the "worthy application" to which he refers, given the subject and context within which the allusions sits, can be any other than the *Commedia*, so that the *Vita Nuova* can be re-read as a precursor to the grander work that succeeded it. In Dante's new work, however, is an ancient model. The conversion of desirable vision into avowed

²⁸ Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?*, p. 5.

²⁹ *Pur.* 32:103.

³⁰ *Vita Nuova*, XLII.

testament follows the visionary, prophetic and apostolic model of the writers of holy texts – “I saw, so I wrote.”³¹

Dante may also have absorbed the idea that the imitation of “God’s way of writing”, in which the moral and anagogical elements could be harmoniously present, involved assembling the meaningful spiritual events of his life and incorporating them into a narrative that demonstrated the divine providence that ordered such events; as though the writing of the poem was, in the true meaning of spiritual autobiography, both an attempt to gather these events into a meaningful arrangement and complete them by the work under his hands. In this way it can be seen to precisely mirror the psychological states of the many personae he describes in the after-life, who can only fully understand their lives as seen from its end-point. The dead, it is said, know more about life than the living, for only they have seen the completion of death that gives life its full meaning. There exists here a parallel with the eschatological plan of the *Commedia*. The “meaning” of paradise, it seems, can only be fully grasped by first seeing its opposite. This is an imitation of the way in which the events of the Old Testament, marked by the separation of God from his people, were supposed to point to the events of the New Testament, in which such separation is repaired. Dante can only fully understand the nature of beatitude because he has been face-to-face with the misery of spiritual alienation. Similarly, Dante attempts to incorporate the Christian view of history in the poem, for it purports to tell his whole life story as though he were standing outside of it.³² In addition, the work claims for itself a quasi-sacred status. Dante states that the composition of the *Commedia* is not merely a human act, as no work of art, in the traditional view, is ever merely human but brought about by “inspiration”; that is, in its proper meaning, the incorporation within the human artist of some divine or supernatural power. There are

³¹ At the end of the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice prepares Dante to take his otherworldly vision back to the realm of earth, with the following command: “*Tu nota, e sì come da me son porte / così queste parole segna a’ vivi / del viver ch’è un correre a la morte.*” (“Take note and, as these words are borne from me, / inscribe them for a sign to those who live, / the life that rapidly runs on to death.”) (*Pur.* 33: 52-54). This use of “*segna*” (“sign”) indicates the very poem in which we read of him receiving this instruction. In the manner of a prophet, Dante is the recipient of a divine command to report back to earth all that he has been granted to see and hear. Dante’s claim that he received the benefit of a special revelatory experience lies within the sphere of Christian poetics, for the scriptures attest that the Holy Spirit of God could and did visit individuals in just such a fashion, setting them apart for a particular calling or purpose, the most important of which was to become a witness in the world. Viewed from a Christian viewpoint, “...it would not be absurd to claim that a man inspired with the spirit of prophecy and poetry could discover the meaning of things and events, could use and manipulate God’s language, read God’s books and fuse elements therefrom into a book of his own.” (Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, *Structure and Thought in the Paradiso* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 31.) Dante’s status as a political exile therefore also neatly accords with his avowed prophetic role, in that he imitates that archetypal biblical figure – the lone voice crying in the wilderness.

³² Freccero, “An Introduction to the *Paradiso*” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 216.

moments when Dante regards his authorship as akin to the work of an amanuensis for God, transcribing that which is preternaturally dictated to him, as though all that is required of him is to remove his own ego or individuality from the process and allow the Divine Mind to pour forth from his pen.³³ As is well-known, in the twenty-fifth Canto of the *Paradiso*, dedicated to the theological virtue of hope, Dante expresses his own intensely human hope (poignantly unfulfilled, as it turned out) that he might return from exile to his native Florence, as a poet, through the sheer force of his poetic accomplishments, which he describes as “*che ‘l poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra*” (“this sacred work, / to which both Earth and Heaven have set their hands”).³⁴ Likewise, in *Paradiso* XXIII Dante refers to the inadequacy of his poem before the task of describing Beatrice’s smile, claiming that “*convien saltar lo sacrato poema*” (“the sacred epic has to make a leap”).³⁵

The exegetic tradition seems to reinforce both the “Allegory of the Theologians” model and the interpretation of Dante’s poem as a “second scripture”. The scriptures for Dante were a work-in-progress, since to the medieval exegete the process of uncovering the full meaning of the texts was in itself part of the historical fulfilment for which those texts were designed, a process that remained incomplete in Dante’s lifetime. The scriptures, in this view, stood before the interpreter “unfulfilled”, awaiting their proper reception and interpretation. Yet the weighty task of this interpretation fell to particular human beings who, however gifted or scrupulous in their work, were always open to fallibility and error. Therefore, interpretation was always (and possibly remains) susceptible to ambiguity and some uncertainty. Traditional exegesis did not contrast or see as irreconcilable the notions of authority and ambiguity, nor did they feel obliged to choose one standpoint over another.³⁶ This “process” of the scriptures had an end in which all the meanings of the texts would be drawn together in its final act, the Apocalypse, the “uncovering”.³⁷ Dante himself is eager to employ the figure of the veil as a metaphor for the gradual and progressive uncovering of knowledge, and he addresses the reader many times in a form that shows that the composition of the work is still in progress, as if the end of the book is still incomplete and possibly unclear.³⁸ Dante’s

³³ See Clive Staples Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 76-77.

³⁴ *Par.* 25:1-2.

³⁵ *Par.* 23:62.

³⁶ Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds, introduction to *Dante in English* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. lxvii.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

achievement, however it is regarded, is to stake out a position as the first human author to consciously apply the four-fold method of allegorical interpretation to his own work, however tentative or inconsistent the subsequent results of such methods may seem.³⁹ In parallel, the achievement of the Dantean scholar is to likewise unravel the meaning inherent within the “second scripture” of Dante’s text.

In all of this, Dante may have been mindful of St. Augustine’s handling of the question of biblical exegesis. In Book XII of the *Confessions*, Augustine undertakes an extended meditation upon the possible meanings that can be drawn from interpreting the opening two verses of *Genesis*. After lengthy consideration of the first verse, he admits the possibility that different interpretations of an allegorical text may exist, without either undermining the authority of the text or creating ambiguity in any particular reading:

There is no doubt of these truths in the minds of those whom you have gifted with insight to understand such matters and who firmly believe that Moses, your servant, spoke in the spirit of truth. But from these truths each of us chooses one or another to explain the phrase ‘In the Beginning God made heaven and earth’.⁴⁰

After further consideration of the second verse, he concludes with a remarkable statement that contains much significance for Dante’s own project:

For my part I declare resolutely and with all my heart that if I were called upon to write a book which was to be vested with the highest authority, I should prefer to write it in such a way that a reader could find re-echoed in my words whatever truths he was able to apprehend. I would rather write in this way than impose a single true meaning so explicitly that it would exclude all others, even though they contained no falsehood that could give me offence.⁴¹

The scenario which Augustine contemplates, read forward into history, appears to be precisely the experience of Dante as poet, who indeed claims that he was “called upon to write a book which was to be vested with the highest authority”; an approximation to the nature of scripture in this case being the loftiest profession an author could make. As it eventuated, “whatever truths he was able to apprehend” has indeed become the experience of

³⁹ Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, pp. 190-193.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), XII.20, p. 297.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, XII.31, pp. 308-309.

Dante's audience, for the author's self-declared "polysemous way" has allowed for a multiplicity of meanings and purposes to be drawn from the text.

As has been suggested, scholarly attempts to preserve the certainty or exclusivity of just one of the four levels of allegorical reading, as they may apply to Dante's work, has tended to obscure, rather than clarify, the issue at hand. We should be open to the probability that Dante, being a poet and not a systematic theologian, has deliberately chosen to use all the different levels of allegory, as it may have suited him for a particular purpose at a particular time.⁴² The *Commedia* is an immense project, composed over more than a decade, which seeks to incorporate a vast and complex assortment of influences and ideas into a harmonious structure. Any attempt to apply one particular method of interpretation across the entire poem will distort the work, for not even the most elaborate passages of Dante's work, nor indeed the multi-layered texts of the scriptures he sought to imitate, can more than temporarily contain all four of the standard levels of meaning. Most obviously, Dante's poem, like the scriptures it sought to imitate, does not always convey direct narrative or historical content; in which case it cannot meet the requirement, established in the "allegory of the theologians", of having a specific, literal level of meaning. It is here that we must allow that for Dante the poet, as for all poets, the primary sense of his text, in accordance with the "allegory of the poets", comprises the literal meaning. The words as they appear on the page convey a precise and literal meaning, which should be understood as such, whether or not they intimate a higher level of meaning, or whether, like the texts of scripture, they purport to relate an historical truth.⁴³ Whatever our understanding of the subtleties of these arguments when considering Dante's authorial intent, a distinction should be made between the possible latent meanings in the text, and the grand arrangement of the text *per se*. For it is the over-arching *structure* of the work, rather than the consistent rendering of a particular intent of meaning within the text, that can withstand the force of such sustained examination.

For a justification of this approach we need only refer again to the most authoritative source available to us, Dante's letter to Can Grande della Scala. The passages previously quoted

⁴² Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, pp. 332-333.

⁴³ See Freccero, "Introduction to *Inferno*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp. 179-187. It is of course natural that medieval theologians would have been instinctively mistrustful of the art of poetry, since poetry, apart from that which existed on the pages of scripture, was traditionally the form employed by those whole dealt in fiction. Dante achieves a way to overcome these concerns, since despite the self-consciously fictive moments in the *Commedia*, the poem's approximation to scripture in content and mood serves to elevate it beyond existing attitudes to the role of the poet in constructing valuable theological discourse.

here, derived from chapters six to eight, typically form the basis of scholarly attention on the issue of interpretative methodology; yet the subsequent portion of the letter, largely overlooked, allows us the flexibility of interpretation that potentially dissolves any tension concerning the “correct” approach. Having laid down the doctrinal, polysemous, and subjective nature of the work, Dante continues by discussing the “form of the treatise, and the form of treating it.”⁴⁴ Significantly, the emphasis here is not on the work’s consistency, but its divisibility and variety:

The form of the treatise is triple, according to its threefold division. The first division is where the whole work is divided into three canticles; the second is where each canticle is divided in cantos; the third is where each canto is divided into rhythms.⁴⁵

After explaining the basic divisional structure of the work, Dante would have the poem’s audience consider the various techniques of approach required for proper understanding: “The form or method of treating is *poetic, figurative, descriptive, digressive, transumptive*, and, in addition, *explanatory, divisible, probative, condemnatory, and explicit in examples*.”⁴⁶ Is this not in fact the experience of reading the *Commedia*, which moves us from one mode of expression to the next so effortlessly? Dante is endlessly shifting his tone and content, displaying a dazzling variety of style and material: allegorical set-piece, biblical allusion, theological discourse, astronomical observance, dialogue, historical digression, diatribe, acrostic, riddle, interrogative, metaphysical speculation, geographical reference, panorama, art criticism, philosophy, personal reminiscence, catalogues, prophecies, visions, dreams, and enchantments. The scriptures also contain many different literary “types” – myth, history, epigrams, philosophical speculation, poetry, prophecy, first-hand accounts, correspondence, visions, and this diversity of texts within the corpus of Holy Writ is necessary to reach the variety of human aptitudes and experiences.⁴⁷ This seems to match precisely with Dante’s

⁴⁴ Dante’s letter to Can Grande della Scala, in Latham, ed. *A Translation of Dante’s Eleven Letters*, p. 195.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 196. Readers of Dante will also recall his frequent habit of referring to his own structure of divisibility in the commentary sections of his two *prosimetrum* works, the *Convivio* and the *Vita Nuova*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, introduction to *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 1: Inferno*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 18: ‘Such breadth and diversity can be matched within a single book only by the Bible, which is itself a miscellaneous compilation of verse and prose, myth, chronicle, prophecy, allegory, and sententious wisdom, high style and low (although always sublime in some sense, being the transcription of God’s word). Medieval study of the Bible also affects how we interpret Dante’s poem, for Dante’s views of the multiple meanings possible for a text derive directly from techniques of biblical interpretation typical of his age (although by Dante’s day even works written by pagans – Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for example – were interpreted in a similar way). Although the manner and extent of Dante’s application of such schemes to his own poem is hotly disputed, that the richness of the poem’s meaning is in

advice on the proper “treatment” of the form of the “treatise” of the *Commedia* in chapter nine of the letter, and should be read as not a weakness or evidence of inconsistency, but as a testament to its strength. Traditional readings of the scriptures recognised their multiplicity and variety, and saw this as a virtue, praising the Divine author for allowing divergent levels of meaning. The scriptures express plurality in form, style and meaning, because they contain the entirety of existence, which is multiple and variant, and because they seek to address a humanity that is many and diverse. The heterogeneity of the *Commedia* can be perceived as an alternative argument for Dante’s employment of the four-fold method of interpretation since it gives him the very flexibility of approach that the multi-faceted scope of the work requires. An advantageous position, then, is to read the *Commedia* as an “open book” in which the reader finds an unprecedented level of freedom to explore and construct their own readings, despite the fact that the poem is at all times marked by Dante’s unmistakably authoritative voice.⁴⁸ Dante grants us an invitation to decide - vision, spiritual narrative, autobiography, allegory, symbolic journey through the body; or possibly an amalgam of these. The work breaks down established boundaries, and instead opens up a multitude of interpretive possibilities, which allow and indeed encourage consonant overlap and assimilation.⁴⁹

A final point of comparison is that Dante provides the reader with a multitude of direct references and allusions from the Scriptures themselves. The consistent incorporation of the holy texts into his own work can be read as Dante’s most sincere imitation. He was writing out of a “fund of scriptural metaphor and narrative so deeply assimilated as to be second nature – more a mother tongue than a foreign language deliberately acquired.”⁵⁰ In the *Commedia*, he quotes directly from the scriptures on more than two hundred occasions, far

some sense analogous to that of the Bible (as then interpreted) has been an influential view among modern students of the poem.’

⁴⁸ Robin Kirkpatrick, introduction to *Inferno*, pp. lxvi-lxvii.

⁴⁹ We can also consider how the subsequent *treatment* of the poem has strong parallels with the tradition of reverence and exposition afforded to the scriptures, although we should also be wary of reading backwards into the poem that which was not originally intended. The text’s own claims to prophetic status and divine inspiration have somehow deemed it necessary to afford it a quasi-biblical authority, and the history of its reception has borne this out. From its earliest readings the *Commedia* gave rise to a tradition of detailed analysis, well beyond that afforded to any other single literary achievement, which has continued to the present day. Study of the *Commedia* requires a concordance. The apparently supra-human qualities of the *Commedia* – its length, complexity and subject – seemed to merit the epithet of “Divine” (which Dante himself, rightly, could not have dared to attach to his own work). We can also contemplate how the work, much like the scriptures, has proven to be a fount of inspiration for visual artists, or how for the Italian peoples and the Italian language the cultural standing of the poem approaches something like the foundational status of the Torah for the Jewish peoples, or the gospels for the early Church.

⁵⁰ Hawkins, “Dante and the Bible” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, p. 121.

more than for any classical author, and it has been estimated that there are more than five hundred total references or identifiable allusions to the scriptures.⁵¹ At times it seems as though the language of scripture is so deeply ingrained within Dante's text as to appear inseparable from it – the famous opening line of the poem initiates this practice in the strongest possible way. Any argument against Dante employing "God's way of writing" must account for the deeply instilled way the scriptures are found in the poem.

There remains, however, one important difference between the scriptures and Dante's "imitation" of them. In the *Commedia*, "intimation" is clearly intended by its human author, for he was well placed well along the traditions of literary form and scriptural analysis that understood the distinction between immediately-inspired texts and purely human creations. Dante could clearly predetermine that his work would contain multiple layers of meaning, whereas for the writers of Scripture, even if they sensed that they were the recipients of supernatural inspiration, it can hardly be imagined that they foresaw how their work would one day become the subject of an analytical tradition.

Dante's allegory is biblical, because it contains the narrative structure of the Scriptures, wherein the central theme of resurrection is echoed in the Christian reading of the Old Testament, and in the retrospective writing and "reading of one's own history, thematically represented as conversion."⁵² The text of the *Commedia* follows the general Biblical figure of conversion, and conversion (which, in purely physical terms, can be represented in its supreme form by *resurrection*) is the primary metaphorical "matrix" through which the entire allegorical system of the Comedy must be understood.⁵³ The *Commedia* also conforms to the pattern of Christian spiritual biography, given a preliminary formulation in the epistles of St. Paul and a definitive example in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in that it largely forsakes originality in order to conform to the standard pattern of the "journey of the soul", (incorporating, it must be said, elements of Platonic allegory), from fear and darkness to certainty and light. In this conformity we can see how Dante wants to generalise his personal experience into an archetypal narrative of the epic voyage – the story of his life is also that of "*la nostra vita*" ("our life") – so that the truths of such an experience can be effectively

⁵¹ Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*, p. 36. See also Paget Toynbee, *Concise Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), pp. 78-81.

⁵² Freccero, "Introduction to *Inferno*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, p. 188.

⁵³ Singleton, "*In Exitu Israel De Aegypto*" in *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 103.

communicated as didactic. Dante's journey is autobiographical and yet deeply emblematic, a synthesis of the personal circumstances of his life, fused within the paradigms of salvation history as depicted in the Bible.⁵⁴ In this sense, his entire life is allegorised in the *Commedia*, since his exile in the political wilderness becomes an emblematic representation of *the* exile – the entire human race's exile from Paradise. A somewhat paradoxical feature of the *Commedia*, then, is that despite all its daring originality as a poem, it nevertheless maintains a strict conformity to the established, biblically-based structure of spiritual narrative. It is a “comedy” because it tells of a conversion from sin to beatitude, as it narratively moves from lowest to highest; from bareness and disorder to elevation and perfection. The poem moves progressively and steadily in accord with the pattern of a salvific story, from despair to joy.⁵⁵

In its structure and content, however, the *Commedia* is imitative of the created order as a reflection of its creator, for it is strictly measured, hierarchical, patterned, and, most importantly, completely self-contained. That Dante saw the entire universe as “God's book” places him firmly in the medieval tradition of such understandings, and is borne out by a beautiful simile at the culmination of the *Paradiso*.⁵⁶ If he in fact experienced a vision of the cosmos as being metaphorically “*legato con amore in un volume*” (“bound up and gathered in a single book”) it would be a simple move to then conceive that a single book, this time a literal book of his own devising, could bind up the entire cosmos. And so this is the scope of the *Commedia*, a poem that dares to gather together and hold within it no less than *everything*. In this way it stands in comparison to the *summa* of the scholastic theologians, and the massive stone temples of the medieval world, in its striving for what has been called “total containment”, or an attempt to bring the entire sum of human experience into a single, unified work.⁵⁷

Dante has imitated “God's way of writing” in attempting to emulate *the book of the world*, as this phrase was understood in two senses by the medieval mind. For the believer, God had

⁵⁴ Freccero, “Introduction to *Inferno*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, p. 179.

⁵⁵ As a simple measure of this progression, consider Dante's use of “*lieto*” (“happy”) throughout the poem, which changes in both frequency and purpose. The word is used on only seven occasions in the *Inferno*, sixteen in *Purgatorio* and nineteen in *Paradiso*. More than this, however, the purpose of the word changes, from being used in the context of remembrance in the *Inferno*, becoming mostly a noun (that is, a transient quality) in *Purgatorio*, to a verb in the *Paradiso* (implying the eternalness of that realm). See Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds, introduction to *Dante in English* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. lxxi.

⁵⁶ See *Par.* 33:85-93.

⁵⁷ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 13-14.

produced two “testaments” of his will and pleasure – the sacred texts in which men could find all their requisite moral order and examples; and the natural world in which men lived. Or, as Aquinas had phrased it: “God, like an excellent master wanting to ensure there be nothing missing in our education, took care to leave us two perfect books: Creation and Holy Scripture.”⁵⁸ In a traditional understanding of Scripture, God has used both *words* and *things*. He has spoken *in verbis* and *in factis*. The explicit commands of the Law, the warnings of the prophets, or the direct instruction of St. Paul’s letters, for example, convey a direct and immediate understanding that is transmitted through the literal reading of the text. Alternatively, significant and symbolic *events*, such as the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, or the story of Jonah, carry a literal meaning in that they purport to describe *what actually happened*, yet they also contain an embedded, deeper meaning, deliberately designed to be later uncovered and interpreted. Thus, the exegete saw his role as itself being part of the purpose of Scripture – completing the picture, as it were, by unravelling the hidden significance of the texts according to their archetypal figures, and disseminating such significances. In addition, God is the author of the book of Creation, a “language” in which every thing was thought to carry, in some way, the mark of its creator, since it was a logical conclusion that in a purposefully designed universe there can be nothing *without* meaning. In the *Commedia*, Dante adopts both these forms. He writes *in verbis* and *in factis*, consciously performing the role of divine imitator and divinely-authorized maker, for he sets out to achieve nothing less than the creation, through words, of an entirely imagined cosmos, which he orders and controls, in which he can travel and intervene, and, somewhat alarmingly, over which he exercises the right of final judgement.⁵⁹ He imparts to

⁵⁸ Jean Hani, *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2007), p. 11.

⁵⁹ Oliver Davies, “World and Body: A Study in Dante’s Cosmological Hermeneutics” in *Dante and the Human Body: Eight Essays*, eds. John C. Barnes and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), p. 210: “He can indeed break the rules of the world he represents, as part of a claim perhaps that as Christian artist he occupies a uniquely privileged position in the cosmos.” It may also be useful to consider that the basic nature of the *Commedia* alone suggests a move towards a representation of the manifold as it emerges from divine unity in the act of creation. All existence develops from a single unified point but remains harmonised and proportioned despite its innumerable variety, and the human form likewise begins its existence as a minute singularity, yet expands into a complex and diverse but always unified entity. Just so, the *Commedia*, which Dante claims originated with a single miraculous vision, evolved to become a complete “body” incorporating immense variety and detail, yet always maintaining its cohesion and harmony within its organic structure. And of course Dante’s choosing to cast himself as the main protagonist in his own narrative adds an additional layer of physicality upon this theme, for he is a fully fleshed human being passing through the realms of shades. Their reaction to Dante’s apparent physical solidity, and Dante’s own bodily reactions to all that he experiences, re-enforce the very ‘bodiliness’, the concreteness, of the poem. Dante would also have us understand that, for him, the poet holds an especially privileged position in his role as imitator of *deus artifex* – God as Maker. While in a general sense every artist can reproduce the symbolic language that is created by God in the natural world, whereby things point to other things, it is only the poet that *makes* out of *words*. As Dante argues, the gift of human communication through words – at a higher level than that of the written word, but primarily and more

the work the sense of totality that was thought to exist only in the canon of scripture; and he imitates the structure and detail of the universe as the “symbolic text” of physical signs by which God also spoke to mankind. By employing to their limit these two senses, Dante has produced a reconstruction of the “archetypal book”.⁶⁰

But if the cosmos is “contained” within the body, and vice versa; and the *Commedia* is a literary containment of the cosmos; can it follow then that the *Commedia* can be said to symbolically “contain” the human body, or be a metaphorical journey through the body? How surely can it be stated that an analogical parallel exists between the thematic and symbolic presentations in the poem (as they specifically relate to the human body as metaphor) and the author’s regard for the body as a central component of his theological and temporal concerns? In pursuing such parallels, two avenues present themselves. In Dante’s work there is an emphasis on the specific use of references to the human anatomy to convey an immediate and precise effect or implication; and a more generalised technique of applying an overarching structure or symbolic layer to the poem in order to produce a sustained metaphor. Both are fit for examination, since it is typical of Dante’s own intellectual approach, and hence analysis of his work, that in isolation neither reductionism nor holism will lead to a satisfactory understanding, and this in itself accords with the subject under consideration in being an imitation of the macrocosm-microcosm axiom which governs the work.

This is the understanding of Dante’s allegory upon which the remainder of this thesis will proceed. It is now necessary to outline how Dante not only incorporates allegory generally, and the specific form of the “allegory of the theologians” because it imitates the nature and

commonly through speech – is a means by which Man is set apart from, and elevated above, all other creatures. See *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, 1.3. See also Davies, “Dante’s *Commedia* and the Body of Christ” in *Dante’s Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, pp. 163-166.

⁶⁰ Freccero, “An Introduction to the *Paradiso*” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 215-216. It is in this special sense of the poet as creator and shaper of words that Dante takes on the role of *dux artifex*. We should be mindful, for example, of the way in which Dante invented many neologisms for various purposes within the *Commedia*, and in constructing the poem brought his own native, emerging language into something like a definitive form. He has “made the world anew”, imitating the original act of divine creation, by constructing an intricately structured, detailed and highly organised physical world at once both imaginary and vividly realistic; and, in accord with our parallel to the divine creation of the cosmos, contains nothing that is meaningless. The general body of scholarship agrees that nothing within Dante’s thought, and hence nothing within his written work, can be considered meaningless. Based on this understanding, much energy is often devoted to the explication or unravelling of a particularly obscure reference or “crux” in the texts. See, as examples, R. E. Kaske, “Dante’s DXV” in *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Freccero (Galveston: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 122-140; Freccero, “The Firm Foot on a Journey without a Guide” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 29-54.

purpose of the scriptures that were his narrative and moral example; but to show how Dante has employed traditional forms of fundamental symbolism, particularly as they relate to the classical understanding of the symbolic arrangements of the human form. The foundational image upon which this thesis turns, *la nostra effige*, found at the conclusion of the *Commedia*, is the last in a long series of examples in which Dante has deliberately employed the use of symbols, signs, and reflections that convey multi-layered levels of meaning. It confirms Dante's assent to the notion that within the universal language of signs that the author inherits and develops it is *la nostra effige* – our human form – that is the supreme sign by which all the other signs are, and should be, measured and ordered. The human body is the most primary and complete of all symbols, and it is worth detailing here the ways in which the symbolism of the human form can be viewed as paralleling the structure and thematic development of the *Commedia*.

It is straightforward enough to assert that the basic three-part structure of the work corresponds to the three fundamental divisions of human anatomy – the belly, chest, and the head. In a natural ascendancy from lowest to highest the *Commedia* delineates a course through the abdomen in Hell, the chest in Purgatory, and the human head in Paradise. The significance of the limbs within such an arrangement is more complicated, but the most defensible alignment is that the legs and feet belong to the *Inferno*, while the arms and hands find a place in the *Purgatorio*.⁶¹ The anatomy of human beings naturally lends itself to tripartite symbolism, and there seems something intrinsically right about dividing the human form into three distinct parts.⁶² This habit of mind exhibits itself across all eras and places within the western tradition, and is attested to by traditionalist commentators.⁶³ Analysts of the *Commedia* are also strongly inclined to producing allegorical interpretations of the three-

⁶¹ It is a useful exercise to consider the symbolic treatment Dante affords to the human feet as the journey of the *Commedia* develops. At a purely quantitative level, a survey of the text reveals that the poem commences with a heavy concentration upon the feet, and progresses with a steady declination away from them, as we may expect in a narrative that contains a basic element of journeying from difficulty to ease. There are a total of 60 references to “*pie*” or “*pie*” (“feet” or “foot”) in the *Inferno*, where many of the residents suffer torture to, or deformity of, their feet, and in which the pilgrim-poet offers the reader many detailed descriptions of the way his feet struggle with the infernal landscape beneath them. There are 37 references in the *Purgatorio*, where a new emphasis on the feet as instruments of holy pilgrimage begins to move descriptions of the feet away from literalness and towards metaphorical representations. In the *Paradiso*, where it becomes obvious that the pilgrim is moving through space without walking, there are just 17 references, all of which are either metaphorical or are used by a resident of heaven in regards to their previous, earth-bound existence. A similar pattern of reference can be observed in regard to Dante's use of “*gambe*” (“legs”). There are 9 within *Inferno*, 6 in *Purgatorio* (all of which occur within the first nineteen cantos), and none in the *Paradiso*.

⁶² See Blackhirst, *Primordial Alchemy & Modern Religion: Essays on Traditional Cosmology*, pp. 67-68.

⁶³ For example, see Jean Hani, *The Divine Liturgy: Insights into Its Mystery* (San Rafael, Ca.: Sophia Perennis, 2008), p. 87fn.; Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human: Survey of Metaphysics and Epistemology*, pp. 96-97.

fold division of the poem, and indeed its tripartite structure appears to encourage this habit of allegorical interpretation.⁶⁴

This tripartite nature of the human form, however, can apply to more than merely its physical arrangement. It is also relevant to the functions of the human complex. Dante assents to the important idea that human existence can be understood, at least at the level of *operation*, in terms of a hierarchical, tripartite structure. In the third treatise of the *Convivio* he explains thus:

I say, then, that the Philosopher, in the second book on the Soul, when speaking of its powers, says that the Soul principally has three powers, which are, to Live, to Feel, and to Reason:...And according to that which he says, it is most evident that these powers are so entwined that the one is a foundation of the other; and that which is the foundation can of itself be divided; but the other, which is built upon it, cannot be apart from its foundation. Therefore, the Vegetative power, whereby one lives, is the foundation upon which one feels, that is, sees, hears, tastes, smells, and touches; and this vegetative power of itself can be the Soul, vegetative, as we see in all the plants. The Sensitive cannot exist without that. We find nothing that feels, and does not live. And this Sensitive power is the foundation of the Intellectual, that is, of the Reason; so that, in animate mortals, the Reasoning power is not found without the Sensitive. But the Sensitive is found without Reason, as in the beasts, and in the birds, and in the fishes, and in any brute animal, as we see. And that Soul which contains all these powers is the most perfect of all. And the Human Soul possessing the nobility of the highest power, which is Reason, participates in the Divine Nature, after the manner of an eternal Intelligence...⁶⁵

While not in complete harmony with the following treatment of the allegorical possibilities presented by the structure of the *Commedia*, it can be seen that the essential elements of the Aristotelian ideas from which Dante quotes are generally supportive. Man is comprised of three levels of operation, or *power*, which are tiered and have distinct qualitative differences, and involve the higher functions being dependent on the existence of the lower. All living things have vegetative powers in as much as they share temporal existence; the beasts and

⁶⁴ See, as examples, Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds, introduction to *Dante in English* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. cxii, where the three *cantiche* of the poem are paralleled to the three stages of the sacrament of confession – examination of conscience in the *Inferno*, confession and penance in the *Purgatorio*, and reintegration into the community of the faithful in *Paradiso*; or Robin Kirkpatrick's proposal that the three parts of the poem illuminate three differing aspects of the experience of exile, in his introduction to *Inferno*, p. xv.

⁶⁵ *Convivio*, 3.2.

birds have sensation of feeling and, we may add, the faculties of emotion and movement; while only Man, the “Divine Animal”, is granted the “sovereign power” of Reason. Man is comprised of these three elements of the soul, since he *exists* at a base level, he *feels* at an intermediate level, and he *thinks* at the highest level.

Moreover, we can understand the symbolism of the human form at another level, for the body, when viewed in a particular fashion, demonstrates microcosmic representations of *itself*. Man contains miniaturised versions of his own form, and in this aspect the human form can also be seen to parallel the structure of the *Commedia*, since the three parts of the poem can be understood as containing microcosmically tripartite elements within their own structure. Primarily, this anatomical miniaturisation of man within himself can be read in the most personal and semiotically rich element of the human form, the face.⁶⁶ This idea will find special relevance in the higher spheres of the *Paradiso*, where Dante reaches the endpoint of his representations of gradual disembodiment of the human form, electing in the sphere of the Contemplatives, and in the Empyrean, to focus particularly on the primacy of the face as guarantor of human identity. At a level of basic symbolism, the arrangement of the face resembles the greater organisation of the human *in toto*, in as much as it contains a distinctly tripartite and hierarchical structure. The mouth holds an obvious correspondence to the belly, since both are a warm and enclosed space that is internalised and contain particular fluids, and both are intimately connected through the actions of eating and digestion. The nose is comparable to the rhythmic organs of the torso, particularly the lungs, since both are bi-fold and are symmetrically arranged about the central axis of the body, and again are connected through the action of human breathing. Most suggestively, however, the eyes are analogous to the head, as both are spherical and the metaphor of “seeing” is the primary means by which we describe the mental activity that occurs inside the head. The eyes, too, best display those qualities of the observable heavens that are, traditionally speaking, represented in morphology by the human head. As will be fully explicated in the following chapters, the topographical symbolism of the various *cantiche* of the *Commedia* lends itself to precisely this kind of symbolic reading. Hell can be seen as both a belly and a great mouth; Dante’s intermediate realm of Purgatory is a place where the crucial rhythms of pulse and breathing, and the symbolism of the mountain as a central axis of the cosmos, remind us of the form and function of the human torso; the spheres of the *Paradiso*, round like the human

⁶⁶ For an imaginative reading of the various symbolic interpretations possible within the human form, See Blackhirst, *Primordial Alchemy & Modern Religion: Essays on Traditional Cosmology*, pp. 67-69.

head, contain the concentricity and gem-like qualities of the human eye, while being the setting for ever-ascending experiences of “looking” that symbolise the inner states of understanding.⁶⁷

It can also be imagined that, in accordance with the correspondences between the macro- and micro- representations of the human form, some broad parallels can be made between the five human senses, the traditional four elements of the physical world, and the three realms of the *Commedia*.⁶⁸ A continuum of relationship can be seen to exist between man and his external environment, which are replicated in the moral and topographical arrangement of Dante’s poem. These associations require us, in the main, to forego our contemporary conceptions of physics and astronomy, and return to the medieval model, largely inherited from antiquity, that comprised a geocentrically arranged universe and the classical four-element system of understanding and categorising natural phenomena.⁶⁹

We can construct a simple, hierarchical arrangement of the four elements as they may apply to the various *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, particularly in regard to its topography. Such an arrangement is based on both the perceived weight of the elements, and their relation to temperature. The heaviest elements, Earth then Water, accord with the physical earth and its obvious solidity. The central, static position of the earth in geocentric cosmology meant that all matter was inevitably drawn down onto, and then within it. The nature and behaviour of these two elements is most easily paralleled with the subject matter of the *Inferno*, where the action takes place not only on the surface of the earth, but *within it*. A key element of the *Inferno*’s moral programme is the schematic arrangement of sins whereby the increasing

⁶⁷ Conversely, one consideration is that in viewing the microcosmic representations of its own larger form, the human face can be an image of the macrocosmic universe that the human form was thought to imitate. See Roger Swoyer, “Three Short Essays in Astrophysiology,” *Eye of the Heart* 3 (2009): pp. 53-71. It has been argued here that in the various physiological elements and arrangement of the face, we can glimpse an anthropomorphised impression of the entire universe. This might be one reason why looking directly into the face of another is amongst the most intensely personal of experiences, since it provides, in a moment, a glimpse of total containment.

⁶⁸ There are traces of all the elements in every compound body in creation, just as each human person was thought to be a combination of the four ‘humours’ of the body. Health was a matter of keeping these humours in proper proportion, such that illness was often diagnosed as a disproportion of humours – ‘distemper’ or ‘indisposition’, say – that was treated by a ‘materialistic’ method that directly impacted upon the body’s physical properties. The humours within the body, were, in turn, ‘influenced’, in the original meaning of that word, by the operations and powers of the planetary bodies that comprised the cosmos. See James Burge, *Dante’s Invention* (Stroud: History, 2010), p. 99; Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, p. 110.

⁶⁹ For an overview of the classical designation of the ‘four elements’ as they may apply to the work of Dante, see Boyde, *Dante, Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos*, pp. 57-73.

seriousness of transgression is matched by the continuing descent of the pilgrims, as if by natural downward inclination, into the dead and heavy centre of the earth. As a preview of this phenomenon, the first sinners whose physical forms are portrayed in a symbolic way, the gluttons of Canto VI, are strongly connected to images of the lower elements and have been described as “...merely versions of the elements earth and water.”⁷⁰ Similarly, *Inferno* is notable for the way the rivers of Hell play a key role in its demarcation; and for the way many of the various punishments involve immersion or covering with fluids. The elements of Earth and Water, traditionally understood, are also cold – they involve constriction and contraction. This is an obvious feature of the topography of Dante’s Hell, where the circles of punishment grow ever-tighter as they near the centre of the earth; and where the lowest circles feature landscapes of frozen water populated by the damned who are rendered inert by the punishments that mirror the seriousness of their sins. One great surprise for many readers of the *Inferno* (and accordingly one of literature’s great anti-climaxes, generated by our common conceptions of infernal punishment as involving trial by burning) is that the worst sinner of all, Lucifer, is reduced to a near de-animated state. He is mute and nearly motionless, an image of the paralysing nature of sin in its purest, we might say *chilling*, form. Dante’s cosmology tends to confound the modern reader in the application of this analogy, since we have become habituated by the findings of modern geology and astronomy to think of the earth as containing a hot core whilst also being surrounded by an atmosphere that is a cold extremity. We have internal heat, surrounded by external chill. In Dante’s arrangement, the reverse is the case.⁷¹

The lighter elements, Air then Fire, are comparable to the mood and structure of the *Purgatorio*. According to the classical arrangement of the elements, these sit above the heavier elements of Earth and Water, just as the mountain of Purgatory is clearly designed to

⁷⁰ Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 1 - Inferno*, ed. Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, trans. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), notes, p. 108.

⁷¹ We should also note that, although used infrequently, specific terminology designating temperature in the *Commedia* supports this analogy. There are 12 instances of “*freddo*” (“cold”) used as an adjective – five in each of the first two *cantiche* and only two in *Paradiso*. However, all references to cold outside of the *Inferno* are made in a metaphorical sense. It is only in Hell, and in particular the lower circles of Hell, where objects are directly described as being cold. See particularly *Inf.* 32:22-30; 33:97-114. Dante’s use of “*caldo*” (“hot” or “warm”) shows an opposite trend – there are 8 uses in the *Inferno* but 15 in the *Paradiso*. Significantly however, the meaning of the word undergoes a distinct change. Whereas in the earlier *cantiche* the concept of heat has a meteorological or elemental intent, in *Paradiso* the term “*caldo*” begins to describe the warmth of human emotions and, more importantly, the love of God. The climax to this progressive development of meaning comes in the final canto of the poem, where St Bernard of Clairvaux says: “...*per lo cui caldo ne l’eterna pace / così è germinato questo fiore*.” (“And here, in this eternal peace, the warmth of love / has brought the Rose to germinate and bloom.”) (*Par.* 33:8-9).

be on, but significantly above and beyond, the ordinary, downward-tending confines of the earth's surface. The elements of Air and Fire have an upward-tending quality that mirrors both the upward-pointing form we usually associate with mountains, and the ever-upward motion of the penitents who occupy the mountain of Purgatory. The terraces of Purgatory are structured to provide an ascent into realms of increasingly rarefied and pure air that are crowned by a circle of perfectly purgative fire.

To continue this analogy, it is possible to compare the uniform, harmonious and unreachable heavenly bodies (and perhaps the perfect non-corporeal "bodies" of the blessed) as described in the *Paradiso*, with the mysterious fifth element – the "quintessence", which was thought to be a special kind of material that was perfect, imperishable and eternal. The Aristotelian concept of the fifth element – Aether – that sat beyond and somehow imparted impetus to all matter that was comprised of the other elements, found an obvious counterpart in Dante's Christian cosmology to the *primum mobile* – the "first mover" – a mysterious, invisible outer sphere of the heavens that was speculatively posited as necessary for the nature and behaviour of the observable heavenly bodies.⁷²

This hierarchy of elements and their corresponding parts of the *Commedia* can also be paralleled in one particular aspect of the human form – the arrangement and function of the human senses. There are five senses just as there are five classical elements, allowing for some convenient associations. I say that the human senses are subtly alluded to in Dante's cosmology, since the hierarchy of elements and moral states of the *Commedia* are paralleled in the organisation of the human sensory faculties. In this, he is likely to have drawn upon a source that, as identified in the appendix to this thesis, provided specific models of microcosmic imagery – the *Cosmographica* of Bernardus Silvestris. In the final chapter of the work Bernardus concludes with an overview of the construction of man, which contains a hierarchical arrangement of the senses, from the highest – sight, to the lowest – touch, and he parallels the senses with the various elements of the physical world with which they interact.⁷³ A similarly broad correspondence between hierarchical human senses and topographical imagery can be observed throughout the *Commedia*. What we might call the

⁷² Boyde, *Dante, Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos*, pp. 134-135, 158-160; Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p. 171.

⁷³ Bernardus Silvestris, *The Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris*, trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 123-127. See commentary in Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's Rime Petrose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 97-99.

base faculties, touch and taste, parallel the Hell of *Inferno*. The emphasis upon tactile experience is most obviously forefront in the *Inferno*, where the bodiliness of the inhabitants (and their physical interaction with the two pilgrims) plays a major role in both their physical punishments and their role as symbolic representations of the sins they are said to have committed. There are recurrent themes of eating and digestion throughout the *Inferno*, whose narrative action takes place within an internal space that can be compared to a giant mouth. The intermediate senses, smell and hearing, are comparable to the mood of Dante's intermediate realm of Purgatory. Smell here is restored and revived to its proper function, after the toxic experiences of Hell. Specifically we can recall the "*milli odori*" ("thousand perfumes") of the valley of the Princes in Canto VII, or the tantalising fruit odours that permeate the circle of the Gluttons.⁷⁴ Yet throughout the *Purgatorio* wafts the scent of "fresh air" that seems to assist in, and be emblematic of, the restoration of the penitents who inhale it. Scenes that involve the experience of refreshment in a revitalising landscape, such as the emergence onto the foot of the mountain in Canto I, or the opening view of the Terrestrial Paradise in Canto XXVIII, while not specifically mentioning scent, nevertheless strongly imply the freshness and sweetness of air that is sensed through inhalation. Like smell, hearing is also properly restored and features prominently in the *Purgatorio*, for here is recovered the proper place and purpose of human speech, and here is heard for the first time in the *Commedia* the human voice in song. And hearing, like smell, is a sense directly aligned to the element of Air that we have previously identified as being characteristic of the mountain of Purgatory; where both senses carry the key "airy" qualities of invisibility and expansiveness.

To complete this series of analogies, the faculty of sight is properly comparable to the *Paradiso*. The eyes are placed higher on the body than all other sense organs, and the eyes themselves resemble the heavenly bodies. But more than this, the faculty of sight, according to the Platonic tradition, is given to Man so that he might look upon the heavens as the

⁷⁴ *Pur.* 7:79-81 – "*Non avea pur natura ivi dipinto, / ma di soavità di mille odori / vi faceva uno incognito e indistinto.*" ("Nor had great nature worked in paint alone. / She also with a thousand perfumes wrought / a sweetness never known and indistinct."); *Pur.* 22:130-132 – "*Ma tosto ruppe le dolci ragiona / un alber che trovammo in mezza strada, / con pomi a odorar soavi e buoni;*" ("But then (a sudden break to soothing words!) / we found there, in the middle of the road, / a tree – its fruits, in perfume, good and sweet."); *Pur.* 23:34-36 – "*Chi crederebbe che l'odor d'un pomo / sì governasse, generando brama, / e quel d'un'acqua, non sappiendo como?*" ("Who would have thought the scent of some mere fruit / could work to make a craving grow like this, / and water, too – unless he knew the 'how'.")

supreme means by which he will come to understand the universe in total.⁷⁵ The upright stance and unique upward-looking quality of the human form finds its ultimate expression in the act of the human eye contemplating that which in the cosmos it most resembles – the shining, concentrically arranged bodies of the heavens. This invites a further level of parallel by which we may align the senses with the topography of Dante's cosmology in the *Commedia*. The hierarchy of sense is one of increasing power, where the relationship between sense faculty and sensory source is based on *distance*. The faculties of touch and taste are immediate and close to us, because they rely on direct contact between the body and the object so experienced. This is very like the tactile nature of existence for Dante's damned, who are locked into a world of sensory pain no bigger than their own bodies, and beyond which they have no worthwhile understanding. With the intermediate sense of smell and hearing, the distance between sensor and source can increase dramatically, so that the senses greatly expand the range of physical phenomena available to human comprehension. We can clearly hear and smell objects that are well away from our person, so that these sensory experiences direct our attentions away from the immediacy of our physical selves. This often seems to be the experience of the penitents as they scale the mountain of Purgatory. They feel a gradual uncovering and expansion of their senses (recalling that on the lower terraces they have limited or no sight, and are therefore bound to rely mostly on the lowest of the senses, that of touch). The journey through Purgatory proper culminates in a magnificent set-piece, the Triumphal Procession through the Earthly Paradise, which is, given its intense pageantry and concern with the perfection of the human form, at one level a celebration of renewed and reinvigorated sense perception. The expansion of sensory range is exponentially increased when we consider sight, the faculty that allows us to perceive the very edge of the cosmos. The eyes, in this way, provide us with an almost limitless experience, since they can bring into their operation all that cannot be perceived by any of the other senses. The expansiveness of the faculty of sight is a keynote of the *Paradiso* in another crucial respect: Dante frequently and often with urgent intensity employs the metaphor of sight for the experiences of spiritual development that he undergoes as he makes his celestial ascent.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Plato, *Timaeus*, 47B, p. 65: 'For I reckon that the supreme benefit for which sight is responsible is that not a word of all we have said about the universe could have been said if we had not seen stars and sun and heaven. As it is, the sight of day and night, the months and returning years, the equinoxes and solstices, has caused the invention of number, given us the notion of time, and made us enquire into the nature of the universe; thence we have derived philosophy, the greatest gift the god have ever given or will give to mortals.'

⁷⁶ Robert Durling has observed that the *Paradiso* contains a specific treatment of the human senses – "sensory representations of the *Paradiso* are limited to sights and sounds; there are no experiences of smell, taste, or

It is natural that we should perceive the physical world as containing elements that can be effectively internalised – mirrored in the inner states of our own selves. Dante insists on making essential connections between the physical features of the “outer world” and the inner states of man.⁷⁷ Of all the created order from which Dante drew to construct a “language of signs”, it is the human body that stands as the centrepiece and pivot of his intellectual, moral and cosmological systems. For the body, in an age before the invention of “advanced” scientific instrumentation, was both a means and an end of human enquiry. There is an inherent naturalness in observing the world merely by looking at it, or measuring the world by touching it. If sense experience is how we come to rightly comprehend the physical world, what might our senses tell us about the other-world? Within an intellectual setting that prized metaphorical expression, what could be more natural than employing the human form, of all the entities in the physical world that which is most apparent and accessible to us, as the means by which artists should seek to convey their sense of this world to others? The body, as the final and perfecting work of creation, is the supreme sign, by which and through which all other signs are to be understood.

A key component of this supremacy of the human form as symbol is that mankind as a collective entity, and any one individual human body in particular, can and should be understood as a *mikros kosmos* – a little cosmos, or model of the universe, containing within it all the elements, proportions and functions of the greater world around it; and that conversely the entire physical universe could be understood as an immense representation of the human form. Being of Greek origin, the term *microcosmo* is not one that Dante employs directly, yet doubtless it was part of his intellectual environment. As I have suggested, an important element of Dante’s intellectual endeavours was his adoption, full incorporation, and further extension of the lengthy philosophical and literary traditions of “man as microcosm” that was available to him. An examination of these traditions shows that Dante stood squarely in the cultural mainstream of his time, using established imagery that would be recognised and understood by a common audience. Of course, Dante is renowned as a great synthesiser – a thinker who, by virtue of his wide-ranging intellect and desire to construct an all-encompassing schema, became highly adept at incorporating and assimilating

touch.” (Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, p. 760n. Likewise, one of the first descriptions of Hell in the *Inferno* describes it as a “cieco mondo” (“blind world”). (*Inf.* 4:13-15.)

⁷⁷ Burge, *Dante’s Invention*, p. 99.

an immense and varied range of influences. Yet I also hope to demonstrate that in regard to the particular theme of microcosmic representations of man, the sources from which he drew may be even wider and richer than is usually acknowledged. The survey of sources that comprises the remainder of this chapter (and the attached appendix) does not purport to be exhaustive, and will be concerned with directing attention to traditional sources, with a view to proposing how they anticipate and prepare the way for the Tuscan. In retrospectively reading some of these sources we may find a large measure of uncannily similar and therefore highly suggestive imagery that points to a direct influence.

The path taken here is a chronological overview of the known and possible sources available to Dante that might act as points of inspiration or “seeds” for his construction of two key literary motifs: the overarching metaphor of man as a microcosmic representation of the universe; and the portrayal of man in both his corporeal and “complex” form – an entity comprised of inter-related body and soul – as an essentially three-fold construction. Further, individual moments in these sources will be highlighted for the way in which they are direct forerunners to some of Dante’s own work. In accordance with his own liking for tripartite division this examination of Dante’s sources is divided into three sections: the classical texts of ancient Greece and Rome; the epistles of the New Testament and the works of Augustine; and in what we may think of as an extension and amalgamation of the first two categories, a much longer and broader group of texts that we can generally describe as Christian neoplatonist. The first and third of these two sections will be fully detailed in the attached appendix. I will conclude this chapter with an overview of the ways in which the concept of “microcosmic man” was tentatively developed in Dante’s minor works, as a series of developmental steps towards a full flowering in the grand project of the *Commedia*. In this way it can be seen how in the Western Tradition the ancient idea of man as a representational form of the physical universe had survived despite the near-total collapse of the civilisation that generated its initial expression; how it became a staple component of a long era of intellectual development in medieval Christendom; and how it would come to find its full expression and completion in Dante’s works.

I want to start, however, with the concept that for Dante, as for all individuals who laboured as creative artists, the traditional idea of the “maker”, the human artisan, involved him in creating artefacts that were in themselves miniature representations of the cosmos in which they lived. If the universe was the planned and ordered construction of a benevolent Creator,

then man could respond by producing works that were “normatively microcosmic”.⁷⁸ Even if the article was not explicitly microcosmic in form, it still contained the intellectual content – design, function, beauty, proportionality – that was thought to be inherent in all created things. But there were created objects that held an overt expression of microcosmic form, most notably the sacred temples of all ancient cultures. In architecture, the representation of the cosmos could be physically expressed in the materials, dimensions, proportionality, harmony and ritual use of the building; in an encoded “language” that was implicitly understood. Dante was doubtless highly sensitive to the ways in which these singular human constructions could be formed as, and understood as, representations of the whole world.

In a Christian context, man’s understanding of the parallels between divine presence and human existence was most powerfully manifested in the construction of the Christian temple, for in the architectural symbolism of the Christian basilica or cathedral the designers and builders endeavoured to construct an edifice that in all its aspects represented a kind of paradise on earth. This symbolism is the subject of much study, but for our purposes it is sufficient to see that in the architecture of the building a basic analogy was implied. The temple was a man-made representation of Christ’s body on earth. The textual foundation for this concept was found in the gospel of John, where the Apostle declares that Christ himself compared his own body to that of a temple, to which followers were meant to orient their lives and find meaning therein:

*Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews replied, “It has take forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body.*⁷⁹

It was natural therefore that the builders of the Christian temple found in the image of the human form, with Christ as the supreme example of this form, a proper template on which to design a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of God. Briefly, the correspondences between architectural formation and human anatomy were these: the floor plan of the sanctuary was a “recumbent man”; with the feet, by which we are carried to and enter the temple, being the doors; the legs are the nave, and the extended arms the transepts; the heart, in which one receives the transmission of grace, is the altar on which the Eucharist is served; and the head,

⁷⁸ Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p. 614.

⁷⁹ John 2:19-22.

in which is seated the intellect, is the high altar from which the liturgy is conducted. Overlayed on these symbolic correspondences is the crucifix formation that represents the theological doctrine of the sacrificial body of God, to which the believer is internally “approaching” each time they enter the building. As well as this, the divine idea of creating diversity within a harmonised unity was symbolised by the gathering of the faithful being compared to the very stones of the building in which they gathered, for the “Church” is at once the physical building *and* the promised metaphysical appearance of God each time believers came together in worship. This step from individual worshipper to member of a corporate, living organism was achieved through participation in the central component of holy rites, the communal meal of the Eucharist. The worshipper could therefore see themselves as a small but nevertheless invaluable part of a greater complex, an idea surely appreciated most by those whose calling it was to construct the temple at its origins. That Dante thought in such terms is borne out in a simile from *Purgatorio* X, where he literally compares the bent figures in the terrace of the Proud to the corbel stones of architecture.⁸⁰

At the same time, the Christian temple was also an architectural representation of the entire physical universe as it was understood to be arranged by a divine hand. The temple’s orientation, height, geometric pattern, proportion, permanence, devotion to the sanctity of light, and detailed decorative splendour, were a conscious imitation of these qualities as they were perceived in the natural world. Thus the temple is at the same time a representation of both the microcosmic human form, and the macrocosmic universe, and in the conceptualisation of it as either we can also see the reflection of the other.⁸¹ In all of this we can see clear parallels to the artefact that we call the *Divine Comedy*. It is an obvious feature of the work that it is highly structured. The nuances and meanings of such structure have been the subject of much scholarship, but the central theme of this analysis is that Dante has, following the traditional idea of the craftsman as an imitator of the Divine Maker,

⁸⁰ See *Pur.* 10:130-135.

⁸¹ John G. Demaray, *Dante and the Book of the Cosmos* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1987), p. 2: “The medieval conception of the universe as a figural model for religious buildings arose from many early sources, among them St. Augustine’s discussion of the order of the cosmos in *De ordine* 2:39, and the remarks of Macrobius in *Commentarius ex Cicerone in Somnium Scipionis* 1:14, on that order in which he describes the universe as a “cosmic temple”. Medieval builders of religious edifices were also clearly inspired by passages in the Book of Revelation 21:2-31, describing the descending heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, resplendent in “pure gold, like to transparent glass.” Influential too were passages in Proverbs 8:27, and Ezekiel 40:3, that were interpreted as alluding to divine architectural creation. Numerological proportions in medieval religious edifices were developed – though the exact degree of influence has been questioned and debated – using cosmic proportions cited in Plato’s *Timaeus* and supposedly advanced also by Pythagoras, and by referring to biblical passages on the size of Solomon’s Temple.”

endeavoured to emulate God in the construction of his great poem. It has therefore become quite natural to see Dante's poem as distinctly "architectonic" in character, since it possesses those qualities – detailed structure, pattern, harmony, grandeur – traditionally associated with monumental architecture. It has become a routine task of many commentators, it seems, to compare the vastness and structural unity of the poem to *the* great monument of medieval Christendom, the cathedral.⁸²

To return to the theme of literary sources, Dante would have found in the pages of scripture some confirmation of his attempts to frame a macrocosmic-microcosmic view of man. In terms of influence, it is St. Paul's first epistle to the church at Corinth that is primary to Dante's thinking, for it addresses an important theological issue on which Dante will concentrate in the *Commedia* – the resurrection of the body; and it will use the human body as a microcosmic image. In at least one important passage of this epistle, Dante could see the very image of both man as microcosm, and, happily, a justification for him being "read" in this way by those who were blessed to have been granted such insights. In the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians the Apostle is mindful that a new church, being comprised largely of pagan converts, may be confronted with the question of how an offering of universal salvation can be assimilated to the obvious fact that human society is inherently divisional and unequal. He commences his answer by affirming that it is part of the divine will that there should be abundant diversity within a corporate unity of believers, and that men are given gifts according to their particular attributes:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of varieties, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

⁸² See, for example, Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds, introduction to *Dante in English* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. lxi, which endeavours to argue that in its structural arrangements the *Commedia* has more in common with the earthiness and solidity of Romanesque architecture than with the Gothic style to which it is usually compared. See also the comparisons drawn between the standard iconography of medieval cathedrals and Dante's use of religious symbolism in the *Commedia*, in Demaray, *Dante and the Book of the Cosmos*, particularly p. 64: "Just as Dante gave form to the iconography of the Book of the World in the *Commedia* by using the popular literature of "spiritual geography" and pilgrimage, he gave form to the transcendent Book of the Cosmos in his poem employing the popular art of cathedral architecture." Or consider another parallel, that made by Christopher Kleinheiz, who bypasses the standard "Gothic cathedral" comparison to state that the *Commedia* has much more in common with the twelfth-century mosaic in the apse of the Church of San Clemente in Rome, in that they share a "totalizing vision" of the universe. (Christopher Kleinheiz, "On Dante and the Visual Arts" in Teodolinda Barolini and Wayne Storey, eds., *Dante for the New Millennium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), p. 275. Even a famous French author of the nineteenth century was moved to declare that "Dante in the thirteenth century was the last Romanesque church." (Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, translated by John Sturrock, London: Penguin, 1974, p. 200.)

To one is given through the manifestation of the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit...All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.⁸³

Dante would have read in these lines a confirmation of his own project, in that it appears to fall to particular members of human society the special task of “utterance of wisdom”, which would naturally be understood as the interpretation and transmission of the embedded meanings within given texts. Since no text held greater wisdom than that which God himself was said to have composed, the full extrapolation of this particular passage involved a kind of reflexive reading. It is a microcosmic example, for those who held an ability to interpret beyond the basic textual meaning, of the reading of all scripture. Notably, Paul reinforces his new metaphysical concept by use of an extended analogy that involves the features of the human body. The mystical “body” of this new spiritual entity, the Christian church, is compared to the construction of the physical human body:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body...Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many...But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.⁸⁴

Hence the very beginnings of the new faith were implanted with the idea that the human body, having been granted renewed status as an object of highest regard by the incarnation of God into a human form, was an appropriate metaphor for the communication of spiritual ideas. Paul would have his audience look no further than their own selves for an illustration of the arrangement of the new unseen, unified but essentially diverse sacred “body” of which they had become part. Yet he goes on to emphasise that the arrangement of the members of the “body of Christ”, as part of a metaphysical entity, has an earthly dimension that is no less relational but is, however, hierarchical: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing...”⁸⁵ The favouring of one office of the church over another is not, therefore, a human construction, but part of the divine ordinance. The church as a human institution is no less subject to the

⁸³ 1 Cor. 12:4-11.

⁸⁴ 1 Cor. 12:12-20.

⁸⁵ 1 Cor. 12:28.

divine will than the rest of creation, including the body of man, which has greater and lesser members, but all of which perform some necessary function.

Dante would also have been mindful of the way in which Paul seals his metaphor of the “body” of the metaphysical church of believers by referring to Christ as the “head”, meaning both the source of, and authority over, such a body. Ephesians 4:15-16 –

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

This idea adds a specifically Christian overlay to a basic analogy, present in texts since at least the Platonic era, that the head is the “sovereign” over the upright human form, a notion Paul later supports at Colossians 1:18 –

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

By this a mode of personal conversion is presented as a metaphor of a journey from lower to highest, whereby the apparently necessary but “base” functions of the body must be controlled and disciplined in order that one may overcome their ability to waylay the believer from their true nature – to be imitative of and in communion with their leader and “head”.

Dante would likewise have been encouraged by the way in which the great Church father, Augustine, a scholar of high seriousness to whom Dante demonstrates significant indebtedness and to whom he makes several direct allusions, would deem it appropriate to call on allegorical figures as the situation may have demanded. That Augustine might be a literary model for Dante could stand on the *Confessions* alone, as the prototype of conversion narrative: a lost man is rescued by Divine favour in a transformative experience then reports back, from the perspective of his new state as witness to the goodness of his redeemer. This also adequately describes the moral journey of the *Commedia*, yet one commentator has gone so far as to argue that the very structure of the *Commedia* is based primarily on Augustine’s three-fold compartmentalisation of human vision into *corporalis*, *spiritualis* and *intellectualis* – or literal sight, imagination and intellection – as set out in the final section of his *De Genesi*

ad litteram.⁸⁶ For the purposes of this survey, I want to briefly draw attention to two instances in Augustine's work that fall within the terms of our enquiry. In Book VII of the *De civitate Dei*, the *City of God*, Augustine presents an argument in opposition to that of the Roman polymath, Varro, that the earth itself is a deity that has a "world-soul". Even though Augustine is *against* the account of Varro, the airing of the idea in Augustine's text provides us with another example of the ways in which the human complex can be considered tripartitely, and how the parts of the human body can be analogously and anthropomorphously compared with the structure of the natural world around it.⁸⁷ Also fruitful is Augustine's extended allegory that fills Book XIII of the *Confessions*, in which he conducts an inventive reading of the first four chapter of Genesis. Such motifs as comparing the sky to a great book, the multitudinous and restless sea to the mass of sinful humanity, and the steady dry land of the earth to redeemed humanity bearing spiritual fruit, are all figures from which Dante drew significant inspiration.⁸⁸

These sources comprise part of a long tradition within Christian texts that seek to place man, divisible according to spiritual principles, as the centrepiece of creation and a representational figure that contains all the elements and structure of the universe. It is a key argument of this thesis that the *Commedia* represents a summation of this tradition, yet it is worth considering how Dante's minor works have also played a role in the development of his thought; for it can be seen that far from being a single leap, the construction of macrocosmic-microcosmic imagery in the *Commedia* has been foreshadowed in Dante's earlier writings.

⁸⁶ Francis X. Newman, "St. Augustine's Three Visions and the Structure of the *Commedia*" in *Dante*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 65-81. This idea will receive more detailed treatment in Chapter Four.

⁸⁷ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Scowcroft Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), VII, 23, p. 281: 'Varro himself, in the same treatise on the 'select' gods, asserts that there are three degrees of soul in the whole universe of nature. The first is that which penetrates all living parts of a body; this does not confer sensibility but simply supplies the condition requisite for life; and this power, says Varro, is diffused in our bones, our nails, and our hair, in the same way that in the world in general the trees are nourished and grow, and are, in a certain sense, alive, though without having sensibility. The second degree of soul brings with it sensibility; this power extends to our eyes, our ears, our nostrils, our touch. The third and highest degree of soul is also called mind, and in this intelligence holds pre-eminent place; and intelligence is a faculty denied to all mortal beings except man. It is this part of the World-Soul which, according to Varro, is God; in man he calls it the *genius*. The stones and the earth which we see in the world, which are not permeated by sensibility, are as it were the bones and nails of God, while the sun, the moon, and the stars which we perceive by our senses and which are his means of sensibility, these represent God's senses; the ether is his mind, and its powers extend to the stars to make them deities; and the goddess Tellus (Earth) is constituted by that influence which penetrates to the earth through the mediation of the stars; and that which reaches to the sea and the ocean forms the god Neptune.'

⁸⁸ See Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII.15-17, pp. 321-324.

The first of Dante's four *Rime Petrose* (Stony Rhymes), the *Io son venuto* ("I have come") is a major milestone in the development of this theme, for it is here that he explicitly uses some of the key motifs that find their full expression in the *Commedia*, and it is "the first of Dante's poems to include an astronomical description; it is also the first in which he adopts the analogy with the human body as a principle of structure."⁸⁹ The *Io son venuto* is a bittersweet meditation on the author's experience of being shunned by a mysterious and nameless young woman. But the significance of the work lies in its elaborate structure, for the poem contains a series of interconnected themes: the astronomical references within the work that hint at the spiritual significance of Dante's own birth; the relationship between the cosmos and the human body; the similarities between the course of the poem and the cyclical course of the sun; and the way in which the poem makes its own journey, in an opposite direction to that of the *Commedia*, from the highest to the lowest points. As has been demonstrated, the five-stanza *Io son venuto* imitates a descending spiral.⁹⁰ Each of the five verses describes the effects of winter upon the various levels or layers of creation – the heavens, the atmosphere, creatures of the air, plants, and the earth. In parallel, the poem makes subtle but distinct references to the human body in a descending path – head, breath, heart, belly, genitals. In addition, each stanza appears to imitate the daily course of the sun, containing a distinct three-fold set of connected references to rising, stillness, and descent, which are comparable to the movement of sol. Combined, these two motions can be read as imitating the descending, spiralling course of the sun as it makes its way towards the winter solstice, bringing the coldness and hardness that are the poem's dominant themes.

In Dante's only overtly and exclusively political work, the *De Monarchia*, he employs only one instance of microcosmic analogy, yet it stands out as being typical of his use of established sources and is appropriately situated at the commencement of his argument, as if to lay down a pictorial framework upon which the subsequent discussion could be arranged. The opening sequences of *De Monarchia* set out for us the key questions to be addressed in the work, and yet again this takes a trinal form: whether the existence of the "temporal monarchy" (that is, the Holy Roman Empire) is necessary for the wellbeing of the world; whether it was by right that the Roman people took upon itself the office of the Monarch; and whether the Monarch's authority is derived directly from God.⁹¹ The comprehensive

⁸⁹ Durling and Martinez, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's Rime Petrose*, p. 97.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 71-108.

⁹¹ *De Monarchia*, 1.2.

answering of these three questions (all, as it happens, in the affirmative), will form the body of his treatise. Yet as a preliminary move Dante asks us to consider that all such arguments can only properly proceed from the firm establishment of a prior and irrefutable principle. This principle, it turns out, is that the proper task of man is to fulfil the capacity of his intellect, in all its manifold respects. Yet this cannot occur arbitrarily, for the proper environment that man requires to complete this task of fulfilment is that of a peaceful and ordered civil society – “Hence it is clear that universal peace is the most excellent means of securing our happiness.”⁹² Having set down this preliminary ground as virtually axiomatic, Dante can proceed with the main thrusts of his argument.

Therefore let us see what is the ultimate end of human society as a whole; once that is grasped our task is more than half accomplished, as the Philosopher says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In order to clarify the issue it may be noted that nature forms the thumb for one end and the whole hand for another, and the arm for yet another, whilst each of these ends is different from that to which the whole man is destined. Similarly the end towards which the individual's life is directed is different from that of the family community; the village has one end, the city another and the kingdom yet another; and last of all there is the end that the eternal God has established for the whole human race by means of nature, which is the mode of his art. It is this last-mentioned end that we are looking for and that will be the guiding principle in our inquiry.⁹³

It seems likely that Dante has drawn upon the imagery previously used in the writings of St. Paul and John of Salisbury.⁹⁴ Different components of the human body are designed for varying purposes and have differing abilities and strengths, while none are either indispensable or completely dominant over the other. Again, Dante enjoys employing a

⁹² *De Monarchia*, 1.4.

⁹³ *De Monarchia*, 1.3.

⁹⁴ See John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*, trans. Cary J. Nederman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), V.2, p. 67: “The position of the head in the republic is occupied, however, by a prince subject only to God and to those who act in His place on earth, in as much as in the human body the head is stimulated and ruled by the soul. The place of the heart is occupied by the senate, from which proceeds the beginning of good and bad works. The duties of the ears, eyes, and mouth are claimed by the judges and governors of provinces. The hands coincide with officials and soldiers. Those who always assist the prince are comparable to the flanks. Treasurers and record keepers (I speak not of those who supervise prisoners, but of the counts of the Exchequer) resemble the shape of the stomach and intestines; these, if they accumulate with great avidity and tenaciously preserve their accumulation, engender innumerable and incurable diseases so that their infection threatens to ruin the whole body. Furthermore, the feet coincide with peasants perpetually bound to the soil, for whom it is all the more necessary that the head take precautions, in that they more often meet with accidents while they walk on the earth in bodily subservience; and those who erect, sustain and move forward the mass of the whole body are justly owed shelter and support. Remove from the fittest body the aid of the feet; it does not proceed under its own power, but either crawls shamefully, uselessly and offensively on its hands or else is moved with the assistance of brute animals.”

three-fold analogy, comparing how the human thumb, hand and arm, while appearing to be part of the same organic structure, can fulfil both separate and individual functions while also contributing to the operation of the “whole”, that is, the entire human frame. Yet he goes on to build a larger comparison that places an individual man as the centrepiece. Just as the components of an arm, he says, can be part of a grander function, so too can the life, politically speaking, of any one individual. Like the nested spheres of his *Paradiso*, Dante frames an image of ever-widening spheres of influence and concern, from individual to family, and then outwards to village, city, kingdom, and finally the entire human race before an all-enveloping God. In this image Dante expects us to understand that political concerns are inseparable from spiritual ones by claiming that both are centred on the human form. The inference is clear: just as individual parts of the body have a unique and indispensable part to play in the function of the “whole man”, so too the individual in a human society is part of something beyond himself: thumb is to hand is to arm, just as man is to family is to community.

This initial experiment in body analogy is a precursor to Dante’s passionate treatment of justice in cantos XVIII – XX of the *Paradiso*. Here, he presents his full argument for the way in which political justice must fulfil not just the operations of civil law, but the deeper spiritual needs of man. Justice, says Dante, is not merely an intellectual abstraction but a practice, a way of living that enables all people to live freely and rightly in pursuing the excellence of which they are capable. In expression of this ideal, Dante builds a stunning symbolic set-piece in the concluding lines of *Paradiso* XVIII – thousands of brilliant lights, which turn out to be the fiery forms of the just souls, leap upwards, and, each finding their divinely-ordained place in the arrangement, configure themselves to form the head and neck of an enormous emblematic Eagle, the very symbol of Imperial Justice.⁹⁵ Many thousands of individual members contribute to the construction of the organic, unified entity.

There is yet another element of this chapter of the *De Monarchia* that falls within the sphere of this enquiry. Shortly after the analogy of the body already considered, Dante goes on to re-state two of our key themes – that the human form is essentially triadic in its construction, and that as an analogous extension of this construction as it applies to the cosmos, man is placed in an intermediary position within the arrangement of creation:

⁹⁵ See *Par.* 18: 100-111.

And so the specific capacity of man does not consist simply in *being*, since the very elements also share in being: nor does it consist in *compound being*, for this is also found in the minerals; nor is *animate being*, which the plants also enjoy; nor in the capacity to apprehend things, for this is shared by brute animals, but it consists in the capacity to apprehend by means of the *possible intellect*, and it is this that sets man apart from inferior and from superior beings. For although there are other beings endowed with intellect, their intellect is not *possible* like that of man, since such beings are completely intellectual; in them intellect and being coincide, and their very *raison d'être* is to perform intellectual operations without pause, otherwise they would not be eternal.⁹⁶

The “other beings” are of course the angelic hierarchies, who have the ability, indeed the *function*, as Dante points out, to fully and instantly comprehend all things with pure intellection. Man has only *possible intellect*, (and likewise *only* man has *possible intellect*), because whereas human beings have been granted the potentiality to comprehend with pure intellection in this life, any one individual person may not in fact achieve the fulfilment of such potential. In as much as this capacity is always within us, however, we have a status that in some way *approximates* to that of the angels, and it is the cultivation of this component of our being that forms the heart of philosophy and spiritual contemplation. Alternatively, the earthiness of man’s construction, in that he is partly comprised of gross matter, means that he is forever hindered by the demands of such construction. Dante again alludes to the standard topos of the three-fold arrangement of the human form: an animate being that, like plants, maintains existence at a purely vegetative level; a sensate being that can operate at a moderate level of apprehension; and an intellectual being that can approximate to the function of the angels. This tripartite division will come to form the essential superstructure of the analogy of the human form that underpins the narrative of the *Commedia*.

In the *Convivio*, we also find an outstanding set-piece that is explicitly microcosmic in its construction. In his explication of the work’s second canzone, Dante professes to uncover the meaning of the opening line “Ye who the third Heaven move, intent of thought...”⁹⁷ This, he says, is meant to be understood as part of an allegorical schema that directly equates the arrangement and nature of all the various spheres of the cosmos with the established human

⁹⁶ *De Monarchia*, 1.3.

⁹⁷ *Convivio*, 2.1.

sciences. That is, the workings of the heavens are a cosmic representation of the workings of the human mind, contained, of course, within the spherical entity of the head. Dante introduces his analogy in this way:

In order to see what is meant by the ‘third Heaven’, one has in the first place to perceive what I desire to express by this word Heaven alone: and then one will see how and why this third heaven was needful to us. I say that by Heaven I mean Science, and by the Heavens ‘the Sciences’, from three resemblances in which they must appear; as will be seen by discussing that word third.⁹⁸

Yet again, he shows his love of allegorical presentation, and triune symbolism. The “three resemblances” are: that both the heavens and the sciences share “the revolution of the one and the other round one fixed centre”⁹⁹ – that is, they revolve around that which is subject to them; both cast “light” on that which is below them – “For each heaven illuminates visible things; and thus each Science illuminated the things intelligible”¹⁰⁰; and both contribute to “the inducing of perfection in the things so inclined.”¹⁰¹ Having established that a correspondence exists between the heavenly bodies and the human sciences, Dante goes on to make a series of elaborate distinctions as to the precise quality of each coupling. The seven planets are comparable to the seven subjects that comprised the established curriculum of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*; the heaven of the Fixed Stars is comparable to Physics, the crystalline Heaven of the Primum Mobile is akin to Moral Philosophy; and the final seat of Heaven, the Empyrean, is like the “Divine Science” – Theology. This arrangement can be read as a preliminary model of the more extensive contemplation of human intellectual and moral virtues that will play a part in the structure of the *Paradiso*. While the *Convivio* merely suggests that the nature of the human mind and the order of the heavens are both a reflection of the other, the *Paradiso* will become, among its other aims, a consideration of the nature of the human mind as it seeks to make its systematic progression through a gradation of intellectual capacities. In particular, a passage from *Paradiso* II will make the connection between the fruits of human endeavours and the intelligent movements of the heavens, claiming that the influence imparted by the circling heavens is directly comparable to the powers of the soul within the body.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Ibid. 2.13.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² See *Par.* 2:112-138.

Finally, to the *Commedia*. That the work is divided into three clear parts in terms of both its length and subject matter is one of its most obvious features, and will provide a basis for all the analogical reading of the poem that proceeds from this point.¹⁰³ Yet before considering the detailed subtleties of this arrangement we should state that the poetic form of the narrative, the famous invention of *terza rima*, no less than its architectonics, demonstrates a deep engagement with microcosmic thinking. The most obvious symbolism to be drawn from *terza rima* is its intricate numerology. The number 3, and its square, 9, are Dante's most important and beloved symbolic numbers, and readers of the *Vita Nuova* will recall the way he takes the symbolism of these numbers to levels that can verge on the obsessive.¹⁰⁴ In the *Commedia* his use of these numbers moves towards the grandiose and architectural. The entire work is divided into three main parts, and much scholarly effort has been given to further sub-dividing each of these three after-worlds into strict partitions. Dante was clear in providing his own hierarchical division of the three worlds into nine separate sections, and in both the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* he uses a significant moment of pause within the narrative to have Virgil set out the structure of those two realms.¹⁰⁵ Within the work, there are multiple examples of persons organising themselves into groups of three, or multiples of three, and symbolic uses of objects presented in trios, such as the memorable three steps that stand before the gate of Purgatory, and the final vision of God as a set of three brilliantly-coloured rings.¹⁰⁶ For Dante, the number three most obviously evinced the traditional Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. If God was conceived as unity but also threeness, then any instance of the number 3, or a trio of objects, was a physical reminder of this essential characteristic of the divine. In addition, Dante is always grateful to adopt such tripartite

¹⁰³ Newman, "St. Augustine's Three Visions and the Structure of the *Commedia*" in *Dante*, p. 66: "To speak baldly of the "structure" of Dante's poem is, of course, to raise a virtually inexhaustible question, but I want to discuss only the most obvious of the multiple patterns of the poem: the division into three *cantiche*. The apportioning of the *Comedy* into *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* constitutes the primary aspect of the "form of the treatise," a form given by the poet by conventional eschatology. But eschatology merely provided the premise of the narrative; it did not tell Dante how to make the experience of each realm distinct for the pilgrim and thereby for the reader. Nothing is clearer about the *Comedy* than that Hell, Purgatory and Heaven are more than places with different kinds of souls in them. Indeed, so striking is the difference between successive realms that we can describe the pilgrim's journey as a passage through three different kinds of experience."

¹⁰⁴ See *Vita Nuova*, XXIX.

¹⁰⁵ See *Inf.* 11 and *Pur.* 17.

¹⁰⁶ See *Pur.* 9:76-102, and *Par.* 33:115-120.

systems as Aristotle's classification of moral errors in his *Ethics*,¹⁰⁷ or the complex three-by-three structure of the orders of angels from Pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*.¹⁰⁸

Embedded within the basic building blocks of the work is a microcosmic representation of its structure. The hendecasyllabic meter of each line of the *Commedia* produces a total of 33 metrical feet in each *terzina*, so that the *terzina* itself becomes a miniaturised version of each section of the poem, where each part contains 33 Cantos (allowing for the usual exception that the initial Canto of the *Inferno* is not part of the story *per se*, but an introductory prologue designed as a platform from which the narrative will spring). The utterance of a single syllable is therefore the microcosm to the *terzina* as macrocosm. Grammatically speaking, each *terzina* is, in the great majority of instances, a complete or unified entity, a self-contained expression or descriptive set-piece delivered by Dante as author, or a finished component of a speech delivered by one of the narrative's characters. Rarely do such descriptions or speeches terminate mid-*terzina*.¹⁰⁹ This is imitated in larger form by the fact that in nearly all cases each canto of the poem is a complete and self-contained episode, attending to a particular individual character, or philosophical or moral theme.¹¹⁰ Thus, in an expansion of the previous analogy, each *terzina* is a microcosmic imitation of both the Canto which contains it, and the entire *cantiche* that contains it *and* the Canto to which it belongs. Further, while each *terzina* is usually a contained unit, to fully comprehend the rhyme in any particular *terzina* (excepting the first and last of each Canto) the reader must refer to both the proceeding and succeeding *terzinae*, for they are inextricably linked by the overlapping rhyme scheme. This gives the impression of each *terzina* having an individual identity, yet also being dependant on its neighbouring verses, like interlocking links in a chain. This can be seen as a direct imitation of the grand structure of the poem as a whole, for while the three-fold division of the work is essential to its meaning, in no way can any one part of the narrative be fully understood without knowledge of the other two – Dante shows by elaborate geometrical structures and metaphors of spirallic and circular movement that the three parts are inextricably linked in form and meaning. Thus the poetic arrangement of the poem holds

¹⁰⁷ See Aristotle, *Ethics*, 7.1.

¹⁰⁸ See Pseudo-Dionysius: *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 143-191.

¹⁰⁹ This of course creates the strong impression that the *terzina* is somehow the natural mode for Dante's poetic expression, an effect achieved so effortlessly by the author that it is only revealed by a detached analysis of the poem.

¹¹⁰ For an analysis of the way in which Dante's use of the poetic forms of the poem can be perceived as paralleling its content see Ferrante, "A Poetics of Chaos and Harmony" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp. 153-171.

within it an imitation of the microcosmic-macrocosmic relationships to which it frequently alludes.

Furthermore, each *cantica* of the poem can be seen to contain its own distinct tripartite divisions, such that each lesser part of the poem is a microcosmic version of the greater macrocosmic whole. This divisionality of the poem has long engaged the attention of its commentators. While not strictly correspondent, a generally coherent parallel can be drawn between the three *cantiche* of the poem in respect of its structural arrangement. The *Inferno* has traditionally been divided into the three realms of Hell according to the three-fold classification of sins into that of incontinence, malice and fraud. The *Purgatorio* clearly contains a tripartite division into ante-Purgatory, Purgatory proper, and the Terrestrial Paradise. *Paradiso* appears to be ordered along similar lines, with the blessed souls divided into three categories: the deficient in virtue, the exemplars of cardinal virtues, and those who have perfected the theological virtues.¹¹¹ In a likewise comparison, in both the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* there exists what has been called a prefatory space that occupies the first nine Cantos of the *cantica* and provides a point of demarcation in the structure of the narrative, which is paralleled by the partitioning of the first three planetary spheres in the *Paradiso*. This approach also compares the conclusions of each *cantica* – the icy circle of *Inferno*'s traitors, the Earthly paradise, and the Empyrean of the *Paradiso* all provide a special environment for the dramatic climaxes they contain.¹¹² Thus, the tripartite division of each *cantica* gives it a micro/macro structure that imitates both the inclusive nature of the greater work, and the behaviour of the multiple *terzinae* they contain.¹¹³

Here can be seen a three-fold development in Dante's thinking, whereby he incorporates the best of a long tradition of literary representations of microcosmic themes, begins to implement such thinking within various elements of his minor works, and then brings to fulfilment his adoption of this tradition by including specifically detailed and microcosmic patterning within the very basic poetic structure of the *Commedia*. Likewise, the full harnessing of all Dante's literary sources, and the final development in a steady progression of experiments, finds its form in the grander architectural structure of the *Commedia*. A principal feature of the work, what I identify as the arrangement of the poem along distinct

¹¹¹ Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, pp. 183-184.

¹¹² Rachel Jacoff, "An Introduction to *Paradiso*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 210-211.

¹¹³ Ibid.

anatomical analogies, is one important way in which Dante can honour and then fully extend the tradition to which he is heir. Meanwhile, he also provides a symbolic confirmation, at a level well beyond the literal, of the fundamental importance – theologically, morally, in every way – that he places upon a proper understanding of the human body and all its meanings. Dante as pilgrim in his own story makes a spiritual journey in a bodily form. In this journey he affirms the goodness and centrality of the human body in the divine plan for mankind. This goodness and centrality is founded upon the doctrine of the Incarnation, which posits that God deigned to intervene in the history of humanity by taking on a body, that became *the* body which was granted a central place in that history, and by which all history was re-understood. His allegory contains the polysemous qualities associated with scripture, and the narrative form of the Bible. It imitates the “low” style of the holy texts, and in its moral programme it is a “comedy” because it progressively moves from the lower state to the higher. Dante’s own narrated journey closely parallels the central drama of *the* journey, and makes an allegorical and symbolically-ordered journey through the three realms of the human form.

CHAPTER THREE

INFERNO AND THE BELLY OF HELL

*Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth
beyond measure...*

Isaiah 5:14.

That Dante's conception of Hell demonstrates a particularly strong resemblance to a gigantic and infernal gut has attracted significant scholarly attention. Extant analysis has been constructed within the larger questions of how Dante's poetry as a whole, and the *Commedia* in particular, draws upon the parallels that were understood to exist between the human form and various other elements of the cosmos; and how Dante's allegorical constructions in the *Commedia* have been prefigured by earlier attempts within his minor works, particularly the *rime petrose*.¹ In this chapter I propose to expand these ideas, and demonstrate that the anatomical symbolism which permeates the *Inferno* can be understood as both a self-contained world of diabolical symbolism, and part of a larger schema that underpins the entire *Commedia*.

That the *Inferno* in particular should be constructed around imagery associated with human anatomy is to be expected, since the residents we meet here are specifically punished in their supposed shade-bodies; Dante as pilgrim moves through this place in his own physical form in a particularly physical way; and the pilgrim engages in a series of distinct physical interactions with the realm's inhabitants. By comparison, the experiences of journeying through Purgatory and Paradise are, for the pilgrim, qualitatively different, in that they involve a progressive disconnection from the physical landscape and, it is suggested, increasing *disembodiment*. The distinct topography of Dante's Hell, completely imaginal and yet rendered with intensely concrete and detailed realism, lends itself naturally to parallels with other physical entities. In searching for such parallels it is equally natural that the poet

¹ For an overview of the principal relationships between the *Inferno* and human anatomy, see Robert M. Durling, "Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell" in *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979-80*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 61-93; Robert M. Durling, "Seneca, Plato, and the Microcosm" in *Dante*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 113-131; and Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 62-78.

may have drawn upon that which is most immediate and accessible to us in this world, our own bodies, for an allegorical frame around which to construct a series of referential allusions and markers. These references can be compiled to construct an allegory of Hell as a self-contained image of the human form (albeit an essentially corrupted and distorted form, specifically an “inverted man” or what Dante describes as man *sottosopra* – “upside-down”); as well as being a distinct part of a much larger allegorical construction that incorporates the entire poem.

An immediately obvious feature of the *Inferno* is its intense physicality. Confronted with a richly detailed landscape, and bombarded by an array of sensory references, the reader is quickly and easily drawn into a highly tactile experience. In contrast, the subsequent journeys through *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* involve an increasingly imaginative, dream-like experience that develops into an excursion into the purely metaphysical. But the beginning of the poem is undoubtedly *grounded*, and the many metaphorical representations that populate the *Inferno* operate in a multi-layered fashion that specifically make associative ties between the very bodily nature of Dante’s *contrapasso*, the physical characteristics of an underground world, and the clear emphasis on descending weight (or earthiness) as a structural determinant for the poet’s tripartite classification of sins. The sense of physicality, or physical “closeness”, steadily develops and intensifies within the *Inferno* as the *cantica* progresses – the descent into Hell involves an increasing reduction of experience to the merely literal.² The *Inferno*, of the three *cantiche*, is marked by the intense accuracy of its descriptions of the physical landscape, and its pressing *bodiliness*. To make a general topographical comparison, Dante’s Hell is *earthly* (albeit almost entirely subterranean); Purgatory is *otherworldly*; and Paradise is *celestial*.

The opening sequences of the poem project a downward descent into ever-enclosing space: even though the poet’s conception of Hell involves an inverted cone that must be perceived as having an immense opening at its apex, at no point is such a sense of open space expressed in the *Inferno*. The opposite is usually the case: the enclosure of physical space, expressed by darkness, oppressive air, immersion in substances or the “entrapment” within one’s body experienced by the damned, serves to mirror the moral enclosure of damnation. This underground topography of the *Inferno* – a highly animated and enclosed space – and the

² Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*, p. 65.

imagery the poet employs throughout, are marked by references to the lower and commonly offensive parts and functions of the body. Hell is quite literally the lowest level of all existence, since in Dante's cosmology any overview of creation properly takes place from the seat of the Empyrean, which was imagined as resting above the heavens on the *opposite* side of the earth from the entrance to Hell that serves as the pilgrim's starting point. The residents of this realm are described as merely "falling" into it, in great multitudes, to the lowest point that is appropriate to their signature transgression.³ And, although the text does not grant specific details on how each soul is moved to its allocated designation within the vortex of Hell, it can be assumed that this experience of uncontrollable and irreversible descent is a key part of the anguish experienced by those so afflicted.⁴ Despite the enclosed and self-obsessed nature of their existence the damned can often demonstrate an awareness of the structure of Hell and their place within it – close to the lowest point of Hell the traitor Branca d'Oria (whose appearance here, prior to his physical death, raises problematic questions of its own) describes the experience of his fellow condemned: "*ella ruina in sì fatta cisterna*" ("Swirling, / the soul runs downwards to this sink.")⁵ As shall be seen, the concept of physical weight, and its accompanying theme of descent to the lowest point appropriate to it, plays an important role in Dante's finely graduated hierarchy of sins, where depth of descent directly corresponds to seriousness of transgression. In moral terms this descent is an image of the condition of man when, according to Christian theology, he has surrendered the offer of divine grace – a "sinking" into the unavoidable consequences of such a decision.

In this analogous reading, Dante's Hell is comparable to both the functions of our lower organs and the inevitable way its contents descend through them. The nature and operation of Hell resembles an enormous digestive system. Hell is enclosed and dark, and although we are told that Virgil can still estimate the time by watching the stars, this faculty is clearly denied to the residents of Hell sub-Limbo. The air is foul and pestilential, as if imitating the noisome odours of the gut; and mostly the atmosphere is hot and oppressive (although, crucially in respect of another order of symbolism which shall be explored later, the lowest levels of hell are bitterly cold). Heat is necessary for the operation of many elements of Dante's *contrapasso*, not merely for the traditional imagery of fire as painful punishment, but

³ See *Inf.* 3:118-120.

⁴ One commentator has even suggested that the helpless, downward tumble of the condemned souls is strongly suggested by the onomatopoeic language used at the point where such descent is described, *Inf.* 5:12 – "*quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa*." ("the numbered ring to which he'll send them down.") See Reynolds, *Dante: The Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man*, p. 131.

⁵ *Inf.* 33:133.

to express the notion that the sinners in Hell, particularly those guilty of the sins of Fraud, are “cooked” in the belly of Hell, where abundant metaphors make the connection between spiritual states and food consumption. Hell is also loathsome to listen to. Dante’s first sensory experience of Hell is to hear the discordant moans and cries of the sinners echoing up to the rim of the abyss, and throughout his journey we are given descriptions of the screaming, gurgling and howling that assaults his senses at almost every turn. Our bellies too create such offensive sounds, uncontrollably and unwantedly. Hell is also heavily *irrigated*. It is often disagreeably dank and sloppy, restlessly bubbling and gurgling. The rivers of Hell, which Dante claims as having their origins in human anatomy, are like the fermenting and caustic gastric juices that lubricate and work the gut.⁶

Dante’s Hell is also characterised by its maddening restlessness. The damned are clearly denied the faculty of normal human motion, since free physical movement is an outward expression of the freedom of the will; this freedom to choose being that which they have misused in their earthly lives. They are incapacitated or restricted in their movements, or else goaded into action beyond the range of normal human experience. And it never stops – Hell is a ceaseless cycle of pointless agitation or painful humiliation; and the desire for continual process and consumption, expressed in the frenzied behaviour of those who control the operations of Hell, such as the ferryman Charon or the diabolical devils of the malebolge, is never sated. Though the shade-bodies of the damned pour into this great system, there is always room for more. In this too it resembles the mechanics of human digestion, which can never rest and is driven by physical laws of need and consumption to be endlessly demanding and working.⁷ Yet neither can our lower organs be moved or controlled by the will – they are externally static and yet display an internal freneticism of their own making. The lower functions of the body make continual and insistent demands upon us – hunger is acutely unpleasant, sexual desire is commonly irresistible and needs regular sating, and the mechanisms of human waste require our routine attention. These functions or desires must be regularly quelled or brought under control of the will, yet they cannot be altogether eliminated. The routine and unending demand of the belly is comparable to what has been

⁶ The origins of the rivers of Hell are explained in Virgil’s extended speech at *Inf.* 14:94-120.

⁷ Barbara Reynolds, amongst others, has made the observation that Dante appears to have drawn upon the medieval artistic tradition concerning visual representations of Hell, as can be seen in the ceiling mosaics in the Baptistry of St. Giovanni in Florence, which depicted eternal suffering as an “endlessly continuous” experience of being eaten and re-eaten. See Reynolds, *Dante: The Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man*, p. 227.

called the “terrifying periodicity” of the sinner’s punishments.⁸ The comparatively “small” but incessantly demanding functions of the belly necessitate our regular attention, and thus provide constant opportunity for both fascination and frustration. At the level of personal development and subsequent transcendence, the pilgrim’s journey through the *Inferno* is a conquering of the bodily appetites that perpetually threaten to frustrate or undermine spiritual development.

The *Inferno* is particularly notable for its consistent textual references to the lower parts and functions of the human body. The flatterers are immersed in excrement, the simoniacs are burned on the soles of their feet, the schismatics have their abdomens riven, the diseased falsifiers crawl worm-like over one another’s stomachs. The image of the *Inferno* as a journey through the universal *fondo*, or bottom, is re-inforced by the *cantiche*’s regular and distinct scatological references. In the circle of the flatterers Dante says that “*vidi gente attuffata in uno sterco*” (“we saw / that all of them were plunged in diarrhoea”)⁹, and that “*vidi un col capo sì di merda lordo*” (“I noticed one whose head was foul with shit.”)¹⁰ Elsewhere, he comments upon “*l tristo sacco / che merda fa di quel che si trangugia*.” (“that grim bag / that turns to shit whatever gullets swallow.”)¹¹ The soothsayers shed tears that “*le natiche bagnava per lo fesso*.” (“ran down to rinse them where the buttocks cleave?”)¹² It is clearly unthinkable that such imagery could find a place in the other *cantiche* of the *Commedia*. They apply to the belly of Hell alone.¹³

Dante’s reputation for attending to the entirety of the human experience is partly merited by his unflinching descriptions of the workings of the lower body parts, and a demonstration of such use supports the analogy being constructed here. It is primarily the case that in almost all instances such references to bodily functions are confined to the *Inferno*, and that where such exceptions occur in the other *cantiche*, a contextualisation of those exceptions allows us to re-fit them for our purposes. That Hell is a belly is borne out in the direct references to *ventre* (“stomach” or “bowels”) in the *Inferno*. The three-headed dog Cerberus has a “*ventre*

⁸ Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, p. 284.

⁹ *Inf.* 18:113.

¹⁰ *Inf.* 18:116.

¹¹ *Inf.* 28:26-27.

¹² *Inf.* 20:24.

¹³ For an analysis of Dante’s use of scatological references, see Zygmunt G. Baranski, “Scatology and Obscenity in Dante” in Barolini and Storey, eds., *Dante for the New Millennium*, pp. 259-273.

largo”¹⁴; the prophet Arruns is punished as a soothsayer by being turned “*ventre li s’atterga*” (“spine to gut”) ¹⁵; the falsifiers are like lowly worms who sprawl “*sovra ‘l ventre*” (“over the stomach”) ¹⁶ of the next; the leprous impersonator Cappochio is dragged away from Dante, his “*ventre al fondo sodo*” (“Belly scraping across the ground”).¹⁷ The summation of such imagery comes in Dante’s description of the severed abdomen of the figure of Mohammed in the circle of the sowers of discord:

*Tra le gambe pendevan le minugia;
la corata pareva e ‘l tristo sacco
che merda fa di quel che si trangugia.*

Between his legs his guts all dangled down,
innards and heart on show, and that grim bag
that turns to shit whatever gullets swallow.

(*Inf.* XXVIII, 25-27).

Setting aside the contemporary tensions this episode may inflame, the connection in Dante’s symbolic structure is clear. If the human form is the highest physical expression of truth, then the corrupt or misdirected use of the human will is best imagined, in poetic terms at least, as the debasement of that form. The rendering of the belly is an image of violence that mirrors the divisions in the social and religious order supposedly threatened by the schismatics.

That the belly, and in particular the disfigured or ill belly, belongs to the *Inferno*, is neatly contrasted with its use elsewhere in the *Commedia*. In Canto XIX of the *Purgatorio* Dante has a vivid dream of a Siren, whose dress is stripped from her by Virgil, which “*mostravami ‘l ventre*” (“displayed her guts”).¹⁸ The nightmarishness of this scene places it firmly in the poetic mood of the *Inferno*, and in moral terms it serves as a reminder for the progressing Dante (who is about to enter the terrace of the Avaricious), of the continuing dangers that arise, even for the penitent, in misapprehending the world’s physical goods and pleasures. In the *Paradiso*, the two allusions to the belly take on a completely different significance, for they refer to *the* human belly, in Christian terms – the divinely-ordained purity of the womb

¹⁴ *Inf.* 6:17.

¹⁵ *Inf.* 20:46.

¹⁶ *Inf.* 29:67.

¹⁷ *Inf.* 30:30

¹⁸ *Pur.* 19:32.

of Mary. In Canto XXIII the angel Gabriel introduces himself as “*che giro / l’alta letizia che spira del ventre / che fu albergo del nostro disiro.*” (“encircling here the height of joy that breathes / around the womb our Longed-for sheltered in.”)¹⁹ Again, at the climax of the *Paradiso*, Bertrand of Clairvaux will honour this aspect of Mary’s divinity with “*Nel ventre tuo si raccese l’amore*” (“Love, in your womb, was fanned to fire again.”)²⁰ These references illustrate Dante’s understanding of the human body as being a vessel of received truth, where the constant reference point, in theological terms, is the entering into the world of *the* human body in the Incarnation. The reversal, which is also a restoration, is made complete. The distended or wounded belly, a symbol of falsity or misrepresentation, is now the sublime, undefiled womb that will bring Truth into being. Instead of a harbour of grotesqueness and decay, the body, rightly ordered, is shown to be an agent of fruitfulness and peace.

It is not only the lower body parts themselves, but the products of their operations that form part of Dante’s bodily imagery. There are moments in the *Inferno* that reek of human waste. Most notably, in the pocket of the seducers and panderers, Dante describes how the inhabitants are mired in what appears to be their own excrement, even to the point of rendering them unrecognisable:

*Quivi venimmo; e quindi giù nel fosso
vidi gente attuffattata in uno sterco
che da li umani privadi pareva mosso.
E mentre ch’io là giù con l’occhio cerco,
vidi un col capo sì di merda lordo
che non pareva s’era laico o cherco.*

Reaching that point and looking down, we saw
that all of them were plunged in diarrhoea
flowing, it seemed, from human cubicles.
And while my eyes were searching deep within,
I noticed one whose head was foul with shit.
Had he the tonsure? It was hard to tell.

(Inf. XVIII, 112-117).

This utter squalor of this scene, where the human body, paragon of creation, is rendered almost unrecognisable by the outward display of its own waste, finds its completion in the

¹⁹ *Par.* 23:104.

²⁰ *Par.* 33:7.

description of the filthy prostitute Thais, who is not allowed to speak but is mocked by Virgil for her contemptuous use of flattery to please her sexual partners.²¹ It is difficult to imagine a more disgusting yet compelling display of the waste to which human faculties can be distorted. That these sinners turned some of the highest functions of the mind and body (the power of language, sexual love) to such perverse and self-serving ends is repaid to them in full.

Elsewhere, we are given other instances of offensive anatomical imagery. At the brink of the circle of Heretics Dante and Virgil are repulsed by an unbearable stink rising from the pit before them. Virgil's response is to advance slowly, so that the two pilgrims can acclimatise to the "*tristo fiato*" ("grim belch"),²² offering us a neat comparison between the theologically offensive utterances of the heretic and the bad breath we might associate with the person who has either consumed the wrong kind of "food" (in case of the heretic an absorption of corrupt reasoning) or has neglected their duty to cleanliness, or both. At the pocket of the Barrators in Canto XXI, a mock-epic plays out among a crazed group of anarchic devils. In concluding the frenetic banter that has dominated the canto, Dante produces an emphatic exclamation mark by having the leader of the devil-gang respond to the insults of his lesser: "*ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta*" ("in answer made a trumpet of his arse.")²³ This moment, while offering scatological humour, also accords with the abdominal imagery of the *malbolge* and points the reader towards another possibility.

That the structure of Hell involves an increasing constriction as it descends, and that the "bowels" of this realm are occupied by the traitorous, invites us to regard the figure of Satan, the "lowest of the low", as being the "anus" of the world. Dante sketches such an idea by the analogous use of two words – "*sottosopra*" ("upside-down") and "*cloaca*" ("sewer"). His use of these terms is limited to a few specific instances, which bear a direct relation to one another. In the final moments of the *Inferno* Dante traverses the belly of Satan, and is suddenly disoriented by the fact that the beast has changed its apparent position in space: "*e*

²¹ See *Inf.* 18:127-132 – "*Appresso ciò lo duca: 'Fa che pinghe,' / mi disse, 'il viso un poco più avante, / sì che la faccia ben con l'occhio attinghe / di quella sozza e scapigliata fante / che là si graffia con l'unghie merdose, / e or s'accoscia e ora è in piedi stante.*" ("When that was done, my leader now went on: / 'Just poke your nose a little further out. / Your eyes may then be able to detect / a slut down there – filthy, with tangled hair, / scratting herself with cacky fingernails, / squatting at one time, upright at the next...")

²² *Inf.* 11:12.

²³ *Inf.* 21:139.

questi com' è fitto / si sottosopra?" ("And why is that one there / fixed upside down?")²⁴ This demonstrates that Dante has passed the fixed point at the centre of the earth, about which the figure of Satan is suspended. Once past this point, terrestrially, all things appear inverted, but theologically speaking Dante's experience is an expression of the invertedness that is sin – proper order turned on its head. If Lucifer was the highest and brightest and most beautiful of all the angels, Dante now represents him as the greatest sinner – the lowest, darkest and ugliest of all things. Anatomically there can be nothing lower than the rectum, a place hidden from our sight and most disgusting to us. And we should recall that the fall of Lucifer to an inverted state is not merely moral but, in the poem, carries cosmological significance, since the physical fall is said to be responsible for both the carving out of Hell's interior and the creation of Mt. Purgatory.²⁵ In a deliberate parallel, Dante's other use of *sottosopra* occurs in the nineteenth Canto of *Inferno*. Here, the simoniacs are punished by being suspended upside-down in mock baptismal fonts of fire, and Dante confronts the disastrous Pope Nicholas III, who inadvertently insults Dante by mistaking him for his own arch-enemy, Pope Boniface VIII. Nicholas anticipates that the corrupt Boniface will soon follow him here, exactly as he followed him in the papal succession,²⁶ and it is this reference to both Boniface and the image of physical inversion that are reiterated in a shocking moment much later in the *Commedia*.

In Canto XXVII of the *Paradiso* the figure of St Peter delivers a bitter rebuke on the contemporary corruption of that which he calls "*il luogo mio*" ("my place")²⁷, referring to the papal seat in Rome, now vacant after the removal of the Holy See to Avignon. Dante now presents the worldliness of Boniface in an anatomically disturbing image, and compares him to the status of the fallen Lucifer:

‘...*Quelli ch’usurpa in terra il luogo mio,
il luogo mio, il luogo mio, che vaca
ne la presenza del Figliuol di Dio,
fatt’ ha del cimitero mio cloaca
del sangue e de la puzza; onde ‘l perverso
che cadde di qua sù, là giù si placa.*’

‘...He who on earth has robbed me of my place,

²⁴ *Inf.* 34:103-104.

²⁵ See *Inf.* 34:121-123.

²⁶ See *Inf.* 19:79-81.

²⁷ *Par.* 27:25-26.

my place, my place – which therefore, in the sight
of God's dear Son, stands vacant now – has made
of my own burial ground a shit hole
reeking of blood and pus. In this the sod
who fell from here down there takes sheer delight.'

(*Par.* XXVII, 22-27).

The key term here is "*cloaca*", which is usually translated as "sewer", but which is also a colloquialism for "anus".²⁸ In any case, the meaning is clear, for the anus is the "sewer" of the body, by which the unwanted waste is removed. From a theological standpoint the message is also unmistakeable – the "head" of the church, God's supreme representative on earth, is charged with the responsibility of leading by, conversely, lowering himself in service to the people. Where temporal concerns are placed before those of the spirit, the church is reverted to the inverted "way of the world". Dante emphatically threads together these themes of corrupt papacy, the fall of Satan from highest to lowest, and the loathsomeness of the baser bodily functions, within an allegorical framework that says that sin is excremental, Hell is a great dark abdomen, and Satan is the arse of the world.²⁹

The reader's sensation throughout the *Inferno*, paralleling that of the pilgrim, is one of steadily increasing constriction. As the sins become graver, and the punishments harsher, the circles of Hell, particularly in the malbolge pockets of the fraudulent, become tighter, and the sinners contained therein experience the increasingly combined weight of those above pressing downwards upon them. To extend this idea, the journey through Hell can be read as a form of *peristalsis*, as though the transient protagonists, Dante and Virgil, are progressively squeezed and pressed through a series of contracting muscles. It is this sense that Hell is a great *processor* that might carry the most significance for modern readers, since we have become accustomed to not only seeing the body as merely a combination of mechanistic forces that follow unalterable rules of biological process, but we also recognise how much our human existence in a highly technological age (at least, in the industrialised First World) is dependent upon both the new kinds of work we perform, and new access to material goods, which are themselves driven by mechanical processes. Such mechanisms, we might say, are

²⁸ Of all recent English translators, it is only Robin Kirkpatrick who approaches the latter meaning, substituting "shit-hole" for "sewer".

²⁹ Dante's Satan has been called "the most corporeal object in the universe." (Marguerite M. Chiarenza, "The Imageless Vision and Dante's 'Paradiso'" in *Dante*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 83.)

producing a kind of life that tends towards the mere maintenance of physical existence, but which “kills” the soul – a contemporary echo of Dante’s conception of damnation. Canto III of the *Inferno* describes how the allotments of damned souls arrive without cessation at the shores of the river Acheron:

*Così sen vanno su per l’onda bruna,
e Avanti che sien di là discese,
anche di qua nuova schiera s’auna.*

Then off they went, to cross the darkened flood.
And, long before they’d landed over there,
another flock assembled in their stead.

(*Inf.* III, 118-120).

Here, today’s readers may find a curiously prescient echo of the experience of living in modern, industrialised societies, whose great swarms of people, subject at every turn to the “batch processing” of their lives, and the secularism that drives those people to the endless cyclical consumption of material goods, reduces them to the level of a “product” of an enormous processing machine that “consumes”. It may be for this reason that the *Inferno* is the best-known of Dante’s works, and the one in which modern readers best see themselves. “Like something out of Dante’s *Inferno*” has become a catch-all phrase used to describe our more miserable experiences.

As well as concerning itself with a range of metaphorical imagery drawn from the nether regions of the body, the *Inferno* is also deeply engaged with the symbolism of the human mouth and the act of eating. This is entirely natural, since, as identified in the previous chapter, there are obvious connections and associations to be made between the mouth and the belly. While the mouth is part of the human head, and for now setting aside its higher role as the outlet of human speech, it primarily serves the needs of the body’s alimentary functions, and is therefore captive to the baser urges of the human creature. The mouth is literally connected to the belly, since it feeds the body, but it is also related symbolically. If, as was proposed in the previous chapter, the human face is the microcosmic representation of the entire person (and Dante seemingly assents to this concept in his depiction of the contemplatives in *Paradiso* 22), then the mouth is the “belly” of the face.

It has been observed that Hell itself also resembles a great mouth. References to “*bocca*” (“mouth”) in the *Commedia* demonstrate a two-fold pattern that can be interpreted as supporting both allegorical interpretations of “Hell as belly” offered here. Over the entire poem, use of “*bocca*” diminishes, from 13 references in *Inferno* to 11 in *Purgatorio* to only 5 in *Paradiso*, suggesting a de-emphasis on the literalness of eating. Yet within the *Inferno* itself the use of *bocca* increases as the *cantica* progresses, with the majority of references occurring within the second half of the *cantica*, and a specific reference in each of the final five cantos.³⁰ We can also see a general shift in emphasis in the purpose of “*bocca*” – in *Inferno* it almost always refers to the literal, often disfigured mouth of the sinner; by *Paradiso* the mouth is only mentioned in context of the beatified’s expressions of praise. In parallel with these trends, we see that it is only in the *Inferno* that Dante uses specific references to “*mangiare*” – “to eat”, and then again only in the final cantos, where the heavy metaphor of cannibalism dominates the exchanges between the various sinners. This pattern of increasing bodiliness and literalness parallels what Kilgour has identified as the “increasing reduction of spirits to mere flesh” in the *Inferno*, where the souls take on a concentrated substantiality that culminates in the most “basic” representation of physical substance – food.³¹

Indeed, we may say that Hell is *many-mouthed* – the mouths of the damned are frequently the object of their punishment, but also their means of self-declaration. The pilgrim’s first sensory impression of the state of damnation is a distressing cacophony of discordant voices, and the terrain of Hell proper is entered through an almost literal “mouth” that talks. The inscription over Hell-gate, described at the commencement of *Inferno* III, is written in the first person as a direct statement to the pilgrim (and the poet’s audience). This creates the effect of the words of the inscription, placed without context at the very beginning of the canto, as being assumed to be spoken until we realise that in fact they are being read by the pilgrim.³² This “talking gate” that offers nothing but the expectation of desolation appears to be an ironic upending of the hope offered by Christ according to the gospel of John: “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.”³³ Thus hell opens its belly with an ironic mouth, and closes it likewise. The emphatic and predominant image of evil in the final

³⁰ See *Inf.* 28:95; 30:125; 31:68; 32:38; 33:1; 34:55.

³¹ See Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*, p. 65.

³² See Freccero, “Infernal Irony” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 93-109.

³³ John 10:9.

cantos of the *Inferno* is that of the deformed or debased mouth.³⁴ At the opposite end of the great gut, the realm's infernal and inverted leader is parodically reduced to inert silence, but is also "all mouth", since the action of gnawing – relentlessly and pointlessly – is one of only two physical actions that remain to him.

There is an obvious connection to be made between the sin of flattery (which, in its particular way is here a precursor to fraud, since the flatterer sets out to mislead by means of falsity), and the imagery of the mouth as, when wrongly used, a sewer or anus. Human speech, properly ordered, is the highest expression of the intellect, and is created, according to Christian theology, for the purpose of praising the Creator. Words can mislead, can be containers of fraud. The mouth that speaks fraud, in this understanding, is by definition a diseased and inverted mouth. Dante is acutely aware that the poet, as creator of words and therefore of imaginary worlds, is always at risk of creating words that run dangerously close to lies. The poet, says Dante in the *Convivio*, creates images that appear to have literal falsity even when concealing a metaphorical truth.

As the pilgrim approaches the frozen lake Cocytus at the commencement of Canto XXXII, an "inexpressibility" disclaimer is offered to the reader, in which the nobility of the human mouth, properly used in suitable conversation with others, is contrasted with the grossly inhuman nature of this new environment and its inhabitants:

*S'io avessi le rime aspre e choicce
 come si converrebbe al tristo buco
 sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce,
 io premererei di mio concetto il suco
 più pienamente; ma perch' io non l'abbo,
 non sanza tema a dicer mi conduco:
 chè non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo
 descriver fondo a tutto l'universo,
 né da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo.*

If I had rhymes that rawly rasped and cackled
 (and chimed in keeping with that cacky hole
 at which, point down, all other rock rings peak),
 I might then squeeze the juiced of my thought
 more fully out of me. But since I don't,
 not without dread, I bring myself to speak.
 It's not (no kidding) and sort of joke

³⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, p. 442n.

to form in words the universal bum,
no task for tongues still whimpering ‘Mum!’ and ‘Dad!’

(*Inf.* XXXII, 1-9).

The seriousness of this new level of sin is emphasised by the poet’s concerns, as Dante is confronted with a disconcerting task. How does a poet, particularly one with such strong concerns for the nobility of language and the symbolic resonances bound within language, uncompromisingly reduce his art to the level of the completely abhorrent? One answer seems to be that metaphor and suggestion, used in conjunction with the greater allegory that accords placement in the universe with moral or mental state, can continue to be used as means to impress upon the reader. We should note that, appropriately, the anatomical imagery assigned to the circle of the traitors is the lowest available. The frozen lake in which they reside is “*fondo a tutto l’universo*” (“the universal bum”) and is unflinchingly described as “*al tristo buco*” (“that cacky hole”). The “hole” is in fact the apex of an inverted cone, at which an increasing pressure is brought to bear in both topography and pilgrim. As if the landscape of Hell itself produces the mood and appropriate rhymes within the poet, Dante elects to commence the canto by rhyming “*choicce*” (“cackled”) with “*rocce*” (“rocks”). This use of onomatopoeia continues as a running theme throughout the canto, emphasising that the poem as it is heard is designed to reflect in its acoustic effects a resemblance to the material under consideration. As has been suggested, Canto XXXII is noteworthy for its use of onomatopoeic words that refer to the behaviour of the mouth. Further, the connection between landscape and speech is heightened by Dante’s use of “*discriver*” at line eight, which can mean both to provide a description in words and to “circumscribe” – to draw a circle as with a compass. In this instance, the mere act of speaking of a thing is akin to creating that thing, since the image of the small circle, a concentration of the similar, larger circles above and beyond it, is precisely that which the poet wishes to present before the imagination of his audience. As if to reinforce the importance of spoken truth at this critical juncture, Dante calls upon the Muses, one of the few occasions on which he does so in the *Commedia*, so that “*dal fatto il dir non sia diverso.*” (“fact and word may not too far diverge.”)³⁵ That Dante should here be acutely conscious of the relationship between describer and described undoubtedly reflects a concern over the way in which fraud is perpetrated through language. The traitors deceive through words, destroying the natural human medium of exchange that ought to be our means of participating in community.

³⁵ *Inf.* 32:12.

Worse, however, is that sustained and concentrated deceit can be hidden in the “false container” of words, just as the swollen but insubstantial belly is the metaphorical vehicle for demonstrating the emptiness of fraud. We should also note the theme of increasing pressure in the circle of the traitors. The poet intimates that the problem of truthfully representing the full nature of fraud creates substantial pressure within his own mind: the right kind of words might allow him to “*premerei di mio concetto il suco*” (“squeeze the juices of my thought.”)³⁶ The intense cold of the traitors’ environment appears to produce emotional reactions of intense pressure (though not relief), while the image of two sinners clamped together tighter than any two pieces of wood suggests the pressured and restricted function of the constipated bowel.

In the *Inferno*, the act of eating, the consumption of literal food instigated by a base desire, becomes largely representative of the desire for all material goods, and this desire is presented as an obstacle that waylays us on the path to spiritual food.³⁷ In this metaphor, the delayed gratification that comes with the resistance to physical hunger is analogous to the forsaking of all physical pleasures in this life for the sake of the ultimate gratification, salvation, in the next. In the *Commedia*, the meaning of “*cibo*” (“food”) and eating undergoes a marked transformation as the journey progresses. In the *Inferno*, all references to eating apply to a literal act – the sinners are either devoured or devouring in a sterile exchange where eating is always reduced to a form of perpetual, diabolical cannibalism. In contrast, references to food consumption throughout the remainder of the work demonstrate a marked change in emphasis. By the time Dante-pilgrim has reached the Terrestrial Paradise atop Mt. Purgatory he can say that “*l’anima mia gustava di quel cibo / che, saziando di sé, di sé asseta*” (“my soul received the savour of the food / that makes us full and makes us thirst for more”).³⁸ This subtle reference to the spiritual “food” of the Eucharist is designed to remind us that only the things of God contain the special quality of being able to both completely satisfy, and simultaneously stimulate our desire for greater satisfaction. In the *Paradiso*, where all the immediate demands of corporeality have been eliminated, food takes on a purely metaphorical purpose, particularly as it conforms to the biblical symbol of spiritual nutriment, where eating is a sign of the spiritual or intellectual development of the

³⁶ *Inf.* 32:4.

³⁷ Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*, p. 65.

³⁸ *Pur.* 31:128-129.

individual who is invited to “dine” at the courses of knowledge set before them.³⁹ This progression of metaphorical representation of *cibo* reaches its climax in *Paradiso* XXV, where the gathering of the saints to celebrate the enunciation of the theological virtues is compared to a banquet:

...così vid' io l'un da l'altro grande
 principe gloriosa essere accolto,
 laudando il cibo che là sù li prande.

So, too, I saw in glory each great prince
 made welcome, each by each, in that high realm,
 praising alike the feast at which they sat.

(Par. XXV, 22-24).

Maggie Kilgour's admirable study of metaphors of incorporation through the history of Western literature, referenced throughout this chapter, is entitled *From Communion to Cannibalism*; yet the precise reversal takes place in the *Commedia*, as the self-eating that sickens gives way to the consumption of the “bread of angels” that nourishes and transforms. In the circle of the gluttons, Dante enquires as to the whereabouts of several great fellow Florentines, so that he can record their destiny in terms of food metaphors: “*ché gran disio mi stringe di sapere / se 'l ciel li addolcia a lo 'nferno li attosca.*” (“For I am gripped by great desire to tell / if Heaven holds them sweet – or poisonous Hell.”)⁴⁰ Dante is highly sensitive to the connection between eating and the spiritual life, as would be expected of anyone who properly understood the meaning of the Levitical dietary laws, and who upheld the communal aspect of the Eucharist as the centre of religious praxis. The scriptures themselves alert Dante to the subtle connections between food and truth, as both warnings and exhortations make plain that the belly can waylay while consumption of food (and likewise its opposite, fasting) carries strong metaphorical associations.⁴¹ At a personal level, Dante's reputation for

³⁹ See, for example, *Par.* 3:91-96, 5:34-39, 10:22-27.

⁴⁰ *Inf.* 6:83-84.

⁴¹ In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul compares the relatively “simple” spiritual teaching he must dose to new converts, to the difference between milk and solid food: “*And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh.*” (I Cor. 3:1-3). Elsewhere, he cautions that there is a clear link between inconstancy of appetite and moral inadequacy: “*I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded*” (Rom. 16:17-18.) “*For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.*”

abstemiousness is born from Boccaccio's famous description in his biography of his countryman, and by his own references to the way in which his personal circumstances have made him thin.⁴² In *Paradiso* XVII Dante compares the physical experience of political exile to eating the salty bread from another's table,⁴³ and in canto XXV he describes the effect of dedicating himself to the composition of the *Commedia* as "*sì che m'ha fatto per molti anni macro*" ("making me over many years grow gaunt").⁴⁴ Further, the image of devils devouring the bodies of the damned in Hell was a common motif in the medieval treatments of the afterworld, as can be seen in the mosaics of the cupola of the Baptistery in Dante's Florence.⁴⁵ It is therefore not surprising that we should see Dante's application of highly unpleasant oral experiences as punishment in the *Inferno*.

In a broader image all the residents of Hell are "eaten", inasmuch as they are involuntarily thrown into an enclosed space from which they will never return, and in which they are routinely and relentlessly digested. In this sense, Hell swallows and devours all who inhabit it, since the experience of being consumed is directly analogous to the loss of human identity that in the *Inferno* is metaphorically expressed through the breaking down of human wholeness.⁴⁶ But even within this general climate of digestion, particularly striking instances are notable. We recall the disgusting mouth of the monstrous dog Cerberus that guards the

Their end is destruction; their god is their belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." (Phil. 3:18-19.)

⁴² See Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, VIII: "In food and drink he was most temperate, both in partaking of them at the appointed hours and in not passing the limits of necessity. Nor did he show more epicurism in respect of one thing than another. He praised delicate viands, but ate chiefly of plain dishes, and censured beyond measure those who bestow a great part of their attention upon possessing choice things, and upon the extremely careful preparation of the same, affirming that such persons do not eat to live, but rather live to eat."

⁴³ See *Par.* 17: 58-60.

⁴⁴ *Par.* 25:3.

⁴⁵ For an analysis of how the visual arts have made strong connections between the experiences of damnation and digestion, see Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, pp. 305-309.

⁴⁶ Even the greatest sinners and devourers are themselves said to be devoured. At *Inf.* 31:142-143 Dante says that the depths of Hell "*divora*" the bodies of Lucifer and Judas. This cannibalism breaks down all proper distinctions between eater and eaten, giving metaphorical expression to what Kilgour has described as the collapse of all distinction in Hell between self and other, inside and outside, microcosm and macrocosm, individual body and social body, cook and cooked – "in Hell all relations are ultimately redundant". (Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*, p. 69.) It is perhaps for this reason that allegorical representations are more fraught with instability, or more tenuous, in the *Inferno* than in other parts of the poem. If lack of cohesion is a defining characteristic of the mood of the *Inferno*, we can say that this is reflected in the way that competing and seemingly irreconcilable allegorical interpretations can co-exist. *Inferno*, in this sense, is a place where the very notion of certainty itself seems always threatened, despite the tightly fixed nature of Dante's moral schema and system of symbolic punishments are prescribed by his *contrapasso*.

circle of the gluttons (who, of course, sinned with their gullets).⁴⁷ The tempestuous Guelf aristocrat Filippo Argenti bites himself in anguish; the wrathful stupidly bite one another to shreds; the usurers have deformed mouths like those of oxen; the bizarre vegetative bodies of the suicides are continually bitten by the Harpies; the “sower of discord” Gaius Curio has his mouth mutilated; the counterfeiter Adam of Brescia has his mouth distended by disease; Dante and Virgil themselves can be said to be “eaten” and “digested” in as much as they enter through the “mouth” of Hell, follow a continual downward and spiralic path, and exit through the sphincter at the bottom of the world.

This theme of the great belly imitating the function of the mouth reaches its culmination in the circle of the traitors. Firstly, the Pisan politician Count Ugolino is depicted gnawing at the skull of his enemy and prisoner, the Archbishop Ruggieri degli Ubaldini. In possibly the most famous episode of the *Inferno*, Ugolino describes how his actions are revenge for Ruggieri’s incarceration of him as a traitor, a miserable circumstance which led to Ugolino being forced to eventually cannibalise his own children.⁴⁸ Then, at the climax of the *Inferno* (which in many ways is a pointed anti-climax), Dante chooses the image of a devouring mouth as the ultimate punishment “machine” for those very worst of sinners – the traitors to their lords.⁴⁹ The figure of Satan is depicted as a monstrous three-headed beast that, in a disgustingly bloody and slobbery way, continuously chews the bodies of three infamous betrayers:

*Da ogne bocca dirompea co’ denti
nn peccatore, a guisa di maciulla,
sì che tre ne facea così dolente.*

In every mouth he mangled with his teeth
(as flax combs do) a single sinning soul,
but brought this agony to three at once.

(*Inf.* XXXIV, 55-57).

⁴⁷ As is fitting for a canto that concerns itself with gluttony, Dante makes particular reference to Cerberus’ mouth: “...le bocche aperse e mostrocci le sane;” (“He stretched his jaws; he showed us all his fangs.”) *Inf.* 6:23.

⁴⁸ At least according to some interpretations of the highly charged and subtle wording of the famous line 33:75: “*Poscia, più che ‘l dolor, poté ‘l digiuno.*” (“Then hunger proved a greater power than grief.”)

⁴⁹ We should be mindful of the specifically mechanistic nature of Satan as he is presented by Dante, in that his structure and motion resembles that of a windmill, in Dante’s time the largest “machine” in existence.

The explanation provided by Virgil here points to the lowest state of intelligent existence – mere repetition of pointless and endless consumption, “fed”, as it were, by the repellent and compulsive driving of the completely corrupted will. The traitors are described as being “*in eterno è consunto*” – “consumed eternally”.⁵⁰ They represent the entire phenomenon of digestion and consumption, since they are “consumed but not destroyed”, in part an infernal parody of the burning bush that “spoke” the truth to Moses. They are continuously eaten but provide no nourishment or fulfilment to the consumer. The traitors are placed lowest of all because they destroy the social body. This lowest point is also described as where “Satan sits” – the “*punto de l’universo in su che Dite siede*”⁵¹, again a parody of the “throne” to which Lucifer had originally laid unauthorised claim. The ultimate treachery is repaid with the ultimate humiliation of being the “bottom” of the universe.

The allegory of Hell as the infernal belly is underpinned by the symbolism of *gravezza* – weight. This word is employed but twice in the entire *Commedia*, and on both occasions in the *Inferno*. And, on both occasions, the term is laden with symbolic meaning. In the famous opening scene of the *Inferno* Dante is confronted by the three beasts, the last and seemingly most potent of these being the ravenous she-wolf, who, Dante says, “*questa mi porse tanto di gravezza*” (“so heavily oppressed my thought with fears”)⁵² The experience of being confronted by such a creature is akin to being weighted. Colloquially speaking, the pilgrim has “that sinking feeling”. Fear is a base primal response: it is commonly felt in the belly, and it is the first physical experience recorded by the pilgrim in the poem – “*che nel pensier rinova la paura!*” (“Only to think of it renews my fear!”)⁵³ There is no textual evidence as to why the she-wolf in particular should provoke such a response, but it accords with the traditional interpretation of the relationship between the three beasts and the threefold partitioning of the categories of sins in Dante’s moral schema, particularly as it holds the she-wolf to be an image of fraud. It should also be observed that the use of *gravezza* here is placed in the crucial rhyming position, (which I take to be an indicator of the importance of any particular term), and that it is accompanied by “*magrezza*” (“thinness”) and, phrased in the negative sense, “*l’altezza*” (“heights”). Both of these terms accord with our analogy of the lowness of the human belly. The *magrezza* of the she-wolf is a physical manifestation of the relentless and seemingly insatiable demands of the beastly belly, which is an image of the

⁵⁰ *Inf.* 11:66.

⁵¹ *Inf.* 11:65.

⁵² *Inf.* 1:52.

⁵³ *Inf.* 1:6.

perpetual physical torments of the damned.⁵⁴ The lowliness of the belly is reinforced by the accompanying negative reference to the intended “heights”, both geographic and spiritual, that the appearance of the she-wolf has now blocked: “*ch’ ioperdei la speranza de l’altezza.*” (“I lost all hope of reaching to those heights.”)⁵⁵ The theme of continual downward movement through the *Inferno* is instigated at this moment, for the she-wolf “*mi ripigneve là dove ‘l sol tace.*” (“drove me back down to where the sun is mute.”)⁵⁶

The second use of *gravezza* occurs near the end of the *Inferno*, as the two pilgrims approach the dead centre of the earth, which is the pivot point and gravitational centre of Hell, the earth, and thereby the entire cosmos: “*al quale ogne gravezza si rauna, / e io tremava ne l’eterno rezzo*” (“onwards we went to reach the cone’s last core, / where all the weight of everything weighs down.”)⁵⁷ This concept of the “dead centre” is reinforced by the later description of “*‘l punto / al qual si traggon d’ogne parte I pesi.*” (“the point / to which from every part all weight drags down.”)⁵⁸ These two uses of *gravezza* serve as signifying terminals to the downward journey experienced by the pilgrim. The course through the infernal realm is a physical descent, with an accompanying experience of moral degradation, from the heart of the pilgrim’s fear to the static, dead “heart” of the universe.⁵⁹

The theme of weight and downward momentum as physical parallels to the moral gravity of sin is explicitly outlined in the circle of the gluttons in the sixth canto. It is straightforward enough to make the connection here between the sin of gluttony, where the appetite of the

⁵⁴ Dante plays on the standard imagery of the wolf as a creature famous for its ravenous, insatiable hunger; and the etymology of *lupus* as being derived from the Greek “*lykos*”, “rage”. See Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, trans. Stephen A. Barney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), XII.ii.23.; Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p. 87. Notably, Dante invariably uses the wolf as a symbol in a negative sense, particularly in regard to the corruption of the church.

⁵⁵ *Inf.* 1:54.

⁵⁶ *Inf.* 1:60.

⁵⁷ *Inf.* 32:73-74. The theme of Satan as the heavy, dead heart of the cosmos persists into the final *cantica* of the poem. In *Par.* 29:55-57, Beatrice refers to him thus: “*Principio del cader fu il maladetta / superbir di colui che tu vedesti / da tutti i pesi del mondo costretto.*” (“The first cause of the fall was that cursed flounce / of arrogance, in one whom you have seen / gripped tight below the weight of all the world.”)

⁵⁸ *Inf.* 34:110-111.

⁵⁹ According to Kilgour, “The progress of the *Inferno* is, then, a prefiguration of the final literal descent of Lucifer’s body, during which the figures who represent the various appetites become increasingly substantial. This is a descent into sheer materiality and literalism, the reduction of all appetite into grotesque modes of incorporation of Lucifer, who is a demonic host, a body politic, a transcendent deity who absorbs the Many into his hairy Oneness by devouring them, and a perverted symposium that subsumes all knowledge. His sin even includes all others, and, as it essentially consisted of trying to contain too much, his punishment is to spend eternity stuffing himself.” Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*, p. 63. The attention to the pilgrim’s own physical weight as a characteristic that separates him from the forms of those he encounters persists throughout the poem, even unto the upper reaches of the *Paradiso*. See *Par.* 27:64.

belly is allowed to exceed proper restraint, and both the distortion it produces in the physical body, and the spiritual malaise it induces. For unlike any other of the traditional “deadly sins”, gluttony *does* produce a distinct and often permanent disproportionality in the appearance of the body. Hoggo, the canto’s main character, can even recognise this in his own person, calling himself “*disfatto*” – “unmade”.⁶⁰ The gluttons can be said to be “all stomach”, since their distended physical forms carry the highly-visible consequences of their unrestrained appetites. Dante makes explicit that such deformation is itself a punishment within one’s own body, and is effectively the ruination of the entire person, since he describes the gluttons as “*vanita che par persona*.” (“voided nothings only seeming men.”)⁶¹ The gluttons are “big, empty bodies” that carry within them the essential self-contradiction of sin: they are bulky and heavy, yet without “substance”, both physically and morally.⁶² The heat and energy derived from eating is now denied them. They remain forever cold and desperately sluggish, which is precisely the opposite of the normal state of human digestion – warm and active. The weather which ought to be appreciated for the plenty it brings upon the earth is turned hard against them, so that they are, ironically, constantly weighed down by the elements lighter than themselves – water and air. It is perhaps for this reason that Dante has elected the circle of gluttony to strongly accelerate the imagery of *weight* as it corresponds to seriousness of transgression. The overwhelming mood of Canto VI is the downward movement caused by heaviness. The weather features rain that has a distinct substantiality, falling “*eterna, maladetta, fredda e greve*,” (“endlessly, chill, accursed, and heavy”).⁶³ Although the gluttons have substantial bulk, they are “*come tu vedi, a la poggia mi fiacco*.” (“lying, you see, squashed flat by battering rain.”)⁶⁴ And the reaction in the pilgrim is to admit that Hoggo’s “*affanno*” (“heavy labours”)⁶⁵ produce in himself a sympathetic response: “*mi pesa sì ch’a lagrimar mi ‘nvita*” (“weigh on me hard and prompt my heavy tears.”)⁶⁶ In Hoggo’s prophetic declamation of Florentine political rivalries, he states that one side will “*tenendo l’altra sotto gravi pesi*” (“grind the others under heavy weights”).⁶⁷ The prophetic qualities of Hoggo’s speech incorporate the notion that forward-looking is *downward*. The internecine struggles of the Florentine factions, like any civil war, carry all the marks of the

⁶⁰ *Inf.* 6:42.

⁶¹ *Inf.* 6:36.

⁶² A quite different presentation of the gluttons is offered in the *Purgatorio*, where the penitents are rendered desperately thin in their bodies, but also experience a moral “fullness”.

⁶³ *Inf.* 6:8.

⁶⁴ *Inf.* 6:54.

⁶⁵ *Inf.* 6:58.

⁶⁶ *Inf.* 6:59.

⁶⁷ *Inf.* 6:71.

ugly and inevitable “downward spiral” with which we usually associate the decay of civic order. And, in response to the pilgrim’s enquiry as to the whereabouts of the perpetrators of such decay, Hoggo again makes a downward indication:

*E quelli: ‘Ei son tra l’anime più nere;
diverse colpe giù li grava al fondo:
se tanto scendi, là i potrai vedere.*

And he: ‘These dwell among the blackest souls,
loaded down deep by sins of differing types.
If you sink far enough, you’ll see them all.’

(Inf. VI, 85-87).

This forecast, the first in the *Commedia*, introduces the accord between *gravezza*, weight, and sin. The lowest souls suffer not only punishments for their own transgressions, but, it seems, also carry the weight and pressure of those located above them; while the natural course through Hell is “one-way”, a sinking produced by both physical gravitation and moral degeneration which nobody can resist. And, as if to provide a physical exclamation mark to his little, wearisome speech, the glutton incorporates in his own demeanour an imitation of the very action he suggests, for Dante remarks that he “*guardommi un poco e poi chinò la testa: / cadde con essa a par de li altri ciechi.*” (“stared at me a little, bent his head, / then fell down and joined his fellow blind.”)⁶⁸

Further, Hoggo’s little speech introduces the notion that sin, and specifically the sins of fraud, corrupt the political body. The poet ironically has Hoggo employ, seemingly without any awareness of self-deprecation, an anatomical reference of his own. In berating the corruption of Florentine politicians, he refers to the city as “*il sacco*” (“that sack”)⁶⁹, a clear reference to the belly. The inference here is that the self-contained and ordered condition of the properly-ruled city state, (which in this analogy is comparable to the human head), has been reduced to the chaotic, intemperate condition of poor digestion. The bilious nature of political infighting causes the belly of the body politic to “*trabocca*” – “overflow”.⁷⁰ The negative connotations associated with the unruly or over-filled stomach are borne out in the only other two references to *sacco* in the *Commedia*. In the circle of the schismatics the belly is a “*tristo*

⁶⁸ Inf. 6:92-93.

⁶⁹ Inf. 6:49.

⁷⁰ Inf. 6:50.

sacco” (“grim bag”)⁷¹ that illustrates the divisiveness of civil and religious discord. Even while in the higher reaches of the *Paradiso*, where we might expect to have left behind any negative imagery of the body, Dante is willing to lambast contemporary corruption within the monastic orders, resultant from worldliness and soft living, with a similar image – “*le cocolle / sacca son piene di farina ria.*” (“Monastic cowls / are bursting sacks stuffed full with rotten flour.”)⁷²

The central core of the *Inferno* is marked by a theme of gigantic weight. The massive size and weight of the inhabitants – the giants and the enormous figure of Satan – are contrasted with the constricted space they occupy. (Dante’s presentation of the Giants makes them a natural precursor to Satan, at least physically in that they are mute and immense). The themes of consumption and digestion are here made acute, for the image is one of bloatedness or fullness. The greater spaces of the upper circles, and the rapid motions of the “lighter” sinners who occupy them, have been gradually overturned to claustrophobia and inertia. The “core” of Hell represents the final concentration of the effects of “gravezza” both in the literal sense of the physical centrepiece of the geocentric universe, and the seriousness, the “gravity”, with which the sins are regarded.

In seeking an infernal figure who can represent Dante’s subtle allegory of the distended, distorted belly of Hell, we should consider the striking and emblematic character known as Master Adam, the counterfeiter we meet in the thirtieth canto of the *Inferno*. Existing commentaries on the theme of the “belly of hell” have invariably directed their attentions to Master Adam, with one critic labelling him “the very belly of the belly of hell.”⁷³ Adam is a microcosmic version of Hell *in toto*, since he is false, ironically mis-named, isolated, and self-delusional; and carries in within his physical form the key characteristics of distortion and disease. It is this final quality of the “sick belly” that carries the most resonance for our theme. Illness is, in human society, always accompanied by separation. As in the *Inferno*, the damned suffer a form of diabolical separateness from each other in an image of anti-

⁷¹ *Inf.* 28:26.

⁷² *Par.* 22:77-78.

⁷³ “To hazard a preliminary formulation, Dante’s allegorical method as seen here may be described as a way of focusing and combining a wide range of abstract considerations – religious, metaphysical, cosmic, social, moral – in representations of the human body. Master Adam’s belly is an extreme case of a basic allegorical principle: the individual’s actions and their significance are inscribed in his body and become legible there.” Durling, “Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell” in *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979-80*, p. 72.

community. In the context of Christian theology, everyone is “ill” because all are unavoidably contaminated by the “disease” of sin. At *Paradiso* VII:28 Beatrice laments that the original sin of the father of humanity led all to a state of perpetual spiritual illness – “*onde l’umana specie inferma giacque*” (“The human race, because of this, lay sick”)⁷⁴ A world of illness, physical decay, ageing, and death are the conditions into which man had brought himself.⁷⁵

Why should we consider the affliction of being diseased as a just penalty for the sins of falsifying? The answer rests on the core idea of *corruption*, which in common usage can mean both a lack of moral integrity (particularly in the context of financial transactions), and the physical decay of a living being. In both of these uses the imagery is of something being destroyed from within, and in Dante’s general schema of *contrapasso* he frames the punishment as an internalisation of the corruption of the world’s goods that is the real nature of fraud. It is only in this circle of the fraudulent that Dante uses the word *marcio*, or rotten.⁷⁶ If in the simple existence of the human body there resides an image of eternal and perfect truth, where the human form is the highest manifestation of the goodness and truth of the Creator, then the bodies of the falsifiers are expressions of deceit in all its hideous and ridiculous forms. And if the highest act of a human person is to honour and express the truth, given that mankind alone is given the faculty of reason by which we may understand such truths and share it with others, then the greatest sin is to defraud, for it is only in a world where we should have a reasonable expectation of receiving the truth that the fraudulent will prosper. The sin of the falsifier is to mock, in a series of fraudulent and self-advancing imitations, the primary act of God’s creation. We *cannot* become “someone else” or generate “something else”. The persistent fraud is a corrupter of the body of society, for he betrays the foundational trust that underpins all human relationships, and therefore the extended structure of human civilisation. The falsifier is a dry rot that weakens such foundations. Counterfeiting, in all its forms a misrepresentation of the truth, induces doubt and mistrust, which in their own turn spontaneously regenerate, as lies breed more lies.

⁷⁴ *Par.* 7:28.

⁷⁵ For a traditional expression of the body being tormented by physical disease as just one of many temporal consequences of man’s fallen nature, see Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, XXII.22, pp. 1067-1068.

⁷⁶ *Inf.* 30:122.

But if the “crimes” of the falsifiers may seem trivial when compared with the graver offences of murder or violence, it is important to remember that such acts go well beyond mere trickery. Dante is concerned here to demonstrate the ways in which human ingenuity, improperly directed, can undermine or distort the form or image of created objects we use to orient ourselves in the world. Illusions deceive the eye, and as the eye is the highest of the senses, and the sense agent upon which the mind and body are most reliant for action based on an understanding of what is perceived to be the truth, then illusions are among the very worst types of fraud, for they deliberately misrepresent the natural order upon which we must be reliant for proper judgements and understandings of our existence in this world. Where there is a relationship based upon deceiving the work of the body, there is in fact no true relationship, but a discontinuity. Dante draws our attention to such notions of discontinuity by introducing the neologism *dispaia*, meaning to uncouple or discompose, to describe the physical distortions experienced by the hydroptic sinner, Master Adam, in *Inferno* XXX. Adam is emblematic in that the punishment assigned to him follows the principle of Dante’s allegorical method – his body carries all the signs of his crime, so that his punishment is written in his physical form. He suffers an acute distemper of his physical form that precisely mirrors the diseased effects that his currency counterfeiting produces in society.

Here the symptoms of dropsy cause the various parts of the body to swell out of proportion to one another. This is an image of the perversion of the proper balance, reciprocity and relationship that defines a healthy human body, and by extension the harmony intended for human relations and societies in the social body. Dante has previously claimed, in the *Convivio*, that the healthy and proportionally harmonious human form is a guarantor of spiritual soundness.⁷⁷ If we trust that harmony and truth are borne in the images of everyday things, and in the proper relationship of one thing to another, then the incongruous form of Master Adam is an image of the travesty of such trust.⁷⁸ Pointedly, Dante’s only other uses of *dispaia* occur at *Inferno* 7:45, where the souls of the avaricious and spendthrifts are repeatedly “locked” together and then “unlocked” in a pointless mockery of their denial of

⁷⁷ *Convivio*, 4.25: “Here it is to be known that this work of beneficent Nature is also necessary to our good life, for our Soul must work in the greater part of all its operations with a bodily organ; and then it works well when the body through all its parts is well proportioned and appointed. And then it is well proportioned and appointed, then it is beautiful throughout and in all parts; for the due ordering or proportion of our limbs produces a pleasing impression of I know not what of wonderful harmony; and the good disposition, that is to say, the health of mind and body, throws over all a colouring sweet to behold. And thus to say that the noble nature takes heed for the graces of the body, and makes it fair and harmonious, is tantamount to saying that it renders it fit to attain the perfection ordained for it.”

⁷⁸ Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante’s Inferno: Difficulty and Dead Poetry*, p. 384.

the right use of worldly goods; and at *Purgatorio* 25:9, where a narrow staircase “uncouples” those who climb it together, a veiled reference to the theme of human reproduction that is about to be presented at length to Dante-pilgrim, and the reader. A proper utilisation of the good things in this life and the blessing of human procreation are but two of the harmonious human experiences brought undone by *dispaia*.

We know little of the historical character Adam of Brescia, but as is his pattern throughout the *Commedia*, Dante elects to employ a known figure whose details allow him to develop the allusions from which we can draw higher levels of meaning. It seems Adam was in the employ of the Counts Guida of Romena, and was implicated in a scam to counterfeit the florin by adulterating the gold coin with three parts of dross.⁷⁹ This was undertaken on such a scale that a currency crisis erupted throughout Northern Italy. Adam’s punishment was to be burned at the stake in Florence in 1281, an event of which Dante was likely to have had first-hand experience. Master Adam is presented to us as a multi-layered, symbolic example of the heavy, inhuman form of the damned sinner. He is a representative figure, whose deforming illness is an image of goodness corrupted. He is dragged downwards, and rendered immobile, by the ridiculous bulk of his torso, which has literally gone “pear-shaped”. The reader must imagine how he *might* appear by performing a mental trick that involves the distortion of two other objects – a lute and a fork.⁸⁰ Thus he is a parodistic image of two goods – the material benefit of eating and the intellectual blessing of music that ought to be means for our harmonious participation in community with others. In his grotesquely bulked form he is punished in a mock inversion of his earthly death. Where his earthly body was reduced to ashes while being held totally upright, he is “resurrected” in an oversized form that sags helplessly to the ground. Dante’s description of Adam’s “*destri confini*” (“left

⁷⁹ It is tempting to draw inferences from Dante’s use of numbers here. As is commonly known, three is among the most sacred numbers in traditional numerology, and it is a standard observation that any use of specific numbers in Dante’s work is never arbitrary but indicative of symbolic meaning. That Master Adam attempted to adulterate the currency by three parts in twenty-four may be a plain historical fact (in that it represented to him, or his co-conspirators, the most part that could be adulterated while remaining unnoticeable, and perhaps also the least part that made the scam worth attempting), but it also suggests the ungodliness of his actions in that it subtly parodies the Trinity. We may compare this use of the number three, for example, with the three times that Ulysses’ ship is whirled around before it sinks, at the conclusion of Canto 26. There is also the suggestive fact that a twenty-four carat coin, when diluted by three parts, is reduced by one eighth. In Christian numerology, eight is the symbolic number of the baptismal rite. Many baptismal fonts were octagonal, the baptistery in Florence was named after St. John the Baptist, and the florin so counterfeited by Master Adam was, in his own words, “*suggellata del Batista*” (“printed with the Baptist marque”).

⁸⁰ It is interesting to note that Dante would have found the tuning fork a perfect image for parody in his portrayal of Master Adam. Although not invented until the early 18th century, the figure of Adam is curiously prescient in its employment of an image that combines music with the eating utensil.

frontier”) implies that Adam is more an amorphous occupier of space, or a territory, than a man.⁸¹

Master Adam’s offence was reportedly carried out at the Guida stronghold in Romena, in the lovely, “Edenic” Casentino valley, origin of the Arno River. Dante uses this fact to draw the parallel between the two Adams – both privileged residents in an idyllic land (to which Dante looks eastward, since Romena lay at the eastern edge of the city-state of Tuscany, and for all Europeans the land of Eden lay to the East), whereupon they had the full contentment of all they sought, but fell into error and banishment – to portray the region of Tuscany as a kind of “second Eden”, a formerly idyllic landscape that has been neglected by human corruption.⁸² Thus it is fitting that the sharper part of Master Adam’s infernal punishment is psychological, in that he should be tormented with a perpetual vision of, and desperately unfulfillable longing for, an Edenic landscape famous throughout his native land, filled with the *ruscelletti*, or “little streams” that might otherwise relieve him of his suffering.⁸³ Dante allows us to experience the maddening sensation of “counterfeit”, a frustration built upon the confounding incongruity between things as they seem and things as we rightfully expect they should be, that Master Adam feels when images of things cannot be brought to proper fruition by those that imagine them, just as the false coinage is made in the image of its true ideal form but ultimately proves incapable of fulfilling its proper function. Where Adamic man was created in perfect harmony with his natural milieu, corrupted man finds that his experience is one of frustrating estrangement from the natural order, and that the memory of what used to be (but can never be again) is a perpetual source of loss and torment to him. It is highly ironic that in Master Adam’s own misshapen, diseased corporeality (for being

⁸¹ Master Adam is also a symbol of the primacy of gold, and his crime of counterfeiting the highest of the metals has precise correspondences with Dante’s overarching theme of the degeneration of the human form. Earlier, in Canto XIV of the *Inferno*, we find one of Dante’s most elaborate allegorical inventions – that of the old man of Crete – constructed to explain the origins of the rivers of Hell. Drawn from a variety of sources, this allegory both re-affirms and expands upon the ancient motif of the Four Ages of Man. Dante’s primary source is the dream of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, as described in Daniel 2:31-33. Traditionally, this text was interpreted as a vision of the descent of mankind from a distant Golden Age through the eras of Silver and Bronze through to the end days of the Iron Age, as expressed in the reign and decline of various earthly kingdoms. But Dante also incorporates the story of the Four Ages from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, where the Roman poet describes the first men enjoying a Golden Age of peaceful plenty in an innocent, effortless arcadia. This, for Dante, is in fortunate accord with the biblical account of the first human creatures residing in a mythic Eden, at least in that they were the purest and finest humans living in complete and timeless harmony with their earthly surrounds. But the biblical account also tells us that a defining feature of the inhabitants of the ancient Golden Age of Man is that people were immensely long-lived, and never became ill.

⁸² Dante will later re-enforce the idea of the origins of rivers as places of idyllic beauty in his descriptions of the descent of the Arno as an allegory of the moral decay of the Tuscan people, in *Purgatorio* XIV.

⁸³ *Inf.* 30:64-72.

shaped like a lute he also resembles a water-drop, and a tear) he is a representation of the very thing for which he yearns. Adam's physical image is that of the destruction of the very verisimilitude that allows us to draw meaning from such images. His psychological distress is located in being unable to ever forget, yet also unable to reach, the object of his desire.

In his corruption of coinage Adam also indicates a further dimension of Dante's conception of figurative punishment – that the damned experience Hell as a form of anti-community. The infernal realm is a parodic inversion of the body politic, since it is composed of a vast multitude of like-willed “citizens” who, however, demonstrate a complete loss of the desire for civility and regard for the other that characterises politically stable communities. Thus the body politic of Hell is an *anti-politic*, a disconnected entity that is ruled from below. The traitors' distortion of the bodily politic is expressed in their variously contorted forms, as though even amongst one another there is no semblance of human community:

*Altre sono a giacere; altre stanno erte,
quella col capo e quella con le piante;
altra, com' arco, il volto a' piè rinverte.*

Some lay there flat, and some were vertical,
one with head raised, another soles aloft,
another like a bow, bent face to feet.

(*Inf.* XXXIV, 13-15).

These various associations comprise the means by which we may see the *Inferno* as a giant, infernal belly that consumes or processes its contents in a form of mock-digestion that parodies the natural operations of the human body. However, we can also say that within the moral and topographical structure of the *Inferno* it is possible to discern an allegorical representation of the entire human form, specifically a diabolical variation of the proper arrangement and nature of the human body that turns on the notion of *inversion*. As shown in Chapter Two, Dante gives assent to the important idea that human existence can be understood, at least at the level of *operation*, in terms of a hierarchical, tripartite structure, as he explains in the third treatise of the *Convivio*.⁸⁴ If used as a basic structure for the

⁸⁴ *Convivio*, 3.2: “I say, then, that the Philosopher, in the second book on the Soul, when speaking of its powers, says that the Soul principally has three powers, which are, to Live, to Feel, and to Reason:...And according to that which he says, it is most evident that these powers are so entwined that the one is a foundation of the other; and that which is the foundation can of itself be divided; but the other, which is built upon it, cannot be apart from its foundation. Therefore, the Vegetative power, whereby one lives, is the foundation upon which one

experience of the after-life as portrayed in the *Commedia*, it can at least be said that the inhabitants of the *Inferno* are suffering an existence close to the merely *vegetative*. The damned are condemned to eternity in a gross physical body, a form of base existence that offers neither respite nor development. And, while they admittedly experience physical sensation as part of their penalty, this does not in any way represent an advance upon the merely vegetative, since no pleasure or intellectual benefit can ever be derived from it. Hell is the most material and base level of human existence as it could be conceived in the afterlife. Setting aside the complex question of precisely how human souls suffer corporeal punishment while in a state of disembodiment, there is no doubt that the damned are specifically afflicted in their bodies, and that furthermore they are locked into an eternal and enclosed world of self in which they receive neither benefit nor understanding from undergoing such affliction. In this sense they occupy the lowest state of being, and operate at the level of mere physical existence.

Within the *Inferno* can be seen a more condensed version of the grander analogy being considered here. In Canto XI the two wayfarers pause before entering the circle of the Violent, and Virgil sets out for Dante-pilgrim the schematic arrangement of Hell:

*Non ti rimembra di quelle parole
con le quai la tua Etica pertratta
le tre disposizion che 'l ciel non vole,
incontinenza, malizia e la matta
bestialitade? E come incontinenza
men Dio offende e men biasimo accata?*

Do you, at any rate, not call to mind
the terms in which your *Ethics* fully treats
those three dispositions that the Heavens repel:
intemperance, intentional harm and mad
brutality? Or that intemperance
offends God least, and least attracts His blame?

(*Inf.* XI, 79-84).

feels, that is, sees, hears, tastes, smells, and touches; and this vegetative power of itself can be the Soul, vegetative, as we see in all the plants. The Sensitive cannot live without that. We find nothing that feels, and does not live. And this Sensitive power is the foundation of the Intellectual, that is, of the Reason; so that, in animate mortals, the Reasoning power is not found without the Sensitive. But the Sensitive is found without Reason, as in the beasts, and in the birds, and in the fishes, and in any brute animal, as we see. And that Soul which contains all these powers is the most perfect of all. And the Human Soul possessing the nobility of the highest power, which is Reason, participates in the Divine Nature, after the manner of an eternal Intelligence..."

Drawn primarily from Book Seven of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Dante constructs a hierarchy of sin that has as its basic framework a three-fold division, that itself accords with the trinal construction of the human form. The sins so regarded in the *Inferno* are classified into *incontinenza* – incontinence, or the inability to restrain one's physical appetites; *malizia* – malice, or the deliberate harming of others through our lack of emotional control; and the worst offences of all, *matta bestialitade* – bestiality or fraud, where the sin is the deliberate and sustained turning of our rational faculties to destructive purposes.⁸⁵

The arrangement then is that of the natural order inverted, or man standing on his head. The sins of the natural appetites accord to the belly and genitals (lust, gluttony, avarice), which are in themselves, when rightly ordered and controlled, a means of enjoying the material blessing of this world. It is only in their unrestrained application that they become destructive, and even then limited mostly to the wellbeing of the individual sinner. The sins of malice involve the outward workings of the uncontrolled passions, which accord with the chest. These transgressions involve the harmful manifestation towards others of our unbridled emotions, typically in violence or physical ruin. The sins of fraud are the lowest or worst of all offences, for they involve the deliberate, sustained misuse of rationality, and, Dante argues, are the variety of sins that typically involve the corruption of the social order, and thus carry significance well beyond the individual perpetrator. If being granted the blessings of a rational mind is the mark that sets man above the orders of the beasts, and by which we are to develop and express our love for our Creator, then the misuse of such faculties is the most serious of offences. A downward journey through the sins of the *Inferno*, in these terms, is a course through the three “realms” or functions of the inverted human form.

It has been argued that the tripartite arrangement of Hell is representative of the human body in that the journey through the *Inferno* is analogous to a passing from the human head down through the torso and into the abdomen.⁸⁶ Using the starting point that “...all Hell is a kind

⁸⁵ There has been significant scholarly attention to Dante's treatment of these three broad categories of transgression, which in part has demonstrated that seeming inconsistencies in the way Dante has adopted the Aristotelian categories into his own schemas invites a variance in analysis and interpretation. See, for example, Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, pp. 338-339, 362-363; Freccero, “The Firm Foot on a Journey without a Guide” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, 50-53; Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p. 117.

⁸⁶ Durling, “Seneca, Plato, and the Microcosm” in *Dante*, pp. 129-131; Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p. 117.

of great projection of the human body”⁸⁷, this model argues that the entry into Hell at the circle of Limbo is made at the rear ventricle of the head, as this is the seat of memory; that the gluttons accord to the gullet, and the sullen to the spleen; that in continuance the torso is suggested by the river of blood and the “heart’s forest”; that the Malebolge of the fraudulent is equivalent to the intestines, and the giants to the male genitals⁸⁸; and that finally the space of Cocito is like the “anus” of Hell. Accordingly, the “lightest” sins – those of lust, gluttony and avarice – are analogous to the human head (since those guilty of these sins “lose their head”); while the human passions correspond to the chest or torso; and, most importantly, the sins associated with fraud are comparable to the nature and workings of the human belly. In this model, it is crucial to make the association between the operation of human digestion and the punishments suitable for the fraudulent, since, in traditional modes of thought, knowledge is like food because it provides sustenance and nutrition for the soul.⁸⁹ Dante himself attempted a wide-ranging philosophical work – *Il Convivio* – in which truth is set out as a series of “courses” to be digested by the reader.⁹⁰ The perpetrators of fraud find their punitive *contrapasso* in the “belly” of hell because fraud, the antithesis of nutritive truth, is poison for the body and soul; although it is in the nature of fraudulent claims (or acts) that, like the honeyed words of the flatterer, they initially tempt with a superficial sweetness that later poisons and sickens. The truth, Dante says, carries the opposite qualities – it is initially bitter or difficult, but eventually proves to be nutritive and satisfying. As has been observed, the entire phenomenon of Hell can be thought of as a giant belly because the very notion of digestion allows for easy association between the body and the mind.⁹¹ The original force of the Latin *digero* implied the action of separating and distributing, and this is precisely the

⁸⁷ Durling, “Seneca, Plato, and the Microcosm” in *Dante*, p. 129.

⁸⁸ There are some subtle references throughout *Inferno* XXXI that are suggestive of male genitalia. In particular, we should note the specific (and only) use of “*perizoma*”, the Hebrew word for the fig-leaf apron by which the first humans covered themselves.

⁸⁹ Durling, “Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell” in *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979-80*, p. 61.

⁹⁰ *Convivio*, 1.1: “Wherefore, now wishing to prepare for them, I mean to make a common Banquet of this which I have shown to them, and of that needed bread without which food such as this could not be eaten by them at their feast; bread fit for such meat, which I know, without it, would be furnished forth in vain. And therefore I desire that no one should sit at this Banquet whose members are so unfitly disposed that he has neither teeth, nor tongue, nor palate: nor any follower of vice; inasmuch as his stomach is full of venomous and hurtful humours, so that it will retain no food whatever. But let those come to us, whosoever they be, who, pressed by the management of civil and domestic life, have felt this human hunger, and at one table with others who have been in like bondage, let them sit. But at their feet let us place all those who have been the slaves of sloth, and who are not worthy to sit higher: and then let these and those eat of my dish, with the bread which I will cause them to taste and to digest.”

⁹¹ Durling, “Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell” in *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979-80*, p. 61.

process by which the sinners in the *Inferno* find their assignation.⁹² They are systematically and relentlessly separated and distributed into the various strata of Dante's inventive schema. The sinners in hell are *digested*, "disassembled" in the original meaning of the term, in as much as their bodies are rendered disproportional or distorted. They are *dispaia* – discomposed – to use Dante's neologism.⁹³ It is therefore straightforward enough, given this etymological premise, to envisage the *entire* realm of Hell as a gigantic abdomen that "processes" its contents in a mock-digestion that serves to disassemble but is never nutritive or purposeful. It can be construed that the bi-focal possibilities of viewing Hell in such analogies can be said to be in itself testimony to the confusion brought on by the disordering effects of sin. The symbolism can work in two ways that initially appear to be contrary to one another. Hell can be both the self-enclosed, infernal abdomen and the wholly inverted man.

In Dante's moral schema, sin is clearly associated with distorted bodily form and function, purgation with the "straightening" or re-ordering of the self, and beatitude with the perfection of self. Therefore, the natural analogical construct would be to portray Hell as an inversion of the body, where sin has corrupted the natural order of the body *fundamentally*, in the literal meaning of that word. To use an admirable phrase, Dante takes us on a tour through "infernal inversion", where everything in Hell is upside-down and wrong-way-round.⁹⁴ The physical arrangement of Hell, and the behaviour of its inhabitants, gives tactile expression at every turn to the spiritual deformation within. In parallel, the narrative structure of the *Inferno* is also a grand inversion. Surely the climax of the story here is the meeting between pilgrim and fellow poets in the circle of Limbo in Canto III, one of perhaps only two circumstances in the *Inferno*, which, if it occurred in reality, would have been desirable to Dante. The finale of the *Inferno* turns out to be a stunning anti-climax, in which the highest creature is shown to have suffered the absolute fall. Satan is the last sinner encountered but

⁹² In traditional understandings of the process of human digestion, there were thought to be "four digestions" by which food was converted to recomposed matter within the body. *Ibid.*, p. 68. This seems to be suggested by Dante's description of the way in which the monstrous figure of Cerberus deals with the bodies of the gluttons, at *Inf.* 6:16-18 – "...*graffia li spirti ed iscoia ed isquatra*." ("...he mauls and skins, then hacks in four, these souls.") The descriptions of the glutton's bodies as they interact with one another is also highly suggestive of the motions of the stomach, at *Inf.* 6:20-21 – "...*de l'un de' lati fanno a l'altro schermo; / volgonsi spesso I miseri profani*." ("They squirm, as flank screens flank. They twist, they turn, / and then – these vile profanities – they turn again.")

⁹³ See *Inf.* 30:52.

⁹⁴ J. Freccero, "Infernal Inversion and Christian Conversion: *Inferno* XXXIV" in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. R. Jacoff (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 180-185.

chronologically the first and greatest of the “fallen”. He who was highest is now lowest. The imagery is complete in the inverted hierarchy of the angels in Hell, turned to diabolicalism.⁹⁵

Following this programme, any analogy that frames the arrangement of Hell on the image of the human form must take such *invertedness* as its key characteristic. To this end, the most appropriate model, one that can stand up to sustained analysis, represents Hell as the inverted human form. The “lighter” sins, the misuse of those appetites which inflame most quickly but are also more quickly sated, involve the abuses of the body’s lower portions. Lust and gluttony afflict the loins and the belly, while avarice can be said to incorporate sensuality that is bound up with the external but fleeting pleasures of the skin. The intermediate sins, we might say, are those of violent action or thought, associated with the human passions of the torso.⁹⁶ The most serious sins, those of the gravest moral “weight”, are placed at the bottom of the inverted man and thereby draw comparisons with the human head, for the specific categorisation of these sins as “fraud” directly connects them to human rationality.

To Dante, the fraudulent are most guilty of the waste of human intellect. In essence, all sinful action carries within it some loss or perversion of intellect, since both the creator and ultimate goal of the intellect is God, reached through contemplation of both the material world and of philosophical truths. The damned are so because they have lost sight of this goal and have thus “*perduto il ben de l’intelletto*.” (“lost / the good that intellect desires to win.”)⁹⁷ Dante follows the Aristotelian concept that the proper application of the intellect is the pursuit of truth, and asserts that the intellect is the most noble and excellent part of the human soul.⁹⁸ The arrangement of the souls in Hell, therefore, is largely predicated on the notion of this abandonment of the proper use of the human intellect. The function of rationality that places man above all the other populations of the created order is precisely that which is so distorted and misused by the unrepentant sinners Dante places in Hell. Those who elected to undertake a deliberate and willing misapplication of rationality are placed lowest in the infernal kingdom, and, of these, the traitors to their lords are placed lowest of all.

⁹⁵ See *Inf.* 34:121-123.

⁹⁶ It is of course a convenience that in either arrangement the correspondences assigned to the chest are identical, since the torso in the human and the sins of violence in the *Inferno* occupy the central position in a trifold system, and therefore maintain this centrality regardless of where the other two segmentations are placed.

⁹⁷ *Inf.* 3:18.

⁹⁸ *Convivio*, 3.2, 4.22.

The tripartite categorisation of sins, and their apparent parallels in the human form, are specifically previewed in the presentation of the allegorical “three beasts” that dominate the opening sequence of *Inferno* I. As is well known, the pilgrim’s path to the holy mountain is blocked by the apparently threatening appearance of the *lonza* (leopard), *leone* (lion) and *lupa* (she-wolf), a circumstance that precipitates the entire journey of the *Commedia*. The particular meaning of these figures has been much contested in the history of Dantean scholarship, with readings that vary from the moral, to the political, to biographical. It is of the nature of such compelling but general symbols that they may invite various interpretations; but it is equally the case that some correlation clearly exists between the striking appearance of the three beasts in *Inferno* I and the later Virgilian classification of sins in *Inferno* XI, on two counts. Firstly, the fact that the pilgrim is afraid of these creatures and finds them blocking his path provides a natural symbolic association between the creatures and the general nature of sin, since in Christian theology sin is the ever-present threat or stumbling block to the progress of the adherent; and that according to medieval thinkers the fact that man is afraid of animals at all is a symptom of the fallen nature that is the inevitable and irreversible effect of original sin.⁹⁹ (A condition which, according to the gospel accounts, appears to have been temporarily relieved in the Nativity). Secondly, the *threefold* appearance of the beasts is so suggestive as to make it impossible *not* to consider them as being somehow in accord with the threefold division of Hell. The use of *beastliness* as a physical metaphor for moral degeneration is a standard element of allegorical expressions of human nature, since the aim of philosophical and contemplative endeavours is to raise oneself above the mere creaturely nature of our existence. To remove ourselves from the sources that form the goal of such endeavours is to “retreat”, such as the pilgrim is literally forced to do, back to the level of the beasts. It should also be noted that this initial image of the lone pilgrim in the wilderness confronted by wild animals is a representation of the poet’s desire to parallel his journey with that of Christ, whose descent into the underworld and re-emergence into a perfected state, as we identified in our opening chapter, serves as a spiritual model for the poem.¹⁰⁰

How then to make an allegorical application between the three beasts and the tripartite division of sins? It is clearly the case that the pilgrims in the *Inferno* follow a general

⁹⁹ Freccero, “The Firm Foot on a Journey without a Guide” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 49.

¹⁰⁰ Mk 1:13 – “...and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.”

downward course, both physically and morally. The ordering of sins proceeds from the least serious – “the lightest” and the least affective – to the gravest. The sins of apathy, lust and gluttony, for example, are obviously of a very different order of seriousness from those of political treachery. Naturally, the descent into increasing gravity finds its counterpart in the reversal and correction that is the ascent of Mt. Purgatory. Here, the weightiest sins are addressed *first*, where the penitence is more onerous and, as I shall argue in the next chapter, the mountainside is at its steepest. The lightest sins, those of the bodily appetites, are eradicated last. It is for this reason that the pilgrim himself is gradually “de-weighted” as the ascent develops.¹⁰¹ At the simplest level of comparison, we can say that Dante confronts the beasts in a specific order – leopard, lion, she-wolf – that corresponds, in similar chronological order, to the division of sins into their broadest categories of incontinence, violence, and fraud. This follows the poet’s natural desire for order and structure within the poem; but the particular characteristics of the creatures themselves can be construed in accord with the allegorical nature of their presence. The leopard can be understood as particularly representing the incontinent sin of lust, since its attractive physical appearance and quick movement – “*leggera e presta molto*” (“light and lively”)¹⁰² – suggest the fascination, rapid inflammation but also easy satiation of sexual desire. The nagging nature of temptation is captured in the single-line reaction to the leopard’s presence: “*ch’I’ fui per ritornar più volte volto.*” (“I’d half a mind at every turn to turn.”)¹⁰³ The lion, a creature of tremendous power and fierce aggression, is emblematic of the sins of violence. The wolf is a beast of great cunning and patience, whose legendary rapaciousness places it as the image of the fraudulent mind; since fraud, or *malizia*, involves the sustained, concentrated effort of human reason. The ceaselessness of the wolf’s craving – “*la bestia senza pace*” (“That brute which knows no peace”)¹⁰⁴ – is comparable to the perpetual dissatisfaction experienced by the defrauder, who is endlessly captivated by the desire for material improvement but whose mind, and thereby entire spiritual state, is overtaken by an irritating restlessness.

We should also observe that of the three creatures, the she-wolf is the only one for which Dante appears to show explicit fear (although it is unclear from its mere appearance why this should be so); and accordingly it is the only beast that Dante mentions to Virgil. It is the seriousness of that which the she-wolf represents – namely, fraud – that must explain Dante’s

¹⁰¹ See *Pur.* 11:34-39.

¹⁰² *Inf.* 1:32.

¹⁰³ *Inf.* 1:36.

¹⁰⁴ *Inf.* 1:58.

fear. As far as categorisation of sins makes some transgressions more serious than others, Dante must fear the sins of fraud above all others, since this involves the abuse of his highest faculty – his intellect. The sins of fraud are those that flourish when the proper fruits of rational intellect are abandoned for pursuit of false goods. Dante confirms the gravity of the sins of fraud with a distinct topographical feature; the massive waterfall that demarcates nether-Hell serves to topographically symbolise the seriousness of the sins of fraud, so much worse than all other types of transgression.

It is not coincidental that for narrative purposes Dante should elect to employ an emblematic figure of fraud, that of the mythological creature Geryon, to transport the two pilgrims over this seemingly insurmountable barrier. Like Minos before him, Geryon is a deformed creature that serves a specific transportive function within the narrative, and naturally the direction of this transportation is downwards. The body of Geryon is itself an image of the inherent self-contradiction involved in Fraud, since in post-judgement the absurdity of one's attempts at deception are fully exposed before an omniscient judge. Everything about the appearance and behaviour of this creature is characteristic of the tensions induced by Fraud, and he is described as "*quella sozza imagine di froda*" ("that filthy image of deceit.")¹⁰⁵ Geryon carries the image of truth in his face, but a torso reminiscent of a serpent (a standard image of deception) and the tail of a scorpion. It is this element of Geryon's anatomy that seemingly carries the most significance in its symbolic function, being mentioned on five occasions throughout Canto XVII, and significantly appearing in the opening line, where the invertedness of fraud is captured by an initial reference to the lower anatomical part – "*Ecco la fiera con la coda aguzza*" ("Behold, The beast who soars with needle tail")¹⁰⁶

Likewise, some attention is due to the oft-overlooked figure of Minos, whom Dante re-invents from classical mythology to be the judge of his new underworld. Minos himself is a figure of bodily distortion, since he is a human being partly transmogrified into one of the many bi-form creatures that populate the *Inferno*.¹⁰⁷ He has a horrible appearance – "*Stavvi Minos orribilmente*"¹⁰⁸ – and barks like a dog, to Dante a lowly animal completely devoid of

¹⁰⁵ *Inf.* 17.7.

¹⁰⁶ *Inf.* 17:1. The image of a destructive tail is briefly revisited in the *Purgatorio*, where the dragon that destroys the processional chariot at the climax of the canto does so by the use of its tail. See *Pur.* 32:130-132.

¹⁰⁷ In this respect all the bi-form beasts of the *Inferno* represent the distorting effects of sin, and preview the final appearance of the ultimate deformation – Satan, a bat-like creature who retains a part-appearance of angelic form but is also monstrously altered.

¹⁰⁸ *Inf.* 5:4.

the companionable appeal to which we are accustomed.¹⁰⁹ In this barking voice we see a corruption of the human voice that should be the ordered expression of rationality. The dog-like voice strongly suggests the distortion of reason that increasingly characterises the nature of damnation as the pilgrims descend through the levels of Hell. The figure of Minos can also be read as an emblem of Hell's distortive influence, since he is both bestial but also, in a partly comic effect, harshly judgemental. The bitter satisfaction that comes with the formal role of condemning others is captured in the description of the unchanging exchange between sinners and judge.¹¹⁰ Central to this exchange is the gesture of Minos' own body, for he indicates his judgement and consignment of each sinner with a particular circling of his *tail*. The repetitious swirling of his tail, when naturally each circuit or "orbit" of the appendage would decrease to be a lesser version of its predecessor, provides a geometric intimation of the continually constricting landscape of the circles of Hell, to which the poem explicitly refers immediately prior to the appearance of Minos.¹¹¹ Thus Minos provides an infernal parody of a key geometrical representation, that of the spiral or set of concentric circles, by deliberate employment of a body part that should be regarded as unnatural to him.¹¹² For the tail is a most inhuman anatomical feature, and is commonly associated with the baser land mammals. The tail of any creature is literally of a *fundamental* nature, since it is located at the posterior and serves only base purposes. That Minos should use such a lowly component of his person to partly fulfil the judicial role assigned to him is an early symbolic indication of how Dante will use human anatomy to illustrate that Hell is a realm where the normal operation of human affairs has been irrevocably inverted.

The Christian ideal of the human community is that all believers are joined together, by love, in a mystical body of which Christ is the head. The individual members are bonded together by a common unity of the will. Following the theme of "infernal inversion", the great multitudes of the damned represent the body of Satan. Hell is an anti-church, an anti-community ruled by chaos, rather than order. Satan is the infernal and parodic image of Christ crucified – the head of the anti-church who is also the fundament. The traitors are

¹⁰⁹ It is noteworthy that there is not a single positive reference to the appearance or behaviour of dogs in the *Commedia*. Such references that do exist in the *Inferno* focus on the animal's pack mentality and predilection for biting, both of which suit the overall mood of the *cantica*. For examples see *Inf.* 6:19, 6:28, 8:42, 17:49, 21:68, 23:18, 30:20, 33:78.

¹¹⁰ See *Inf.* 5:4-15. Note the expression of joy in William Blake's painting of this scene.

¹¹¹ See *Inf.* 5:1-3.

¹¹² The original depiction of Minos in the *Aeneid* shows no references to such bestial appendages. See Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. C. Day Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.432-434, p. 170.

placed lowest of all because they destroy the social body. Hell is an inverted parody of the body of Christ. It is the body of Satan. It is the body inverted and imploded. It is an internal space, where relations to landscape are inverted, air is noxious, the stars hidden, the waters bitter, the surfaces harsh and unsteady, the soils infertile. The internality of the *Inferno's* topography is one of its key characteristics, and accords with the spiritual state it encompasses. The pilgrim is confined within the enclosedness of a physical cave, just as the damned are trapped by their own sins into a world no bigger than their own forms. The shedding of such entrapment, purgation, is signified by the re-emergence of the pilgrim *onto* the exterior of the earth, where the physical experience of regeneration involves the interaction with what is above and beyond as much as it is with overcoming that which lies below.

CHAPTER FOUR

PURGATORIO AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE HUMAN CHEST

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them.

Mark 9:2.

Thus far it has been established that the theme of “*la nostra effigie*” – “our human form” – plays a central role in Dante’s theological and poetic concerns; that the topos of bodily resurrection is a crucial frame upon which the narrative structure of the *Commedia* is constructed; that the poet uses, extends and completes the long literary tradition of microcosmic representations of the human form; and that, in an intertwining of these themes, the *Commedia* can be read as an analogous journey through the human body, where each of the three *cantiche* of the poem display recognisable parallels, in mood and structure, with each part of the (traditionally understood) tripartite human form. In the previous chapter, the structural arrangement and anatomical imagery of the *Inferno* was compared to the nature and workings of human digestion, in an analogy that has previously received significant scholarly attention. A satisfactory continuation of this reading of the *Commedia* demands that the *Purgatorio* be interpreted as somehow paralleling the structure and workings of the human torso, a task that requires a fresh reading of this particular *cantica*, since there is no extant scholarship that explicitly addresses this concept.¹ What follows is an attempt to explore the possibilities that exist in pursuing such a reading, whereby a series of seemingly tenuous associations can, in an admittedly conflated manner, be brought together to produce a new, symbolic rendering of the *Purgatorio*.

That in this broad analogy Purgatory should correspond to the chest is natural at the simplest level of symbolism, for it is the central realm of the *Commedia*, just as the chest has a central

¹ For general scholarship and commentary on the main themes within Dante’s *Purgatorio*, see Anderson, *Dante the Maker*; Robert M. Durling, “The Body and the Flesh in the *Purgatorio*” in Barolini and Storey, eds., *Dante for the New Millennium*, ; Manuele Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*.

location in the traditional, trichotomous model of the human form. In comparing the structure of Purgatory (which Dante conceives, with much originality, as being a mountain – an image of verticality) to that of the human chest, we can at least state that the human spine, being an object of utmost verticality, serves as the upright “axis” of the body. In this is an expression of the standard idea, familiar to Dante, that it is man’s essential *uprightness* that separates him, in physiological terms at least, from all other creatures.² Such homologies that exist between the anatomy of the human body and the macrocosmic universe are part of the traditional spiritual meaning ascribed to all parts of the created order.³ As shall be demonstrated, at key points in the progression up the mountain it can be seen that Dante uses specific moments of anatomical imagery to subtly illustrate this conception.

However, it should firstly be recognised that the structure of the *Purgatorio* conforms to an identifiable principle that governs all three parts of the *Commedia* – namely, that it contains a microcosmic version of the poem’s arrangement as a whole, based on the anatomy of the human form. It was established in the previous chapter that a supportable reading of the *Inferno* holds it to be an image of “inverted man”, or, to use Dante’s own phrase, man *sottosopra* – man upside-down. *Inferno* symbolically shows man standing on his head. This reading is based on the notion that the abuses of the *highest* faculties of the human person, the rational operations of the intellect, receive in turn the harshest punishments in Dante’s scheme of *contrapasso*; and that accordingly the perpetrators of these abuses are placed *lowest* in Hell. Conversely, the least serious sins, those of the lowest part of the human form – the belly and genitals – are placed highest in Hell, in accord with their comparative “lightness” of transgression. The *Purgatorio*, although containing a completely renewed outlook on the possibilities of human redemption and improvement, nevertheless is still

² It is an ancient notion that the physical uprightness of the human form is symbolic of its supreme status within the created order, and requires no further elaboration here, other than to state that such standard symbolism would have been readily apparent to Dante or any of his contemporaries. According to traditional understandings, two of the key characteristics of animals, particularly land animals, were their essential four-footedness, and earth-facing tendencies. Man is vertical and looks upwards, while animals are horizontal and face downwards. The primary analogy available from this distinction is that the pursuit of higher intellectual and spiritual goals is the true purpose of Man, setting him apart from the stupidity of beasts. For a formative milestone in this tradition see Plato’s *Timaeus*, 92A-92C. Of course, the notion of human verticality as a symbol of *moral* status is prevalent in the biblical tradition, as frequent references in the Psalms, for example, will attest. To Dante, the notion of uprightness is critical to the distinction between Man, representing the highest level of earthly existence, and the animals that represent the middle tier. For example, in the opening scene of the *Inferno* the sins that threaten to retard the spiritual progress of the pilgrim are represented by beasts; and at various moments throughout the *Commedia* the distinction is made between the superior, noble pursuits of Man and the ignoble existence of animals as they represent the degenerate state of uneducated or immoral men. See *Inf.* 24.124, 26.118-120; *Par.* 7.139-148.

³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane the Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), p. 169.

arranged on the same structure of the “inverted man” that we see in *Inferno*. In *Purgatorio*, the traditional conception of the “Seven Deadly Sins”, strongly alluded to but never made completely explicit in the *Inferno*, is now given a clearly overt treatment. The notion of spiritual (and accompanying geographical) progress is based on a systematic eradication of these vices whereby the most serious, perhaps it could be said *foundational* sin, Pride, is purged first. From here, the journey through the “Sins” portrays a journey through the inverted human body, in such a way that it undertakes a neat reversal of the descent experience in Hell. The most serious of sins, those of the human intellect – pride, envy, anger – are removed first, while the least serious or “lightest” sins – avarice, gluttony, lust – are dealt with last. In this way, the inverted human form remains the template of the poem’s narrative structure, and this is in accord with the moral theme of the *cantica*, since in Purgatory, the souls present are still being refined and renewed from the effects of distortion and inversion that are the physical, symbolic representations of sin. They are being cleansed, and they *will be* perfected, but they are not yet so. It is only *after* the pilgrim himself has passed through all the terraces of purgation that he is referred to as “upright”. We must then wait until the *Paradiso* to find that the structural arrangement of the *Commedia* has taken on a new form, whereby the symbolic references to the various parts of the human form (and here it is done in a particularly astronomical fashion) show that the perfected souls are sorted according to an image of the new “upright man.”

To preview some of the important thematic developments in the *Purgatorio*, it is clear that in the realm of Purgatory an entirely new vision of human experience becomes available to us. Dante’s *Purgatorio* introduces its audience to new modes of motion, progress, renewal, cleansing, and communal development; and in these themes we can find parallels to the structure and workings of the human chest, and specifically to the heart and the lungs. Two of the *Purgatorio*’s key themes, notably absent in the *Inferno*, are tempo and rhythm. The organs of the chest represent balance in that they are centred within the human form, acting as a pivot, separating the necessary base functions of the belly from the higher rational and sensory functions of the head. They are also the most rhythmic parts of the body, for the beating of the heart and the breathing of the lungs are the body’s metronomes – instruments of cadence that constantly mark out the tempo and rhythm of the entire body. The central *cantica* of the poem refocuses our attention from the anatomy of the lower parts, towards those of our core, again in both its explicit references and over-arching themes. The theme of the core of the human person – the heart which is the controller and distributor of blood and

therefore also that of “vital spirit”, as well as being the symbolic seat of human passions and emotions; and the breath that is a key identifier of earthly aliveness – dominates much of the anatomical symbolism of the *cantica*. In many ways, the *Purgatorio* is the most human of the three parts of the poem, not only because it focuses on the core experiences and emotions that seem to define us; Dante’s Purgatory, as both a topographical entity and the forum for a particular mode of human existence in the *Commedia* – that of the temporal-minded, earth-bound but forward-moving pilgrim in a like-minded community, is most like our own existence on this earth. It is most like *here* and its residents are most like *us*.

In keeping with its attention to the metronomic elements of the human form, the *Purgatorio* is noteworthy for its particular attention to *time*. Sidereal references as a method of describing the hour of day are abundant in the *Purgatorio*, and, in consideration of our theme, one of its more salient features.⁴ It is also appropriate that Dante should choose Purgatory as the realm in which to express his concerns with the practical and moral considerations regarding the proper use of earthly time, and it is here, calculated from all possible references in the text of the *Commedia*, that Dante as pilgrim spends the most time.⁵ Time is a key theme in the *Purgatorio* in that the mountain is the realm of the rhythmic. The experience of being on the mountain is deeply linked with the concepts of motion, transition, and process. The poetics of spiritual restoration in which Dante engages in the *Purgatorio* are inseparable from these concepts. From its opening lines the *Purgatorio* is concerned to convey the effects of movement, temporality and time. The penitents in Dante’s Purgatory are deeply concerned to make amends for the apparent squandering or abuse of their earthly time, and the designated penitence is measured out according to the elements of temporality. Here, the true pilgrim, in Christian terms, is ever cognisant that time is “religious and clerical time” and is granted in order that we might make proper preparation for eternity.⁶ That Dante is now “back on earth” but also rising into the finer strata of alpine air, demonstrates a new focus on natural rhythms, particularly in the diurnal cycle of night and day, labor and rest, progress and pause. Where the depiction of movement in the *Inferno* is typically that of manic,

⁴ For a complete analysis of Dante’s use of “time-telling” in the *Purgatorio* see Alison Cornish, “Telling Time in Purgatory” in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and Its Aftermath: Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, eds. John Freccero, Dana E. Stewart, and Alison Cornish (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), pp. 139-154

⁵ Telling time in the *Paradiso* is particularly difficult, due to the lack of astronomical references used for the marking of earthly time as have existed earlier in the poem, and due to the fact that the Empyrean is understood to be a place that stands outside of all time and space.

⁶ John C. Barnes, “Vestiges of the Liturgy” in John C Barnes and Cormac O Cuilleain, *Dante and the Middle Ages - Literary and Historical Essays* (Chippenham: Antony Rowe Ltd., 1995), p. 231.

chaotic, incessant but also unproductive motion, the *Purgatorio* progresses to a new portrayal of human actions, where movement is marked by organised groups rhythmically participating in purposeful work and rest.

In accord with the torso's role as seat of human movement and rhythm, it is *progress* that forms the core of the penitents' journey through the realm of Purgatory. The mood is now one of productive movement, which is always forwards and, in topographical terms, upwards. The opening reference to the heart in *Purgatorio* demonstrates just such an attitude. At the commencement of Canto II, Dante describes how he and Virgil are walking in the dawn light at the base of Mt Purgatory, "...come geste che pena a suo cammino, / che va col cuore e col corpo dimora." ("...as people do when pondering the road. / Their hearts go forward, though their limbs delay.")⁷ A true pilgrim anticipates the nature of the journey before they commence it, and the desire for bodily motion, drawn from the heart, is the impulse that generates the physical action of the body. That Dante should choose to illustrate the forward urgings of the heart using a simile that involves *walking* is also significant, for, in keeping with the *Purgatorio's* theme of human pilgrimage, he demonstrates the relationship between walking, the most natural of all human movement, and the rhythms of the chest, which contains within it the origins of all such movements.⁸ Most obviously, exertion of walking involves an elevation of our pulse and rate of breath, so that our physical activity heightens our awareness of these operations. And, the rhythmic behaviour of our chests is paralleled to our walking in that the inhaling-exhaling of our breath and the contraction-expansion of our heart mirrors the basic two-step, left-right motion of our stride; and where, similarly, the regular vacillation of the arms, as attachments to the chest, serves as a natural counterbalance to the movement of the legs. In this way, motion is the proper mood for the chest, since it is in fact always "in motion", but also because it is the seat of *emotion*, the experience of being "moved" into a new state. Here a note of microcosmic parallel is available to us, since the

⁷ *Pur.* 2:11-12.

⁸ I can but briefly note here the complex relationship that seems to exist between Dante's references to feet and the act of walking throughout the *Commedia*; the underlying theme of pilgrimage that serves as a basic metaphor for the narrative action of the poem; and the relentless, forward-moving nature of the poem's *terza rima* rhyme scheme. In short, it can be stated that the *terza rima*, with its unstoppable momentum and use of constant overlap, is deliberately intended by Dante to simulate the physical act of walking. The two main protagonists *walk* through the entire earthly landscape of the poem (except for a couple of notable sections) and likewise the "stepping" motion of the poem's rhyming invites us (particularly when we recite the poem aloud) to imitate them as readers. As has been noted elsewhere in this thesis, there is a distinct pattern of references to the feet at the *Commedia* progresses, whereby a heavy emphasis on the feet permeates the *Inferno*, gradually dissipates as the *Purgatorio* develops, and is replaced by another means of transportation entirely in the *Paradiso*.

Purgatorio's status as the central part of the poem fits with emotion as a human experience that is commonly described as being felt in the chest. Emotions, particularly those most intense to us, are frequently accompanied by changes in the behaviours of the chest – rapid or shallow breathing, for example, or a racing heart. This may also be why Dante has chosen to populate the *Purgatorio* with many significant poets and serious discussions of poetry, for a key purpose of the poet is to express human emotions. In a further parallel, the anticipation of the pilgrim on the journey (and, by force of the poet's artistic powers, the reader of the poem) is analogous to the devotee's spiritual state whilst present before the altar of the temple, since the entire experience of entering into the vast, microcosmically ordered edifice of the Christian temple was meant to represent an earthly preview of the heavenly destiny that awaited the believer. In this sense, a correspondence between the *Purgatorio* and the temple can be established in as much as both are a foretaste of that which they promise.

That Dante should conceive of Purgatory as a *mountain* is also in accord with this analogy, for, as I hope to demonstrate, there are numerous subtle correspondences between the natural symbolism of the human torso and the symbolism of mountains, which derive primarily from their central or intermediate position in the existing schematic arrangements concerning the cosmos and the human form. The mountain, typically imagined as pyramidal in shape, is fixed to earth but points to heaven, and in its permanence and size conveys the power of divine authority. The mountain-top, a rarefied place still on earth but close to heaven, is the location of the temporal Paradise from which all the natural activity and outward manifestation of providence flows. The symbolism of the mountain makes it the place at which special communication may be made between God and man, or where man may go to test and refine himself.⁹ The mountain is often conceived as an *axis mundi*, symbolically a centre of the world around which human life can be understood and organised, and to which lowly people can look as a symbol of divine aid. In accord with the natural symbolism of the mountain, Christian communities would traditionally construct temples and altars upon mountains or high places, increasing their visibility and re-enforcing their heavenward aspiration.

The mountain is encapsulated, architecturally speaking, in the altar that is the centrepiece of the Christian temple and liturgy. In the standard interpretations of the symbolism of

⁹ Hani, *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple*, pp. 85-86.

Christian architecture, mountains are represented in the altar of the temple. The altar is a raised platform, a “little mountain” on which the manifestation of the divine Being is brought within reach of the people. The word “altar” has its etymological roots in the Latin *altus*, which simply referred to a high place. The altar holds the Eucharistic elements, the celebration of which is the “heart” of worship. The altar is the central point of the cosmic cross symbolised by the architectural layout of the temple, and the “locus of the mimodrama of the Mass is the altar, which is the most sacred object in the temple, the reason for its existence and its very essence.”¹⁰ In symbolic terms, it is the “heart of the world” through which and above which the vertical pole of the *axis mundi* operates as a conduit between the human and divine worlds. It is placed at the centre, or “heart” of the building, re-enforcing the imagery of the heavenward-reaching dome, (and later, spire) that sits above it:

The temple acts like a charm, for in it we can feel the throbbing of a harmonious soul, whose rhythm, coming to meet us, prolongs, transcends, and sublimates our own living rhythm and even the rhythm of the world in which it floats. This ‘magic’ derives from the existence of a center from which lines radiate, engendering and extending with unreserved joy and according to the golden mean, forms, surfaces, and volumes, to a skilfully calculated limit, which arrests, reflects and returns them to their point of origin; and this twofold current in a way constitutes the subtle ‘breathing’ of this body of stone, which, after expanding outwardly to fill space, gathers itself into its origin, into its heart, which is pure inwardness. This center, from which everything radiates and towards which everything converges, is the Altar. The Altar is the most sacred object in the temple, the reason for its existence, and even its essence, for while in cases of necessity, the Divine Liturgy can be celebrated elsewhere than in a church, it is absolutely impossible to do so without an altar of stone.¹¹

The altar is also the symbolic means by which the Christian adherent may offer themselves in devotion, for in the theology of the New Testament the believer is called upon to forsake the ritual sacrifices of the Hebrews, and instead offer themselves as a “living sacrifice” to God. Dante would have been cognisant of the abundant biblical references that affirm the heart as the seat and symbol of one’s spiritual state.¹² In this understanding, the heart is the “true person”, hidden from physical sight but responsible, as the inner reservoir of emotion and conviction, for the manifest actions of the individual.

¹⁰ Hani, *The Divine Liturgy: Insights into Its Mystery*, p. 79.

¹¹ Hani, *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple*, p. 87.

¹² See, as examples, Mt. 5:8, 5:28, 6:21, 9:4, 12:34, 15:19.

The Holy Mountain is a foundation image in scripture and Christian art, a feature shared among all religious traditions. In the Biblical account of God's intervention in human affairs, the mountain-top – Eden, Ararat, Moriah, Sinai, Zion, Tabor, Calvary – provides the proper setting for the key moments of providential action. The association between a mountain landscape, and the sense of renewal that is delivered to the penitent who has “crossed over” from the land of sin, is frequently and subtly intimated in the lines of the *Purgatorio*, as in the prominent use of Psalm 114, which is both famously used as the “song of exile” for the newly arrived at the base of the mountain in Canto II¹³, and which contains lines (“the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like young sheep”¹⁴) that prefigure the moment in Canto XXI when it is declared that the entire mountain quakes at the arrival of every new soul.¹⁵ Other suggestive references to mountainous geography, inserted within incidental passages of the text, continue to remind the reader that the scenes of the *Purgatorio* are played out on an alpine landscape.¹⁶ It is also notable that specific allusions to all of the crucial mountain landscapes in biblical history (and, indeed, several famous mountain sites referred to within classical literature and mythology) can be detected in the climactic cantos of the *Purgatorio*.¹⁷

In framing an image of the archetypal mountain, it is natural that we should see it as alpine – that is, broadly pyramidal in nature, and indeed the prevailing view, though it is never rendered as a crucial point in the interpretative readings of the *Purgatorio*, is that the mountain is pyramidal, peaked, or at least generally conical in shape. Many mountains are in fact shaped to a peak in this way, and the early references in the *Purgatorio* to the steepness of the path that lies ahead of the pilgrims, or indeed a suggestive image such as “*sotto la guardia de la grave mora*” (“guarded by that great cairn of heavy stones”)¹⁸, confirm this preconception. Certainly, the image of Mt. Purgatory as essentially pyramidal comprises the standard visual representation of Dante's landscape in the tradition of illustrations of the *Commedia*.¹⁹ The pyramidal mount is also in accord with the symbolism

¹³ See *Pur.* 2:43-51.

¹⁴ Ps. 114:4.

¹⁵ See *Pur.* 20:124-129, 21:58-63.

¹⁶ See *Pur.* 5:117, 6:37.

¹⁷ See Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 2 - Purgatorio*, p. 11n. For specific references to particular geographic sites, see *Pur.* 4:86 (Zion); 22:65, 28:141, 31:141 (Parnassus); 24:15 (Olympus); 29:40 (Helicon).

¹⁸ *Pur.* 3:129.

¹⁹ As examples, see the illustrations for the *Purgatorio* as selected in Peter H. Brieger, Millard Meiss, and Charles Southward Singleton, *Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy*, 2 vols., Bollingen Series

we might ascribe to both the mood and purpose of Purgatory. The pyramidal shape is a geometric companion to the element of fire; and fire, along with air, finds its symbolic home on the mountain. Fire, as an element, always tends upwards and sharpens as it rises. In the heart of the *Purgatorio* Virgil declares that “*come ‘l foco movesi in altura*” (“as fire moves upwards to the heights.”)²⁰ Fire is naturally pyramidal in shape. It is also the “hot” element, in accord with the chest’s role as seat of the heart, the “fire” of the body. In this conception, the organs of the torso directly correspond to the higher elements: the air to the lungs, and fire to the heart. In the *Timaeus*, Plato details how the various elements of the earth are composed of the regular geometric solids, and an association is made between fire and the most basic of the solids, the pyramid.²¹ The pyramid is the simplest, lightest and most mobile of the solids, in accord with the brief, quick behaviour of the element of fire. But Dante would have noted that Plato, who shares with Dante a fascination for the metaphors of sight, also makes a further distinction between two “kinds” of fire. There is the literal fire that burns and consumes, but also the “pure fire” of light, which, in accord with our explorations of Dante’s symbolism of the eye, is described as participating in a particular way with the structure and nature of the human eye.²²

Dante may also have been mindful of chapter IX of Augustine’s *Confessions*, in which the church father makes the seemingly natural connection between the heart of man in which is planted the “fire” or “flame” of divine love, and the metaphorical rising of the believer from the “valley of tears” while singing the so-called “songs of ascent”, the series of psalms (119-133 in the Vulgate version), that employ the imagery of the lowly sinner who turns his eyes to the “hills” of Zion in seeking for deliverance.²³ Likewise, in the *Cosmographica* of Bernardus Silvestris, an important but seemingly under-recognised source for Dante’s thematic symbolism, Bernardus perpetuates the association between the human chest and the

(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 333-348; John Ciardi and Kenneth Clark, *The Drawings by Sandro Botticelli for Dante's Divine Comedy: After the Originals in the Berlin Museums and the Vatican* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 89; Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, pp. 725, 729.

²⁰ *Pur.* 18:28. See also *Par.* 1:115, where Beatrice explains to Dante that “*Questi ne porta il foco inver’ la luna*” (“One instinct bears the fire towards the moon.”)

²¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 56, p. 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 45, p. 62. “And the first organs they fashioned were those that give us light, which they fastened there in the following way. They arranged that all fire which had not the property of burning, but gave out gentle light, should form the body of each day’s light. The pure fire within us that is akin to this they caused to flow through the eyes, making the whole eye-ball, and particularly its central part, smooth and close-textured so that it would keep in anything of coarser nature, and filter through only this pure fire. So when there is daylight round the visual stream, it falls on its like and coalesces with it, forming a single uniform body in the line of sight, along which the stream from within strikes the external object.”

²³ See Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.2, p. 182.

elements of fire and air, here referring specifically to the heart: “Its sacred shrine is within the breast, its royal palace and imperial throne; its form is such as its brother element, fire, provides, whose crown tapers upward to a point.”²⁴

Thus by Dante’s time an established symbolic connection was made between the peaked form of the mountain, the behaviour and nature of the element of fire and the structure and workings of the human chest. As previously observed, Dante was cognisant of an order of symbolism in which the human senses, as the means by which the human intellect can experience and understand the physical universe, could be attributed in their nature to the four traditional elements. Augustine’s *De Genesi Ad Litteram* (*On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*) provides just such a suggestion, aligning the faculty of sight with the phenomenon of fire, or light; hearing with the nature of air; smell and taste to the “moist element” (water), and the faculty of touch to the element of earth.²⁵ In Purgatory, we can see an elevated purpose and meaning to both sight and hearing, since the expansive clearness of the mountain’s landscape makes proper human sight once again possible after the murkiness of Hell; and the return of natural sounds and the emergence of the human voice in exercise of reason, and the recital of the psalms, provides contrast to the blatant discord of the infernal realm.

These associations certainly conform to the moral schema of Purgatory. To reiterate an earlier conception, the heavy, bodily nature of Hell is best characterised by the elements of earth and water; that of Purgatory, an intermediate realm between concrete materiality and

²⁴ Silvestris, *The Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris*, p. 125.

²⁵ See Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, 2 vols., Ancient Christian Writers No. 41-42 (New York, N.Y.: Newman Press, 1982), 3.4, p. 77-78: “There are also writers who have subtle theories to relate the five senses of the body to the four elements. The eyes, they say, are accommodated to fire; the ears, to air. Smell and taste they link to the moist element: smell to the humid vapours that fill this space in which birds fly; taste to water in a liquid and (one might say) bodily state. For anything that is tasted is mixed with saliva and thereby made capable of being tasted, even though it may have seemed dry on entering the mouth. Fire, however, penetrates all bodies to give motion to them. For moisture freezes when heat is removed; and, though the other elements can be warmed, fire cannot be cooled. It can more readily be extinguished and cease to be fire than remain cold or become cool by contact with cold. Touch, the fifth of the senses, has an intimate connection with earth; hence, throughout the whole of a living body, which is made from earth, objects are perceived when touched. It is also said that nothing can be seen without fire or touched without earth, and that therefore all elements are in everything, but that each thing has been named for that element that predominates in it. And so, they say, it is through lack of heat, when the body grows extremely cold, that sensation is dulled; for then there is a slowing down of the motion that belongs to a body because of its heat, since fire acts upon air, air upon water, water upon earth, and, in general, finer matter penetrates what is grosser. Now, the finer the nature of anything in the corporeal world, the closer its affinity to the spiritual; but these two realms are vastly different in kind, for the one is body and the other is not.” Augustine evidently has in mind here Plato’s treatment of the human senses in *Timaeus* 65b-68d.

complete immateriality, is marked by the “lighter” elements of air and fire, where the behaviour of air is signified by the human lungs and fire by the workings of the heart; while Heaven, in this analogy, is *quintessential* – it is both the point of origin from which emerged all the elements while simultaneously holding none of them, a realm of pure immateriality. In Canto XXVIII of the *Purgatorio*, Dante-pilgrim meets the as-yet unidentified figure of Matelda, who provides her visitor with a meteorological explanation for the environmental conditions that have caused wonderment in the mind of the pilgrim. She says:

‘Perché ‘l turbar che sotto da sé fanno
l’essalazion de l’acqua e de la terra,
che quanto posson dietro al calor vanno,
A l’uomo non facesse alcuna guerra,
questo monte salio verso ‘l ciel tanto,
e libero n’è d’indi ove si serra.’

‘Water and earth below breathe vapours out
that search, as fully as they can, for heat,
and this induces turbulence down there.
Yet, so that these should bring no harm to men,
this mountain climbs and reaches to the sky,
free of these swirls from where the gate is locked.’

(*Pur.* XXVIII, 97-102).

The penitents in Dante’s purgatory experience an increased lightening and gradual disembodiment as they ascend the mountain and reach ever-more refined layers of atmosphere. And their movement on the mountain, like that of fire, is directed continually upward, for “man’s soul, like fire, seeks its home upward, in the realm of the stars.”²⁶

Dante’s deep interest in the human heart, both as a physiological feature and as a prime metaphor for the harbouring and working-out of human passions, is demonstrated by his use of anatomical symbolism throughout the *Purgatorio*. For his conceptions of the operations of human anatomy Dante adopted the strong Galenic tradition that had come to dominate medieval man’s understanding of both the arrangements of the human body and the subtle relationships between the body and the soul. The central component of such understandings was that the body is animated by an essential quality – “*spiritus*”, or “spirit”. This operated throughout the body, providing its movement, growth, and reparation, and acting as a vehicle

²⁶ Anthony M. Esolen, introduction to Dante, *Purgatory*, (New York: Modern Library, 2003), p. xvi.

by which the soul could disperse its influence throughout the body. This notion stands in contrast to our contemporary models of the human complex, which choose to see the heart as merely a mechanical apparatus, and which relocate the “centre” of man to the brain, which is now both the controller of the body’s operations, and, in psychological terms, the seat of the personality. To the medieval mind, the *spiritus* was understood to consist of three kinds – the *spiritus naturalis*, natural spirit, was generated by the liver and controlled the body’s lower functions such as appetite and digestion; *spiritus vitalis*, vital spirit, a refined form of natural spirit, was born in the heart and regulated the essential functions of the torso, such as the pulse, breathing, and circulation of blood to the brain; and *spiritus animalis*, animal spirit, a subtle element also known as “spirit of the soul” which controlled sensory and mental activities. These three forms of spirit were conceived as circulating throughout the body for the movement, alternately warm and cool, of the blood throughout the body’s arterial system. In this, the heart is the most central and vital component of human anatomy.²⁷

In metaphorical terms there are grounds for associating the human heart, in its central place and function as circulator of the body’s blood, with the centrality of the altar as the central feature or “heart” of the temple and the Eucharistic rite as the central fact of Christian liturgy. For the Eucharist commemorates and repeats in its form the sacrifice of Christ that was designed to effectively replace the existing rituals of the Jewish tradition, foremost amongst which was the blood sacrifice of the holocaust. The Greek word *holocauste* means “entirely burnt”, since the offered animal, after being bleed to death, was ritually burnt to the point of total incineration on the altar, a signification that it was an entirely consecrated offering to God.²⁸ The scattering of the blood of the victim also has significance, “for blood, in effect, corresponds to the transcendent essence of man, which is seated in the heart.”²⁹ This blood is also recognised in the pages of the Old Testament as comprising the vehicle of the of the living soul or vital principle that animates the human creature,³⁰ as we have noted in regard to the Galenic tradition; and it is also, in the medieval notion of the four elements of creation, associated with the element of *air*, one of the two elements that most easily correspond to the

²⁷ For a complete analysis of Dante’s employment of Galenic anatomical theory, see Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante’s Comedy*, pp. 140-149; Simon A. Gilson, “The Anatomy and Physiology of the Human Body in the *Commedia*” in *Dante and the Human Body: Eight Essays*, eds. John C. Barnes and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 23-26.

²⁸ Hani, *The Divine Liturgy: Insights into Its Mystery*, p. 8.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 17. See also Lev. 17:10-11, Deut. 12:23.

topography and mood of the *Purgatorio*.³¹ The notion of complete consecration is also intimated in the upward-rising smoke of the sacrifice, which naturally ascends, symbolically speaking *and* in obvious accord with the pyramidal and upward-tending nature and behaviour of fire, towards heaven.³²

This experience is echoed in the famous opening of the *Commedia*. As in the *Vita Nuova*, the first physical experience we see in the *Inferno* involves the workings of the heart as the seat of human passions and emotions. Dante is lost in a dark woodland, then, *at the foot of a hill*, reaches the edge of a ravine that “*m’avea di paura il cor compunto*” (“had before so pierced my heart with panic”).³³ He then says that he has endured a night of fear, as terror was residing “*che nel lago del cor*” (“in the lake of my heart”).³⁴ This highly original phrase again seats the emotions and passions of the body, in this instance extreme fear, in the *spiritus vitalis*, now imagined as a kind of protective but energising reservoir of fluid, that surrounds the heart. But for our purposes it is important to see that this experience of the chest, the “lake of the heart”, occurs within sight of a hill, which, we are told later, is in fact the mount of Purgatory that Dante will ascend. The landscapes in which the opening scene of the *Commedia* take place – wilderness, dark ravine, lonely scree – represent the fears and anxieties that are felt in the *spiritus vitalis*, and are terrestrial. They are part of this earth, not the infernal realm. In metaphorical terms the opening of the *Commedia*, like the first sighting of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*, is a kind of “shock” or moment of sharp individual crisis, felt deeply within the centre of the person of Dante, that animates his desires. It is a confirmation of the centrality of the heart to the human form, a starting point from which all feeling, and therefore action, must flow.

Dante references the heart throughout the *Inferno*, usually in regard to its status as the place where he experiences (and sometimes hides) his own emotional reactions to all he is experiencing (and these are typically fear, anxiety or astonishment); but also to position the unruly passions and emotions of the damned in the *cor* of their shade-bodies. All the

³¹ Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy*, p. 145.

³² The natural, upward-tending behaviour of fire in the *Purgatorio* can be compared with the way that fire acts *unnaturally* in the *Inferno*. For example, in the circle of the Blasphemers, the sinners lie supine under a shower of fire. See *Inf.* 14:28-30 – “*Sovra tutto ‘l sabbion, d’un cader lento, / poivean di foco dilatate falde, / come di neve in alpe senza vento.*” (“And over all that barren sand there fell – / as slow as Alpine snow on windless days – / a shower of broad-winged fire flakes drifting down.”)

³³ *Inf.* 1:13.

³⁴ *Inf.* 1:20.

animosity, despair and bilious talk of the damned is represented as the outpourings from the dark, corrupted wellsprings of their hearts.³⁵ It is as though their hearts were dead and therefore unable to properly animate their bodies or offer to their bodies a sign of progress. In the second canto of *Inferno*, Dante describes how his “*cor*” will be challenged by Virgil, and transformed by the interceding grace of Beatrice so that it reanimates Dante to focus upon the principal, essential element of the narrative:

*Tu m'hai con disiderio il cor disposto
sì al venir le parole tue,
ch'i' son tornado nel primo proposto.*

You, as you speak, have so disposed my heart
in keen desire to journey on the way
that I return to find my first good purpose.

(*Inf.* II, 136-138).

It is this “disposition of desire” that impels Dante through the entire journey of the *Commedia*. The starting point, and central point, is the heart. And, at the endpoint of this journey of spiritual desire towards Beatrice, when he is unexpectedly berated by his beloved, Dante states that the emotional response generated by this experience bursts forth from his core, from the wellspring of his heart:

*...ma poi che 'ntesi ne le dolci temper
lor compatire a me – par che se detto
avesser: 'Donna, perché sì lo stempre?' –
lo gel che m'era intorno al cor ristretto
spirito e acqua fessi, e con angoscia
de la bocca e de li occhi uscì del petto.*

And yet, on hearing, through these harmonies,
Their pity on me (for it seemed they'd said:
'Why, *donna*, cause him discord such as this?'),
the ice, so tightly stretched around my core,
turned now to breath and water, issuing,
at mouth and eye, in spasms from my heart.

(*Pur.* XXX, 94-99).

If a comparison is made between the realm of Purgatory, the most earthly and “bodily” division of the after-world as Dante so constructs it, and the structure and workings of the

³⁵ See, as examples, *Inf.* 5:100, 6:75, 11:47-51, 27:38, 32:38, 33:5, 33:113.

human chest, it is appropriate that this is where Dante should embark upon the longest (and to many the most perplexing) discussion of human anatomy in the *Commedia*. In response to an enquiry from Dante-pilgrim regarding the true nature of the bodies in Purgatory, the Roman poet Statius is invited by Virgil to respond. He delivers what is in effect a lesson in the medieval understandings of human embryology. While modern readers are likely to find this passage wholly unsatisfactory, one striking image is pertinent to our discussion. Borrowing largely from the biological theses of Aristotle, Dante produces his own explanations of the mechanisms of human generation, which, he says, originate in the human heart. The “perfect blood” that circulates around the heart of an adult male contains within it a small part that undergoes further refinement and is imbued with *virtute informativa*, “informing power”, that enables it to generate new life. This blood, when joined to the blood inside the “passive” female body, initiates the processes by which the human foetus is produced. In this model, the heart is again placed as the central feature of human anatomy, being the central and single point of latent power that is the primary agent of reproduction.³⁶

Dante’s adoption of the Galenic model of human physiology is demonstrated in two key moments, in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*, that bear comparison to one another. In the opening scene of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante is nine years old when he first sights the figure of Beatrice:

At that moment, and what I say is true, the vital spirit, the one that dwells on the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that even the least pulses of my body were strangely affected; and trembling, it spoke these words: ‘Here is a god stronger than I, who shall come to rule over me’. At that point the animal spirit, the one abiding in the high chamber to which all the senses bring their perceptions, was stricken with amazement, and speaking directly to the spirits of sight, said these words: ‘Now your bliss has appeared.’ At that moment the natural spirit, the one which dwells in that part where our nourishment is attended to, began to weep, and weeping, said these words: ‘Alas, wretch that I am, from now on I shall be hindered often.’ Let me say that from that time on Love governed my soul, which became so readily betrothed to him and over which he reigned with such assurance and lordship given him through the power of my imagination that it became necessary for me to tend to his every pleasure.³⁷

³⁶ See *Pur.* 25:25-108.

³⁷ *Vita Nuova*, II.

We infer from this passage that Dante, in actually giving “voices” to the animating spirits, is affirming their role as active agents in the body; and that the result of this experience is that Dante is subject to a substantial inner disturbance, the result of which is his willing submission to the “lordship” of his love for Beatrice, in dedicating himself to following the commands of his desires for her. Such desires, stimulated by the faculty of his imagination, cause him to forever move towards the object of his desire.³⁸ This key motif – the individual driven by his heart’s desire towards a divinely-blessed goal of adoration – will become the primary metaphor of the entire *Commedia*.

Naturally, besides being the seat of the heart, the other function of the human chest is to provide breath for the body. Dante rarely mentions the lungs, or the act of breathing, but we can be certain of his equating the working of the lungs with the spiritual function of Purgatory, and again with the role of the liturgy in the use of the Christian temple. Essentially, the ritual of the liturgy is simply designed to be “an anticipation of heaven, of the celestial life of the elect.”³⁹ In the presence of divinity, called down to assist the earth-bound, the pilgrims, like the adherents, are in a highly anticipatory state of upward and forward looking. What we find in the opening scene of the *Purgatorio* is a balm to the terrors described at the introduction of the *Inferno*. At once, the mood is one of renewal, freshness and clear sight. The first vista Dante draws for us is as follows:

*Dolce color d'oriental zaffiro
che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto
del mezzo, puro infino al primo giro,
a li occhi miei ricominciò diletto,
tosto ch'io uscì' fuor de l'aura morta
che m'avea contristati li occhi e 'l petto.
Lo bel pianeta che d'amar conforta
faceva tutto rider l'oriente,
velando i Pesci, ch'erano in sua scorta.*

Soft hues of sapphire from the orient,
collecting gently, marked the circles now
of skies serene from height to horizon.
And this sight – once I left the morbid air,
which weighed so heavy on my eyes and heart –
began afresh to bring my eyes delight.
The lovely planet, strengthening to our love,

³⁸ Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy*, p. 147.

³⁹ Hani, *The Divine Liturgy: Insights into Its Mystery*, p. 129.

lit up with laughter all the orient sky,
veiling her escort, Pisces, in bright light.

(*Pur.* I, 13-21).

In poetic terms, this passage expresses the desire to take a brief retrospective of the initial scene of the poem, in repeating the phrase *del mezzo* from its opening line; but also to offer, in accord with the pilgrim's sudden and dramatic emergence into another topographical realm, a new upward-looking aspect, which is shown not only in the descriptions of hitherto unseen astronomical phenomena, but in the employment of three interlocking 'o'-rhymes, as if the poem itself is pointing to the nine concentric spheres of heaven.⁴⁰ But our key sensation here is the near-exhilaration that comes with breathing the clean, clear air of a fine seaside dawn. Distinctive features of Dante's Hell, as we have noted, are the sense of constriction as one descends through it, and the *malaria*, the "bad air", that persists throughout. Hell is filled with dark, gritty, choking air. The sense of "atmosphere", as one falls through it, is of claustrophobia and breathlessness. If the reader moves directly from *Inferno* to *Purgatorio*, as is best, the effect of the opening scene of the second *cantica* is an immense opening out and renewal of space. The emergence onto the isle of Purgatory is, literally, a breath of fresh air.⁴¹ And the terraces of Purgatory are open and airy, except for the third, that of the Wrathful, who wander about in a smoke so thick and dark that Dante declares it darker than Hell itself. This surprising imagery is best understood as reflecting the suffocating, blinding nature of anger, which paralyses the will and prevents the individual from a clear sight of his proper relationship with others.

The distinctively different presence of the pilgrim's own *pre mortem* body is a primary motif of the *Purgatorio*. Very early in the *cantica*, the first instance of this motif demonstrates that the essential aliveness of Dante's own form is evident to others by his *breathing*:

*L'anime, che si fuor di me accorte,
per lo spirare, ch'i' era ancor vivo,
maravigliando diventaro smorte.*

The souls who were aware (because I breathed)
that I was still alive, now blanched in awe,

⁴⁰ See the rhyme pattern commencing with "*sono*" in line 8.

⁴¹ The scenery of the opening sequence of the *Purgatorio* should, in a rightly-ordered existence, be completely familiar to us. Yet the sense of surprise, or shock, that envelops the reader can only be an indicator of the wholly unnatural distortions that have so overwhelmed the reader of the *Inferno*.

and, wondering at the sight, grew very pale.

(*Pur.* II, 67-69).

This dramatic moment of recognition is twice echoed on the lower slopes of the mountain, as the ability to draw breath is specifically noted as a defining characteristic of our mortal existence. On the terrace of the Late Repentants, the world of living men is described as “*ancor sarei di là dove si spira*” (“my place would be where men breathe, even now.”)⁴² Later, on the terrace of the Envious, the pilgrim is noted as “*e porti li occhi sciolti, / sì com’ io credo, e spirando ragioni?*” (“with, still, I’m sure, / your eyes unbound, and breathing when you speak?”)⁴³

The new sense of rhythm that grants surety to the mountain’s penitents (and, we may say, the poem’s audience), is echoed in the poetics of rhythm, oscillation and harmony that Dante introduces in the *Purgatorio*. Where the structure and mood of the *Inferno* projected a grim sense of both manic freneticism and restrictive containment, the new experience of the mountain is to be reconnected to, and freed by, the natural movements of the human form and the turning of the heavens, and the temper of restoration here is often underlined by the harmonious and rhythmic structure of the poem itself. As has been demonstrated, even the line length of cantos throughout the *Purgatorio* conforms to rhythmic patterns of oscillation that seem to imitate the physical experience of breathing.⁴⁴ Joan Ferrante has shown in a detailed study that Dante has used pattern and symmetry in the *Purgatorio* to subtly reinforce the themes of the *cantica*, and has particularly shown how it can be compared with the other parts of the poem.⁴⁵ In two separate phases of the *Purgatorio* – Cantos 3 to 9, and 12 to 22 – the line lengths of the Cantos are clearly arranged in a symmetrical, oscillating pattern, a deliberate feature of the poem’s structure that occurs nowhere else.⁴⁶ This pattern of oscillation is prominently centred in the seventeenth canto of the *Purgatorio*, which in turn is

⁴² *Pur.* 5:81. It is notable here that Dante uses an anatomical metaphor that incorporates the classical idea (probably in this instance specifically borrowed from the writings of Seneca – see Appendix) that the veins and reservoirs of blood in the human body are akin to the rivers and lakes of the earth. The figure of Jacopo di Ugucione de Cassero describes, in onomatopoeic terms, how during a battle he fell into a marsh and was mortally wounded: “*e lì vid’ io / de le mie vene farsi in terra laco*.” (“I fell, watching as, in this mire, / a lake spread outwards, forming from my veins.”)

⁴³ *Pur.* 13:131-132.

⁴⁴ For a detailed mathematical analysis of patterning in the *Purgatorio*, see Ferrante, “A Poetics of Chaos and Harmony” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp. 153-171.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-171.

⁴⁶ In cantos 3 to 9, the canto line lengths are 145, 139, 136, 151, 136, 139, and 145. In Cantos 14 to 20, the line lengths are 151, 145, 145, 139, 145, 145, 151. Furthermore, this second group of symmetrical cantos is itself “framed” by two pairs of cantos that share the same line lengths of 136 and 154.

the central Canto of the entire work. At the core, or heart, of the *Purgatorio* is a mathematical expression of the centrality of the human chest, that part of the human form that contains rhythm and oscillation, as an emblem of peaceful, rhythmic restoration. Ferrante also charts the manner in which the structure of the *Purgatorio*, with particular reference to its topographical arrangement, ordering of vices, and appearances of dreams and angels, also follows clearly defined, symmetrical patterns.⁴⁷ Likewise, it has been shown that Dante also employs a chiasmic use of scriptural references to the virtues of the Virgin Mary throughout the *Purgatorio*, confirming the subtle relationship between the patterns of the mountain and the ritualised, rhythmic nature of the liturgy as a physical enactment of theological virtue.⁴⁸ The sense of “arch” or of progression from and return to the primary moment is explicit here, since the seven references to the conduct of Mary begin and end with that of the Annunciation. This figure of oscillation – springing from and returning to first principles – is a strong element of the structure of the *Purgatorio*.

There are a series of references within the *Purgatorio* that elaborate the theme of the “breathing mountain”. For example, the temporality and transience of earthly renown is clearly subordinated to the permanence of the divine will, in the eleventh canto:

*Non è il mondan romore altro ch'un fiato
di vento, ch'or vien quinci e or vien quindi,
e muta nome perché muta lato.*

The roar of earthly fame is just a breath
of wind, blowing from here and then from there,
that changes name in changing origin.

(*Pur.* XI, 100-102).

The movement of pilgrims on the mountain is paralleled with the temporary nature of human existence. Just as one's reputation may be replaced by that of those who come after, so too is impermanence characteristic of the swirling, ever-changing movement of *air*, an elemental symbol of the *Purgatorio*. The variability of the earth's atmospheric conditions should here be considered in light of the speech of Matelda in Canto XXVIII, in which it is declared that the Earthly Paradise is a foretaste and promise of heaven in that it is free from the meteorological disturbances, and by extension the spiritual perturbation, that surrounds us on

⁴⁷ Ferrante, “A Poetics of Chaos and Harmony” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, p. 155.

⁴⁸ Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 2 - Purgatorio*, pp. 617-618n.

earth.⁴⁹ It is the sheer height of the mountain that places its summit outside of the normal vagaries of weather. At a similar moment in Canto XV, as the pilgrims leave the terrace of the Envious and hear the second reciting of the Beatitudes, on this occasion the *Beati misericordes*, they contemplate the meaning of a speech from Guido del Duca in the previous Canto.⁵⁰ Virgil's subsequent explication of this speech again draws upon the image of the chest as the "pivot" or focal point through which, symbolically, one may progress from temporality to ethereality. Envy over the distribution of earthly goods, it is suggested, will "move *il mantaco a' sospiri*" ("make the bellows sigh")⁵¹; while a mind directed to a heavenly understanding will, it seems, drive such emotion from the body: "*non vi sarebbe al petto quella tema*" ("such fears would have no place within your breast.")⁵²

But in Purgatory there is a special kind of breathing, which brings a new resonance to the narrative. There is the elevating action of singing. Dante would have us see that, while still short of the perfection of Heaven, the sense of rhythmic, purposeful movement upon the "breathing mountain" of Purgatory is expressed by the actions of the lungs, particularly that of communal singing (for singing, properly speaking, is itself an act of rhythmic, purposeful, forward movement conducted in measured co-operation with others); and that this is a far remove from the discordance and chaos of Hell. On the Terrace of the Proud in Canto XII Dante says:

*Noi volgendo ivi le nostre persone,
 'Beati pauperes spiritu!' voci
 cantaron sì che nol diria sermone.
 Ahi quanto son diverse quelle foci
 da l'infernali! ché quivi per canti
 s'entra, e là giù per lamenti feroci.*

While turning (we two persons) to that slope
 voices sang out: 'Beati pauperes',
 as no mere speech could properly relate.
 How different from the thoroughfares of Hell
 are those through which we passed. For here with songs
 we enter, there with fierce lamentations.

(*Pur.* XII, 109-114).

⁴⁹ See *Pur.* 28:97-102.

⁵⁰ See *Pur.* 14:76-126.

⁵¹ *Pur.* 15:51.

⁵² *Pur.* 15:54.

All the transient penitents in Purgatory recite a benediction or psalm, chosen for its expression of a particular theological virtue that is the “cure” for their specific sin. This is a new experience for readers of the *Commedia*, for there is clearly no singing in Hell, where discord and dissonance rule; and the communal nature of the act in Purgatory signifies a recovery from the schisms of Hell, and a preview of the perfect harmonisation of individuals in Heaven. Of all human actions, singing, or, more specifically, *chanting* as it occurs in Purgatory, contains a particular symbolism, for it involves an indrawing of air to a unique strength and depth, which is then returned to its place of origin. In this, it is an amplified and intensified form of breathing, and represents, in spiritual terms, a willing intake of divine *inspiration* (in the literal sense of the word), and a devotional act of reinstatement, since the act of singing, within the context of the liturgy, involves a repetition of established recitation. So it is the most natural way of expressing worship, since in these terms the human form, a divine creation, contains within itself the means by which it might offer praise to its creator. The human body is the first and finest of all musical instruments, the prime articulator of the divine ideals of rhythm and harmony. The projection of sound in singing is made from the core, the “heart”, of a person. Though the vocalisation of “expression” in singing is shaped by the mouth, the essence of the action occurs with the holding in and resonation of air within the chest. Thus the best vocalisation comes from deeply within, and is projected outwards and upwards, and this accords with the *meaning* of the Purgatorial chants, whose authors, centred on the restoration of their inner spiritual selves, are nevertheless always focused forwards and heavenwards.

The breath, here converted into song, has been restored to its proper place of human identifier. The effect of song is to provide full participation in one’s own form, since the song is the means by which the body is fully “inspired” – that is, when it is most filled with an element, air, that is lighter and finer than the body itself, and therefore is temporarily placed in a physical state that is most comparable to that of the ethereal. Yet in spiritual terms it is also the means by which individuals may sublimate themselves within the greater community of others. And the song here is the *Beati pauperes spiritu* – “blessed are the pure in heart” – in which we can enjoy a continuance of our chain of associations, since the text for this recital is the opening beatitude of the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in the gospel of Matthew.⁵³ Thus we are given a series of regular reminders of an archetypal biblical

⁵³ Gragnolati, *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture*, pp.123-124.

model for the spiritual mountain as an *axis mundi* that serves as a conduit between spiritual master and adherent – the emanation of divine wisdom from the summit of the peak is that which draws the seeker upwards, literally in the *Purgatorio*, and spiritually in the heart of the believer. As will become evident throughout the journey up the mountain, the exiting of each terrace is accompanied by the singing of one of the seven Beatitudes from the famous scriptural text, and here the initial focus is, appropriately, on the foundational nature of the *heart* as symbol of the seat of the individual spirit.

And what of laughter, that other action of the chest? As we have seen, in the opening sequence of the *Purgatorio* Dante says that the skies are “laughing” at, we should think, the pure joy of their being:

*Lo bel pianeta che d'amar conforta
faceva tutto rider l'oriente,
velando i Pesci, ch'erano in sua scorta.*

The lovely planet, strengthening to our love,
lit up with laughter all the orient sky,
veiling her escort, Pisces, in bright light.

(*Pur.* I, 19-21).

This is the first time he uses “*ridere*” (“laughter”) in the *Commedia*. Clearly, there is no occasion for laughter, not even the bitter kind, in Hell, for the natural spontaneity and free play of mind required for the recognition of joy or pleasure, or even a low joke, is denied to the damned.⁵⁴ In *Purgatorio* the opening up of space naturally re-invites a correspondence between the behaviour of the heavens (here newly appreciated by the pilgrims) and the emotional states of Man. The spontaneity and communal nature of laughter is a theme that will develop throughout Purgatory, and intensify in the *Paradiso*, where Dante will declare that in the highest heaven Mary will appear to simply laugh for pure joy at the perfect play and song of the innumerable angels.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Although readers may infer a form of mocking, scatological humour in the behaviour of the crazed devil who punctuates the conclusion to canto XXI with an obscene gesture. See *Inf.* 21:133-139.

⁵⁵ *Par.* 31:133-135 – “*Vidi a lor giochi quivi e a lor canti / ridere una bellezza, che letizia / era ne li occhi a tutti altri santi;*” (“I saw there, smiling on their games and songs, / the height of Beauty who, as height of Joy, / was there in all the eyes of all the saints.”)

However, beyond these simpler anatomical analogies, yet not at all divorced from them, lie higher spiritual meanings. In theological terms, the human chest is analogous to Mt Purgatory in that it is the home of one of the three theological virtues – hope. We say, even if unconsciously, that we hold hope “in our hearts”, and this is precisely the experience of the penitents in Dante’s Purgatory. They “look” with their hearts to a condition that is better than their current experience. And the imagery of the heart and chest in the *Purgatorio* reflects the inner state of the souls so described, as Dante is careful to illustrate in the individual penitents he encounters on the mountain. In Canto IV, Dante meets the indolent Florentine Belacqua, who holds to the hope that his stay in ante-Purgatory may be shortened by the intercessory prayers “*che surga sù di cuor che in grazia viva*” (“rising on high from the hearts that live in grace”)⁵⁶, reflecting the new attitude that is unique to Purgatory, and reinforcing the symbolism of upward motion. There is, famously, no hope in Hell, and strictly speaking there is no need for hope in Heaven, since the denizens of the celestial realms experience the complete and perfect fulfilment that renders hope obsolete.

In Canto V, we meet the Ghibelline general Buonconte da Montefeltro, a former political enemy of Dante, whom the poet has surprisingly placed in ante-Purgatory as a supreme example of the late repentant. Buonconte recalls the last moments of his life during the famous battle of Campaldino in 1289, declaring that his final words were a hopeful beseeching of the aid of Maria, (which in itself is an operation of the core of his being), and that he folded his arms across his chest, “*e sciolse al mio petto la croce*” (“loosing there / the cross that...my arms had formed.”)⁵⁷ in a symbolic gesture that reflects his concentrated attention on divine aid. The success of this appeal is demonstrated in the deceased body of Buonconte, which retains its penitential “shape” even when buffeted by a diabolical storm. Dante again signifies that anatomy and gesture disclose the spiritual intentions of the inner man.

But the significances that can be read in the physical appearance of the human form are greatly heightened in a startling episode in canto III, in the circle of the excommunicates. Here, Dante meets the Sicilian King Manfred, illegitimate son of Emperor Frederick II, who is described as physically attractive and who initiates conversation with Dante. The appearance here of this historical figure is wholly unexpected, as we have already seen the

⁵⁶ *Pur.* 4:134.

⁵⁷ *Pur.* 5:126-127.

Emperor Frederick in the *Inferno*, where he has been condemned for his Epicurean heresies. Manfred, however, finds a place in Dante's Purgatory as a model of hope, and an illustration of the power of divine grace to surpass the judgements of men. Like Buonconte da Montefeltro, Manfred too died on the battlefield defending a failing cause, and he too was supposed to have called on the mercy of God with his dying breath. But above this, Manfred has a distinctive bodily feature that invites a cosmological interpretation. After initially speaking to Dante, who denies having seen this new figure, Manfred forces the confrontation:

...*el disse: 'Or vedi,'*
e mostrommi una piaga a sommo 'l petto.
Poi sorridendo disse: 'Io son Manfredi...

... 'Look!' he said,
 and pointed out a wound high on his chest.
 Then, smiling: 'I am Manfred,' he declared...

(*Pur.* III, 110-112).

Outwardly, there is both normality and perplexity in the presentation of this wound, for it is not unusual that a warrior should carry scars of this nature, yet we are also disturbed to see that an inhabitant of Purgatory, who after all is now destined for physical resurrection and perfection in Heaven, should be recognisable by such a mark. Multiple interpretations of the proposed meaning of this figure are extant, but it is certainly clear that the meeting between Dante and Manfred is deliberately analogous of a famous recognition moment in scripture.⁵⁸ In the twentieth chapter of John's gospel we read how the resurrected Christ appeared among the disciples, and invited Thomas to place his hands in his riven side to ensure the certain recognition that will overcome his human incredulity.⁵⁹ Dante daringly compares the wounded Manfred, handsome and noble in bearing, to the resurrected Christ, just as he places himself, temporarily, in the role of denier and doubter. Significantly, Manfred is at pains to display the wound on his *chest*, for that is surely the sign of his mortality. The wounds of Christ are "given" to us as sign of the power of the resurrection in which we are called to hope, beyond doubt. The analogy continues, precipitously it seems, when Manfred goes on to declare that "*Poscia ch'io ebbi rota la persona / di due punte mortali*" ("I, broken in my

⁵⁸ For a full account of the various possibilities inherent in Dante's depiction of Manfred, see J Freccero, 'Manfred's Wounds' in Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 195-208.

⁵⁹ See John 20:24-31.

person, had received / two mortal wounds”)⁶⁰ This is highly reminiscent of the symbolism of the crucifixion, where the body of Christ is physically broken, but also “broken” in a symbolic and sacramental way. Manfred has two wounds, which directs our attention to the wounded side of Christ, but the cut across his brow is an intimation of the spiritual “scarring” that Dante will undergo at the entrance to Purgatory proper. The scar on Manfred’s head is indicative of the internal imperfection that still must be purged through the realms of the penitent. Manfred maintains his hope in the salvation of those who lie outside the blessing of the church, and therefore embodies the theological doctrine that salvation lies outside of man’s determining. And if such salvation is born in the figure of Christ, it is appropriate that Dante should evoke the image of the resurrected Christ here in Purgatory, for the penitents here have been “resurrected” to a destiny in glory, but the resurrected Christ is still “earthbound”. The Christ of the *Inferno* was the destroyer of evil, who ruined the city of Dis and brought the souls of the faithful Hebrews out of Limbo. The Christ of the *Purgatorio* is the bodily sign in which we may at first place our hope of resurrection, and later in the *Paradiso* the ascendant, triumphant victor who commands adoration.

In considering in greater detail the symbolic associations that may exist within Dante’s *Purgatorio*, it is important to return once more to the common theme of tripartite division. It is possibly the most obvious feature of the *Commedia* that it is divided in this way, and furthermore it is readily apparent that the three realms of Dante’s imagined after-world are distinct from one another, in many respects. Yet they share a common point of distinction – namely, their treatment of the phenomenon of light, and the corresponding modes of human “vision” that would both accommodate the physical experience of light and provide an appropriate moral analogy. As has been demonstrated, there is sufficient evidence to state that Dante has, at least in part, based the structure of the *Commedia* on the three-fold partition of human vision as set out in the twelfth book of St. Augustine’s *De Genesi ad litteram* (*On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*).⁶¹ Francis Newman argues that the three parts of Dante’s poem correspond to three different types of human experience, and that these experiences are largely identified with the differing responses to three different kinds of light.⁶² He goes on to detail how Augustine’s analysis of the famous Pauline vision of ascension into the “third heaven”, as described in II Corinthians, produces an analogical result: namely, the three

⁶⁰ *Pur.* 3:118-119.

⁶¹ Newman, “St. Augustine’s Three Visions and the Structure of the *Commedia*” in *Dante*, pp. 65-81.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

“heavens” of Paul’s vision are properly understood as figures for the three fundamental modes of human vision, or awareness.⁶³

The first of the Augustinian modes of vision is *visio corporalis*, or the literal sight gained by the organ of the eye, but which can be extended to mean the entire range of sense perceptions available to the body. We should have no difficulty in according this most obvious and prevalent way of seeing with the experience of the damned as detailed for us in the *Inferno*. The common experience of the *Inferno*’s audience is to feel a highly tactile response to its literalness (since in Hell everything is exactly, no more nor less, as it appears to be), its concreteness, and the sense of increasing bodiliness or *gravitas*, as the narrative continues to descend through the circles of punishment, ascribed to the sinners contained therein. They experience a form of damnation that is distinct in its corporeality. The *Inferno* is intensely physical in a way that the other *cantiche* are clearly not. Moreover, the physicality of the sinner’s bodies, and their parodic punishment, is intended to mirror the limited moral “vision” of its inhabitants. Morally, the damned have cut themselves off from the divine grace that may have broadened their vision, so that their punishment involves no remorse or increase of understanding. They are locked into a moral universe no bigger than their own distorted forms.

The second mode of vision is *visio spiritualis* or *visio imaginativa*, by which we may attain knowledge through a combination of sense impression and imagination. In imagination, or “spiritual” vision, “we do not see bodies themselves, but images that have corporeal shape without corporeal form.”⁶⁴ In Purgatory we enter the realm of the *visio imaginativa*, since here are visions, dreams and what we might call hallucinatory experiences – on the mountain some things are as they appear, but many things are clearly intended as signs or images of things beyond themselves. Purgatory is situated in “two worlds” – that of matter (since it is notionally situated “on the earth”) and that of the spirit (since it is inhabited by angels and the souls of the blessed), so that it incorporates two ways of seeing. To Dante, there is no difficulty in anticipating that the everyday workings of the human mind, and in particular the human imagination, may receive and benefit from some form of intervention from higher, divine realities. This is, in effect, the accepted mode of composition for the scriptures, and indeed was understood to be, in many instances, the only means by which divine truths could

⁶³ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

be satisfactorily communicated to man.⁶⁵ Dante has previously granted the veracity of such means of vision, most famously in the intense, hallucinatory “imaginings” he experiences while suffering an extreme physical illness, as described in the twenty-third chapter of the *Vita Nuova*.

The shades upon Purgatory provide a precise correspondence to this new way of seeing, since they possess “corporeal shape without corporeal form” – that is, they demand of Dante-pilgrim a new way of seeing; “the dominant note in Dante’s experiences as a seer in Purgatory is the perception of images.”⁶⁶ This new visual mode in Purgatory reaches a perfected climax at the summit of the mountain, where Dante is presented with a pageant of intense, dazzlingly imaginative splendour.⁶⁷ This pageant, and indeed the entire landscape of the Earthly Paradise in which it is set, are granted to the poem’s audience in a specific and intense form of vision, rendered by a new and perfect clarity of sense perceptions of color, texture and shape, while employing a rich repertoire of symbolic imagery that produces a near-hallucinatory effect. The journey to ascend the mountain, then, is one of progressive dematerialisation of one’s vision, from literal sight to *imaginativa*, though Dante is yet to see purely with the faculty of pure intellection – until Paradise he must still see *per speculum in aenigmate*, “through a glass and in a sign.” The summit of Mount Purgatory, in this reading, becomes “the nexus of the corporeal and incorporeal worlds, the appropriate locale for the *visio spiritualis* that takes place there.”⁶⁸

The final mode of vision is *visio intellectualis*, where one may perceive through direct cognition of realities without the intermediaries of either sense perception or imaginative reconstruction. This mode is reserved for purely spiritual realities – God and the host of angels.⁶⁹ Augustine declares that the *visio intellectualis* is the mode in which Paul was able to see the vision of his “third heaven.” The passage of the pilgrim through paradise is faithful to both the idea of the “rapture” required for perception of non-corporeal realities, and the Pauline injunction against the human descriptions of such visions. Dante does see a final image of God, but tellingly confesses that such vision defeats his powers of literal description. Meanwhile, the entire schema of the *Paradiso* is admitted to be a concession to

⁶⁵ Kenelm Foster, *The Two Dantes, and Other Studies* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977), pp. 110-111.

⁶⁶ Newman, “St. Augustine’s Three Visions and the Structure of the *Commedia*” in *Dante*, p. 73.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Dante's inability to yet perceive the fullness of such a vision.⁷⁰ In *Paradiso* everything is still somehow a shadowing or preface of an immaterial reality, though the veracity of such prefacing is never beyond doubt.

As has also been shown, Dante may have utilised another primary text that attempted to hierarchically systematise the different modes of human "vision" into an arrangement that paralleled a personal journey to divine wisdom. In the opening chapter of his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (*The Soul's Journey into God*), St. Bonaventure provides a conveniently trichotomous division of the three general stages, or ways of "seeing", that must be passed through on a complete journey to the mind of God, and in which the universe itself is understood to be a kind of ladder, by the comprehension of which one may make such an ascent.⁷¹ More pertinent still is that Bonaventure chooses to make correspondence between these three modes of vision and two particularly Dantean themes – the three days' journey into the wilderness according to the narrative of Exodus, and the development of the intensity of light during a single day, from evening to morning to midday.⁷² This is a prefiguring of the specifically solar and architectural analogies that Dante will employ to describe the nature of the human journey through both mortal life and the climb of Mount Purgatory. Bonaventure goes on to state that:

Corresponding to this threefold movement, our mind has three principal perceptual orientations. The first is toward exterior material objects and is the basis for its being designated as animal or sensual. The second orientation is within itself and into itself and is the basis for its being designated as spirit. The third is above itself and is the basis for being designated as mind.⁷³

⁷⁰ See *Par.* 4:25-48.

⁷¹ Bonaventure, "The Soul's Journey into God" in *Bonaventure* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 1.2, p. 60.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1.3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1.4. We can broadly correlate these Bonaventurian ideas with those of Augustine: the mind can "see" in three principal environments: exterior material objects, within itself, and above itself. We should note, however, that Bonaventure also expands this three-fold arrangement into six levels of progress towards illumination, by arguing that God can effectively be seen "twice", that is, directly or "in a mirror"; so that the tripartite arrangement of his schema is accordingly doubled, and that the faculty of "imagination" is placed as the second of the six steps towards God. Bonaventure will later re-inforce the notion of the tripartite ways of seeing in the thirteenth paragraph of his opening chapter: "In the third way, that of investigating by reason, one sees that some things merely exist, others exist and live, and others exist, live and discern. He sees that the first are less perfect; the second, intermediate; and the third, more perfect. Likewise he sees that some things are material, others partly material and partly spiritual. From this he realizes that others are purely spiritual and are better and more noble than the two previous classes."

Thus the journey through the *Commedia* may be seen as modelled on these three modes of vision, which are hierarchically arranged, and through which it may be said each of us are required to ascend in order to see God. Augustine's model of human vision, highly influential throughout the Middle Ages and seemingly supported in its schematic approach by the later work of Bonaventure, provides Dante with the perfectly tri-form, ascending scale of states of being and seeing to which the Tuscan was so deeply attracted. The eye, it seems, has three levels of operation – literal sight of corporeal forms, imaginative sight of spiritual forms or signs, and intellectual sight of metaphysical realities. Since the first two of these involve human capacities, they are prone to error, while the intellectual vision, since it is given directly from a divine source, can never be anything but perfect and true. Optical misjudgements and misinterpretation of dreams or images are part of the human experience; while only a supra-human state, beyond the corrupting involvement of human judgement, can avail us of the highest experience of *intellectualis*.⁷⁴ These three modes of sight form a direct correspondence to the embodied states of the souls in Dante's other-world: the intensely physicality of the damned; the part-bodily but increasingly refined forms of the penitents in Purgatory; the perfected forms of the blessed in Paradise.

So far, these thematic analyses of the *Purgatorio* fall within the traditional range of interpretative explorations, yet there is more that can be suggested in regard to symbolic readings of the work. I propose a model for interpreting that is founded on an alternative to the traditional conception of the Mount Purgatory as pyramidal. This is not to reject such established readings, but to demonstrate that a new way of seeing the physical appearance of the mountain will yield fresh possibilities as to its purpose and meaning. While all traditional understandings of the structure of Dante's mythical mountain remain valid in their own right, the very nature of the landscape, set as it is in a fantastic dreamscape that is both earthly and imaginal, allows and perhaps even demands that the reader examine it for new, inventive models of interpretation. As has been noted, there can be difficulties with any attempt to fully force an interpretive model on the poem, even allowing for the flexibility of reading that the sheer scale and variety of the *Commedia* seems to naturally invite.⁷⁵ Properly situated, a

⁷⁴ As examples, see *Inf.* 31:22-27, where Dante's literal sight is shown to be in error, through rushing his deliberations, of mistaking the shoulders of the Giants for man-made towers; and *Inf.* 34:106-108, where Virgil declares that Dante erroneously "*imagini*" that he is still on the "descending" side of the Earth's gravitational centre. Cf. *Pur.* 29:43-45, *Par.* 1:88-90.

⁷⁵ John C Barnes, *Vestiges of the Liturgy in Dante's Verse*, in Barnes and O Cuilleain, *Dante and the Middle Ages - Literary and Historical Essays*, p. 245. We should also be mindful of the advice of Etienne Gilson: "It is

proposed model is not to be forced upon the text in ways that it cannot finally sustain, but is to be drawn from it, utilising both the direct evidence from Dante's text and the supporting indications from within his other work and thought.

Specifically, I propose an imaginative re-reading of the *Purgatorio* that, taking a cue from Augustine's treatment of the three levels of human "vision", parallels both the purpose and structure of Purgatory to the arrangement and workings of the human torso, but not solely at an anatomical level. I argue that Dante allows for an understanding of Mount Purgatory as a *dome*, not as a pyramid or tower as usually conceived. Its essential structure is not triangular or conical, but circular and spherical.⁷⁶ At the level of primary geometry, there is no discord

at this point that the confusion is increased still further by the interposition of the symbolist notion. Those who regard Dante's work not only as being admirably constructed, as it certainly is, but also – and this is quite a different matter – as submitting in its construction to the dictates of that system, owe it to themselves to find the consequences of that system on every page. There could be no more convenient way of attaining this end than to ascribe to it a symbolism with manifold ramifications, thanks to which it will always be possible to attribute to the text of Dante the meaning that it should yield according to the system attributed to it." (Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. David Moore (London: Sheed & Ward, 1952), pp. 290-291.)

⁷⁶ I have taken as my starting point for this conception the notion that Dante was inspired by the construction of the Pantheon in Rome. There is a general consensus that Dante most likely visited the ancient city of Rome at least twice in his lifetime, although direct evidence for this is lacking. The reference in the *Inferno* to the innovative pedestrian traffic control on the Ponte Sant'Angelo during the famous papal Jubilee of 1300 has the definite ring of personal observation (see *Inf.* 18:28-33 – "*come i Roman per l'essercito molto, / l'anno del giubileo, su per lo ponte / hanno a passer la gente modo colto, / che sa l'un lato tutti hanno la fronte / verso 'l castello e vanno a Santo Pietro, da l'altra sponda vanno verso 'l monte.*" ("The Romans, in the Jubilee, devised / a way for pilgrims and pedestrians, / in all their multitudes, to cross the Bridge / so that, on one side (making for Saint Peter's), / they faces the Castle and took, conversely, / the other lane when heading for the Hill."), and Dante is listed as an official ambassador as part of a Florentine delegation sent to Pope Boniface VIII in 1301, according to the contemporary chronicler Dino Compagni. Elsewhere in his works Dante makes references of a first-hand nature to various monuments and sights of the ancient city. This circumstantial evidence would make it remarkable should we ever learn that Dante in fact did not visit Rome. On this assumption, it would be inconceivable that Dante would not, during any stay in the holy city, visit one of the city's most famous sights, the ancient Roman temple of the Pantheon, despite the fact that Dante does not mention the building at any point in his works. The Pantheon was notable for its one outstanding architectural feature – an immense, unsupported dome. This domed building was the largest in all of antiquity (and remains the world's largest unsupported masonry dome), and, for the purposes of this exploration, contains three distinct elements that will be later examined – it has an oculus; it is built around a controlling vertical axis – that is, it is a centralised structure; and is built according to a strict geometrical formula that dictated that the total height of the building, taken from the observer on the floor directly beneath the oculus, was the same as the building's width. The dome is perfectly hemispherical, and the theoretical continuation of the curvature of the dome produces a complete sphere that tangentially meets the floor of the building at a spot directly beneath the central oculus. See William L. MacDonald, *The Pantheon: Design, Meaning, and Progeny* (London: A. Lane, 1976), p. 34. Given the structural demands required of such vast, unsupported vault, we can say that it approaches the limits of what was, and is, possible in attempting to represent the entire, spherical cosmos in a single building. It is this unique feature of the Pantheon, I argue, that moves Dante to employ architectural models in constructing the "landscape" of the *Commedia*, and particularly the mountain of Purgatory. We can see in the Pantheon a perfect architectural representation, in fact, for Dante's entire project, in some critical respects: it stands as a figure of the "whole world"; it is a building laden with cosmological significances; and it had a classical "foundation", in temporal terms, but was given over to Christian "completion". All such characteristics are shared, under this analysis, with Dante's great poem. That he would have drawn inspiration from a visitation to the re-named Santa Maria Rotunda cannot be doubted, for "Its message, compounded of mystery and fact, of stasis and mutability, of earth and that above, pulses through the architecture of western man; its progeny, in both shape

between this conception and the design of Dante's entire cosmos, since the fundamental plan of all the realms of the *Commedia* is that of the circle, with particular emphasis on the arrangement of concentric circles. Further, there is no disharmony in linking the idea of the dome with that of granting a spatial representation to the realm of the blessed (and blessedness is the ordained destiny of those we meet in the *Purgatorio*), as in the traditional architecture of the Christian church the vault over the altar was implicitly understood to represent heaven, while the square arrangement of the altar-space itself was a picture of earth. In this way, the dome of Purgatory is a microcosmic version of the greater spheres of heaven, towards which it "points" and for which it is designed to serve. Nor should we see the dome as an inappropriate geometric metaphor for the purpose of Purgatory, since the dome is an intermediary, a midpoint, between the circle and the cube, where the former imitates the perfection of the heavens, and the latter the baseness and solidity of the earth.⁷⁷ In doing so we can apply the natural association between the geometric figure of the dome and specifically domal elements of the human form, most notably the eye. For the human eye, as it is essentially spherical but only partly revealed to the onlooker, is the primary anatomical imitation of the geometric form of the dome. The relationship between the form and function of the eye and the structure and purpose of the mount of Purgatory is key to this new reading of the text. The *Purgatorio*, seen in this light, is an extended meditation on the meanings, literal and symbolic, of the eye, beginning with the geometric foundation (as can be evidenced through many specific references within Dante's text) that the mountain itself is domed and therefore takes on the very form of the eye.⁷⁸ The journey through the

and idea, are all about. The force of its presence and its planetary symbolism still works irresistibly upon the visitor..." (ibid.) Dante frequently presents precisely that mode of thinking in which keen personal observation is translated into symbolic or suggestive representation, and in constructing metaphors drawn from experience of the world he seems equally at home in employing imagery associated with his culture's architectural constructions as he is with that of the natural world. See Hani, *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple*, p. 95.

⁷⁷ René Guénon, *The King of the World* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 30.

⁷⁸ To what extent does the textual evidence support such a conception? If Purgatory is a dome, we should expect to find that the ascent of the mountain begins in extreme difficulty at the point of near-verticality, gradually lessens in gradient and becomes easier to traverse, and then approaches horizontality at the summit where the "climb" becomes effortless. And, while not comprehensive or conclusive, the available evidence from the text of the *Purgatorio* certainly does meet such an expectation. At the precise moment when Dante and Virgil reach the beginning of their ascent of Mount Purgatory, the poem proceeds thus: "*Noi divenimmo intanto a piè del monte; / quivi trovammo la roccia sì erta / che 'ndarno vi sarien le gambe pronte.*" ("We had, meanwhile, now reached the mountain foot. / And there we came across a cliff so sheer / that legs, though willing, were quite useless there.") (*Pur.* 3:46-48). From here, a series of references illustrate that the passage up the mountain becomes less onerous as it continues. *Pur.* 4:32-33 – "*e d'ogne lato ne stringea lo stremo, / e piedi e man volea il suol di sotto.*" ("On every side its edges tightened round. / The ground beneath us called for feet and hands.") Shortly after this, a more specific measure is granted the reader, at *Pur.* 4:40-42 – "*Lo sommo er' alto che vincea la vista, / e la costa superba più assai / che da mezzo quadrante a centro lista.*" ("The summit was so high it conquered sight. / The slope stood proud, its incline far more steep / than (point to centre) forty-five degrees.") Dante here employs a geometric fact that is simple yet potentially revealing. It is

mountainscape then becomes, at one level, the gradual uncovering and clarifying of the “vision” of the pilgrim, both physically and spiritually.⁷⁹ At the most basic level of symbolism, Purgatory is the temporal realm of night and day, just as the eye is the primary

impossible to see around curvature, and the pilgrim claims he cannot see the summit of the mountain because of its height. Yet could this also be an allusion to the phenomenon that unless the slope of a mountain is of a uniform gradient, or is concave, then there will always be some part of its surface, usually nearer the base, that remains out of line-of-vision to the summit? The specific use of a mathematical gradient reference here, the only occasion in which this occurs in the Purgatorio, is particularly suggestive. There may also be a moral implication for this reference, since it occurs within the terrace of the Negligent, those who were indolent in the observation of their spiritual duties, or were “late repentant”. The “summit of the mountain”, in this metaphor, is the higher purposes to which they were called, but disregarded. To be placed in the lee of the mountain’s own form, deprived of sight of the mountain’s supreme part – its summit – is part of their purgation. But shortly thereafter it is the reaction of Dante to the seeming difficulty of the slope ahead that precipitates a crucial revelation. Born from his anxiety over how much of the mountain is yet to be traversed, Dante elicits this response from Virgil, at *Pur.* 4:88-94 – “*Ed elli a me: ‘Questa montagna è tale / che sempre al cominciar di sotto è grave; / e quant’ om più va sù, e men fa male. / Però, quand’ ella ti parrà soave / tanto che sù andar ti fia leggero / com’ a seconda giù andar per nave, / allor sarai al fi d’esto sentiero*” (“And he: ‘This mountain is by nature such / that, down below, the start is always hard, / yet hurts far less the more one rises up. / And so when you will find the going smooth, / floating as lightly upwards in ascent / as boats that travel down a flowing stream, / you’ll then have reached the end of this rough path.’”) The implication is clear. The mountain must be convex. The shape of the mountain must be in accord with the purpose of the mountain. The moral weight borne by those on the lower slopes is heavy and extremely burdensome, and is gradually lessened throughout the ascent. The schema of sins as detailed later by Virgil in Purgatorio XVIII are in decreasing order of gravity, just as the bodies of the repentant are increasingly righted and lightened. This arrangement can only find satisfactory agreement with a landscape that continually tends from steepness and difficulty to shallowness and ease. We should also note Virgil’s reference to the experience of approaching the mountain’s summit. He says that the final part of the ascent will be so gradual in gradient that it will actually feel as easy as going downhill – in this case, like a boat that drifts upon a stream. At the climax of the *cantica*, the motion of a flowing stream is precisely the geographic indicator that completes the evidence available for the assembling of this interpretive model. The transition from extreme difficulty to extreme ease is completed in the opening sequence of canto XXVIII, where Dante describes the experience of entering the Earthly Paradise, at *Pur.* 28:4-5 – “*lasciai la riva, / prendendo la campagna lento lento*.” (“I left the verge, / treading in slow, slow steps across the field.”) The use of *campagna* here is clearly meant to convey the image of a flat, or nearly-flat, landscape. It is used for this purpose in every prior reference in the work, and it is notable that canto XXVIII of the Purgatorio is the only one in which *campagna* is used twice. But it is the behaviour of the river Lethe that confirms the nature of the Earthly Paradise, which we can see is one of both perpetual fruitfulness and gentleness. The atmosphere here is of ease and gentle pleasure, and in accordance with this the river Lethe, the centrepiece of the landscape of the Earthly Paradise, is imagined as a stream of the purest waters that gently flows under a canopy of forest. (See *Pur.* 28:25,35,47,62,70,85,121; 29:7. etc.) Dante can see both images from the further bank reflected in the waters of Lethe, and through the surface to its depths. Allowing for the supernatural source and sustenance of the river, it can only have these qualities should its waters be calm and slow-moving. Thus the land over which it moves must be of very slight gradient, since anything more than the slightest slope would drag the water’s flow into turbulence; and no slope at all would render the waters static and stagnant. This is precisely what we would expect to find at the top of a domed mountain – a surface that, at its peak, flattens out to approach, but, except for an infinitesimal point at its very apex, never quite reaches absolute horizontality. We can conclude, then, that the both the moral schema of the Purgatorio and the geographical references within the text agree to support a model that proposes the journey to ascend Mount of Purgatory involves a difficult, near-vertical beginning; a gradual lessening of gradient and difficulty throughout its middle sections; and then a rapidity and ease of movement over its final stages as one approaches horizontality. Thus the journey broadly approximates to the convex curvature of a dome. For further supporting evidence from the text, see *Pur.* 10:30; 12:106-108; 12:115-117; 12:121-126; 24:1-3; 27:121-123.

⁷⁹ This theme of the “uncovering” or cleansing of the eye is introduced at a literal level very early in the *cantica*, when Cato of Utica instructs the pilgrim to be clean of face before meeting the first of Purgatory’s angels, at *Pur.* I:97-99 – “*ch’è non si converria, l’occhio sorpreso / d’alcuna nebbia, andar dinanzi al primo / ministro, ch’è di quei di paradiso*.” (“It cannot be that any eye, still clutched / by mist and murkiness, should meet the first / of ministers who’ll come from Paradise.”)

human indicator of sleep (which, it should be added, is also strongly indicated by marked changes in both breathing and pulse). The eye is the one part of the human body that accurately imitates the rhythmic patterns of night and day.

The early stages of the *Purgatorio* are marked by a certain obtuseness of both sight and understanding, as though Dante were seeing only with the limited function of peripheral vision. The later experience of being witness to the events that unfold in the Earthly Paradise represents a new clarity of vision, the lucid vision that Dante accords to the direct line of sight. The climax of this process occurs at twin moments that both involve the figure of Beatrice and both involve the metaphors of looking as spiritual understanding. Firstly, in Canto XXX, Beatrice delivers an extended speech on Dante's misdirected attentions that include multiple references to waking, sleeping, tears, human sight, looking, eyes, glances, images and dreams⁸⁰; and secondly, the set-piece in Canto XXXI, where Dante describes the precise optical effect of looking into the eyes of Beatrice only to see both her returned sight and the reflected image of the twifold form of the Gryphon.⁸¹

It is worth noting that the references to the human eye, *occhio*, tend to increase in both frequency and intensity of meaning as the *Purgatorio* progresses, so that the *cantica* can be read as a gradual but consistent "uncovering" of previously obscured sight.⁸² The earlier references tend to mark only the explicit reference to physical sight – "*li occhi rivolsi*" ("I turned my eyes") is a common phrase – whereas the latter references evolve into higher registers of meaning and symbolic significance, where "looking" comes to denote the engagement of the entire person, as in the two instances mentioned above. The references to sight will continue to escalate in frequency and power in the poem's third *cantica*, so that the experience on Purgatory can be read as a preliminary exercise of "uncovering" the spiritual eye in preparation for the true visions granted through the faculty of *visio intellectualis*. The opening sequence of the *Paradiso*, for example, includes a specific reference to the way in which a vision of Beatrice is said to enter through Dante's eye and penetrate into his imagination, as preparation for the revelations to come.⁸³

⁸⁰ See *Pur.* 30:103-145.

⁸¹ See *Pur.* 31:118-126.

⁸² This trend of increasing attention to the eye is a pattern that maintains a consistency across the entire poem, and not the *Purgatorio* alone. There are 67 references to the human eye in the *Inferno*, 97 in the *Purgatorio*, and 92 in the *Paradiso*.

⁸³ *Par.* 1:49-54 – "*E sì come secondo raggio suole / uscìr del primo e risalire in suso, / pur come pelegrin che tornar vuole, / così de l'atto suo, per li occhi infuse / ne l'immagine mia, il mio si fece, / e fissi li occhi al sole*

It is also significant that the punishments meted out to the penitents in the first five terraces of Purgatory render them incapable of properly seeing, or indeed seeing at all, the pilgrims with whom they meet and converse. The Proud are forced by their immense load to stare at the ground; the Envious have their eyes sewn shut, the Wrathful are blinded by acrid smoke; the Slothful are made to move too fast to allow normal human facial interaction, and the Avaricious are made to lie face downwards upon the earth. Thus the metaphor of spiritual blindness is supported by the conception that the summit of the mountain is akin to the cornea and pupil of the eye, that part of the organ by which proper sight is revealed, as opposed to the “eyeball”, the sclera, which we may see as the supporting structure of the organ. But beyond mere anatomical analogies, the “eye” under study here is not merely the literal eye, although Dante’s typical fascination with the science of optics and the symbolism of human sight continues to develop in the *Purgatorio*. Instead, attention will be turned to the “eye of the heart”, the traditional idea of the inner or spiritual eye that “sees” with the “very eye of God.”⁸⁴ Such turning of our own attentions is drawn by Dante’s often-subtle yet persistent use of symbolic references, a key strand of his poetic operation.⁸⁵

That the *Purgatorio* should invite imaginative interpretation is not unexpected, since of the three *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, the *Purgatorio* is itself the most imaginative, Dante having no clear literary precedents or doctrinal teachings on Purgatory by which his creativity might be shaped and guided. Indeed, it is the employment of intense personal imagination that makes the *Purgatorio* what it is, and, we may say, inspires the imaginative interpretations amongst its readers.⁸⁶ If textual evidence were required, we could indicate that Dante’s most

oltre nostr’ uso.” (“As any falcon’s searching flight will dive, / then strike back up, or else like reflex rays, / which, angled from the first, return on high, / so, too, her gesture, pouring through my gaze / into imagination, made me turn / and fix my eyes – beyond our norm – straight at the sun.”)

⁸⁴ Hani, *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple*, p. 85. The use of the phrase “eye of the heart” was established in the literature of Europe by Dante’s time. For example, see Alanus de Insulis, *The Complaint of Nature*, trans. Douglas Maxwell Moffat (New York: H. Holt and company, 1908), Prose VI, 199-210. It may have its origins in the letter of Paul to the Ephesians, v. 18: “I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...”

⁸⁵ “The structure of the poem, its imagery, and its characters were, in Dante’s mind, not only things but signs, and as signs they served an indispensable function. Dante did not envision literary critics reading his poem so much as fellow Christians, who would be aware that it continually points beyond itself. His symbolism is not simply a ‘literary’ feature of the *Commedia*: it forms an integral part of its message. For, as Dante well knew, mortals limited by a materialist vision can only see immaterial truth through a tangible symbol.” (Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p. 806.)

⁸⁶ For an example of a highly detailed, imaginative account of the *Purgatorio*, see Peter Armour, *The Door of Purgatory: A Study of Multiple Symbolism in Dante's Purgatorio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); or Kenelm Foster ‘Purgatorio XXXII’ in Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde, *Cambridge Readings in Dante's Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 138-154.

emphatic deliberations upon the nature of the human imagination, and indeed the only occasion on which he explicitly uses the term *imaginativa* in the *Commedia*, occur right in the heart of the *Purgatorio*, in Canto XVII. It has been claimed that the *Purgatorio* represents a significant shift away from the dead certainties and moral fixations of the *Inferno*, towards a new view of human possibilities: “emotions here are no less valuable than philosophies, dreams as important as formal argument, and imagination as important as intellect.”⁸⁷ I hope to show that all of these themes – emotions, dreams and visions, the human imagination – can be arranged around a central idea of the inner vision of the “eye of the heart”, and that the appropriate physical parallel for these human experiences is the human torso. And indeed the theme of *hope* itself permeates the *Purgatorio*, for the penitents can hold genuine hope in the reward promised to them; and we might see *hope*, a human emotion or perhaps a spiritual disposition, as a particular form of *imagination*, in that hope is the state of seeing things as they might be?

In conceiving of the mountain of Purgatory as *domal*, Dante need not be seen as constructing anything unorthodox or particularly startling, since the dome appears as a universal, unifying feature of all ancient architecture, and likewise provides an exemplary architectural model for a microcosmic representation of the cosmos.⁸⁸ The meaning of the domed mountain is conveyed by the geometric symbolism of centre and circumference: “The circumference designates the ‘world’, that is to say the ‘dispersion’ of the being in everything contingent, in action, and temporal life, whereas the immobile centre signifies the return to the Principle, to God, contemplation, life eternal.”⁸⁹ The circularity of the dome expresses the moral purposes of the mountain, whereby the “many”, diverse and multivalent and yet equidistant from the point of perfection, are progressively gathered and unified at the still point of origin and power.

Further, if we accept, as it seems we must, the author’s own claim for direct divine inspiration for the construction of the *Commedia*, we should not be surprised that the poem might follow distinctly architectural forms, since in the traditional understanding of the role of artist or architect, the conception of the temple is not a result of a particular artist’s

⁸⁷ Robin Kirkpatrick, introduction to *Inferno*, p. xix.

⁸⁸ Rènè Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995), pp. 176-178.

⁸⁹ Jean Hani, *Divine Craftsmanship: Preliminaries to a Spirituality of Work* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2007), p. 68.

personal “inspiration”, as it were, but is bestowed directly by a divine power: “...the earthly temple is produced according to a heavenly archetype communicated to mankind through the intermediary of a prophet, this being the basis of the legitimate architectural tradition.”⁹⁰ Dante fits this model of the chosen intermediary, since the *Commedia* holds within it direct references to the poet’s receipt of the commandment to memorise and record all that to which the poem makes witness. In this specific conception of the poet as architectural intercessor Dante has a clear precedence in the figure of King David, who received directly from God the directions for the building of the temple.⁹¹ It may be for this reason, as well as his political skills, that Dante elects to place David as the brightest and highest star in the form of the celestial Imperial Eagle in the *Paradiso*. Like David’s special “sighting” of the plans for the Holy Temple, Dante’s work is not solely, as we might view it today, a work of one man’s individual creative genius, but the outpourings of an artist whose spiritual eye is firmly fixed on a divine archetype. The *Commedia*, like the temple or church, is an image of the world not only because it contains representational images of everything in the world, but because it is built according to structural principles that copy the innermost structures of the universe itself.⁹²

To repeat, a different conception of the meaning of the *Purgatorio* turns on how we might view the very structure of the landscape in which the events of the central *cantiche* of the *Commedia* are set. And in seeking a proper footing for such a new conception we can confidently turn to the principles of geometry as a valid starting point. It has been emphasised that among the three *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, the *Purgatorio* is the most “symbolic”, and the most concerned with the initiatic nature of progression through the realms of the after-life.⁹³ The fantastical, sometimes near-hallucinatory qualities of the *Purgatorio* are generated largely by its employment of a powerful and highly suggestive language of symbols and signs: “In their often-magical effect, the scenes that unroll here are frequently designed to ‘convert’ the mind to meanings other than the literal. Mount Purgatory is a place of symbols as well as of physical realities.”⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the moral schema of the mountain demands that its inhabitants are but transitory pilgrims or “initiates”, who must pass through a series of purgative ordeals – an experience borne by none more so

⁹⁰ Hani, *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple*, p. 13.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 14. See also I Chr. 28:11,19.

⁹² Ibid., p. 18.

⁹³ René Guénon, *The Esoterism of Dante*, trans. Henry D. Fohr and Cecil Bethell (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 1996), p. 9.

⁹⁴ Robin Kirkpatrick, introduction to *Purgatorio*, (London: Penguin, 2007), p. xlviii.

than Dante-pilgrim himself. These two qualities are by nature complementary, since in traditional modes of initiatic experience an essential part of the rite was the granting to the initiate the meaning of a prescribed set of symbols, or symbolic objects or images. Further, the use of symbol is the only means by which certain essential elements of a tradition may be adequately transferred – “a symbolical mode of expression is the indispensable vehicle of all teaching of an initiatic character.”⁹⁵ And, at their core, the essential qualities of symbols are *geometric*, since in traditional applications of symbolic systems, the geometric figure is not predominantly quantitative – that is, a mere accompaniment to the traditional science of mathematics – but of a qualitative nature, a means by which can be expressed certain “realities of a higher order.”⁹⁶ The notion of “core” is also pertinent here, since there exists too a natural parallel between the essential nature of a symbolic image or object – its core or “heart” – and both the placing of Purgatory at the centre, the core, of the poem; and the way in which the initiatic experience is designed to profoundly affect the inner man, the “heart of being”, of the initiate.⁹⁷ In such ways of seeing, the spatiality invoked by metaphor can only be granted to us through the language of geometry. Properly understood, then, geometric forms can be seen to comprise the essential foundation for all symbolism.⁹⁸ It is with a particularly geometrically-minded approach that a new vision of Dante’s *Purgatorio* may reveal itself.

The agreed facts are that Dante “constructed” the imaginary land of Purgatory as a vast and isolated mountain set in the middle of the Southern Ocean, placed directly opposite to the site of Jerusalem. Yet this setting is not to be taken literally, since the *symbolic* purposes of the mountain’s placement greatly surpass questions of actual geography. In parallel to the architectural principles involved in our image of the domed mountain we can say that in every important respect Dante’s Purgatory is not a place in the literal sense. It is a “representative type”, an imaginal place that is both nowhere and simultaneously everywhere. It is a place in the transcendent sense.⁹⁹ It exists somewhere between reality and imagination, between the known territories of the earth and the observable but essentially unknown sphere

⁹⁵ René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & the Signs of the Times*, 4th rev. ed. (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 7.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹⁷ Guénon, *The Esoterism of Dante*, pp. 47-48.

⁹⁸ Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & the Signs of the Times*, pp. 5-7.

⁹⁹ For possible comparisons between the notionally extant but essentially imaginal construction of Purgatory, and the symbolic meaning of the architectural form of the dome, see Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, pp. 175-178.

of the moon, in an intermediary realm that, in our analogy of the eye, lies close to an horizon somewhere between waking and sleeping.¹⁰⁰ In this respect the mountain fulfils its essential function as an *axis mundi*, a traditional idea that certain earthly sites involving a distinct verticality, particularly mountains, were a means by which man may attempt an ascent to the heavenly. To climb mountains is, in symbolic terms at least, to leave behind the worldly and place oneself within the presence of the divine.

A consideration of the *infrastructure*, to use an architectural term, of Purgatory's geography should be adequate to support such a reading as has been proposed. However, we are fortunate in being able to call upon evidence from elsewhere in Dante's oeuvre that suggests that such symbolic and specifically geometrically-based patterns of thought had been developing within him for some time. In the fourth section of the *Convivio* Dante is building an argument for the proper understanding of the Noble Man, when he digresses to demonstrate how such nobility is to be identified within each of the so-called Four Ages of Life. He then proceeds to outline the following geometric metaphor:

Wherefore, since our life, as has been said, and also the life of every living creature here below, is caused by Heaven, Heaven is revealed in all such effects as these, not, indeed, with the complete circle, but with part of it, in them. Thus its movement must be not only with them, but beyond them, and as one arch of life retains (and I say retains, not only of men, but also of other living creatures) almost all the lives, ascending and descending, they must be, as it were, similar in appearance to the form of the arch. Returning, then, to our course of life which at present we are seeking to understand, I say that it proceeds after the manner of this arch, ascending and descending. And it is to be known that the ascent of this arch should be equal to its descent, if the material of the seed from which we spring, so complex in its nature, did not impede the law of Human Nature.¹⁰¹

The idea is a standard in Dante's thinking: all things proceed, in their form and nature, from God, who therefore reveals part of His nature through those things; and the primary expression of this relationship resides in the form and life of Man. But the transitory and temporal things of this world can only offer an approximation or an approach to the completeness of their maker. In geometric terms, Dante here wants to compare the complete

¹⁰⁰ Ronald L. Martinez and Robert M. Durling, introduction to Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 2 - Purgatorio*, p. 11n.

¹⁰¹ *Convivio*, 4.23.

circle with the complete and perfect nature of God; and the incomplete but still well-ordered and centred nature of the arch to the imperfect but still divinely-directed life of Man. Man is an arch on an approach to the circle of God. The arch, or arc, here is a preliminary image of what has been called the “final image” of the *Commedia*, the perfect circular motion of the soul as it spins in harmonious motion with the will of God.¹⁰² Such circular motion of the soul is the experience of the blessed in the *Paradiso*, where increased speed and radius of curvature is an indicator of one’s exaltation. For those still being refined in Purgatory, the geometric figure of the arch is the closest approximation to both their moral progress and the landscape of their temporary home. In the *Purgatorio*, the arch is only part of the curvature of the circle, since the apex represents the point of perfection from which they depart.

The obvious geometric parallel in this arrangement is that the arch, or arc, is linear, and expresses the life, or spiritual journey, of an individual. A human life, Dante says, is like an arch. The arch encapsulates the life of man, in that it can be seen to represent the natural stages of birth, increase, summit, decline and termination or return to the level of birth. The arch is also said by Dante to be symmetrical – its ascent should be understood as being equal in all respects to its descent – just as the human form itself contains an essential quality of symmetry (and indeed any hint of asymmetry in an individual human form, as displayed throughout the *Inferno*, is an immediate indicator of “wrongness”). Understood in this way, the human life is centred on an axial pillar, for the symmetrical arch, or dome, is essentially an expression of *verticality*, a concept that has particular application to the action of the *Purgatorio*. Other features of Dante’s imagery should be noted, for their echoes resound throughout the pages of the *Commedia*. The proposed geometrical metaphor represents, at least superficially, an attempt at the synthesis of classical and scriptural attitudes to man (a project that will find its full flowering in the *Commedia*), since Dante’s conception of the human lifespan as resembling the form of the arch relies heavily on both. Dante predictably claims that the “high point” of the “perfectly natural man” is the thirty-fifth year, since it was understood that this was the age at which Christ ended his earthly life. Naturally, this “high point” is represented by the pilgrim himself in the narrative of the *Commedia*, since the action takes place while he is at precisely this age. The famous reference to the “*mezzo del*

¹⁰² See Freccero, “The Final Image” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 245-257.

cammin” (“midway on our path”)¹⁰³, in the opening line of the poem, places Dante at the apex of his own metaphorical arch, at least in temporal terms.¹⁰⁴

This image of the arch provides a satisfactory model of an individual human life, but the combined desires and spiritual yearnings of a human community can be geometrically represented as the multiplication of the arch into three-dimensionality; and the arch, when expanded into such dimensionality, forms the figure of a dome. The arch is the linear refinement of the dome, just as the dome is the fulfilment, we may say, of that prefaced by the arch. The dome, a figure of geometric certainty and regularity, is therefore suited to the mood of *community* that marks the *Purgatorio*, and in Canto XXI we find a moment that incorporates both ideas, when the Roman poet Statius describes Purgatory thus:

*Quei comincio: ‘Cosa non è che sanza
ordine senta la religione
de la montagna, o che sia fuor d’usanza...*

‘There’s nothing that this mountain’s holy law
consents to,’ so the other now began,
‘that’s lacking order or irregular...’

(*Pur.* XXI, 40-42.)

¹⁰³ *Inf.* 1:1.

¹⁰⁴ However, the image from the *Convivio* also allows for an ingenious “extension” of the human span of years by accepting that, according to the testimony of Cicero, the life of Plato extended beyond the standard biblical allotment, since he died in his eighty-first year. (See ‘On Old Age’ in Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Selected Works*, trans. Michael Grant (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 218: “But there is another sort of old age too: the tranquil and serene evening of a life spent in peaceful, blameless, enlightened pursuits. Such, we are told, were the last years of Plato, who died in his eighty-first year while still actively engaged in writing.” The appealing suitability of this number, being an exponential power of three, no doubt secured such “rightness” of synthesis in Dante’s thinking, for he goes so far as to suggest that the life-span of Plato would have been likewise experienced by Christ had not his death come prematurely (see *Convivio*, 4.24). Further, Dante wants to make typically microcosmic-macrocosmic parallels between the human life as an arch, and the four traditional elements, the four seasons of the year, the canonical hours of the solar day, and, as will be later examined, the myth of the four horses of the Chariot of the Sun as derived from Ovid. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), II, 149-155, p. 154. Thus the life of man is linked to the patterned nature of creation – in matter, space and time. See *Convivio*, 4.23: “Truly this arch is not half distinguished in the Scriptures, but if we follow the four connecting links of the differing qualities which are in our composition, to each one of which appears to be appropriated one part of our age, it is divided into four parts, and they are called the four ages. The first is Adolescence, which is appropriated to the hot and moist; the second is Youth, which is appropriated to the hot and dry; the third is Old Age, which is appropriated to the cold and dry; the fourth is Extreme Old Age, which is appropriated to the cold and moist, as Albertus Magnus writes in the fourth chapter of the *Metaura*. And these parts or divisions are made in a similar manner in the year – in Spring, in Summer, in Autumn, and in Winter. And it is the same in the day even to the third hour, and then even to the ninth, leaving the sixth in the middle of this part, or division, for the reason which is understood, and even then to vespers, and from vespers onwards. And therefore the Gentiles said that the chariot of the Sun had four horses; they called the first Eoo, the second Piroi, the third Eton, the fourth Phlegon, even as Ovid writes in the second book of the *Metamorphoses* concerning the parts or divisions of the day.”

Dante's use of "*religione*" here specifically denotes the idea of religious community, a community or brotherhood in which multiple individual entities are bonded by mutual purpose. This is an expression, in human and social terms, of the order and regularity that can be found in the immutable laws of geometry.

The perception of Mount Purgatory as domal is in accord with traditional considerations of the way that geometric and architectural forms contain an inherent, symbolic layer of meaning. It has been observed that "The first essential point to note in this respect, in connection with the symbolic and initiatic value of architectural art, is that every edifice built according to strictly traditional rules, has in its structure and in the disposition of its different parts a 'cosmic' meaning which can be understood in two ways in conformity with the analogical relationship between macrocosm and microcosm. It refers, that is, both to the world and to man at the same time."¹⁰⁵ In René Guénon's analysis, the dome is a fundamental "type" of the traditional architectural forms, one which is both simple and universal, and, given our model, acts in a special sense. It is indisputable that the dome imitates the form of the cosmos; and if we accept Dante's image of a human life as imitating the arched surface of the dome, then the architectural figure of the dome points in both directions – macrocosmically and microcosmically; universe and man. Thus the dome, architecturally considered, can serve as a double image. In its fundamental form of earth-based but heavenward-reaching circularity, it can imitate both that which is lesser and greater than itself. It acts as a "bridge", so to speak, between the two differing levels of existence, springing from the lesser and moving towards the greater, while imitating them both. For the *bridge* is but one form of the arch, and a traditional symbol of the initiatic passage from one level of existence to another.¹⁰⁶ This is, of course, a key theme of the *Purgatorio*, for its primary purpose is to act as a bridge, a conduit, between both the first and last parts of the poem, and the different geographical and moral environments that house the earthly (the damned), and the heavenly (the blessed).¹⁰⁷

To return to possible evidence from the *Convivio*, there are several other key moments that lend themselves to the associations here being considered. They demonstrate that Dante is

¹⁰⁵ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, p.175.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. pp. 260-262.

¹⁰⁷ It is in this sense that in parallel the liturgy of the Mass can be understood as a "bridge" that serves as a means of "crossing over" from the earthly life to the heavenly. We should note that one of the ancient titles for the supreme head of the Church, that of pontifex, meant "bridge builder".

making deliberate, suggestive connections between the imagery of the arch (or the image of the bow, since *arco* in Dante's Tuscan can and does refer to either); the course of a human life or human endeavours; and the symbolism of sight, with special reference to the workings of the eye. At *Convivio* 2.10, Dante is explicating a verse that describes the experience of the eyes of two lovers as they meet. He says that: "although many things in one hour can come into the eyes, truly that which comes by a straight line into the point of the pupil, that truly one sees, and that only is sealed in the imaginative part."¹⁰⁸ Dante concludes by comparing the line of vision that exists between two lovers to the arrow shot straight from a bow: "And many times in the direction of that line a shaft flies from the bow of Love, with whom each weapon is light."¹⁰⁹ The association is made between the eye, which is the dome of the body, and the curvature of the sprung bow. The shaft, as it flies here, does not trace a path of curvature, since the intense power of the lover's gaze, and the short distance between the lovers, implies that the "arrow" flying between one and the other is straight, or as near to straight as a parabolic course can be, and "straightness" in this context is an image of the fidelity that exists between the two lovers.

Shortly thereafter, we find a further reference that elevates and intensifies the correlation between sight and the figures of geometry. In the *Convivio* Dante is constructing an elaborate and extended allegory that purports to align each of the circles of the Heavens with one of the human "sciences" of his time. Of note for our purposes is that the Tuscan makes explicit reference to the ways in which geometry can be symbolically understood. He again makes the association between the workings of geometry and the power of vision, by proposing a correspondence between geometry and the sphere of Jupiter:

And the Heaven of Jupiter can be compared to Geometry because of two properties. The one is, that it moves between two Heavens, repugnant to its good tempering, namely, that of Mars and that of Saturn...The other is, that amongst all the stars it appears white, as if silvered. And these things are in the Science of Geometry. Geometry moves between two things antagonistic to it; as between the point and the circle, and I term freely anything that is round, either a body or superficies; for, as Euclid says, the point is the beginning of Geometry, and, according to what he says, the circle is the most perfect figure in it, which therefore must have reason for its end; so that between the point and the circle, as between the beginning and the end, Geometry

¹⁰⁸ *Convivio*, 2.10.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

moves. And these two are antagonistic to its certainty; for that point by its indivisibility is immeasurable, and the circle, on account of its arc, it is impossible to square perfectly, and therefore it is impossible to measure precisely. And again, Geometry is most white, inasmuch as it is without spot of error, and it is most certain in itself, and by its handmaid, called Perspective.¹¹⁰

A straightforward analysis of this passage would be to *focus*, using a term suitably applicable to both geometry and optics, on the parallels between the planet and the human eye. Both, in this analogy, move between fixed points, as the eye can rotate within its set limits of movement. Both are predominantly white. And both, in Dante's thinking, convey a sense of certainty, since the "temperate complexion" of the planet speaks of steadiness while likewise the laws of geometry are indisputable. The more convincing element of Dante's construction, however, is the definition of geometry as that which moves "between the point and the circle, and I term circle freely anything that is round, either a body or superficies."¹¹¹ Read symbolically, this can be seen as a precursor to both the structure of Purgatory and the experience of treading its course. A movement "between the point and the circle", the movement of the arch, is precisely the course taken by the penitents in the *Purgatorio*. Similarly, the phrase "either a body or superficies" is highly suggestive of the penitents themselves, since they possess, according to our previously-established definition, "physical form without physical substance". And, to repeat our parallel, the two notions of geometric form and bodily form are inextricably linked, since a crucial element of the scaling of the arch of Purgatory is the gradual dematerialisation of the body. Dante also states that part of the certainty we can attach to Geometry is that it carries as its handmaid the physical science of *perspettiva* – "Perspective", or what we call Optics.¹¹² Theories of optics, and the attendant science of mathematics are, to Dante, intimately related, and both serve, in their particular purposes, to underpin much of the structure and meaning of the *Commedia*. The poem is intricately structured along mathematical principles: at one level, particularly in the *Paradiso*, it can be read as an ascending contemplation on the nature and purpose of light.

And it is to the *Paradiso* that we can turn for confirmation of a final point of association. In Cantos XVIII-XX of the *Paradiso* Dante is visiting the sphere of the Just in the circle of

¹¹⁰ *Convivio*, 3.14.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy*, pp. 61-92; Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, pp. 546, 660-662.

Jupiter. Here, the central emblematic figure is the immense Eagle of Imperial Justice, and to Dante the significance of the eagle as symbol was largely due to the legendary qualities of the eagle's eye. Among medieval bestiaries, the name of the eagle, *l'aquila*, was said to derive from the acuteness, the *acumine*, of its physical sight, thereby making it an appropriate symbol for temporal rulers, who were required to demonstrate particular clarity of vision.¹¹³ Further, Dante freely co-opts the traditional legend that claimed the eagle was the only earthly creature who could withstand looking directly at the sun.¹¹⁴ While in the presence of the Imperial Eagle, Dante-pilgrim is commanded to look, just as he looks into the penetrating gaze of Beatrice, into its eye, the "highest" part of its form.

The *Convivio* also provides grounds for considering the numerological structures that underpin Dante's conception of Mount Purgatory. The primary symbolism of the number seven is one of the mountain's most obvious features, since the seven terraces of Purgatory are designed to specifically treat each of the established Seven Capital Vices of the Catholic imagination. The appearance of "seven-foldness" provides then a foundation, or background against which the action of the *Purgatorio* moves. Yet seven is also recognisable as a numeric component for the basic geometric notion of circularity that dominates Dante's thinking. The simple approximation of 22/7 provides the ratio that governs the circle, and in the *Convivio* Dante contemplates the possible symbolic meaning of twenty-two.¹¹⁵ Significantly, Dante's attentions here are focussed on how the number twenty-two represents *movement*, a reflection of his fascination with circularity as projecting an image not of static geometry, but of dynamism; and of course in the same set-piece in the *Convivio* he has explicitly defined geometry itself as being a function of circular movement.¹¹⁶ The geometric figure of *movement* from stasis to circular dynamism, when applied as a moral analogy, turns out to be an subtle underlying theme of the *Purgatorio*'s ethical programme, since the fundamental purpose of penitence is to "turn" from the self-centred stasis of sin towards the perfection of the divine as evinced by the changeless spinning of the heavenly bodies. Analysis of Dante's use of "*volta*" ("turn") will demonstrate that the word carries particular associations only found in the *Purgatorio*.

¹¹³ Richard H. Lansing, *From Image to Idea: A Study of the Simile in Dante's Commedia*, L'interprete 8 (Ravenna: Longo, 1977), p. 327.

¹¹⁴ Cf. *Par.* 1:46-48, 20:30-32.

¹¹⁵ *Convivio*, 2.15.

¹¹⁶ *Convivio*, 2.14.

This evidence supports the notion that images of partial circularity as representations of human existence may have been forming in Dante's thinking well before the construction of the *Commedia*. Yet an analysis of his use of two key terms – *volgere* and *arco* (“turn” and “arch”) – throughout the great poem, will demonstrate the full development of this theme. The inherent circularity implied in the notion of “turning” and the geometric form of the arch can be identified as a key motif underlying the narrative structure and moral purpose of the *Commedia*, and here specifically in the *Purgatorio*. It is a standard observation that the path taken by the pilgrims in their ascent of the mountain is essentially that of an incomplete helix, or spiral. It is not a linear “point-to-point” ascent directly up the side of the peak. As demonstrated from multiple, direct textual references, the penitents on the mountain must traverse at least part of the circular sweep of each terrace before ascending to the next. Thus the experience of motion for the penitent is of a continual turning. We can afford this physical action a direct moral counterpart, since the purpose of penitence is, in essence, to *turn*, symbolically speaking, away from sin and towards the sources of grace. This is a straightforward analogy that involves the movement and orientation of the body – in a life of correct spiritual order the believer will turn their back upon that which they reject, and face that for which they long; since in all common spatial metaphors of this kind goodness and evil are conceived as polar opposites between which each of us stands and towards either of which we are at all times electing to orient ourselves. The penitents who walk together and chant together as they scale a mountain, have symbolically turned their attention away from the sins of the body and formed a community that imitates the church on earth, just as they look towards, and progress towards, in hope, the higher states of being that await them. The very ability to *turn*, in this sense, is an expression of the freedom of the human will, and *Purgatorio's* theme of the developing, progressing and “turning” will accords with its central position in the poem. The very loss of free will is part of the torment of the damned, who, while often participating in continuous circular motion, derive no benefit from the experience and have no hope of progression. Conversely, the complete harmonisation and synchronicity of one's will with the perfect divine will is the experience of the pilgrim who has reached his spiritual goal.

If we were to define the *Purgatorio* by a single action it would be *re-turn*, the journeying back to our origins. Indeed, it has been observed that the entire poem can be construed as an act of “turning”, since this is at one level merely a physical metaphor for the inner conversion

of the protagonist's self that comprises the essential drama of the narrative.¹¹⁷ In geometric terms we may conceive of it as the closing of the circle, or the final quadrant in a circular path of life, that has been preceded by a fall from the summit, a descent into the netherworld, and a resurrection to temporary earthliness. Anatomically speaking, the human chest or torso can be construed as essential to the symbolism of the "turning" human form. The chest is the "pivot" of the body about which the entire person can turn or be turned. Moreover, while it holds the central position of the human form and therefore represents the non-directionality of stillness, it also contains the flexibility to move, at least partly, through all three axes of dimensionality. Thus it can be said to hold within itself the traditional seven-fold forms of movement.

Multiple examples of *volgere*, or its grammatical variations, occur throughout the *Purgatorio*, many of which are used simply as a preliminary to conversation between the protagonists or to initiate a change of scene. "*Io mi volgea*" ("I turned") or "*noi volgemo*" ("we turned") is a commonplace usage in this regard. Yet there are some specific instances of "turning" where the employment of the imagery must be read as carrying a deeper significance. That the human form should find within itself something of the nature of the heavens under which it stands is repeatedly stressed in Dante's cosmology, and specifically he treats the canopy of the sky as a means by which we might navigate our path on earth. Precisely this form of human action occurs at the commencement of the thirteenth Canto of *Purgatorio*. Having arrived at a featureless path, and temporarily unsure of his bearings, Virgil performs the following action:

*Poi fisamente al sole li occhi porse;
fece del destro lato a muover centro,
e la sinistral parte di sé torse.*

Firmly, he fixed his eyes towards the sun.
He made a fulcrum of his right-hand side,
and moved his left around that central point.

(*Pur.* XIII, 13-16.)

This moment provides an emblematic image of the purgatorial journey as a whole. Amid all uncertainty, the regular and predictable position of the sun provides the fixed point of reference upon which they may confidently reorient themselves; and continue in progress.

¹¹⁷ See Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds, introduction to *Dante in English*, pp. cviii-cx.

From this moment onwards, Dante will increasingly engage in such human-to-cosmos imagery as illustrations of his moral intent. The mountain is “turned”, and the pilgrims turn upon it as they climb, regularly cognisant of the way that such continual turning requires a recalculation of one’s position and direction in relation to the movement of the heavens above them. In a recapitulation of Virgil’s earlier moment of body-as-gnomon, the entry into the next Terrace, that of the Wrathful, is accompanied by a similar description:

*E i raggi ne ferien per mezzo ‘l naso
perché per noi girato era sì ‘l monte
che già dritta andavamo inver’ l’ocaso,*

The sun’s rays struck us straight along the nose.
For now the mountain had, by us, been turned
so that we went direct towards the west.

(*Pur.* XV, 7-9.)

In accord with our earlier conception of the moral import of “facing” and “turning”, we can see that the *Purgatorio* is also concerned to demonstrate how turning, metaphorically speaking, can also carry both positive and negative connotations. In Virgil’s extended speech on free will he says that the human faculty of *apprehensio* is used to generate images in the mind, “*sì che l’animo ad essa volger face*” (“so that the mind turns round to it.”)¹¹⁸ By comparison, the false goals of the intellect are presented in the speech of the Siren in Canto XIX as a “wrong turn”: “*Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin, vago / al canto mio*” (“And Ulysses, entranced to hear my song, / I turned off course.”)¹¹⁹ Throughout the *Purgatorio* there can be traced a series of specific references to *turning* that play on the relationship between the orientation of the person and the hearing of the word.¹²⁰ The various protagonists are said to run in response to, or in deliberate anticipation of, the words of others, in an affirmation of the Christian theme of *conversion*. The climax of this progressive theme of “turning”, as it pertains to the themes of personal interrelations and moral progress, occurs in the long-awaited meeting of pilgrim and muse in the thirtieth canto. Here, the wholly unexpected chastisement of Dante by his beloved is based upon his supposed “turning away” from the theological truths she supposedly represents: “*fu’ io a lui men cara e men gradita, / e volse I*

¹¹⁸ *Pur.* 18:24.

¹¹⁹ *Pur.* 19:22-23.

¹²⁰ See *Pur.* 21:14, 21:103, 25:123, 27:19, 27:32, 27:41, 28:53, 28:55, 28:145, 28:148.

passi suoi per via non vera” (“Yet I to him was then less dear, less pleasing. / He turned his steps to paths that were not true.”)¹²¹

The image of conversion, by which we may mean the inner conviction of the religious adherent or at the level of matter the change from one material state to another, is close to that of *conversation*, in which the subject matter and inner states of man, so to speak, are emanated and returned in a series of cyclical exchanges. The Latin origins of both terms are closely related – *conversio* being the root of conversion; *conversari* for conversation. Thus Dante creates a close association between the orientation, the turning, of the person, and the act of conversing, or speaking, where speaking is an elevated, particularly human and individualised form of breathing. Accordingly, a reinstatement of the goodness and communality of human speech, as well as a confirmation of the role in which human speech and human arts may play in furthering our pursuit of spiritual goods, are key themes in the moral programme of the *Purgatorio*. These associations will reach a new intensity and elevation in several moments among the highly symbolic scenes that develop in the set-piece of the Earthly Paradise in Cantos XXVIII – XXXIII. These will be considered as part of our attention on Dante’s use of the other significant term – *arco*.

In accord with the essential trichotomous nature of the work, we can see that the meaning and purpose of *arco* has a distinct quality in each of the three *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, and that these qualities generally accord with the three modes of vision we have previously identified. Throughout the *Inferno*, the use of *arco* is reserved only for matters of materiality; in *Purgatorio* it partly retains this function whilst also enlarging to take on a metaphorical purpose; and in the *Paradiso* the role of *arco* leaves the realm of physicality altogether and adopts a purely metaphorical or astronomical purpose. Thus the pattern of employment of the word neatly accords with the nature of the very thing that the word itself describes – a progression from its base earthliness to a highest point of projection, all while partaking of an approximation to the image of geometric perfection, the circle.

In the *Inferno*, there are few uses of the term *arco*, and, in keeping with the nature of this *cantica*, such employments pertain to the physicality of the environment, particularly as it may relate to the architecture of the dead city (and sometimes, as a metaphor for the “broken-

¹²¹ *Pur.* 30:130-131.

ness” of the sinner, this is a ruined city), or the distortion of the human form as an example of the author’s *contrapasso*.¹²² In *Purgatorio*, we see a clear thematic development. The image of the arc begins to figure the path of human life, or specific human action. In Canto VI, during Dante’s long condemnation of the political situation in his homeland, he repeats the association between the arc and the human torso, here specifically the heart. He says:

*Molti han giustizia in cuore, e tardi scocca
per non venir senza consiglio a l’arco;
ma il popol tuo l’ha in sommo de la bocca.*

Many, though true at heart, are slow to shoot,
for fear, without advice, they’d rush the bow.
But your lot tongue-tip justice all the time.

(*Pur.* VI, 130-132.)

The *Convivio*’s figure of the arch as the geometric form of human life makes a re-appearance in *Purgatorio* XIII, this time in the words of Sapia of Siena:

¹²² The earliest reference, located in the circle of the wrathful and melancholic, serves to remind us that the physical layout of Hell is essentially a series of ever-tightening and ever-deepening circles. (See *Inf.* 7:127-130). Again in the circle of the Violent the emphasis falls on the generally circular nature of the landscape, as Dante sees “*un’ampia fossa in arco torta*” (“a ditch of great dimensions in an arc”) (*Inf.* 12:52). The nature and meaning of this arcing river, Phlegethon, a boiling mass of human blood, should be compared to and seen as a pre-figuring of, the appearance of Lethe in the Earthly Paradise. The violence of the mood here, emphasised by the tumultuous river of blood, is precisely that which the gentle and clear waters of Lethe is designed to erase from both the life and memory of the pilgrim. Further, we should note that the punishment of the violent here is *double-fold*. In addition to being immersed in the boiling stream, they are periodically shot by a team of centaurs who roam along the adjacent bank. The next significant use of *arco* shifts our attention back toward the physical structure of Dante’s Hell. We are told that the rings containing the sins of Fraud, the *malbolge*, can only be traversed at certain points by the crossing of stone bridges. Yet here the pilgrims are informed that the Sixth Bridge is broken, and uncrossable. This serves as an appropriate image of the whole landscape of Hell, when seen as an inverted and ruined version of the human community. The broken bridge stands as an emblem of human relationships broken by sin. The final instance of *arco* in the *Inferno* shows a striking image of the deformed bodies that have populated Dante’s Hell. In the final moments of the *cantica* Dante contemplates the “traitors to their lords”, and employs a specific use of *arco* that clearly embodies the perverse nature of the treachery for which they have been condemned, at *Inf.* 34:13-15 – “*Altre sono a giacere; altre stanno erte, / quella col capo e quella con le piante; / altra, com’ arco, il volto a’ pié rinverte...*” (“Some lay there flat, and some were vertical, / one with head raised, another soles aloft, / another like a bow, bent face to feet.”) There may be two ways of reading the third line here, but the force of the theme of infernal parody with which this canto is chiefly concerned can only be fully made by conceiving that the bodies of those so described form an arch by bending un-naturally backwards: “*il capo di rivolge all’indietro e si piega sotto i piedi, formando un arco*” (“the head turns back and bends under the feet, forming an arc”). (Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia, Intruduzione* Di Italo Borzi (Rome: Biblioteca Economica Newton, 2008), commentary, p. 228.) This arc of distortion symbolically captures the inverted nature of treason – the head, leader of the body, is reduced to the status of the feet; the spine, the body’s axis mundi that serves to separate the vegetative from the rational and give the human form its distinctive uprightness, is mockingly pressed into a posture that, in earthly existence, would be impossible. Further, the body is arched backwards, exposing the sinner’s torso and abdomen, just as their treacherous sins have been figuratively exposed. In this image is to be seen a forerunner and ironic mockery of the “thoughtful” posture of the contemplative pilgrim that Dante will come to set before his readers in the *Purgatorio*.

*E perché tu non creda ch'io t'inganni,
odi s'I' fui, com' io ti dico, folle,
già discendendo l'arco d'I miei anni.*

Listen. Don't think that this is mere deceit.
Was I (then sinking down my arc of years)
as crazy as I've said I was, or not?

(*Pur.* XIII, 112-114)

There are three connections we may make between the current theme and Sapia's speech. That she may refer to the "*discendendo l'arco d'I miei anni*" ("sinking down my arc of years") is not unexpected here, since Sapia is to be found in the Terrace of the Envious. It is part of her penitence to re-awaken her own thinking to the errors of her earthly life, and it appears that here she is now recognising the way in which the passing of her years was contributing to her envious attitude to others, most obviously to the many now younger than herself, who might be said to be on the "rise" or at the "peak" of their life – it is a commonplace observance that the elderly envy the time remaining to the young. Ironically, the geographic circumstances of Sapia's experience is an inversion of her supposed emotional state, since it is supposed that she looked *down* upon the defeated forces of Colle di Val d'Elsa. Secondly, the Envious are punished with being blinded, a particular reference to the association, as we have already seen, between the moral states of Purgatory and the structure and functions of the human eye. This is particularly apt in this context, for Dante refers to the penitents here not as the envious, but the *invidious* – "*Questo cinghio sferza / la colpa de la invidia*" ("This confine scourges... / the sin of envious hate.")¹²³ The Latin word *invidia* can mean both "seeing into" and conversely "not seeing at all", a clear suggestion that the invidious lack the "vision" to properly perceive the world's physical and moral goods.¹²⁴ Finally, Dante has Sapia ironically recognise the pun implicit in her own name, since *Sapia* is a form of *wisdom*, precisely the virtue that she failed to exercise in her earthly, invidious life, and, according to Dante's model in the *Convivio*, the one virtue that can be inferred to be proper to the Old – those whom, like Sapia, are in the descending arc of their years.¹²⁵

¹²³ *Pur.* 13:37-38.

¹²⁴ Robin Kirkpatrick, Dante, *Purgatorio* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 383-385n.

¹²⁵ See *Convivio*, 4.27: "And it [canzone IV] says that the noble Soul in Old Age is prudent, is just, is liberal and cheerful, willing to speak kindly and for the good of others, and ready to listen for the same reason, that is to say, that it is affable."

The next notable employment of *arco* in the *Purgatorio* sees Dante produce a significant advance in thematic complexity. In Canto XIX, he describes how he is awakened by Virgil during the dream of the Siren:

*Sù mi levai, e tutti eran già pieni
de l'alto dì i giron del sacro monte,
e andavam col sol novo a le reni.
Seguendo lui, portave la mia fronte,
come colui che l'ha di pensier carca,
che fa di sé un mezzo arco di ponte,...*

Up I now got. And all the circles round
the holy hill were full of highest day.
We went along, the new sun at our backs.
Now following in his track, I bore my brow
as people do when – loaded down with thought –
they make themselves the half-arch of a bridge.

(*Pur.* XIX, 37-42)

This image of a man rising from sleep, but then stooping in thought as he walks, is laden with multiple levels of symbolism that confirm the analogy of the arch as central to the meaning of the *Purgatorio*. In terms of the human anatomy, we may consider how the “stoop”, the bending of that pivotal part of the human, the torso, is an emblem of the progression from the downcast, earth-attendant penitent to that of the fully upright, heaven-gazer, that can be said to represent the journey as a whole. We have seen that the punishment meted to the Proud at the base of Purgatory is to be wholly prostrate beneath a debilitating load, so that there is a profound deformation of the natural uprightness of the human form. Here in the mid-point of the journey, Dante himself assumes the form of one who is “still rising”, both physically and spiritually; while at the conclusion of the climb Virgil sees fit to acclaim Dante’s progress with “*libero, dritto e sano é tuo arbitrio*” (“Your will is healthy, upright, free and whole.”)¹²⁶ As with the seven-fold scarring of Dante’s brow, the bending of the body is part of the moral programme of the mountain, which seeks “to restore the human form to the integrity that it always should have possessed.”¹²⁷ In accord with the theme of the restoration of the body’s orientation and posture, Virgil’s closing affirmation to Dante includes a specific reference to the way in which the pilgrim has been fully righted – “*Vedi lo sol che ‘n fronte ti riluce*”

¹²⁶ *Pur.* 27:140.

¹²⁷ Robin Kirkpatrick, introduction to Dante, *Inferno*, p. xxxvi.

(“The sun, you see, is shining on your brow.”)¹²⁸ From the mid-point of the mountain to the summit, the effect has been one of straightening and re-direction: Dante is now fully upright in posture and looks towards the source of light rather than being a follower of his own shadow.

A consideration of the movement of Dante’s own body shows that here we have a typically microcosmic representation, and in characteristic fashion it is a particularly bodily representation of the macrocosmic idea which he intimates, so that both can be seen in a simultaneous parallel. As has been suggested, the path in Purgatory imitates the geometric form of the arch, where, as Dante has previously indicated, geometry means the movement from a still point towards circular motion. And this movement is precisely that which Dante physically undertakes here, for, according to the text, he is asleep, then rises, then walks in a bent fashion. Thus he moves from a still point and forms, in his own body, an imitation of circularity. He becomes “*un mezzo arco di ponte*” (“the half-arch of a bridge”).¹²⁹

This scene also includes specific cosmological and geographical elements. Dante says that this moment is occurring just after dawn – “*e andavam col sol novo a le reni*” (“We went along, the new sun at our backs”)¹³⁰ – so that for a moment it appears the pilgrim and the sun that lights his path are in united, parallel arcing courses; for the sun is, to our sight, “still” during the hours of darkness, and then takes its own path of curvature across the dome of the sky. Darkness on the mountain requires that the pilgrims must remain still and restful. They then continue their circular journey around and up the mountain once the sun has risen, so that their very movement imitates the course taken by the heaven’s primary symbol – the

¹²⁸ *Pur.* 27:133.

¹²⁹ *Pur.* 19:42. Should we require further evidence of the “rightness” of Dante employing such an image of his own person, we may consider that his first biographer makes an explicit reference to the matter of Dante’s physical stature. Chapter VIII of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Life of Dante* is entitled *Dante’s Appearance, Way of Life and Habits*, and opens with the idea that “I judge it well to go on to an account of his bodily stature, his dress, and generally the most notable of his habits...” (Giovanni Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, trans. Philip Henry Wicksteed (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2009), VIII, p. 37). The appearance and outward manner of the man, according to Boccaccio, serves as a means to understand the “inner” man; and, in the biography’s text, as a connecting link, or “bridge” between the events of Dante’s life and the purpose and meaning of his work. Boccaccio claims that “This our poet, then, was of medium height. When he had reached maturity he walked somewhat bowed, his gait grave and gentle, and always clothed in most appropriate fashion, in such attire as befitted his years.” (ibid.) If we accept Boccaccio’s characterisation as accurate, we can posit the notion that Dante may have used the contemplation of his own form, in its ritual posture, to provide him with an archetypal image of all human forms as they appear in penitence, labour, and, reflexively, contemplation. That he should use his own body as the image of the arch at this crucial juncture in the *Purgatorio* is highly suggestive in this regard

¹³⁰ *Pur.* 19:39.

sun's path being essentially *spirallic*, not merely circular. Yet there is a further cosmological element – not of the sun, but its opposite – shadow. The pilgrims are heading westwards, away from the sun, so that their bodies serve as both leaders and gnomons. They follow, or reach towards, a representation, without substance, of their own form. And this accords with what I have identified as the type of vision particular to the *Purgatorio*, namely, the “seeing” of the imaginative eye, or the perception of things that have physical form but no physical substance. The waking from a dream (another version of the imaginative mind-state), and immediate transition to the perception of one's own shadow, provides us with further confirmation of the centrality of the “inner eye” symbolism that underpins the *Purgatorio*. There is also a distinct geographical inference to be drawn here. Dante's text suggest that his first experience upon waking is to witness that “...*tutti era già pieni / de l'alto di I giron del sacro monte.*” (“all the circles round / the holy hill were full of highest day.”)¹³¹ The specific interest here is the reference to “*tutti*” (“all”). This implies that he must be at, or at least close to, the midpoint of the curvature of the mountainside, since this is the one part of the domed surface at which one could possibly look in both directions and see an approximation to the “whole” of the mountain.

The structural elements of the *Purgatorio* serve to support this implication, on two points. Firstly, Dante and Virgil are, at this moment, still in the Terrace of the Slothful, which is specifically declared to be the fourth of seven Terraces of penitence. Hence, in purely mathematical terms it is unmistakably the central Terrace of the mountain. Further, the moral schema set out by Virgil in Canto XVII declares that the sins to be expiated in Purgatory are divisible into three categories, with Sloth identified as a stand-alone, central category that separates the sins of misdirected love (pride, envy, anger) from those of excessive love (avarice, gluttony, lust). The slothful lacked proper zeal in their earthly lives, and are therefore punished with frantic movement, perhaps an expression of the fact that in natural systems of movement the midpoint of oscillation will typically be that at which an object reaches its greatest velocity (such as, to use a common example, the swinging of a pendulum that courses through an oscillating arc of motion, an appropriate complement to the earlier contemplation of the human chest as specifically metronomic). Yet their seeming “neutrality” serves to also complement the geometric function of the true tangent to the circle, since at the mid-point of the curve the slope is, in a sense, neither one nor the other. In

¹³¹ *Pur.* 19:37-38.

purely geometric terms, it is no longer steep, but nor is it yet shallow. Secondly, the passage under consideration occurs in Canto XIX, and again in mathematical terms this Canto partly represents the mid-point of the mountain proper, since the actual ascent of the terraces only commences in Canto X, and terminates at the conclusion of Canto XXVII. There are eighteen Cantos in which the climbing of the dome is undertaken, so that only Cantos XVIII and XIX can be considered as “central” in poetic terms. Thus a basic parallel can be said to exist between the poem’s structure, and the physical journey it describes.¹³²

This is therefore an axial moment, since he is, in terms of both landscape and narrative, at the mid-point of the mid-part of the poem. The emphasis here on the curvature of the human torso, which is in effect the curvature of the spine, confirms the symbolic nature of the backbone as the *axis mundi* of the body, the “bridge” that both joins and separates the nether-world, the “Hell” of the abdomen, in our analogy, from the supra-world, the “Heaven” of the head.

These, then, comprise the multitude of associations which we may draw together in depicting the mountain of Purgatory as being represented, symbolically speaking, by the structure and operation of the physical human torso, but also subtly intimated by the metaphorical “eye” that sees spiritually but is located in the heart of man. The dome, the arch, the human eye, the progression from base condition to elevated state, the spiritual progress of the penitent as a gradual removal of “blindness”, the freedom of the human will, emotional response as a signature behaviour of the torso, the rhythm and emotion that complements the practice of

¹³² In support of this geometric representation of the structure of the *Purgatorio*, we can also consider a particular mathematical fact that appears to underpin the poem’s structure at this point. As is well-known, the *Purgatorio*, as with the other *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, is distinctly trichotomous. The ascent of what is commonly regarded as Purgatory proper is contained within Cantos X to XXVII, whereas the preliminary journey through ante-Purgatory occupies Cantos I to IX, and the long set-piece of the Earthly Paradise is bound within Cantos XXVIII to XXXIII. Now, Cantos X to XXVII contain a total of 2,598 lines, and we can also observe that in the opening lines of Canto XXVIII Dante does not explicitly state that he has crossed the threshold of the Earthly Paradise until the fourth line – “*sanza più aspettar lasciai la rive,*” (“not pausing anymore, I left the verge,”) (*Pur.* 28:4). If we take the opening three lines of Canto XXVIII as being counted within the strict boundaries of Purgatory proper, we are left with a total of 2,601 lines. Apart from the neatness of the total “Purgatory” cantos being eighteen (where eighteen is the doubling of Dante’s perfect number, nine), and the seeming fortuity of the addition of an extra *terzina* at the commencement of Canto XXVIII giving us a total that in itself will sum to nine (i.e. $2,601 \rightarrow 2+6+0+1=9$), we can also glean that 2,601, when bifurcated, produces a nearest whole number of 1,300. Naturally, this number is of immense significance for the entire meaning of the *Commedia*, since Dante takes pains to demonstrate that the events of the poem are to be understood as taking place within temporal time, in the year 1300. If we employ the image of the full dome, or a full semi-circular arch, as corresponding to the total lines dedicated to Purgatory proper, then the mid-point of the curve is equivalent to line 1300, or, in this analogy, the year in which Dante imagines that he undertakes his journey.

the liturgy and the human experience of music and song – all of these find multiple and inter-related symbolic resonances in the central component of the human form.

CHAPTER FIVE

PARADISO AS THE PERFECTED HEAD

Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2.

To this point, it has been argued that Dante deliberately uses the figure of *la nostra effigie* – our human form – as the central and controlling image of his intellectual and poetic declarations. Particularly, it has been shown that the chronology and narrative structure of the *Commedia* are arranged around the primary story and central figure of Christian history, that of the central events in the life of Christ throughout the week of Eastertide. I have also demonstrated how Dante has made a decisive move in uniting the centrality and essential goodness of the human body in Christian theology with the long literary and artistic tradition of microcosmic representations of man, to produce a unique frame upon which the author can weave the many detailed narrative components of the *Commedia*. It has been shown how the traditional trichotomous arrangement of the human form can be explicitly paralleled to the three *cantiche* of Dante's masterwork, so that it becomes possible to experience a particular reading of the poem as a journey through the human body. In accord with its decisive shifts in topography, mood and intent, the *Commedia* moves, symbolically, through the three fields of the human form. The work commences with attention to base matters in the belly of the *Inferno*, but turns to discover expansion, rhythm and renewal in the central "torso" of the *Purgatorio*. It remains now to consider how Dante completes and consummates this progression, by asking in what novel ways, given the absence of established scholarship on this particular question, can the *Paradiso* be comparable to the structure and nature of the human head.

At first glance, there may appear to be few correspondences between Dante's depiction of the Christian Heaven in the *Paradiso* and the structure and workings of the human head. Yet any correspondences that may exist can certainly be accommodated within the general analogy of the tripartite arrangements of the human form and their apparent relationship to the three

parts of the poem. The primary difficulty in establishing these correspondences is that so far, in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, we are taken through worlds which are physical and tangible, which at least partly resemble our own, and within which we meet human figures whose experiences and emotions are easily intelligible to us; yet in the *Paradiso* Dante takes us to a 'place' that is clearly beyond the experiences of our earthly existence. Whatever else we might make of it, the *Paradiso* certainly presents as the least *bodily* part of the poem, and that which holds the least immediate appeal. Particularly for modern readers, the *Paradiso* also requires a greater "effort of the imagination", in as much as the collapse of a belief in a literal afterworld paradise divides Dante's world from our own.¹

A consideration of the physical nature of the human head shows that two straightforward correspondences to the *Paradiso* are possible. In accord with the broad comparisons being presented here, any standard view of the human form as a tripartite and vertically-oriented being regards the head as comprising a distinct element of the body, as both its appearance and function grant it a status separate to that of the body *per se*. In metaphorical terms, the head can be said to resemble the heavens in that it is the highest part of the human form; and, uniquely among the various components of the body, it shows a close approximation to sphericity. In the standard model of the human as an upright, heaven-directed being, the head naturally forms the highest, and what Dante upholds as the "noblest", part of the person. The operations of the mind are the highest of human functions, since they at once exercise control over the remainder of the body, and thus the mind reflects the divinity of its maker. The intellect is therefore "sovereign" over the body. The head is understood to control and influence the operations of the body just as the celestial bodies, "intelligences" able to exert formative powers, were thought to influence and order the affairs of men on earth.² Intellection clearly enjoys a higher function that places it above and beyond the physical activity of the abdomen or the torso. The journey of the *Commedia*, spatially considered, is that of a continual movement towards, and then into, the near-immaterial and spherical heavens; and such a journey is paralleled in anatomical terms as an upward movement from body to head. At the simplest level it is the fact that the pilgrim's spiritual journey moves from lowest to highest, and thereby from sadness to joy, that qualifies it, by the author's own admission, as a *commedia*. There is a natural tendency to equate the highest part of the

¹ Freccero, "An Introduction to the *Paradiso*" in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 209.

² Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, p. 761n: "The human head controls the body in a way that is analogous to the governing influence of the heavenly bodies on the sublunar."

human form with the highest of spiritual experiences. In cosmological terms, it is part of Dante's distinctly traditional conceptions of how all matter might be arranged that he places the Empyrean at the height of not only Heaven, but the entire universe. Dante brings to the foreground a Christian formulation of an ancient idea – namely, the close parallel between physical height and spiritual exaltation, an idea that largely dissolved with the effective collapse of all ancient cosmologies.³

That the mind is the most highest and most noble part of man, and that which one must be conscientious in developing, is evident in Dante's work from well before the construction of the *Commedia*. The entire purpose of the *Convivio* purports to be the presentation of arguments for pursuing and developing knowledge – the enlarging and refining of one's mind, or *mente*. The work has been described as demonstrating "his enthusiasm for knowledge as the real perfection of man."⁴ The treatise begins with the statement that:

As the Philosopher says in the beginning of the first Philosophy, "All men naturally desire Knowledge." The reason of which may be, that each thing, impelled by the intuition of its own nature, tends towards its perfection, hence, foremuch as Knowledge is the final perfection of our Soul, in which our ultimate happiness consists, we are all naturally subject to the desire for it.⁵

This desire for knowledge is the motive for all philosophical investigation, indeed all human activity, and provides the basic metaphor for the *Convivio*, as Dante provides a "banquet" of philosophical pronouncements of which his readership will, presumably, desire to partake. Yet this model also neatly previews the narrative action and moral programme of the *Commedia*, for the pilgrim at the commencement of the story is akin to the "thing impelled by the intuition of its own nature" who, drawn by providence, "tends towards its perfection" and is destined therefore to reach the "final perfection of our Soul". The desire by which Dante supposes we naturally reach for knowledge of philosophical truths is the same desire that ceaselessly impels the pilgrim, despite all of his initial reluctance and fear, towards the goal of intellectual and spiritual perfection. As it turns out, this theme of creatures driven by desire to fulfil their purpose and to fully know their maker is the content of the first

³ Davies, "Dante's *Commedia* and the Body of Christ" in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, pp. 177-178.

⁴ Barbi, *Life of Dante*, p. 35.

⁵ *Convivio*, 1.1.

philosophical digression in the *Paradiso*, which launches the new mood of heightened philosophical and metaphysical speculation that will escalate as the final *cantica* progresses.⁶

Elsewhere in the *Convivio*, Dante is particular in upholding contemplation as the highest of human activities, an occupation that exists as the “head” of human social organisations whilst also being inextricably dependent upon the other, “active” human pursuit. In the second treatise of the work he is describing the nature of the heavenly Intelligences, and surmises that the pagan idea of active gods or goddesses can be identified with the hierarchy of his angelology, in that they perform certain functions of influence upon human activity on earth:

But since that which has the Beatitude of the Civil government cannot have the other, because their intellect is one and perpetual, there must be others beyond this ministry, who live only in contemplation. And because this latter life is more Divine – and in proportion as the thing is more Divine so much the more is it in the image of God – it is evident that this life is more beloved of God...⁷

Likewise, in the fourth treatise, he reasserts that the two kinds of “life”, active and contemplative, are necessary for human existence, but that the contemplative is superior. He illustrates the point with the story of Martha and Mary from the gospel of Luke:

For if we will explain this in the moral sense, our Lord wished to show thereby that the Contemplative Life was supremely good, although the Active Life might be good; this is evident to him who will give his mind to the words of the Gospel.⁸

Subsequently, he devotes another passage of the *Convivio* to the same proposition, here making a direct connection between the contemplative life as the highest of human activities, and *mente* as the best part of man:

But, since the noblest part of man is the Mind, he loves that more than the Body; and thus, loving himself principally, and through himself other things, and of himself loving the better part most, it is evident that he loves the Mind more than the Body or any other thing; and the Mind it is that, naturally, more than any other thing he ought to love...the use of our Mind is especially delightful to us, and

⁶ See *Par*: 1:82-141.

⁷ *Convivio*, 2.5.

⁸ *Convivio*, 4.17.

that which is especially delightful to us becomes our Happiness and Beatitude, beyond which there is no greater delight or pleasure...The use of our Mind is double, that is to say, Practical and Speculative (it is Practical inasmuch as it has the power of acting); both the one and the other are delightful in their use, but that of Contemplation is the most pleasing, as has been said above.⁹

Further to this arrangement, however, is the notion that the Mind, when it has reached and sustained this level of highest contemplation, involves itself in a kind of reflective mirror-image of its own form and behaviour:

And what else is there to be said, except that the Philosophic Soul not only contemplates this Truth, but again contemplates her own contemplation and the beauty of that, again revolving upon herself, and being enamoured with herself on account of the beauty of her first glance?¹⁰

It is clear, then, that well before the composition of the *Commedia* Dante had adopted metaphors of spatiality and hierarchy in affirming man as a rational and intellectual creature who realises his fullest potential in the exercise and development of his mind. The *Convivio*'s image of the contemplative mind revolving about itself, in rapt attention to its own rapturous state, anticipates the famous final image of the *Paradiso* in which the mind of the beatified pilgrim, who has reached the goal of intellectual and moral perfection, is turning in faultless harmony with and about the perfect mind of God.

The idea that the roundness of the head is analogous to the spherical universe of traditional cosmologies enjoys a long tradition that stretches back to at least the works of Plato. In the *Timaeus* we read that the structure and function of the universe (which, according to Plato's account, is an enormous living creature) can be directly compared to that of the human head, because the cosmos exists as a template for the human form:

They copied the shape of the universe and fastened the two divine orbits of the soul into a spherical body, which we now call the head, the divinest part of us which controls all the rest; they then put together the body as a whole to serve the head, knowing that it would be endowed with all the varieties of motion there were to be.¹¹

⁹ *Convivio*, 4.22.

¹⁰ *Convivio*, 4.2.

¹¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 44, p. 61.

Likewise, the operations of the human head are designed to fall into conformity with the movements of the heavens, so that one is a microcosmic imitation of the other:

...let us rather say that the cause and purpose of god's invention and gift to us of sight was that we should see the revolutions of intelligence in the heavens and use their untroubled course to guide the troubled revolutions in our own understanding, which are akin to them, and so, by learning what they are and how to calculate them accurately according to their nature, correct the disorder of our own revolutions by the standard of the invariability of those of god. The same applies again to sound and hearing, which were given by the gods for the same end and purpose. Speech was directed to just this end to which it makes an outstanding contribution; and all audible musical sound is given us for the sake of harmony, which has motions akin to the orbits in our soul, and which, as anyone who makes intelligent use of the arts knows, is not to be used, as is commonly thought, to give irrational pleasure, but as a heaven-sent ally in reducing to order and harmony any disharmony in the revolutions within us.¹²

The tradition established by Plato's myth, continued by Dante in both the mood and structural arrangement of the *Paradiso*, posits that spiritual development in the individual human being can best be understood in terms of spatial metaphors, and specifically that of *circular movement*. To Plato, the uniform and circular movement of the stars represented the best form of possible motion and therefore provided man with the supreme metaphor by which the operations of the mind, existing within the circular head, could be understood. Further, Plato's account suggests that the realm of the stars is the origin of the human soul and is therefore also the goal to which the fallen soul should orient itself and to which it should seek to return. Part of this "journey of the mind" is to observe and understand the motions of the heavenly bodies, and attend to the discipline of music. In this exercise, the "orbits" or "harmonies" within our own round heads should come into proper arrangement and alignment with those of the greater "head" of the cosmos.¹³ Dante draws strongly upon this notion, structuring the journey of the *Paradiso* as a progressive expansion and purification of his mental faculties, where mind is brought by degrees into a perfect relationship with the universe. For example, Dante's extended proem at the commencement of Canto X is an

¹² Ibid., 47, p. 65.

¹³ For a unique rendering of the possible metaphorical meanings within Plato's text, see Sworder, "Three Short Essays in Astrophysiology," pp. 65-69.

important sequence that explicitly incorporates the Platonic conceptions of the structure and purpose of the cosmos, as well as being a microcosmic semi-structure that imitates the nature of thought itself.¹⁴ This transitional moment, where for the first time the pilgrim moves beyond the confines of earth and its shadow, invites the reader to contemplate, in accord with the author's own contemplation, the way in which mind and cosmos can be brought into correlation with one another. Dante makes plain that the formative power of the universe, the love within the Divine Mind of the creator God, makes in a like way both the human mind and the heavens – “*quanto per mente e per loco si gira*” (“formed all that spins through intellect or space”)¹⁵ – implicitly creating the analogy between the operations of both intellect and cosmos.

The spinning of the heavenly orbs is an apt geometric metaphor for the movement of thought, since the mind, in its attentions to the everyday matters of material existence, is always “in motion”. This metaphorical conception of thought as movement is usually based on notions of circularity, in accord with the spherical nature of the head. By the fact of our own embodiment we cannot avoid physical similes for even the non-corporeal elements of ourselves – in common expressions, thoughts are said to “go round in our head” and the head “spins” when affected physically or when the mind is overwhelmed by that which it cannot hold.¹⁶ The references to the arrangement and behaviour of *mente* in the *Paradiso* show a strong inclination to spatiality, in sympathy with the schematic structures of hierarchy and gradation that underpin the *cantica*. As examples, we read at various points in the narrative that Dante is urged to “*Drizza la mente in Dio grata*” (“Direct your mind in thanks...to God.”)¹⁷; or that the residents of heaven “*ch’a mente non torna*” (“don’t think back to that”).¹⁸ There likewise exists a natural accord between the increasing dimensions of the celestial spheres and the enlargement of the pilgrim’s *mente*; as the mind, though non-

¹⁴ See *Par.* 10:1-25. It has been stated by Durling and Martinez that, because it contains so many of the central themes of the *Commedia*, and because it imitates in its structure the neoplatonic conception of all creation emanating out from a singular point of origin and then returning to that origin, this passage “is a microcosm, a model of the cosmos: its origin, its structure, and its goal, the return to God, which in true Platonic fashion must begin with the contemplation of the heavens” (Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, pp. 214-215n.)

¹⁵ *Par.* 10:4.

¹⁶ Even scholars of Dante employ this proverbial usage when describing the object of their study. James Burge has remarked that Dante’s inner mental journey, as expressed in the pages of the *Vita Nuova*, can be seen in terms of circular metaphor: “He tells us that conflicting ideas circled around inside his head.” (Burge, *Dante’s Invention*, p. 50.)

¹⁷ *Par.* 2:29.

¹⁸ *Par.* 9:104. See also, as examples, *Par.* 7:22, 33:97.

dimensional, is also perceived in spatial terms, where expansion is reasonably equated with betterment. The “growing” of one’s mind in the accumulation of knowledge and therefore wisdom is, after all, the chief goal of philosophical enquiry. Progression through the heavens in the *Paradiso*, like the advancement through a course of education towards a goal of final realisation, is one of clear incremental increases in expansion of orbit and accompanying increase in understanding.¹⁹

Allowing for some specific symbolic arrangements of the blessed in particular moments of the *Paradiso*, such as the formation of the fiery cross in the sphere of Mars or the assembling of souls into the form of the giant eagle in the sphere of Jupiter, we see that the persistent behaviour of the luminous souls is that of uniform and harmonious circular movement. The souls are driven to imitate the stars, and Dante as pilgrim is likewise driven to so imitate, through the proper ordering and orientation of his *mente*, the souls with which he shares the series of celestial encounters. He is endeavouring to refashion his mind so that it progressively improves and finally parallels in exactitude the structure and operation of the cosmos. This desire within the pilgrim, an instilled virtue assigned to all living things, has been present from the beginning of the journey, and the pilgrim’s progression along his physical path can be compared, in terms of human movement, to those he encounters. In Hell, movement is either strongly, inhumanly restricted, or made to be pointlessly and endlessly repetitious. Purgatory contains movement that is strictly limited but also directional and purposeful. Dante’s Paradise is said to lie outside of spatiality but is nevertheless represented as though it were a singular representation of the best motion possible – eternal circularity in harmony with others. Of course, the climax of both poem and pilgrim’s journey is the famous final image in which Dante assumes the path of perfect circular motion whereby he wheels in complete harmony with God, the perfect other who is like no other.²⁰

¹⁹ Robert M. Durling, introduction to Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, pp. 9-10: “The pilgrim’s journey is to be thought of, then, as a metaphorical fiction (*poeticus, fictivus, transumptivus*, narrated by the poet-narrator); it is a system of metaphors for the process by which a living man, on earth, comes to understand the nature of the cosmos and the state of souls after death. For instance, the repeated description of instantaneous translation from one planet to the next (as in *Par.* 5.91-93, 8.14-15, 10.28-36) is, as the last passage suggests, a spatial metaphor for instantaneous intellectual understanding...”

²⁰ For an analysis of Dante’s final metaphor, particularly as it can be understood as an “amalgam of Platonic imagery and Christian doctrine”, see Freccero, “The Final Image: *Paradiso* XXXIII, 144” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 249-253.

To further the physical analogy, it can be said that Dante's paradise is analogous to the human head in that it is clearly limited and self-contained. Being exoskeletal, the head has a strictly defined limit in a way the other "realms" of the body, due to their internal nature, do not appear to possess (where, exactly, can we say that the belly or the torso begins and ends?); and, apart from its obvious external ornaments, the head has a largely homogenous and uniform nature. Dante's conception of paradise, following the traditional model of a geocentric, ordered universe, likewise insists upon the limited, contained, self-enclosed structure of the heavens. As will be later examined, the subject under consideration – the journey of the supposedly immaterial soul as it ascends through the spheres of heaven to arrive at the non-material realm of the Empyrean – is conducted within a cosmology that carries within it strict physical characteristics, foremost of which is the sense of boundary and gradation that marks off the heavens as a whole and each individual sphere of the heavens from all others. The crossing of boundaries from one sphere to the next carries much significance for the story's pilgrim.

At the conclusion to Dante's planetary journey he crosses an apparent threshold at the summit of the Contemplative's golden ladder, and is immediately present in the sphere of the fixed stars. Yet before he can participate in the full experience of this place he is required to perform a retrospective overview of his celestial journey thus far, so that he is properly prepared for yet greater beatitude:

*'Tu se' sì presso a l'ultima salute,
cominciò Beatrice, 'che tu dei
aver le luci tue chiare e acute;
e però, prima che tu più t'inlei,
rimira in giù, e vidi quanto mondo
sotto li piedi già esser ti fei'*

'You are so close,' so Beatrice said,
'to your salvation here that you must keep
the light within your eye acute and clear.
And so, before you further "in" yourself,
look down and wonder at how great a world
already you have set beneath your feet,...'

(*Par.* XXII, 124-129).

Moments of specific looking back are rare in the *Commedia*, since the work's narrative structure and rhyme scheme consistently produce a relentless onward drive toward the goal of complete vision that is the end of both journey and poem. It is certain that the blessed in Paradise are freed from all recollection of earthly unrighteousness – “*ma si ride, / non de la colpa, ch'a mente non torna*” (“We smile, / not, though, at sin – we don't think back to that –”) ²¹, since the waters of Lethe through which all pass at the summit of Mt. Purgatory are specifically said to remove the very memory of sin. ²² The complete absorption of mind into eternal blissfulness would seem to preclude any remembering of our prior, imperfect state. Dante's “retrospective” at this point, going against the overwhelming impetus of forward-looking, is therefore of special significance. In the allegorical arrangement of the heavens that aligns man with cosmos, the “look back” is here a final act of recapitulating and summing up of the human form, with the purpose of granting the observer a last re-orientation of his *mente* to the workings of the heavens. Notably, Dante delivers a series of periphrastic references that portray the planets in the very human terms of familial relationships. The Moon is “*la figlia di Latona*” (“the daughter of Latona”); the Sun is the offspring of Hyperion – “*L'aspetto del tuo nato*” (“the look of your bright son”); while Jupiter's supposed tempering position between hot Mars and cold Saturn is described as “*tra 'l padre e 'l figlio*” (“between his sire and son”). ²³ As with the innovative and unexpected arrangements of the lambent souls into symbolic figures, where individuality is seen to be heightened while yet subsuming itself into a greater whole, the arrangement of the heavenly bodies is treated as though each is held in proper place by its connection to others. Beatitude, far from being a solitary condition, is completed by its affinity to the other. This harmonious existence is to be mirrored in the mind of the observer here, who makes a clear and perfect sighting of the exact location of each body, but then surpasses this perception with an understanding of the proportionate state of one to the whole:

...e tutti e sette mi si dimostraro
 quanto son grandi e quanto son veloci
 e come sono in distante riparo.

²¹ *Par.* 9:103-104. This speech from Folco of Marseilles does contain, however, what appears to be an unresolvable contradiction. If he has in fact been cleansed from any memory of sin, how can he make even the merest mention of it? Indeed, if any represented soul in the *Paradiso* makes reference to their earthly lives, how can they do so without bringing to mind any trace of the sinfulness that, according to a fundamental tenet of Christian thinking, is inextricable from human existence? Dante, faced with a narrative problem at least, appears to concede that some form of the *idea* of sin must still remain within the mental encompassment of the beatified, even if the *actuality* of sin can no longer possess any active power over them.

²² See *Pur.* 28:121-129.

²³ *Par.* 22:139-147.

And all these seven spheres displayed to me
 their magnitude, their speed, the distance, too,
 that lay between the dwelling place of each.

(*Par.* XXII, 148-150).

The precise geometry that governs the movements and relative co-ordinates of the planets is now reflected in the harmonised mind of the observer, so that an application of right thinking enables him to hold a proper understanding of the comparatively small earth, the “little threshing floor” from which he has come. This “look back” is a celestial version of the astronomical wonderment of which man has always been capable, here rendered in terms of intimacy and precision, but also reinforcing the littleness of the world, and, by extension, the littleness of worldly concerns that can and do distract us from the proper fulfilment of our human possibilities. The pilgrim’s observational skills, rendered in geometric reports of measurement and relationship, show at once the minuteness of the human form when set against the vastness of the cosmos; *and* the way in which all of the universe may be held within the human mind, for it is the only element of the created order capable of such beholding. As per the image of the contained container in Canto XXX, the mind is here shown to align itself to the workings of the heavens so that it may both imitate and incorporate them.²⁴

Finally, it is fitting that symbolic correspondences which illustrate our theme are not limited to the thought of the classical world, but, in accord with Dante’s desire for synthesis and harmonisation, can be located within the biblical tradition. In his epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul calls on the members of the church to act in maturity and unity, as though they were part of an organic whole:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is in the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.²⁵

²⁴ See *Par.* 30:12.

²⁵ Eph. 4:15-16.

The concept of “growing up into the head”, part of a greater analogy that involves the entire human person, involves the believer in a “journey” that is here implied to be an improvement from the lower body to the higher head.

Any analogous interpretation of the physical properties of the human head can be further concentrated upon the distinctly personal characteristics of the human face, which, as previously discussed, can be construed as a symbolic, microcosmic representation of the entire human person. Dante is particularly fascinated by the way in which the expressions of the human face and voice can be a vehicle for meaning and truth, since these are wholly unique features of the human form by which we usually recognise one another. His expression of these ideas in the *Paradiso* are not isolated novelties, however, but the culmination of an extended development of thought throughout his works. In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante previews the way in which the human face, when at its moments of richest expression, becomes the prime signifier of human emotion:

I said this because I bore so many of Love’s signs in my face that they could not be hidden. And when they asked me: “For whom had Love thus dealt with you?”, I looked at them with a smile and said nothing.²⁶

Later, in chapter XI, he goes on to say that “Anyone wanting to behold Love could have done so then by watching the quivering of my eyes.”²⁷ Likewise, in the *Convivio*, he declares that the face, particularly in the eyes and the mouth, is the primary means by which we express our individuation, and recognise individual qualities in others.²⁸ In the *Purgatorio* he gives the symbolism of the human face a particularly strong treatment, suggesting that in the shrunken faces of the gluttons one can read the very word “*omo*” (“man”).²⁹

²⁶ *Vita Nuova*, IV.

²⁷ *Vita Nuova*, XI.

²⁸ *Convivio*, 3,8: “Wherefore we see that in the Face of Man, where it fulfils its office more than in any other outward part, it works so subtly that, by making itself subtle therein as much as its material permits, it causes that no face is like another, because its utmost power over matter, which is dissimilar in almost all, is there brought into action; and because in the face the Souls work especially in two places, as if in those two places all the three Natures of the Soul had jurisdiction, that is, in the Eyes and in the Mouth, these it chiefly adorns, and there it spends its care to make all beautiful if it can. And in these two places I say that those pleasures of content appear, saying: ‘Seen in her eyes and in her smiling face;’ the which two places, by means of a beautiful comparison, may be designated the balconies of the woman who dwells in the house of the body, she being the Soul; because there, although veiled, as it were, the Soul often shows itself. The Soul shows itself so evidently in the eyes that it is possible to know its present passion if you look attentively.”

²⁹ See *Pur.* 23:31-33 – “*Parean l’occhiaie anella senza gemme: / chi nel viso de li uomini legge omo / ben avria quivi conosciuta l’emme.*” (“The sockets of their eyes seemed gemless rings, / and those who read Man’s ‘OMO’ in Man’s face / would clearly have seen ‘M’ in all of these.”)

Dante's conception of beatitude makes the claim that in Paradise every person, when restored to the full resurrection of their bodies, will be *more* of an individual than during their earthly existence. This distinctness of being, and rich individuation, is the "mark of the head" to which Dante refers in the opening of the *Paradiso*.³⁰ The human visage is used metaphorically when describing the various meteorological phenomenon Dante encounters in the heavens, as if to grant emphasis to the personal nature of such experiences. At the opening of Canto XIX he describes an infinitesimally small (and practically indescribable) instant of time in which Beatrice remains silent after her own speech (and then breaking into smiling and laughter), by comparing it to the known transitoriness of a certain astronomical phenomenon.³¹ In an interlude in that earlier speech, Dante describes how the action of the north wind, Boreas, blowing "*da qualla guancia*" ("from his milder cheek") freshens the air in precisely the same way that Dante's understanding has been "swept clean", again placing emphasis on the very personal nature of intellectual development. It is noteworthy that even in the highest moments of the *Paradiso* Dante will reach for images of the human face to give pictorial representation to his conceptions of divinity. This attention to our most individual elements finds its culmination in the final moments of the poem, where twice the fullness of identity to be found in the human face is shown to somehow reflect the nature of divinity itself. The "*luce eterna*" of God is said to "smile on its own being."³² Of course, the final image of divinity reveals "*la nostra effige*" – "our human form".³³ This ultimate expression of individuality extends not just to the human face *per se*, but to its specifically human acts of laughing and smiling.³⁴ In accord with its status as a *commedia*, references to "*riso*" ("laughter") and "*sorridere*" ("to smile") are used more frequently as the poem develops, culminating in the pure expressions of joy that radiate and flash through the Empyrean.³⁵

³⁰ See *Par.* 1:24. See also Davies, "World and Body: A Study in Dante's Cosmological Hermeneutics" in *Dante and the Human Body: Eight Essays*, p. 204: "Appropriately, it is in *Paradiso* that the relation between human body and cosmos is most manifest. The assimilation of embodied individuality into the celestial materiality of Paradise appears to preserve and even to intensify individuation."

³¹ See *Par.* 29:1-9.

³² *Par.* 33:126.

³³ *Par.* 33:131.

³⁴ Peter S. Hawkins, "All Smiles" in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, eds. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), passim, Davies, "Dante's *Commedia* and the Body of Christ" in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, pp. 205-210.

³⁵ Hawkins, "All Smiles" in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, pp. 53-54. There are no references to *ridere* in the *Inferno*. The *Purgatorio* famously re-introduces the poem's audience to laughter in the opening image of the *cantica*, where it is nature herself who "laughs" (see *Pur.* 1:19-21). *Purgatorio* contains a total of 10 references to *ridere*; *Paradiso* holds 20 references.

In the Empyrean, Dante surprises us with a return to distinct human personhood. Where a dissolution into perfect luminosity may be expected, the poet displays a collection of personages immediately named and recognisable. Their faces have become the key markers of their individuation. In the highest of heavens, the souls have become “all face”.³⁶ The pattern of increasing disembodiment of the blessed, and their representation in organised, emblematic arrangements of lights, is now dissolved into a reinstatement of the recognisable individuality of the human person. It could naturally be assumed that the pattern of continuous disembodiment evident throughout the *Paradiso* should reach its denouement in the complete dissolution of the human form into pure radiance. Yet the narrative sequence that details the pilgrim’s experience in the realm of the Empyrean shows a surprising return to the common recognisability of human features, and in particular the identifying characteristics of the head.

That these features should partake in the fullness of beatitude is previewed by the account of the heavenly host at the commencement of Canto XXXI. The angels are described primarily in terms of the fundamental experience of human recognition: “*Le face tutte avean di fiamma viva*” (“Their faces all were bright with living flame”).³⁷ The wonderment of such a sight, however, quickly gives over to astonishment as the full vision of the human assembly is revealed, and the corresponding physical reaction of stunned silence from the pilgrim matches the silent display of the blessed – “*Certo tra esso e ‘l gaudio mi facea / libito non udire e starmi muto.*” (“Indeed, between that shock and solemn joy, / I, gladly, did not hear or speak a thing.”)³⁸ – in an exact imitation of the intensified silence required for proper entry into the state of full spiritual contemplation. The pilgrim’s initial response is also concentrated to the face: he undertakes an extended and detailed gaze that again imitates the motions of the stars, since the assembled souls are arranged in a series of concentric circles.³⁹ Further, the souls so witnessed are imagined purely in terms of their human visage:

*Vedea visi a carità suadi,
d'altrui lume fregiati e di suo riso,
e atti ornate di tutte onestadi.*

³⁶ See *Par.* 32:48, 32:99.

³⁷ *Par.* 31:13.

³⁸ *Par.* 31:41-42.

³⁹ *Par.* 31:47-48: “*meneva io li occhi per li gradi, / mo sù, mo giù e mo recirculando.*” (“I drew my eyes through every step and grade / now up, now lower, circling all around.”)

I saw there faces swayed to *caritas*,
 arrayed in their own smiles and light not theirs,
 and all they did adorned with dignity.

(*Par. XXXI*, 49-51).

The brilliant and ever-escalating radiance that Dante has repeatedly experienced in the countenance of Beatrice is here mirrored in the multitude of the elect. The face, particularly in its distinctly expressive components of eyes and smile, becomes *the person*. It is the particular and revelatory nature of these elements of the human form that secure our identity even in a realm where it might be supposed that individuality is erased by the intense luminosity accompanying the endpoint of the progressing attenuation of our corporeality.⁴⁰ Or, as it has been expressed:

The flash of the eyes and the smile are bodily gestures and thus also maintain the particularity of human identity at the very moment when the body attains its highest semiotic saturation as a living sign of the infinite and celestial cosmos which lies beyond itself.⁴¹

This concentrated attention on the particularities of facial expression is continued and deepened in Dante's initial impression of his new, as yet un-named guide to the Empyrean:

*Diffuso era per li occhi e per le gene
 di benigna letizia, in atto pio
 quale a tenero padre so convene.*

Around his countenance and eyes there flowed
 the generosity of joy, his look
 a gentle father's, firm and virtuous.

(*Par. XXXI*, 61-63).

This is the initial description of Dante's final guide through his spiritual journey, St Bernard of Clairvaux. Yet the extended exchange that separates this vision from the self-declaration of the one so viewed serves to amplify the power of the physical presence of this individual,

⁴⁰ Davies, "World and Body: A Study in Dante's Cosmological Hermeneutics" in *Dante and the Human Body: Eight Essays*, p. 207: "It is perhaps relatively uncontentious to assert that one of the key thematic centres of the *Commedia* is the complex of ideas around the transformation of the human body, involving the notion of human flesh as communicating light and as being itself progressively attenuated as it approaches the divine source of heavenly, cosmic light, which is "*l'amor che move il sole a l'altre stelle*" ["the love which moves the sun and the other stars"; *Paradiso*, XXXIII. 145]."

⁴¹ Ibid.

who is presented to the reader here purely in terms of the distinct features of his visage. It is implicit in the text, however, that Dante does not immediately recognise his new companion, since the wonderment that comes with full recognition is said to occur *after* Bernard has named himself some 40 lines after his initial appearance. Yet Dante compares his reaction at this moment to one who had journeyed from the edge of Christendom to view the famous veil of St. Veronica in Rome. This is a recapitulation of the centrality of the human visage, since the veil was said to carry the impression of *the face*, the image of the crucified Christ. The veil, in this sense, is “all face”.

In Platonic terms, the *Paradiso* makes a general move analogous to the notion that the souls are born in the realm of the stars, and continually seek to return there. The souls that have become divested of bodily representation have completed a return to origins, and have become the original portion of their physical form, since Plato’s myth, whatever we may make of its apparent playfulness, suggests that the human being is initially created as a cranial form, and later grows extremities only in order to satisfactorily support the operation of its primary portion.⁴² Seen in the context of this tradition, the souls in Dante’s Empyrean have become “all head”, or more specifically “all face”. Far from being reduced to a lesser version of one’s self, the beatified are seen to be purified to the essential elements of their personhood; since in the distinctive features of face, eyes and voice are found the strongest markers of individuation.

Of course, it is the eyes to which he devotes more interest than any other part of the human anatomy, a practice that the *Paradiso* displays in full. In accord with these interests is Dante’s near-obsession with the nature and behaviour of light. The *Paradiso*, at one level, is a journey through ever more brilliant and refined light, where light is represented as both astronomical phenomenon, and a metaphor for understanding, just as “seeing” for Dante is as much about the “second sight” of the mind’s eye as it is the physics of optics as rendered to the physical eye.⁴³ The cosmology of Dante’s world, so different from our own, dictated that

⁴² But this reading of the structure of the *Paradiso* should also be understood in contrast to Dante’s treatment, in the fourth canto of the *cantica*, of Plato’s doctrine of the astral origins of human souls. Here, Dante attempts to accommodate the Platonic idea of astral origin as a metaphorical expression of the supposed influence of heavenly bodies on human temperaments, and refutes the idea that astral influence can be called upon as mitigation against responsibility for individual human actions. See *Par.* 4:49-63.

⁴³ There are 82 references to “*luce*”, “light”, in the *Paradiso*, compared to just 5 in the *Inferno*.

the realm we now call “space” was in fact filled with music and light. From earth, man looked out, not into darkness, but *through the* darkness of the earth’s shadow, into light. Of course, the climax of the journey through Paradise is a vision even beyond light, a sight so singular and intense that it is seen by the pure intellect alone, a seeing of the highest form. A complete analysis of Dante’s treatment of the beautiful symbolism inherent in the human eyes cannot be encompassed here, but consider even the brief but potent reference to the eyes at the conclusion to Canto XXII, where the pilgrim arrives in the circle of the fixed constellations. He makes a multi-layered allusion to the possibilities of “bodily astronomy” by comparing the twin stars of the constellation Gemini with the eyes of Beatrice, rhyming *Gemelli* with *belli* in the two-line rhyme that ties off the Canto.

Before proceeding to further possible parallels between the mood of the *Paradiso* and the workings of the human head, it is important to register that despite its apparent otherworldliness and marked difference in tone when compared with the other parts of the poem, it nevertheless shares with them the distinct structural quality of being a microcosmic representation of the whole work, even as it does so in a particularly paradoxical fashion. The *Paradiso*, while attempting to bring to fruition the spiritual search that has underpinned the story of the *Commedia*, contains some startling paradoxes, and it can be stated that *in toto* the *Paradiso*, like the mind that works inside the spherical human head, is essentially paradoxical.⁴⁴ This is foreshadowed very early in the *cantica*, where Dante considers whether or not the visionary journey of St. Paul was made in the body. The “action” of the *Paradiso* is both strictly limited (in a physical sense) and expansive beyond imagining – the physical movement of the pilgrim is akin to a form of disembodiment, since he is completely passive throughout the entire process of ascent that is prepared for him, while this movement itself takes him beyond all known limits of physical human experience.⁴⁵ Yet the attempt at not resolving but sublimating these difficulties is made by surrendering human logic to the traditional celebration of the “incomprehensible” nature of the central paradox of the Christian faith – the Incarnation.⁴⁶ This paradoxical quality of the work is no less applicable to the structure of the *Paradiso*, when viewed in terms of the broad analogy of this thesis. Despite the unearthly setting of the *cantica*, and the supposed immateriality of its inhabitants,

⁴⁴ Jacoff, “An Introduction to *Paradiso*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp. 220-221.

⁴⁵ Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, p. 757n.

⁴⁶ See Par. 2:31-43; Freccero, “An Introduction to the *Paradiso*” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 218; Jacoff, “An Introduction to *Paradiso*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, p. 221.

the *Paradiso* nevertheless displays a strong tendency to strict and hierarchical organisation (a quality it shares with the earlier *cantiche*) that invites structural analogies to be assigned to it.⁴⁷

The *Paradiso* is a microcosmic version of the *Commedia* as a whole, since its structure of ascending virtues and categorisation of exemplars of moral rectitude can be said to contain a general representation of the tripartite arrangement of the human person, although the exact qualities that define the assortment of the blessed into the various spheres of heaven are less defined than can be observed in *Inferno* or *Purgatorio*. A key point of difference, however, is that the “inverted man” of the first two *cantiche* has now been restored to the proper “upright man” that signifies the original place, according to the Christian story, of Man in creation before the Fall, even while the ascription of virtues to planetary bodies certainly borrows more heavily from classical cosmology than any identifiably Christian source. The arrangement of the virtues can be understood as correlative to the life of man, since the course of a human life is constructed of various phases (infancy, adolescence, young adulthood, maturity, old age) that correspond to the particular qualities said to be characteristic of the heavenly bodies, a feature that is often indicated by the very names of the planets themselves. For example, the spirits who failed in the vows reside in the sphere of the inconstant moon (lunatic?); the spirits moved by love of earthly glory are *mercurial*; the spirits inclined to sexual love are *venereal*; the courageous warriors are *martial*; the contemplatives are *saturnine*. In this reading, the journey through the spheres is, like the growth into moral maturity indicated in the earlier reference from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, a “growing up” of the person from youth and juvenility into old age and wisdom. In any case, the examples provided by Dante seem to suggest that a reversal of the schemas used in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* has taken place – the lower spheres of heaven are reserved for those who were marked by the baser passions, particularly the erotic appetites; the central ranges contain those who displayed either a proper control over the lower passions or the public exercise of a correctly-ordered will, such as the courageous warriors or just rulers; while the highest of the “physical” spheres of the planetary bodies is the preserve of the contemplatives who were specifically concerned with the forsaking of the material world in the pursuit of a full development of *mente*. The *cantica*’s arrangement thereby provides a broad illustration of the proper uprightness of the human form when rightly ordered.

⁴⁷ Jacoff, “An Introduction to *Paradiso*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, p. 210.

Thus the journey of the *Paradiso* mirrors the construction of man, growing up into the “head” of the planets as it moves through the hierarchy of the heavenly bodies, the human body, and broadly speaking, through the structure of a society that itself was modelled on the two structures of body and heaven. The sphere of Saturn is, in physical terms, the outermost of the bodies whose motion is of the “different” according to the Platonic conceptions as found in the *Timaeus*, as opposed to the perfectly regular background motion of the fixed stars and, in Dante’s amended model, the turning of the invisible Primum Mobile. To go beyond Saturn, then, is to go into the realm of the purely metaphysical, where the perfect motion of the eighth sphere, that of the fixed stars, and the accompanying three theological virtues attributed to the supra-human nature of the Saints, is naturally *beyond* comparison to the human form; since to the medieval Christian both the inconstant nature of the earthly body and the four temporal virtues assimilated from classical culture occupied the *lower* strata of their hierarchical arrangements. It is for this reason that Dante’s examination of the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and charity – takes place in the circle of the fixed stars, since the “fixedness” of the stars represents the changeless nature of the gifts of the Spirit, as opposed to the merely human, changeable nature of the classical virtues. The sphere of Saturn represents the limit, metaphorically speaking, of human temporality.

Furthermore, the author makes it explicit that the content of the *Paradiso* is in fact a self-declared analogy; that what is presented to the pilgrim, and thereby the reader, in the progression through the heavenly spheres is a “show”, a prolonged analogical demonstration, that serves to display the true nature of blessedness through a series of symbolic and metaphorical representations. And, it is the only *cantica* of the poem to do so, as the descriptions of the terrain on which unfolds both the *Inferno* and, to a lesser degree, the *Purgatorio*, are taken to be as literal. The *Paradiso* makes a step away from this, claiming that the entire work is an account of a “fiction”. Since the entire *Commedia* is designed to be read at various levels of meaning, including that of extended metaphorical representation of the journey of the soul to God, and, in this analysis, a journey through the human form, the *Paradiso* is the *Commedia*’s closest version of miniaturised self-representation. Yet the *Paradiso*, expansive and all-encompassing, is also a *macrocosmic* version of the *Commedia*, in that it attempts to bring together and consummate the attempt at entire containment that has been the goal of the poem from its very beginning. The *Paradiso* in this sense contains

everything, just as the heavens are said to envelop and contain the earth. It is the goal anticipated since the very earliest lines of the *Commedia*, and the privileged vantage point from which pilgrim and reader can look back with satisfaction upon all that has gone before. In this way, the final part of the poem provides the complex and paradoxical element by which the poem's success, and that of the pilgrim's journey, can be judged. The *Paradiso* also encapsulates the entire poem in that it is here in the final *cantica* that the pilgrim is provided with a series of explanations that complete his understanding of all he has hitherto experienced in his journey.⁴⁸ *Paradiso* is the *Commedia* in entirety as much as it "contains" the entire poem, in a way that clearly cannot be said of the other two *cantiche*. The plotting of the poem must have included at least a schematic outline of its structure and organisation. It is also, strictly speaking, the point from which the poem begins, since the narrative action is precipitated by an intervention from Heaven to rescue the stranded pilgrim.⁴⁹ *Paradiso* is thus the "Alpha and Omega" of the poem. It contains all.⁵⁰

These analogies with the physical nature of the human head can be satisfactorily accommodated, however limited their application may be. The full development of this analogical rendering of the *Paradiso*, however, can only be completed with due attention to Dante's extended contemplation upon the *operations* of the head, particularly the nature of the human mind – *mente*. For in accord with the immateriality and expansiveness of the heavens with which the *Paradiso* concerns itself, the human mind is respected as the highest, least physical and most noble part of the human complex. The *Paradiso* is a meditation upon the nature of mind, climaxing in the treatment of the highest form of human activity – the silent and concentrated contemplation of the divine. It is also an exploration of the experiences that lie beyond the human capacity for active cognition – the apparent privilege of being granted pure intellectual vision. The analogy that compares the spherical heavens to the spherical human head can be extended to include a parallel between the Christian Heaven – to Dante a realm that lies beyond all spatiality and temporality – to the nature and workings of our minds. Heaven is mind in that mind is the only insubstantial part of the human complex. It is paradoxically somehow both simultaneously ever-present and non-existent. Like mind, the *Paradiso*, and the realm of the blessed about which it purports to provide an approximate description, is beyond all but contains all.

⁴⁸ Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, p. 757n.

⁴⁹ See *Inf.* 2:52-126.

⁵⁰ Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, pp. 757-761n.

It stands as an unresolvable complication that the content of the *Paradiso* is paradoxically said to lie outside of the poet's own descriptive or imaginative powers (despite the many inventive metaphors and linguistic innovations the *cantica* employs), for he freely admits that the task of adequately translating into words the full nature of his vision is beyond his abilities; and that all the various souls described as residing in the concentric, hierarchical spheres of the heavens do not actually exist in those places, but are all simultaneously present in the unified domain of the Empyrean, a place that has been described as the "head" of heaven⁵¹ – the display of progressive hierarchy is merely the best way that the visitor can approach an understanding of the true nature of communal, eternal bliss in the company of God. In all of this, imagination and understanding, for both author and reader, are pressed to their limits, and within that idea may rest the key to a full development of our analogy – namely, that the representations of immateriality in the *Paradiso* cannot escape the need for them to be expressed in terms of spatiality. Further, the act of reading the *Paradiso* involves one in a form of mind-travel, since it asks its audience to conceive of that which, at least in Dante's time, lay outside of human experience, such as the view of earth from the heavens, or illuminated letters written in the sky. Dante allows the reader to achieve this by the employment of increasingly abstract but richly detailed imagery, so that the essential meaning of the symbols or analogies so used are intelligible to the higher faculties of our own *mente*.

It may be useful to see that the entire journey of the *Commedia* can be interpreted as occurring in the human head. For finally it is the poetic creation of one man, who claims that he constructed the work not only through his own hand, but with aid of divine inspiration, which must reach man through his intellect. Dante is, in any final assessment, neither a theologian nor a philosopher, but a poet. And poets, after all, *create*. They bring into being, through word, that which they can imagine. We know that the entire poem occurs, as it were, "in his head", and at the commencement of the *Paradiso* the poet is careful to remind us that the text before us is somehow both an account of a past event – a direct experience of the divine – and the product of a limited human mind:

*Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende
fu' io, e vidi cose che ridere*

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 721n.

*né sa né puo chi di là sù discende;
 perché appressando sé al suo disire,
 nostro intelletto sì profonda tanto,
 che dietro la memoria non può ire.
 Veramente quant' io del regno santo
 ne la mia mente potei far tesoro,
 sarà ora material del mio canto.*

High in that sphere which takes from Him most light
 I was – I was! – and saw things there that no one
 Who descends knows how or ever can repeat.
 For, drawing near to what it most desires,
 Our intellect so sinks into the deep
 No memory can follow it that far.
 As much, though, truly of that holy realm
 As I could keep as treasure in my mind
 Will now become the substance of my song.

(*Par. I*, 4-12).

We are frequently reminded that, *in its own limited and imperfect representation of a higher truth*, the *Paradiso* is a mere approximation that in itself imitates and displays the limited, imperfect nature of the (fallen) human mind. The mind is fallible, misdirects from the good, cannot always be fully controlled, or cannot properly contain all that it confronts.⁵² This is one reason for the poet's frequent employment of the so-called *inexpressibility topos*, a device by which the author professes his inadequacies (and then ironically proceeds to do that which he claims he could not do), before that which confronts him. The poet's plea for grace purely at the level of artistic operation is a reminder of the limited, fallible nature of his mind when placed before the perfect Mind:

*O somma luce che tanto ti levi
 da' concetti mortali, a la mia mente
 ripresta un poco di quel che parevi,...*

You raise yourself so far, O highest light,
 above our dying thoughts! Now lend once more
 some little part of what it seemed you were,...

(*Par. XXXIII*, 67-69).

⁵² See *Par.* 8:142-144; 14:4; 14:79-81; 19:85-87; 21:100-102;

The *Paradiso*, as both culmination and encapsulation of the entire poem, reflects the manner in which the heavens represent the totality of the cosmos, and the human head, particularly the operation of *mind*, is the means by which we attain any sense of total containment of human experience. To repeat a simplification of the *Commedia*'s narrative as it can be compared to the tripartite arrangement of the human form, it can be said that in experiential terms Dante *senses* in Hell, *feels* in Purgatory, and *thinks* in Paradise. Therefore the journey is a progressive escalation through the faculties of the human complex. In the *Paradiso*, the pilgrim is lead to "think his way to God". He makes his way through a series of mental exchanges, a continuous and intensify meeting of minds that will culminate in the ultimate Mind of God. In this way, the journey becomes a gradual attenuation of physical form and sensation, with a simultaneous heightening of mind, into a final, purely intellectual experience of ultimate reality, where the "journey of mind", represented metaphorically by an astronomical voyage, is said to travel not only to the outward sphere of the fixed stars, but *beyond* it to a dimensionless state.

Dante shows little interest, as we do, in a mechanical brain. He mentions the brain, *cervello*, only twice in the entire *Commedia*.⁵³ It is the functioning of mind, *mente*, that attracts his attention, and Dante refers to *mente* in the *Paradiso* far more often than in the previous *cantiche*. Indeed, in terms of the human anatomy as storehouse of metaphor, the *Paradiso* demonstrates an increasing sense of disembodiment, even as the meaning and experience of the reunion of body and soul is explored and anticipated by the residents of Heaven.⁵⁴ In the circle of the Moon, the pilgrim has his first encounters with the souls of the blessed, and describes seeing the indistinct outline of other human beings, like a reflected image.⁵⁵ By the time he reaches the spheres of Mercury and Venus the respective residents have been subsumed into a particular mode of being whereby they appear to retain the faintest vestiges of human form but are almost entirely enveloped in light of ever-increasing radiance.⁵⁶ Once in the Heaven of the Sun, the forms of the blessed are dissolved into pure luminosity, and one of its chief residents, Dominic, is described purely in terms of his metaphysical component: "*e come fu create, fu repleta / sì la sua mente di viva vertute*" ("And mind in him no sooner

⁵³ See *Inf.* 32:129; *Pur.* 33:79-81.

⁵⁴ Chiarenza, "The Imageless Vision and Dante's 'Paradiso'" in *Dante*, p. 94; Jacoff, "An Introduction to *Paradiso*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, p. 213.

⁵⁵ See *Par.* 3:10-21.

⁵⁶ See *Par.* 5:106-139; 8:16-45.

took on form / than mind was filled so full of living strength.”)⁵⁷ Throughout the *cantica* images of the lower body disappear almost completely, and references to the torso and its various parts are progressively left behind, in favour of a new emphasis on the metaphysical components of the human complex. It should come as no surprise that the final reference to the human form in the *Commedia* is that of the pilgrim’s *mente* being wholly overcome at the final vision of God.⁵⁸

How might we say that the *Paradiso* is a journey of *mente*? Dante clearly draws upon the literary tradition of the physical journey as an image of intellectual and spiritual progress, most notably Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* and St Bonaventure’s *Journey of the Mind to God*. One surprise in the *Paradiso* is that Dante the pilgrim still has much to learn, and the various meetings with the residents of Heaven involve him in the re-ordering or expanding of his still-deficient thinking. The *Paradiso* is often considered the most “theological” volume of the poem, and readers can become bogged down in the extended philosophical discourses and speeches that occupy so much of its content, which seems static after the tension and dramatic action in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. An entire sphere of heaven is reserved for the famous philosophers and teachers from history, and of course these are Christian philosophers, for to Dante there is, ultimately, no true wisdom that is not divine wisdom, and in this he makes a clear distinction between the blessing of divine wisdom and the mere operation of human rationality. Dante as pilgrim is called upon to display and defend his knowledge on the three theological virtues, as though he was participating in a university examination (although the outcome of such questioning is certain). Even to the end, where Dante discovers the true arrangement of the angels in the Primum Mobile, he is still learning. The theme of wisdom, particularly the act of continually refining human knowledge so that it fully accords with divine wisdom, is a central concern throughout Dante’s ascent.

That the workings of *mente* are foremost in Dante’s thinking can be demonstrated by his use of this term throughout the *Commedia*. As the poem develops, the employment of *mente* escalates in both frequency and purpose.⁵⁹ The damned in the *Inferno* display a closing off or irreversible distortion in their operation of *mente*. The hoarders and spendthrifts, for

⁵⁷ *Par.* 12:58-59.

⁵⁸ See *Par.* 33:139-141.

⁵⁹ There are 21 instances of *mente* in the *Inferno*; 33 in *Purgatorio*; and 52 in *Paradiso*. Likewise, there are 6 instances of *intellecto* in the *Inferno*; and 12 in both *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

example, are described as having “*fuor guerci / sì de la mente*” (“such strabismic minds”)⁶⁰. Dante frequently states that a consequence of sin is the inability to rationally comprehend the true nature of the divine grace from which they have chosen to remove themselves. The *Purgatorio*, in accord with the physical experience of its inhabitants, shows a new freeing up and re-ordering of the mind that, while still obscured by the residual effects of sin, is now at least ready to be re-directed and cleansed. The *Paradiso* purports to be an account of the complete transformation of mind; the individual is now fit to be completely harmonised with the divine will or mind, for Dante says that, in this respect, God *is* Mind.⁶¹ The *Paradiso* is also imitative of *mente* in that it can be understood in terms of its overtly paradoxical nature, for the human mind is itself, in some regards, the greatest paradox of all. The mind can be both immensely active or at complete rest; intensely focused, or wandering; able, or incompetent; it can be that part of the human complex that most resembles the divine, or a mere attendant to the body’s physical desires. The mind can contain all, or nothing at all.

Georges Poulet has demonstrated that in a proper consideration of divine eternity the human mind must force itself beyond its normal level of operation, and specifically that it must simultaneously “project” itself into two different and seemingly opposite directions, since in a key traditional understanding God was said to be, metaphorically speaking, both a limitless sphere and an infinitesimal point.⁶² Employing this understanding, Poulet points to Dante’s opening image in *Paradiso* XIV as a metaphorical illustration of how the operations of human thought imitate the nature of the Divine Mind:

*Dal centro al cerchia, e sì dal cerchio al centro
movesi l’acqua in un ritondo vaso,
secondo ch’è percosso fuori o dentro:*

Centre to circle or circle to centre:
water in a round container moves like that,
depending where the rim is struck, inside or out.

⁶⁰ *Inf.* 7:40-41.

⁶¹ See *Par.* 18:118-119 – “*Per ch’io prego la mente in che s’inizia / tuo moto e tua virtute*” (“So I beseech the Mind, in which begins / the motion and the strength you have”; *Par.* 19:53-54 – “*Dunque vostra veduta, che convene / esser alcun de’ raggi de la mente / di che tutte le cose son ripiene*” (“Therefore, the powers of sight that you possess – / which must exist as rays from that one Mind / with which all things what are are brimming full –”). Dante had previously employed this notion in the *Vita Nuova*, XIX, when contemplating the physical beauty of Beatrice: “To the all-knowing mind an angel prays: / ‘Lord, in the world a miracle proceeds,...’”

⁶² Georges Poulet, “The Metamorphoses of the Circle” in *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Freccero (Galveston: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 153.

(*Par.* XIV, 1-3).

This is part of an ascending series of images in which God, and the human mind that comprehends Him, can be compared to both an outer circle (or arrangement of concentric circles) and a still, single point.⁶³ The generation of the natural phenomenon from which the metaphor is drawn is produced by the effect of external influence upon an exactly circular container, whereby a perfect image of movement from perimeter to centre, and return movement from centre to perimeter, is produced. Dante says that this double movement of water within a circular container is brought to mind by the way in which the voices of the blessed move about him, from the circle of philosophers about him and the still “point” of Beatrice beside him. For our purposes, it is significant that Dante here reaches for a specific image of *containment*. All existence is, in Dante’s cosmology, contained. It is held within a definable physical limit. But the generative force that impels all movement within the cosmos comes from without. Likewise, thought itself can be understood as existing both within the physical bounds of the human head, and in a place that is “outside” all spatiality.

The image of God as the “mind” of the universe can be found throughout the *Paradiso*. As early as the second Canto Beatrice embarks on a long speech that delights in the workings of the physical world, and refers to the originator and motivator of creation as “*la mente profonda*” (“that deep mind”)⁶⁴ that grants form and movement to the universe. Dante invokes the Platonic image of the creator as divine craftsman, who constructs the cosmos from the image of the perfect cosmos already held within his mind. This creation is brought into being and sustained by the radiation of angelic intelligences who “move” the order according to the will of its designer. In one of Dante’s favourite images, he posits that the universe is like a waxed tablet which receives the “stamp” of its maker, thus affording to the artefact a permanent sign of the artisan. In a parallel move, Dante imagines that the “deep mind” manifests itself in a physical form as mind would animate the workings of the body, suggesting through anatomical analogy that the universe can be understood as the “body of God”, and that its multiplicity and various virtues correspond to the parts of the human form in their separateness but combined purpose. The seven spheres of the heavens are described as “*Questi organi del mondo*” (“These living organs of the world”)⁶⁵, and a comparison is

⁶³ See, as example, *Par.* 17:17-18 – “*mirando il punto / a cui tutti li tempi son presenti*,” (“wondering on / the point at which all times are present time.”)

⁶⁴ *Par.* 2:131.

⁶⁵ *Par.* 2:121.

drawn between the angelic intelligences that diffuse the power of God and the multiplicitous nature of the human form: “*per differenti membra e conformate*” (“diffuses and resolves through different limbs”)⁶⁶ God is Mind, perfect and wholly indivisible; Universe is Body, imperfect yet stamped with the seal of the *mente* of its creator, multiple yet unified in purpose. These images are repeated in the discourse on divine providence in canto VIII, where again the manifestations of the divine will are given an anatomical flavour: “*questi corpi grandi*.” (“these cosmic limbs.”)⁶⁷; while God is again the perfect mind: “*la mente ch’è da sé perfetta*” (“that mind, which of itself is whole”)⁶⁸ The “wholeness” of the divine mind is here demonstrated by its full knowledge of both the “way” and “how” all things are purposefully placed within the cosmic order.

The intellectual component of man, that part which most imitates the immaterial nature of God, particularly if we consider God “as mind”, is an especial privilege granted to him alone, separating him in this one crucial respect from the rest of creation, even though in his physical being he shares common properties with all other creatures. The proper orientation and purpose of this intellectual faculty is, in its final and full operation, the knowledge of God. The development of one’s *mente*, then, whether in direct contemplation of spiritual truths or merely in the furthering of one’s knowledge, is an approach to God. If God is primarily thought of as a mind, or *The Mind*, then the act of bettering or expanding one’s mind is to take a step, however small, along the journey to God. The narrative of the *Paradiso* relies on spatial and specifically cosmological metaphors to portray the journey to God as a combination of continuous forward momentum towards a defined goal and an ever-increasing circularity of movement – the properly ordered mind is seen to be both singularly focussed and capable of immense expansion. The final state of complete and harmonious union with the divine involves the perfect ordering of one’s *mente* with that of the Divine Mind, reached through a series of intellectual encounters in which the pilgrim’s *mente* is progressively refined and enlarged.

The *Paradiso* also reflects an attitude that says we are most rational when we make a contribution to a collaborative understanding of the universe. The development of *mente* is not a solitary undertaking (despite the notion that the “enclosed” nature of monastic imagery

⁶⁶ *Par.* 2:134.

⁶⁷ *Par.* 8:99.

⁶⁸ *Par.* 8:101.

provides a suitable metaphor for the human head) but is part of our entering into the fullness of relationships with others. We may understand truth by participating in it, wisdom being an organic quality in which we experience growth and completion. If the ultimate expression of the development of mind is the perfect alignment of our intellect with that of God, then it must be the case that any similar involvement with another, however limited, is a step towards this perfection. The harmonious interaction of our minds with the minds of others in this life is an earthly preview, a “shadowy preface”, to use one of Dante’s terms, for the seemingly boundless and effortless intellectual exchanges we will enjoy in eternity. The journey through paradise is presented as a series of just these exchanges, where pleasure and delight define the mood of discussion, and where despite the pilgrim being challenged to continually strengthen and refine the powers of his *mente*, the outcome of such testing is never in doubt.⁶⁹

In accord with the concept that life is a journey by which we undertake a progressive development, refinement and expansion of our *mente* in an attempt to align it with the Divine Mind, Dante upholds that contemplative activity is the highest of human pursuits, for in traditional Christian understandings of these matters it is contemplation by which we most closely imitate God and which brings us closer to him. Whatever analogical arrangement we might find most satisfactory in regards to the population of the *Paradiso*, Dante is clear in stating that the highest planetary sphere, that of Saturn, is reserved for the highest human exemplars of the pursuit of divine wisdom, the Contemplatives. These men who devoted their earthly lives to the things of the next world are, in Dante’s metaphorical schema, rewarded with placement furthest away from earth and closest to God. This confirms that the concentrated employment of *mente*, mind, is the highest of all human endeavours, situated above all those primarily concerned with an application of the “active” life, of which the contemplative life is the necessary accompaniment and “head”. Intellectual activity is the highest of human faculties, and of these, contemplation of the divine is the highest expression of man’s intellectual life. A contrast exists between the body in time and space, and our share of inborn “intelligence” which is a mirror of eternity. The intellectual life is potentially superhuman, and the apex of the intellectual life – unending contemplation of the truth, is superhuman.⁷⁰ The opening sequence of *Paradiso* XXI demonstrates that moving into the

⁶⁹ Hawkins, *Dante’s Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*, p. 233.

⁷⁰ Kenelm Foster, “Religion and Philosophy in Dante” in *The Mind of Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 67.

realm of the Contemplatives in the sphere of Saturn involves an experience of a qualitatively different nature from that which has gone before. The seriousness of the contemplative's occupation is demonstrated by Beatrice's singular refusal to smile and the marked silence of the sphere's inhabitants.⁷¹

The contemplatives can be said to be "all head" or "all mind", since their lives were devoted to the cultivation of mind at the expense of both material possession and physical pleasures. The particular traditional virtue assigned to Saturn is that of Temperance, which involves the restraint of appetites and emotions, a precise correspondence to the way that the contemplative can be said to have "disembodied" by way of separation from human society and participation in a rigidly disciplined asceticism. To make a more explicit comparison, Saturn was considered the "cold and dry" planet, paralleling the austerity, celibacy, and typical old age of the contemplative. Further, the normal state of the head is to be likewise "cold and dry". An obvious feature of a human person in a state of illness is that their head becomes hot and moist while the abdomen suffers chills, an inversion of the normal status in which the abdomen is warm and damp while the head is cool and dry.

In the depiction of Saturn as the realm of the contemplatives, Dante turns to the monastic world for both his imagery and human representatives.⁷² This is to be expected, since the world of the cloister, where the contemplative can undertake a willing detachment from the demands of material existence and devote themselves to the development of *mente* through study, meditation and prayer, is, in its structure and function, an earthly representation of Paradise.⁷³ It was the place where one could come closest to a true knowledge of God. The monastery is an earthly prefacing of eternal beatitude. The physical nature of the two entities – monastery and heaven – invite close comparison, since both are closed and self-contained homes of the blessed, where the arrangements of hierarchical order and the unification of diverse elements are seen to reflect one in the other.⁷⁴ The descriptions of monastic life by St. Benedict in Canto XXII demonstrate how the transmission of civilised values and the

⁷¹ See *Par.* 21:3, 58-60.

⁷² For an overview of Dante's treatment of the various Christian monastic order throughout the *Paradiso*, see Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, pp. 721-725n.

⁷³ The word *cloister* derives from the Latin *claustrum* (enclosure), emphasising that enclosedness and self-containment are essential qualities of the monastic life.

⁷⁴ It also worth noting that in the sphere of Saturn, the two monastic leaders who give extended speeches, Peter Damian and Benedict of Nursia, both comment upon the mountain-top location of their monasteries (respectively, Mount Catria and Monte Cassino), emphasising again the distinct separateness and elevation of the monastic vocation which is matched by the symbolism of the planet Saturn. See *Par.* 21:106-110, 22:37-45.

sustenance of communal order are furthered by the monastic model. The intimacy, contentment, and assurance of personal identity experienced in the cloister is conveyed through Benedict's introduction to Dante of those with whom he shared the contemplative pursuits.⁷⁵ As has been noted, the entire *Paradiso* may be seen as a journey through the world of monastic life.⁷⁶ The first character Dante-pilgrim encounters is the "failed" nun Piccarda Donati, placed in the sphere of the Moon, which houses those regarded as being inconstant in vows.⁷⁷ His final encounter is with the great monastic leader and preacher, St. Bernard of Clairvaux – "*quel contemplante*" ("the contemplative")⁷⁸ – who guides the pilgrim to the very brink of the ultimate vision.⁷⁹

In *Paradiso* XXI, the Italian bishop and reformer Peter Damian exemplifies the immaterial nature of *mente* with the content of his third address to Dante. He speaks of the hermitage in which he lived, as "*è consecrato un ermo, / che suole esser disposto a sola latria*" ("a consecrated cell / devoted, once, to God's unending praise."⁸⁰ The "consecrated cell" – set apart from the body of society, silent, self-contained, and devoted to contemplative practice – evokes an image of the human head that holds the workings of *mente*. He remarks upon the physical privations that accompany the contemplative life as being represented by the simple purity of pressed olive oil, a substance also comparable to *mente* in its nature as an *essence*. Further, he assures his listener that despite such apparent neediness of body the contemplative life of *mente* was entirely fulfilling: "*lievemente passava caldi e geli, / contento ne' pensier contemplativi*." ("that I lived lightly through both heat and chill, / contented with contemplative intent.")⁸¹ The rhythm, alliteration and recapitulation of this second line, which has *pensier* ("thought") at its centre, is in itself highly suggestive of the satisfying self-containment of the monastic life.⁸² Dante is careful to point out, however, that the contemplative life, no matter how intently sought after or practiced, does not in itself lead to the beatific vision. For the experience of direct vision of the divine is granted to those specifically elected, and cannot be reached by mere human effort, no matter how intense or sustained. The human mind, while the highest state of being in the created order, is

⁷⁵ See *Par.* 22:46-48.

⁷⁶ Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*, p. 229.

⁷⁷ See *Par.* 3:34 ff.

⁷⁸ *Par.* 32:1.

⁷⁹ See *Par.* 31:94 ff.

⁸⁰ *Par.* 21:110-111.

⁸¹ *Par.* 21:116-117.

⁸² Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*, p. 233.

nonetheless still far short of the condition of mind enjoyed by the pure intelligences (and indeed at a climactic point in the penultimate canto the angels are described as “*menti sante*” (“holy intellects”).⁸³ The human mind is in constant need of divinisation.⁸⁴ The passive participation in the state of *visio intellectualis* then is a form of bridge (or, as Dante symbolises it, a ladder) between the heights of contemplative thought and the rapture of beatific vision.⁸⁵

The degree to which the contemplatives know God is clearly of a magnitude beyond what others experience. The refining and dedicating of one’s mind to the reception of divine truths is a discipline to be practised, confirming *mente* as a faculty that can enjoy a form of organic growth. The contemplative life is a disciplined preparation for the beatific vision.⁸⁶ The nature of the Empyrean, appropriately designated by its floral shape, is that while it is said to be beyond all spatiality it also represents the fulfilment of the “high desire” that the pilgrim carries within him, so that the state of full beatitude can be grown into, in a kind of full flowering. Dante himself is urged by Beatrice to momentarily adopt the contemplatives’ discipline, so that he will reflect in both his countenance and, we might say, his “mind-set”, the great contemplative figure he is about to encounter:

‘Ficca di retro a li occhi tuoi la mente,
e fa di quelli specchi a la figura
che ‘n questo specchio ti sarà parvente.

Fix your mind firm behind those eyes of yours,
and make them both a mirror for the form
that in *this* mirror will appear to you.’

(Par. XXI, 16-18).

The choice of St. Bernard of Clairvaux as the pilgrim’s ultimate guide to the final vision of the *Commedia* is certainly a surprising one, given that all expectation generated from the text up until the thirsty-first canto of the *Paradiso* leads us to believe that Beatrice, the lover of Dante’s soul and his spiritual rescuer, will be the surpassing and final companion in his journey. The unexpected and initially anonymous appearance of Bernard must be read as Dante’s confirmation of the exalted status of the mystical tradition within which Bernard was

⁸³ Par. 32:89.

⁸⁴ Mazzeo, *Structure and Thought in the Paradiso*, p. 85.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

⁸⁶ Hawkins, *Dante’s Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*, p. 237.

a prominent cultivator. He is specifically referred to as “*quel contemplante*” (“the contemplative”)⁸⁷ and in intellectual terms was renowned mostly for his extended meditative writings on the allegorical desire of the soul for Christ as read in the Song of Solomon – and for his intense devotion to the burgeoning tradition of Marianism. Thus it is fitting that he should be called upon to deliver both the detailed description of the arrangement of the beatified in the Heavenly Rose of the Empyrean, and the final exultant hymn of praise to the Virgin Mary. Yet Dante may also have seen in Bernard the perfect example of the “Noble Man” described in the *Convivio*, for apart from his recognised contemplative and literary pursuits, Bernard was also a ceaseless participant in the various modes of “active” life – counselling political leaders, engaging in monastic reform, and successfully preaching the (failed) Second Crusade.⁸⁸ However, it is noteworthy, and perhaps understandable given the elevated status of Bernard’s entry into the poem, that Dante omits any such biographical references. Moreover, it is clear that Dante rejects any notion of complete hermeticism, instead affirming that even in intense devotion one should be “bodily” as well as “intellectual”. The spiritual life is to be lived in community and finds full fruition in dynamic interaction with others. The head, in this analogy, should not seek to act independently of the body. The appeal of Bernard as a model of the highest operations of the spiritual life may have also been founded in a reflection upon the poet’s own life. For Dante himself can be seen to incorporate the ideal of the “Noble Man”, since he is both an intensely active citizen of his community – student, soldier, author, artist, politician, advocate, diplomat – and also an intellectual of the highest order, the most philosophical of poets.

The mind, even though it contains some approximation to divinity, is clearly limited in what it can store and meaningfully maintain. The inadequacy of mind when presented with the overwhelming fullness of divine truths is acknowledged by Dante at the very beginning of the *Paradiso*, as both a caveat for the author’s supposed inadequacies but also a recognition of the limitations of human mental faculties. Dante’s admission at the commencement of the *Paradiso* makes plain that the celestial journey is far more than his mind, and memory, can

⁸⁷ *Par.* 32:1.

⁸⁸ John S. Carroll, *In Patria; an Exposition of Dante’s Paradiso* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971), p. 329: “It is possible that Dante divined some higher unity which transcended the contrast, and that, for example, in choosing St Bernard to take the place of Beatrice as his guide in the White Rose, his meaning is that the final vision is given in its fullness to one in whom Action and Contemplation had dwelt in perfect balance and harmony.”

hold: “*Veramente quant’ io del regno santo / ne la mia mente potei far tesoro*” (“As much, though, truly of that holy realm / as I could keep as treasure in my mind”)⁸⁹ Yet while acknowledging the mind’s limitations, it is also emphasised that the task of continually seeking to fulfil the potentialities of mind should never be abandoned. Though immaterial, the mind is regarded as an organ that atrophies through neglect or develops with use, and Dante-pilgrim receives continued admonitions and encouragements to this effect. In Beatrice’s extended speech on the revocation of sacred vows in Canto V she directs him to:

*Apri la mente a quel ch’io ti paleso
e fermalvi entro; ché non fa scienza
sanza lo ritenere, avere inteso.*

Open your mind to what I’ll now declare
and grasp it inwardly. To understand
won’t count as knowledge if it’s not retained.

(*Par. V*, 40-42).

The mind, then, is to be opened, filled, and maintained so that it can be strengthened for future expansion and filling, like an elastic organ. This pattern of stepped expansion is precisely the geometric image provided by Dante’s cosmological arrangement – the mind expanding as it encounters expansion of “space” in the heavenly spheres. This expansion of *mente*, however, can be sudden and unexpected, even unto its own detriment. For in Paradise the pilgrim is subjected to unprecedented and unexpected experiences that always threaten to “break” the limited human mind, or, metaphorically speaking, “burst” the mind with knowledge too intense or voluminous for it to contain. For example, in response to an extended speech from his ancestor Cacciaguida, the pilgrim expresses relief that “...*la mente mia, che di sé fa letizia / perché può sostener che non si spezza.*” (“...my mind rejoices in itself to bear / so much and not be shattered by the surge.”)⁹⁰ Likewise, in Canto XXIII Dante is granted a temporary vision of the figure of Christ Triumphant, and likens the mental experience to an observable meteorological phenomenon that centres on the breaking out of previous levels of containment:

*Come foco di nube si diserra
per dilatarsi sì che non vi cape...
...la mente mia così, tra quelle dape*

⁸⁹ *Par. 1:10-11.*

⁹⁰ *Par. 16:20-21.*

*fatta più grande, di sé stessa uscio,
e chi si fesse rimembrar non sape.*

As bolts of fire, unlocked from thunder clouds,
expand beyond containment in those bounds,...
...so, too, surrounded by this solemn feast,
my own mind, grown the greater now, went forth
and can't remember what it then became.

(Par. XXIII, 40-45).

Dante employs the standard metaphoric device of macro-microcosmic representation – “just as...so” – to compare the operation of the mind with that part of the cosmos it most accurately parallels, the heavens. The multifarious nature of *mente* is here shown to include the double-edged quality of divine revelation, which at once expands the mind to new levels of possibilities while also temporarily blinding it through the overwhelming intensity of such expansion.

As we have seen, the author's claim for the *Paradiso* is that, up until the entry into the Empyrean, the entire content of the work is a condescension to the limited and essentially imperfect workings of the human mind. The arrangement of the blessed into their various spheres of particular qualities and virtues is in fact an extended, temporary demonstration of the actual arrangement in the Empyrean, made accessible to the pilgrim for the benefit of his *intelletto*:

*Qui si mostrare, non perché sortita
sia questa spera lor, ma per far segno
de la celestial c'ha men salita.
Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno,
però che solo da sensate apprende
ciò che fa poscia d'intelleto degno.*

They did, here, show themselves, but not because
this sphere has been allotted them as theirs.
They signify celestial power least raised.
To speak in this way fits the human mind.
For you can only grasp through things you've sensed
what mind will then present as fit for thought.

(Par. IV, 37-42).

Herein lies both the power and paradox of the *Paradiso*, as can be paralleled with the human mind itself – that just as Dante reaches the realm of highest realities, these realities lie beyond all signification, meaning that the poet, in exercise of his own mind, must produce a continual “prefacing” of physical, visual representations to provide an approximation to that which is essentially unrepresentable.⁹¹ The *Paradiso* displays the always apparent pressure of the need to represent metaphysical concepts with spatial and temporal metaphors, admitting that such representations can legitimately serve as provisional models fit for our temporarily limited understanding.⁹² The *Paradiso* is notable for being particularly rich in similes, containing approximately one-third more than in the other two *cantiche*.⁹³ The employment of such similes is one way in which the poet, who must work in representation by physical imagery, overcomes the problem of portraying what might be seen as the undifferentiated and eternal, unchanging nature of beatitude. It is a means by which the apparent uniformity of perhaps even the monotony of beatitude is suggested to be just the opposite – increasingly intense and rich similes are employed to describe a continual pageant of rich experiences that differentiate and display the supposed variousness of Heaven.⁹⁴

Dante’s description of the Empyrean presents a seemingly paradoxical treatment of spatial relations that in itself is comparable to the difficulties posed by physical representations of *mente*. At the moment of “arriving” in the Empyrean (itself a confounding concept in a place that is conceived as lying outside of space) Dante employs one last extended astronomical metaphor, laden with specific references to time and space, to convey the image of a celestial play that is drawing to a close.⁹⁵ However, the seeming certainty of spatial representation in metaphor afforded by the regular motion of the heavenly bodies becomes immediately undercut by a striking image that turns space in upon itself:

⁹¹ Chiarenza, “The Imageless Vision and Dante’s ‘Paradiso’” in *Dante*, p. 74. In responding to an element of Francis Newman’s essay ‘St. Augustine’s Three Visions and the Structure of the *Commedia*’, Chiarenza writes: “Intellectual vision is by its very nature incongruent with poetry, for it is the denial of that of which poetry is made, images, and perhaps this is what leads Newman to imply that such an experience does not occur until the end of the voyage. However, what Dante claims in the *Paradiso*, to have seen God and lived, is as inconceivable as representing or mediating that which is by definition unmediated. Therefore, I would like to go further than Newman and suggest that the basic position of the poet in the *Paradiso* is revealed by his struggle to express a vision which was imageless from the start.”

⁹² Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p. 673.

⁹³ Mazzeo, *Structure and Thought in the Paradiso*, p. 151.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151. Mazzeo also makes the case that: “It is precisely in a realm theoretically and philosophically most unlike our universe that the colors and shapes of the human are dramatically introduced. Philosophy alone would have led Dante only to the One, a bland unity of pure light, but Dante’s faith led him to a world in which individuality is eternalized and the divine is somehow differentiated within itself as human.” *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁹⁵ See *Par.* 30:1-9.

*Non altrimenti il triunfo che lude
sempre dintorno al punto che mi vinse,
parendo inchiuso da quel ch'elli 'nchiude,...*

In this way, too, the victories that play
for ever round the point that conquered me –
enclosed, it seems, by that which they enclose –

(*Par.* XXX, 10-12).

The angels appear to “contain” the single point of God, and are simultaneously seen to be contained by it, in an apparent contradiction of human logic. The effect upon the reader is one of a continual shift of mental construction, like a form of optical illusion in the mind where a temporary image is overturned by its opposite possibility, only for it in turn to be overturned. The construction of the *terzina*’s final line itself suggests something of this effect, opening with a possible first vision, “*parendo inchiuso*” (“enclosed, it seems”) that is returned to but subtly altered by the concluding employment of “*inchiude*” (“enclosed”). Thus the line is an image of self-containment, both linguistically and conceptually, the construction of the phrase imitating that which it describes. Significantly, this is the single instance of the transitive verb *inchiudere* (“to enclose”) in the entire poem, occurring here with a precision that itself imitates the single point to which it tellingly refers. The entire *terzina* is a microcosmic representation of the human faculty of *mente*, in as much as the inescapable spatiality within which human intellection is bound leads us to inevitably conceive of the mind as lying *within* the physical confines of the head; while simultaneously we also recognise that *mente* is completely immaterial and operates beyond the physical constraints of the body. Therefore *mente* is, like the image of the angels being surrounded by that which they surround, able to contain that which contains it. It is fitting that Dante should elect to employ an image involving the hosts of angels, for they are a special sense the closest approximation in the created order to the nature of *mente*. If Man is a creature of two natures, existing in body and able to enter into complex cognition, then the body shares all the qualities of his fellow creatures on earth, while the higher faculty of mind is only a step downwards from the pure intellection of the angels. The ability to rationally realise is the special privilege afforded to Man, in imitation of that towards which the mind is intended to be directed.

The *terzina* also makes plain that the striving for ultimate truth begins with the trust that such a truth can exist beyond and before the limited reach of human analysis. Referring to the extended metaphor which has immediately preceded it, the *terzina* opens with “*Non altrimenti*” (“In this way”), which, since it is expressed in the negative sense, may also be translated as “not otherwise”. In any case, the emphasis here conveys the idea of “certainly” when comparing the physical characteristics of a metaphorical representation with that subsequently represented, and “*non altrimenti*” is consistently used in this fashion throughout the *Commedia*.⁹⁶ Yet a literal rendering of this phrase might equate to “not in other minds”, or “not to be understood in another way”; or, to make the most succinct encapsulation of the intended understanding, we might see it as merely “so”, as in the standard metaphorical formula upon which Dante frequently relies: “just as...so”. The certainty with which one can build simple, formal argument (with its rules and order of construction) is akin to that of mathematical equations or geometry. Yet the human observation of natural phenomenon that forms the metaphor is shown here to be limited – the commencement of the canto with “*Forse*” – (“Maybe”), introduces a note of hesitancy that admits to the fallibility of *mente*, challenged as it is by a reliance upon assumed astronomical knowledge lying beyond the reach of direct sighting.

The note of inadequate or logically impossible “enclosure” is repeated immediately after the vision of the enclosing and enclosed angels. Dante turns once more to Beatrice, whose transcendent beauty, we are told, now lies beyond the poet’s power of description, so that even if all previous words of praise offered to her “*fosse conchiuso tutto in una loda*” (“were now enclosed to form one word of praise”)⁹⁷, they would fall short. The imagery of containment and compression of matter to a single point is an echo of the “*punto che mi vinse*” (“point that conquered me”)⁹⁸ from the preceding vision, and serves as a link to the subsequent introduction of the confessional *inexpressibility topos*, in which Dante admits defeat in the face of his beloved’s radiance. He reiterates the motifs of both entire containment and single point by comparing himself to the poet who, exercising his talents in

⁹⁶ See as examples *Inf.* 22:130, 32:130; *Pur.* 9:34, 17:3, 26:67, 28:56.

⁹⁷ *Par.* 30:17.

⁹⁸ *Par.* 30:11.

any of the established range of genres (here represented by the “outer limits” of comedy and tragedy), is reduced to helplessness before the “*punto di suo tema*.”⁹⁹

As the poet himself states, all of the *Paradiso* is a grand, paradoxical concession. All that which it purports to represent is metaphysical – beyond time and space. In this it is comparable to human mind, the only part of the human complex that, while the person is in the state of earthly embodiment, can be said to behave in this way. For mind, if we conceive of it as *thought*, is capable of projection beyond the limitations of temporality and spatiality. Thought can range throughout all time and space, unbounded by reliance on immediate sense impression; and indeed can conceptualise that there may even be a *beyond* to which the categories of temporality and spatiality no longer apply. It is this faculty of mind to which the *Paradiso* makes an immediate and serious appeal at the beginning of the *cantica*, warning its audience with a nautical metaphor that the journey ahead is one which may test the limit of one’s cognitive powers:

...non vi mettere in pelage, ché forse,
perdendo me, rimarreste smarrita.

Do not set out upon these open seas
lest losing me you end confused and lost.

(*Par.* II, 5-6).

The souls as represented in their temporary, analogical arrangements in the *Paradiso* are themselves imitative of the behaviour of thought, since the poet claims that these figures appear to him only once, and for only the required time (albeit that time itself is unquantifiable in this context), before presumably returning to their proper place in the Empyrean for all eternity. This movement *from one point to another*, however we may conceive of it if we accept that it occurs outside of spatiality, can only find a metaphoric counterpart in the actions of the human mind, which can range beyond the constraints of time and space that limit the body. Mind, in this metaphor, is capable of superhuman spatial and temporal movement. It can both anticipate the future and recall the past, and alter its focus and attention from one physical fact to another with apparent instantaneity. The figures in the *Paradiso* move *by thought*, impelled as they might be by the power of the Divine Mind, and

⁹⁹ *Par.* 30:24.

move *as if they are thoughts*.¹⁰⁰ Dante imagines that the Empyrean itself can best be understood as a collective “thought” eternally present within the mind of God:

...e questo cielo non ha altro dove
che la mente divina, in che s'accende
l'amor che 'l volge e la virtù ch'ei piove.

This primal sphere has no “where” other than
the mind of God. The love that makes it turn
is kindled there, so, too, the power it rains.

(Par. XXVII, 109-111).

The experience previewed for the reader is therefore a repetition of that already undertaken by the poet, who claims to present a spiritual vision that is brought back to the world in a limited, humanly-dimensioned version, but will nevertheless stretch the abilities of normal human understanding. The great paradox of the *Paradiso* is that, finally, all ultimate truth is inscrutable. It lies *beyond* – beyond the powers of the human mind, beyond memory, beyond the limitations of human language. Indeed, the mere fact that human *mente* is limited may provide us with the strongest argument for its worth – that understanding, contemplating the truth, may ultimately depend upon recognising and even celebrating the limits of human comprehension; of recognising that, while not diminishing the value of rational enquiry, not all things are open to explanation. Rather, the mind should humbly be “in love” with the Maker who yet limits such explanations. Sin, in its primary manifestation, was a desire to know beyond the ordained limitation. The *mente* of the pilgrim, if we take it as an exemplar, is shown to be progressing in love as much as knowledge.

It is this concern with progression of intellection that directs us towards another source of inspiration. Finally, what of Love? Famously, the poem ends with a vision of the Love by which Dante says “*ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l vella*” (“my will and my desire were turned”)¹⁰¹. This is the Love of God towards which Dante has been drawn by a “disposition of desire” for the entire journey of the poem, and which, he maintains, is mirrored in the exercise of rationality in every human being. The love of a creator, reflected in the infinite variety, complexity and harmony of a created order, is that same love that resides in the minds of men, who above all creatures have been granted the freedoms and appetites of

¹⁰⁰ Note that in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, it is only the angels who appear to move in this way.

¹⁰¹ Par. 33:143.

intellectual activity. Much is made in the *Paradiso* of the ways in which the conventions of human love, particularly the symbolic modes of courtly love as they may apply to his beloved Beatrice, can be re-fashioned to express the relationship between God and those to whom He is revealed. The movement of the poet through the spheres of heaven can be seen, in one way, as analogous to a love affair by which his mind is progressively “wooed” so that it comes to fully love.¹⁰² This love, like a self-feeding fire, is continually drawn to that which will in turn grow and strengthen the mind in love. The *Commedia* is a story of how such love might be manifest in human existence. It can be seen that the *Inferno* is an image of love wasted and destroyed, the *Purgatorio* is love renewed and re-directed, and the *Paradiso* is love perfected. And it is perfected in the mind. This perfection is seeded by Beatrice herself, whom Dante describes as the one through whom all ultimate truth is prepared for him:

*Poscia che ‘ncontro a la vita presente
d’i miseri mortali aperse ‘l vero
quella che ‘mparadisa la mia mente,...*

In contradiction of the life now led
In mortal misery, she – the in-paradizer
Of my mind – had thus laid open Truth to me.

(*Par.* XXVIII, 1-3).

In a precise neologism, Beatrice is described as the “in-paradizer” of Dante’s mind. She implants, or stamps, paradise in his mind. This is a divine form of interpenetration, such that Paradise and mind are becoming one. From this point onwards (and “point” is the correct term here, since the pilgrim’s next experience is to witness God as a single, infinitesimal point of brilliant light), he is ready to receive the final visions of the *truth* of divine love, which here becomes no mere intellectual exercise but an experience of the highest order. For to Dante love is no mere affection or sentiment, but an engagement of the entire person at the highest levels of personal intelligibility. It is a manifestation of true desire – the desire to engage with, and participate in, the entire experience of being human to its complete limits of

¹⁰² See *Par.* 24:118-120 – “*La Grazia, che donnea / con la tua mente, la bocca t’aperse / infino a ui come aprir si dovea*” (“The play of grace that woos / your mind has opened up, till now, your lips / exactly as it’s right to open them.”); *Par.* 26:28-30 – “*che ‘l bene, in quanto ben, come s’intende, / così accende amore, e tanto maggio / quanto più di bontate in sé comprende.*” (“For good *per se*, once recognized as good, / sets love on fire – the fiercer still as love / holds more of good within its proper self.”); *Par.* 27:88-90 – “*La mente innamorata, che donnea / con la mia donna sempre, di ridure / as essa li occhi più che mai ardea,*” (“My mind, so deep in love that always woos, / as *donna*, my *donna*, burned more fiercely still / to turn its eyes once more to where she was.”)

fulfilment. The “love that moves the sun and the other stars” is always within our own minds, Dante says. For us, it is a matter of consummating the possibilities extant in that love, by, as Paul puts it, “growing up” – overcoming the baser appetites of our lower parts, sublimating the core emotions or passions of our creaturely selves, and rightly ordering the turning of our own *mente* to that of the Divine Mind.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has proceeded on the understanding that despite its age, and the immense body of commentary and scholarship trailing behind it, Dante's *Commedia* possesses the special quality of *limitlessness* that makes it amenable to continual re-investigation. Anyone who has invested significant time and effort engaging with this great work will agree with the notion that its depths can never be satisfactorily explored, or, to reproduce a concise quote used in the introduction to this thesis: "We shall not exhaust the mystery of it for all our scrutiny."¹ The labour involved in uncovering the meanings within the *Commedia*, it seems, has no end. On this footing, any scholar dealing with Dante can at best hope to adequately recognise and absorb the results of previous scholarship, make modest advancements of their own, and point the way forward for future explorations. Like a *terzina* within Dante's *terza rima* rhyme scheme, any attempt at Dantean scholarship can expect to be merely one link in a long chain of transmission.

I have taken it as a tacit endorsement for this project that a highly-regarded Dantean scholar has quite recently declared that, while there has been substantial and long-standing acknowledgement of the *Commedia* as a kind of microcosmic artefact that attempts to encapsulate *everything*, there has been little recognition that the poem is also intended to be a poetic model of the human body.² Robert Durling's declaration invites fresh examination, a niche reading as it were, of the *Commedia*, which may uncover a new way of understanding the poem. Durling's extant work, and his recent suggestion, indicates that there ought to be an attempt at interpreting the *Commedia* as being broadly structured according to the traditional tripartite divisions of human anatomy, and that this attempt should also demonstrate that the author deliberately underlines this structure by consistently using anatomical themes or specific references throughout each *cantica*. Hence, my undertaking has been to provide such an interpretation and present it as a significant, or at least novel, advancement to existing scholarship. It is sufficient to say that within the existing *corpus* of research no attempt at a comprehensive account of Dante's work such as mine has been previously formulated.

¹ Singleton, *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure*, p. 13.

² Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3 - Paradiso*, p. 761n.

This thesis has attempted to convince its reader that a new, analogical reading of Dante's *Commedia* is possible – the human body, a central and essential symbol in traditional orders of symbolism, paramount form in all of creation according to traditional understandings, and chosen vessel of earthly divinity according to Christian theology, has been used as the central and controlling image of the poem. This use operates in two contrasting but complementary fashions: at a *macro* level, the poem is broadly structured along the traditional tripartite arrangement of the human body, while at a *micro* level each section of the poem demonstrates a pattern of textual references and underlying thematic significances that relate directly to that part of the human form it parallels. I have also shown that *bodiliness*, as a general concept, is the most appropriate theme on which to structure an analogous reading of the *Commedia*: the author is at all times deeply concerned with the meanings to be drawn from human gesture and expression – ‘body language’, we may call it; the characters of the *Commedia* exist in recognisable versions of their own physical, earthly bodies (however we might wish to understand this); the narrative structure of the poem closely parallels the central story of Christian history that revolves *the* body, the resurrected and glorified body of an incarnate saviour; the pilgrim himself undertakes the described journey in his own earthly body; and finally since Dante's poem demonstrates a full incorporation and fulfilment of the long literary tradition of “man as microcosm” that placed the human form as the central fact of a created order.

Aside from the general advancement I claim in the central theme of my thesis, there are also particular components where fresh or unprecedented ideas have been presented. I have shown that the mood and structure of the *Commedia* contains persistent symbolic parallels to the function and arrangement of the human senses, and likewise how both of these form parallels to the traditional “five-element” model of the physical world. I have proposed new ways of interpreting Dante's representations of the human face as a primary identifier and as a microcosmic image of the human form. I have argued for a re-reading of the *Commedia* by seeing that all three *cantiche* of the poem are arranged upon a version of the human form. *Inferno* is modelled on man “*sottosopra*”, or “inverted man”, *Purgatorio* is still man inverted but being progressive cleansed, while *Paradiso* contains a collection of representative types arranged in a subtle pattern of virtues and qualities modelled on the restored “upright man”. This thesis has proposed a novel reading of the *Purgatorio* that suggests its mood and structure can be compared to the components and operations of the human torso. In an extension of this idea, I have advanced the notion that the traditional concept of the “eye of

the heart” can be applied to the mood and purpose of the *Purgatorio*; and accordingly that, following a precise reading of key signalling texts with the *Purgatorio*, the mountain of Purgatory was always intended by its creator to be recognised as a dome. I have shown that the *Paradiso*, the most abstract and paradoxical of all Dante’s creations, contains much resemblance to the operations of our most immaterial component, our minds. Lastly, I have demonstrated that there are numerous instances of Dante’s previously-unrecognised use of the “microcosmic man” *topos* in the literary tradition to which he was heir, and which have been used by the poet in his own development of this concept.

However, any honest scholar will admit that, as well as offering an advancement, a research project of any seriousness will almost inevitably contain deficiencies and limitations. As I have identified in the body of the work, the Dantean scholar Etienne Gilson has cautioned all against the temptation to impose on the text of the *Commedia* that which it was not meant to bear, as if somehow from without the text could be granted more meaning that it contains within itself; and against any one interpretation being cherished at the expense of all others. He is talking of obscurantist approaches to the *Commedia* in the following quote, but it remains relevant to all scholars nevertheless: “Unfortunately, every initiate is sure that his key is the right one, and as no two have the same key their discussions on the *Divine Comedy* help not a little to obscure its meaning.”³ I do not claim the “right key”, but merely point to a *possible key* that may unlock the *Commedia* in a different way. The best defence of such an approach, as I identified in the introduction, is to consult primary texts primarily and argue from Dante’s own words as often as possible. While Gilson’s admonition is directed at those who search for esoteric or even occultist meanings within the text, I take his criticism as one who aims perhaps too widely. I have approached the *Commedia* with a very broad, analogical view, choosing to avoid obscurities and even eccentricities, instead trying to expose what is hidden in plain sight. Yet all analogies, however sophisticated, break down at some point, and mine is no exception. There remains adequate scope for a more polished development or extension of my argument, or indeed a rebuttal.

Also, while not being proffered as an excuse, it is an unavoidable fact that even in a substantial dissertation there is much that cannot be included, for reasons of space, or overall coherence. My research efforts have produced many loose threads or under-developed ideas,

³ Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, p. 290.

or significant material simply lacking sufficiently strong connection to the primary concerns, even as I present what I claim to be a cohesive account of my chosen theme. There remains much work to be done, and the completion of a dissertation, initially seen as a daunting prospect and an end in itself, once completed, can surprise its author by becoming merely the starting point for a lifetime of investigation. In accord with the belief that the study of Dante is an indefinite exercise, there is much in my own particular sphere of enquiry that still requires detailed treatment.

For instance, there are throughout the *Commedia* subtle but persistent allusions to one of the central mysteries of the Christian faith, the Eucharist. Yet Dante will deliver no explicit address on this most important of themes, and there is scant scholarship on how he may be pointing to the Eucharist indirectly through metaphors of incorporation and eating throughout the poem, and in his presentation of “transhuman” bodies in the *Paradiso*. Likewise, a challenging exercise lies ahead in attempting to unravel the knotty question of how Dante can seemingly exalt the operation of one’s mental faculties as the highest operation of the human person (and, in this thesis, how he uses the human head as the primary metaphorical symbol for the structure and mood of the *Paradiso*) while simultaneously holding the restoration of the soul into the resurrected *pre-mortem* body as the highest state of being for which one can hope. A more pedestrian exercise may be a complete analysis of Dante’s use of references to the human body throughout the poem to reveal what significant patterns or structure may be at play, such as I have periodically employed in my own research. Such unremarkable analysis, however, is the platform for fresh encounters with the text that can produce surprising results. For example, a simple check of the references to “*piede*” (“feet”) in the poem led me to investigate the subtle pattern of references to human feet and walking in the *Commedia*; and to how this patterning is tied to both his underlying themes of pilgrimage throughout the poem, and the structure and purpose of his *terza rima*. As fascinating as this subject is, it could be afforded no more than a passing footnote in this thesis.

I am convinced that more needs to be done in exploring the extent to which Dante still recognises the church as an incorporated body in the *Paradiso*, given how often the state of beatitude is portrayed as an individualised experience. Are there as yet undetected references to the story of Easter in the *Commedia* that confirm the bodily experience of Christ as the central motif of the poem’s structure? How can we expand upon existing research that takes literally (or not) his account of a journey of his own physical body through the afterlife, in

light of modern enquiries into “near-death” and “out of body” experiences? What work needs to be done to provide a complete assessment of the pictorial history of the *Commedia*, with a particular focus on representations of the human form? Who gets it right in this respect – Botticelli, Blake, or Doré? And why? My own focus upon the tradition of the “microcosmic man” *topos* within the literature of the West indicates that there were previously unrecognised (or, at least, badly under-recognised) sources from which Dante had drawn for use in the symbolic registers of his own poetic creations. A mark of the true Dantean scholar (and here I have John Freccero in mind) seems to be an ability to pinpoint previously unidentified sources for Dante’s ideas and demonstrate how they were subsequently developed. How many more obscure or hidden gems remain within the literature of ages past that point to an influence on the Tuscan? It appears that historically scholarship on Dante has underestimated the breadth of his own research, or his ability to inventively intertwine his sources. We will surely never be certain that we have completely “catalogued” all that was available to him, yet the task remains. Closer to my own theme, there is still rich material awaiting development in regard to the symbolic reading of Dante’s geometry, particularly as it may apply to my reinterpretation of Mt Purgatory as a *dome*. What I have not indicated in my thesis is that specific geometric themes carry forward from the account of the pilgrim’s ascent of Purgatory proper into the astonishing descriptions of the triumphal pageant in the Terrestrial Paradise, where geometry takes on a distinctly cosmological tone that prepares the way for a fuller understanding of what one is about to confront in the *Paradiso*. Finally, there is an entire book yet to be written on Dante’s rich and complex use of the symbolism of the human eye, a theme upon which to this point I have merely glanced. Such a work would honour a poet who, perhaps more than any other, has shown us what it can really mean to look at each other, face to face, eye to eye.

Of course, one question that must be considered is what effective purpose another rereading of a medieval text can have for us today. What can the *Commedia* show us that we might not see otherwise, particularly if it is read through the analogical matrix constructed here? A standard answer might be that the classics, particularly the “great” works of the past, survive because they *are* great, and that reading them is simply better than not reading them. More though, the great works of the past make us more human, because they show us the best of ourselves. When we hold Dante’s work in our hands, we realise that we are not only engaging with a great poem, but a great man. I say that he enlarges in the reader’s minds the possibilities inherent within every person, every human life, every community. At another

level, he shows us that it may still be possible to recover that which was lost, that common understandings and shared culture can still be part of our lives. In our modern world, where instant communication and mass movements of peoples has served not to foster community but create ever-more alienation and aloneness, we could do worse than borrow Dante's analogy of the body as the image of human interconnectedness as a means to rethink who we are, and where we might be heading. To borrow a metaphor from this thesis, his work can embolden us to "grow up" in Love, where this is the full participation, body and mind, in the experience of being human. And, I concur with at least one scholar who has recently seen in Dante a person who can teach us about all facets of life, or offer us solutions to contemporary problems, because, no matter what question confronts us, "He seems to have been there before."⁴ The universality of the *Commedia* performs a special function in this regard.

What might Dante have to say today about the often baffling experience of human embodiment as it is experienced in our modern condition? It has been previously indicated that the *Inferno*, with its masses of processed bodies and manic but purposeless activity, has strangely become something of a mirror of our own anxious and isolated lives, and that this is the only part of the *Commedia* with which modern audiences can properly identify. It is worth considering what a member of that audience might find in the *Commedia* in regard to many of the physical ills that afflict our bodies today. Canto VI of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* XXI-XXIV could serve as a correction to our epidemic of gluttony, eating disorders, and obsessions with food as a consumer experience. I suggest that nobody who has read the *Inferno* with any seriousness can think the same way again about our contemporary handling of matters such as sexual liberation, violence against others' bodies, suicide, homosexuality, or sensual and wasteful living. How can we relate the frequently awful punishments of the bodies of the damned in the *Inferno* to our modern practises of what is effectively unmentioned mutilation of the body – abortion, invasive medical interventions, implants, cosmetic surgery, tattooing, decorative piercings, or the industrialised medicalisation of not only illness but almost every stage of life from assisted childbirth to euthanasied death? If the *Inferno* is in any way prophetic about the future of the human body, have we now seen it come to pass? Conversely, does the *Paradiso* still offer us a way out – does Dante's panoply of saints and intellectuals still attract us? Are there models of wisdom,

⁴ A. N. Wilson, *Dante in Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 342.

reason, and contemplation that provide a lead for those seeking to master the demands of the body and devote themselves to the full development of their minds?

In relation to my research method, can a particularly analogical way of using the body as a metaphor allow us to reconsider our own thinking? The steady collapse of traditional habits of mind has been unkind to the *microcosmos* idea, for beyond a last hurrah with the Renaissance ideal of Da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man", there came only an erosion of symbolic methods of expressing the human form. No attempt at a comprehensive analogy of the body exists in literature after Dante, and few convincing instances survived in the visual arts. The legacy of "microcosmic man" also contains a sad irony, for while the modern secular ideologies and industrialised sciences that came to replace Dante's world-view still placed man as the centre (and ruler) of all things, they simultaneously lost the idea that his own form could be in any way an organising principle around which he could gather an understanding of himself and his world. Man is no longer a symbol to himself. Neither the image of God nor an encapsulation of anything beyond itself, the body has become a vehicle divested of all its traditional understandings and purposes.

The modern condition, with its heavy emphasis on limitless development of the physical sciences, its loss of religious traditions, and its desacralisation of the physical world, has become terribly *abstracted*, while at the same time denying that there is any metaphysical and eternal component of ourselves, let alone that the life after this one might involve a restoration and perfection of our earthly physical forms. Modern industrial man has somehow become a strange parody of the model of existence as displayed in the *Paradiso*, in that he has become *all head*. One way to resolve this contemporary condition may in fact be to restore to our thinking, somehow, the idea that the body is rightly considered good and necessary, and that in the best of us there is a proper harmony and balance between all our elements. An aid to this would be the restoration of the conception that the human body *is* the primary symbol by which we should understand the world, and that it is in fact a model of the cosmos in which it lives. Certainly, the current concern over our critical global environmental problems demonstrates the need for a redefining of ourselves, symbolically but also literally – we cannot remove ourselves from our physical home nor be immune to its influences, and if we damage it we surely damage ourselves. In this one particularly modern difficulty, it is best to see that man and cosmos are one and the same. In attempting to recover the loss of spirituality in our lives (another particularly modern malaise) what is

required is not disengagement from the world or retreat into quasi-religious mental states, but a re-engagement with the physical. We could do worse than follow the ancient idea that the human body is a little universe of its own, and reconnect with it by using it to re-interact with its surrounds, both literally and symbolically. Reading the great works of the past, where such traditional thought patterns are expounded, can serve as the starting point for such reconnections. Perhaps in these ways we can partly reclaim, in our own modern fashion, something of the original didactic intent of the poem. Reading the *Commedia* might yet assist us to improve ourselves.

This thesis is concluded, but, as stated earlier, the real task for the serious scholar has no ending. It is not my duty to complete the task, yet neither shall I desist from it. I take to heart the advice of my mentor, who suggests that one important mark of a good student is the desire to go deep inside one of the great books, to know it inside out, to read it over and over again. Certainly, the semi-sacred nature and sublime depths of the *Commedia* invite the engaged reader to participate with it in precisely this way, and the best reaction upon finishing a reading of the work is to simply begin it again, without delay, and continue the search for greater meaning and understanding. The will and desire in all dedicated devotees shall drive them to continually seek the object of their desire, so that they, like Dante the pilgrim, can say:

*ché la mia vista, venendo sincera,
e più e più intrava per lo raggio
de l'alta luce che da sé è vera.*

My sight, becoming pure and wholly free,
entered still more, then more, along the ray
of that one light which, of itself, is true.

(*Par.* XXXIII, 52-54).

APPENDIX

DANTE'S USE OF THE LITERARY SOURCES FOR "MAN AS
MICROCOSM' WITHIN THE CLASSICAL AND NEOPLATONIST
TRADITIONS

The fundamental aim of this thesis was to attempt to fully "flesh out" the many manifestations in which Dante chose to express, in all of his various writings, but particularly in the *Commedia*, what was to him the symbolic and theological centrality of the human form. As has been discussed, an essential component of this centrality is that the human can be understood as a *mikros kosmos* – a little cosmos, or model of the universe, containing within it all the elements, proportions and functions of the greater world around it; and that conversely the entire physical universe could be understood as an immense representation of the human form. This literary *topos* had enjoyed a long history, and can be identified in a range of sources that I have previously grouped into three main categories – classical literature; Scriptural and Augustinian sources; and a third, very broad category best described as "Christian Neoplatonist". The first and third of these categories shall be examined in detail in this appendix. Many of these sources are well-established in the canon of Dantean scholarship, yet I also hope to demonstrate that the range of texts from which Dante drew may be even wider and richer than is usually acknowledged. This survey is not presumed to be exhaustive, and will be concerned with granting attention to sources traditionally overlooked or understated, with a view to proposing how such sources anticipate Dante's imaginative explorations. As shall be demonstrated, some of these lesser-known texts may raise questions regarding Dante's access to, and use of, his literary sources.

The path taken here is a chronological overview of the known and possible sources available to Dante. These sources are selected for their attention to two important literary motifs: the overarching metaphor of man a microcosmic representation of the universe; and that man in both his corporeal and complex form, as an entity comprised of inter-related body and soul, is an essentially three-fold construction. Some individual moments in these sources shall be examined in detail for the way in which they may present as direct precursors to Dante's own constructions.

It is worth reiterating here that for Dante, as for all individuals who laboured as creative artists, the traditional idea of the human artisan as “maker” involved him in manufacturing objects that were in some ways a miniature representation of the cosmos. In this, the human artist was deliberately imitating the Creator of the universe, whom, it was understood, had brought the entire universe into being through a process of planned and ordered construction. Even if the object was not intentionally microcosmic in form, it still contained those aesthetic qualities, such as design, function, and beauty, which were seen to exist in all of creation. However, there were some created objects that contained a deliberate microcosmic form – most obviously the sacred temples of all ancient cultures. It is in architecture that we find representations of the cosmos expressed in the dimensions, materials, proportionality, harmony and ritual use of the building, in an encoded “language” that was implicitly understood. Dante was doubtless highly sensitive to the ways in which singular human constructions could be formed as, and understood as, representations of the whole world.

Using this concept of human artist as divine imitator for a starting point, I wish to begin tracing the influence of the microcosmic image of the artefact in the descriptions of Achilles’ shield in Book XVIII of Homer’s *Iliad*. In this admittedly conflated idea, I want to suggest that Dante could have drawn direct inspiration from the *tradition* of Homer’s famous description of the shield of Achilles, even if he was unable to benefit from direct access to the texts of the Greek poet.¹ The *idea* that a single, crafted object could be understood as a microcosmic manifestation of the universe carries within it an immense power that transcends the barriers of time, language or custom that may otherwise prevent actual experience of the object itself. We know, of course, that Dante was deeply sympathetic to the notion of Homer’s indisputable status as the greatest of the ancient poets, even though the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, surviving only in their original Greek texts in Dante’s lifetime, were inaccessible to him.² The consistent praise of Homer in the available works of Virgil, Ovid, Horace and

¹ Dante may have had access to the subject matter of Homer’s work through Horace’s *Epistles* and the *Heroides* of Ovid. For an overview of Dante’s possible indebtedness to these Roman poets, see Hawkins, *Dante’s Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*, pp. 87, 108, 143-193, 273.

² While not central to the survey being presented here, it is worth considering one curious episode in the *Purgatorio* that suggests Dante may have known more of the content of Homer’s works, particularly the *Odyssey*, than it usually supposed. In Canto III of the *Purgatorio*, Dante presents the figure of Manfred, the illegitimate son of Emperor Frederick II. The shade of Manfred tells Dante how he was killed in the battle of Benevento, and how his grave, created at the battle site, was later desecrated by his political enemies: ‘And if Cosenza’s pastor, who was sent / to hunt me down by Clement (then our pope), / has read aright the face God turned to mine, / my body’s bones would still be where they were, / ...The rain now bathes them, and they’re moved by wind...’ (*Pur.* 3:124-130). This bears a striking resemblance to a passage in the opening book of the *Odyssey*, where Telemachus laments the apparent fate of his father with ‘...a man whose white bones lie strewn

Cicero were sufficient to guarantee the survival of his lofty reputation; indeed such is the esteem in which Homer is regarded by the great classical authors of Roman antiquity that Dante describes him with sword in hand as “*Omero, poeta sovrano*” (“sovereign Homer, poet”)³, ruling over “*la bella scola / di quel signor de l’altissimo canto / che sovra li altri com’ aquila vola.*” (“the lovely college of that lord of song / whose verses soar like eagle over all.”)⁴ Later, in the *Purgatorio*, Homer will again be referred to as “*quel greco / che le Muse l’atar più ch’altro mai*” (“that Greek / who, more than all, the Muses fed with milk.”)⁵ Yet it is notable that despite this consistently high praise of Homer as artist, Dante does not afford such stature to the two great heroes of Homeric epic – Achilles is condemned to the circle of the lustful in *Inferno* V, while Dante famously re-casts the story of the heroic, wandering Odysseus of Homer’s work into an image of intellectual self-destruction in the eighth bolgia of the fraudulent in *Inferno* XXVI. Thus the surface appearance of Dante’s presentation suggests that while the pagan morality of Homer’s world is unpalatable to he who has received the surpassing Christian revelation, the poet that produced a masterful representation of his world is nevertheless worthy of praise in that he initiated the tradition of the ideal artist as divinely-inspired and exalted craftsman.

To return to the earlier quote from the *Purgatorio*, the image of the poet being “nourished” by a divine, maternal source; and the fact that this high praise is placed in the mouth of the Roman poet Virgil, is of immense significance. In this moment, Dante affirms that the artist is best fulfilling his purpose when closely imitating the nature of God. Even allowing for the pagan nature of Homeric religion, Dante makes claim that the adherence to *form*, and the willingness of the artist to avail himself of higher powers, are the defining qualities of the true artist. The utilisation of Virgil for the articulation of this ideal provides Dante with the necessary link between Homer’s world and his own, for it was widely recognised that Virgil had deliberately constructed his own masterpiece using Homer’s two epics as his model, thus ensuring the continuation of the ancient Greek’s legacy. That Dante should have chosen to at least partly base the form of the *Commedia* on that of Virgil’s *Aeneid* affirms his assent to the way in which the tradition of literary *forms* have the power, perhaps indeed the responsibility, to overcome issues of content.

in the rain somewhere, / rotting away on land or rolling down the ocean’s salty swells.’ (*Odyssey* 1.188-189). The Homeric quality of this moment is repeated only two cantos later, in another description of death, that of Buonconte da Montefeltro in *Pur.* 5:119-129. See commentary in Wilson, *Dante in Love*, pp. 127-128.

³ *Inf.* 4:88.

⁴ *Inf.* 4:95-96.

⁵ *Pur.* 22:101-102.

But the specific tradition which Virgil perpetuates in this context is the portrayal of the universal and sacred artefact. In Book VIII of the *Aeneid* Virgil enters into an extended description of the divinely-wrought shield given to the hero Aeneas by the goddess Venus.⁶ This set-piece is in direct imitation of Homer's description of Achilles' shield in *Iliad* XVIII, and is easily interpreted as an essentially microcosmic artefact. Although it is ostensibly a practical object – part of a set of armour designed to protect Aeneas in battle – it carries the weight of a representational emblem, as if not the object itself, but the meaning embedded within it, will safeguard its appointed recipient. The direct symbolism of the object is easily understood – created in heaven, of miraculous workmanship beyond the abilities of mere mortals, the shield is circular like the heavens, and is brought to earth as a gift for a specifically appointed recipient. Small enough for one man to hold, it nonetheless carries within it the entire universe. It traces the entire history of the world, (and for Virgil this is a specifically Roman world) as the lineage that extends from Aeneas' own son, Ascanius, through to the political events of Virgil's own day, and it represents the encapsulation of entire time. In its depiction of both the intervention of heaven into the affairs of mortals, and the division of the dead in hell, it incorporates all physical space (and curiously it makes reference to the mythical *ancilia*, the buckler shield of Mars that fell from heaven, which allows us an image of the microcosmic object which itself appears within the microcosmic object). Moreover, the description of the shield shows it swimming with details – the particularities of landscapes; various flora; the behaviour of animals; the crafted objects of civilisation; the concrete realisation of colours, sounds, and surfaces; a panorama in fact of the key historical moments of an entire civilisation. Yet what we should find even more remarkable is the way Virgil describes the images of historical events on the shield *as though they were actually occurring on it*. The immediacy and urgency of the poetry, as well as the present tense of the grammar, convey a sense that the shield is a “moving image”. Aeneas “sees” the events on the shield precisely as the reader of the poem “sees” them, as though they were being created, or re-created, with each viewing or reading, as though all the world is made anew in this one sacred and macrocosmically representational object.

Virgil's topos of the “universal object”, directly transmitted from Homer has allowed Dante to see that the construction of a literary set-piece incorporating a microcosmic representation

⁶ See Virgil, *Aeneid* VIII, 608-731, pp. 243-247.

of the world was not only possible but highly desirable, for it served to seal the supposed divine authority of the work and provide a figure in which all of the content of the work could be ordered and arranged. In addition, the providential nature of the divine object allows the author to assume a position approximating to prophetic authority by altering the way in which time is treated. For Virgil, the shield granted to Aeneas is the means by which he can show Aeneas, and by extension his own literary audience, the “future” of the Roman people *as though it had yet to happen*. While Dante would have found Virgil’s exaltation of the superiority of the Roman race to be a particularly attractive part of the providential workings of history that allowed for the coming of the gospel into the world, at a literary level he could utilise and extend the idea of the sacred, image object to encompass the entire history of his civilisation. He too can employ the figurative topos of the sacred, moving object – here his all-encompassing and realistically portrayed vision of the after-world, to also bring to being actual historical events as though they had yet to occur, *and* on other occasions gather into the realm of history things that have yet to come to pass. Thus the sacred object, microcosmically understood, gave Dante a powerful literary device by which he might make real that which could otherwise only be imagined. We are shown the great panorama of human history, containing all things in an ordered schema, and for explicit political and moral purposes, just as Virgil has shown to his audience the “whole world” on the shield of Aeneas. In this case Dante casts as the sacred object the epic poem itself, an artefact granted from heaven, macrocosmically ordered and microcosmically expressed.

Of all classical sources, it is Plato and his cosmological dialogue, the *Timaeus*, that stands as the most influential in Dante’s formation of microcosmic-macrocosmic imagery and analogy; an influence that appears to have developed well beyond its due proportion, given that for Dante his direct access to Plato’s thought was limited to a part-translation into Latin (with commentary) by the fourth century Christian bishop Calcidius. Yet Platonic philosophy in general terms was effectively and authoritatively transmitted in the stream of later Roman and Latin Christian neoplatonist authors, with whose works Dante enjoyed a much greater familiarity and confidence, as shall be later demonstrated. In what may be an affirmation of his assent to Plato’s liking for tripartite division, Dante mentions the Greek philosopher on three occasions in the *Commedia*, once in each *cantica* of the poem. He is ranked amongst the virtuous pagan philosophers in *Inferno* IV, a fact that is re-iterated, with a sense of symmetry, by Virgil in *Purgatorio* IV. In the *Paradiso*, Dante grants a somewhat sympathetic view of the Platonic doctrine that souls of humans return to the star of their

origin after death.⁷ This idea, Dante proclaims, is one that “*da non esser derisa*” (“we should not deride”)⁸, allowing as he does for an allegory reading that renders a different meaning to Plato’s text – that some truth is reached if it is understood in terms of the *astral influence* that affects our earthly inhabitation. Plato is further mentioned on fifteen separate occasions in the *Convivio*, where he is generally granted positive appraisal of his doctrines, with Dante even going so far as to call him “a most excellent man” in 2.4. The far-reaching and profound influence of Plato’s *Timaeus* upon the western intellectual tradition cannot be encompassed here, yet a brief summation of its key themes shows that it stood as a foundation document for the intellectual tradition in which Dante stood. Specifically in regard to its imagery of the placing of mankind in the world, it offered the following ideas. The *Timaeus* offers a creation myth which could provide something of a philosophical companion to the account of the world’s creation found in Genesis. The world is a living being fashioned by a benevolent and purposeful creator, and is the best of all possible worlds.⁹ It has a soul, intelligence, and its essential form is comprised of the two competing motions of the Same and the Different. The universe, being a spherical being, and the source of all living things, is analogous to the human head.¹⁰ The “mortal parts” of the soul are ordered along an essentially tripartite arrangement of head, chest and abdomen.¹¹ There is no requirement to expand upon these ideas here, since the strong influence of Plato’s thought on the works of Dante has been considered elsewhere in this thesis.

Our next document for consideration is the *Natural Questions* of the Roman orator and author, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, or Seneca the Younger. Dante holds a high regard for this figure, aligning him with other classical philosophers in the garden of Limbo in *Inferno* IV, where he is described as “*Seneca morale*”¹². Elsewhere, Dante lauds Seneca in the *De Vulgaria Eloquentia* for his integrity as a public official, while in the *Convivio* he is praised for his contempt for wealth and his philosophical stoicism when confronted with death.¹³ Seneca’s *Natural Questions* concerns itself with the operations and causes of various natural phenomena. In a roaming survey, across seven books, he takes account of the many “theories

⁷ Plato, *Timaeus*, 42B, pp. 58-59.

⁸ *Par.* 4:57.

⁹ Plato, *Timaeus* 30, pp. 42-43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 44, pp. 60-61.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 70, pp. 97-98.

¹² *Inf.* 4:141.

¹³ See *Convivio*, 4.12, 3.14.

of the major authorities on the phenomena under study.”¹⁴ It is in accord with Dante’s own inclusivist approach to the natural sciences that he should be attracted to Seneca’s work, since the Roman, just like the Tuscan, was a public official, orator, author, and philosopher, as well as devoting some of his intellectual energy to the pursuit of the physical sciences. And it is not coincidental that Dante’s only known work entirely devoted to the natural sciences, the *Question de aqua et terra*, should concern itself with the apparent relationship between land and water as it can be observed on the surface of the earth, for this is the same intellectual “territory” that Seneca covers in the most “symbolic” section of the *Natural Questions*. It is in Book Three of his survey (happily, in accordance with Dante’s interest in the supreme significance of this number), that Seneca examines the nature of the “waters of the earth”, i.e. the “terrestrial waters”, as opposed to the “celestial waters” that come from clouds:

Let us, then, study the waters of the earth or investigate also the causes that produce them, whether, as Ovid says:

There was a fountain
Silvery clear
With shining waters

or, as Virgil says:

Whence through nine mouths
With a mighty roar from the mountain
A sea goes bursting forward
And presses down the fields
With its resounding expanse.¹⁵

These opening lines should have been enough to rouse the attention of Dante, since they refer to two authors whom Dante obviously holds as authorities and sources of interest. Yet the subsequent content of Seneca’s discussion reveals much that, in following our metaphor, acts as seeds for Dante’s own projects. After an extended examination of how his question has been previously treated by various authorities, such as Aristotle, Lucretius, Thales and Theophrastus, he commences his own poetic and “microcosmic” explanation of the issue at hand:

Some of these are theories with which we can agree. But I have this further theory: the idea appeals to me that the earth is governed by nature and is much like the system of our own bodies in which there are both veins (receptacles for blood) and Arteries (receptacles for air). In the earth also there are some routes through which water

¹⁴ Introduction to Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* (London: Harvard University Press, 1971) p.xiii.

¹⁵ Ibid. III,15.1.

runs, some through which air passes. And nature fashioned these routes so like human bodies that our ancestors even called them ‘veins’ of water. But, just as in us there is not only blood but many kinds of moisture, some essential for life, others tainted and rather thick (brain in the head, marrow in the bones, mucus, saliva, tears, and a kind of lubricant added to the joints to make them bend more readily); so, in the earth also there are several kinds of moisture, some which harden soon.¹⁶

The basic analogy is straightforward enough: the earth, being a living creature, has “terrestrial waters” that are similar, in their composition and purpose, to the various “waters” of the human body, particularly blood. This is to be understood as part of a deliberate design, for Seneca demonstrates an adherence to the Platonic tradition that supposes a divine source, indeed a divine source as purposeful craftsman, is responsible for such a correspondence: “And nature fashioned these routes so like human bodies that our ancestors even called them ‘veins’ of water.”¹⁷ The inference is clear – the construction of the physical world is not only executed along microcosmic-macrocosmic structures, but it was made so that man would read it in this way, and thus be able to avail himself of the higher understandings that can be gleaned from such readings.

Yet what is compelling for our purposes is the introductory statement that commences this entire passage: “But I have this further theory: the idea appeals to me that...” Seneca admits that this idea is, firstly, *of his own construction*, and that secondly it is worth constructing because it finds some intuitive resonance within him that is beyond the mere collection of observable facts that typify the “authoritative” sources he has previously quoted. These analytical approaches have a valid place, Seneca would uphold, yet above the reportage of what we may collectively label “science” he places an idea that employs the analogical method of microcosmic thinking. Analogy, in this respect, has an ability to transfer meaning that is of a qualitatively different kind to that derived purely from sense perception; and it is, it seems, the fact that the human body provides the author with the analogical framework upon which he can assemble such a notion that gives it the air of “appeal”.

Seneca goes on to employ a key phrase that will find multiple occurrences in the works upon which Dante will subsequently draw: “just as”. In the manner of a scientific axiom that

¹⁶ Ibid. III, 15.1-2.

¹⁷ Ibid. III, 15.2.

expresses proportionality or ratio, the various occurrences that are observable within the realm of physical phenomenon are reducible to, and yet, we might say, glorified by, the way they can be readily ascribed to, or compared with, the human form. This typically takes the literary pattern “just as...so in”. This will become a standard form of expressing microcosmic analogies as the literary tradition develops. What can be seen in one thing propels us to conceive of how that thing is represented in something else: “But just as in our bodies, the liquids in the earth often develop flaws.”¹⁸; “Therefore, just as in our bodies when a vein is cut...so in the earth when veins are loosened or broken open a stream or a river gushes out.”¹⁹. Later, Seneca provides a more detailed example of the same basic form:

But why are some springs full for six hours and dry for six? It is unnecessary to name individual rivers which are broad in certain months or narrow in certain months and to seek a provenance for each one when I can give the same explanation for them all. Just as quartain fever comes at the same hour, as gout corresponds to a regular time, as menstruation, if nothing interferes, maintains a fixed period, as birth is ready in its proper month; so water has its cycles in which it withdraws and returns. However, some cycles are short and thus noticeable, others are longer but no less fixed. And what is remarkable about this, when you see that in nature the sequence of events proceeds in accordance with established laws?²⁰

Again, the analogy of the human form as a metaphor for natural phenomenon makes instinctive sense to its author, since it was understood that being cast from the same base materials by the same creator they should observe similar behavioural traits. It is, as Seneca points out, unremarkable. In looking for moments of direct inspiration, we may wish to draw a comparison between Seneca’s analogy here and Dante’s only reference to the known phenomenon of quartain fever, *quartana*, which occurs at a pivotal moment in the *Inferno*. In Canto XVII, Virgil commands Dante-pilgrim to join him on the back of the monster Geryon for the perilous descent to the eighth circle of Hell, when Dante-pilgrim describes his terror thus:

*Qual é colui che sì presso ha ‘l riprezzo
de la quartana, c’ha già l’unghie smorte,
e triema tutto pur guarando ‘l rezzo:
tal divenn’ io a le parole porte...*

¹⁸ Ibid. III, 15.4.

¹⁹ Ibid. III, 15.5.

²⁰ Ibid, III, 16.2-3.

As one who shudders with the four-day chills
 of quartan fever, nails already blue,
 shivers all over at the sight of shade,
 So did I shudder at his words...'

(*Inf.* XVII, 85-87).

The irony in this description of fever is, of course, that this turned out to be precisely the circumstances in which Dante himself met his own death – contracting the quartan malarial fever after a crossing of the Ravenna marshlands at the end of summer in 1321. Symbolically, however, we should draw the correspondence between Dante's description of fever and the fact that, in the narrative of the *Commedia*, this occurs as he preparing to descend alongside an otherwise impassable *waterfall*. Dante's familiarity with the behaviour of this particular phenomenon is demonstrated by the reference in *Inferno* XVI, immediately prior to the appearance of Geryon, that describes the descent of the river Montone as it passes through the western Appennines.²¹ As a naturalist, Dante would be familiar with the way in which waterfalls, as intensified versions of the general behaviour of a river or stream, particularly those that are snow-fed from the peaks of the Appennine range, serve as indicators of the seasons; and it is of course the established, ritual turning of the seasons that Seneca refers to as evidence of the natural laws that govern both man and the world he inhabits. The association of the quartan fever, a water-borne virus fatal to humans, with the behaviour of a cascade should therefore be discernable to those of Dante's audience who enjoyed a close familiarity with his sources.

Yet more can be suggested of what Dante may have gleaned from Seneca's work. Continuing from the previous passage, Seneca goes on to claim that there are also *subterranean* realms that are subject to the same operations of nature as those we can readily observe on the earth:

There are also laws of nature under the earth, less known to us but no less fixed. Believe me that there exists below whatever you see above. There, too, vast caverns exist, and great recesses, and vacant spaces with mountains overhanging here and there. There are gulfs gaping into infinity which have frequently swallowed up cities that fell into them and buried the mighty ruins in the depths. There places are filled with air – for no void exists anywhere – and there are

²¹ See *Inf.* 16:91-105.

marshes enveloped in darkness, and great lakes. Also, living creatures are born there, but they are slow and deformed since they were conceived in dark, heavy air, and in water made torpid by its inactivity. Many of these creatures are blind, like moles and subterranean rats who have no vision since none is needed.²²

Although Seneca delivers these descriptions in a straightforward style, they are not inconsistent with those that Virgil employs to describe the general landscape of the “underworld” in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, which grants to both works some added verisimilitude. Allowing for the fact that Dante would have primarily treated Seneca’s work as a scientific, factual text, nonetheless the accord with Virgil’s work allows it to be doubly read as a metaphorical landscape for the abode of the damned. In other words, even if Dante believed that the lower recesses of the earth’s geography were actually as described, they also provide the imagination with a starting point upon which it can fully develop a supposed world that is fictional and yet vividly realistic. The obvious parallels between Seneca’s description of the earth’s underground recesses and the topography of Dante’s *Inferno* are highly suggestive. All the basic elements of Dante’s imaginary landscape are here in Seneca: the gulf that swallows everything that falls into it; the ruined city; marshes and lakes, which by their stagnancy are implied to be toxic; dark, heavy air (compare to the descriptions of the appalling weather that afflicts the gluttonous in the opening lines of *Inferno* VI); slow-moving and deformed creatures, who lack vision. Read retrospectively, Seneca seems to be pre-describing, and thereby seeding, the creation of the very landscape Dante requires.

There are two further elements of Seneca’s work that require attention. To return to the earlier passage in which he compares the earth’s “fluids” to those of the human body, we can note that among the various bodily liquids described – “brain in the head, marrow in the bones, mucus, saliva, tears, and a kind of lubricant added to the joints to make them bend more readily”²³ – it is only *tears* that Dante elects to utilise in allegorical terms, and this in a most elaborate way. In the famous image of the Old Man of Crete in *Inferno* XIV, Dante makes the most Senecan connection of all – that the rivers of Hell are formed from human tears.²⁴

²² Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, III, 16,4-5.

²³ Ibid. III, 15.2.

²⁴ See *Inf.* 14:100-120.

Finally, as has been demonstrated in detail, the suggestive imagery of “man as microcosm” in these passages of Seneca’s work form the basis for the construction of similar imagery in Dante’s so-called *Rime Petrose*, or “stony rhymes”.²⁵ The role of these early poems in the development of Dante’s microcosmic imagery has been considered in Chapter Two.

Following a chronological order, consideration shall now be given to the influence of the later Roman grammarian and early neoplatonist philosopher Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius (fl. c.400AD), with particular interest in his *Somnium Scipionis* – the *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. This work, an extended display of erudition loosely arranged as a commentary upon the sixth book of Cicero’s *De Republica*, is partly an attempt to restate and therefore revivify concepts of the nature of the human soul and its apparent destiny, in accordance with the established Neoplatonic doctrines of Plotinus and Porphyry; and partly a compendium of the mathematical and astronomical sciences of Macrobius’ time.²⁶ A briefer, affirmative praise of the work is that it “is a *locus classicus* for a resume of the neoplatonic doctrine of emanation and creation.”²⁷ As with many other sources in the tradition of neoplatonic literature to which Dante refers, he does not mention Macrobius directly in any of his work, not employ direct quotation, yet it seems certain that Dante was indeed not only familiar with Macrobius’ work but highly attracted to its engagement with cosmology and mathematical symbolism.²⁸ Dante may also have known Macrobius’ *Saturnalia*, a philosophical dialogue that is largely devoted to interpreting and eulogising Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

But what may have been valuable in Macrobius is not his *Commentary*, *per se*, but the fact that it was the vehicle for preserving and therefore transmitting to the Middle Ages the original text of Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*. Cicero is well-known to Dante through his philosophical works, and is afforded the usual regard by placement in the circle of Limbo in the *Inferno*, where he is referred to as *Tullio*.²⁹ Dante quoted from Cicero’s works, or alluded to them, up to fifty times in his own writings, and declares in the *Convivio* that it was a reading of Cicero’s philosophical tract *On Friendship* that inspired him, at least in part, to

²⁵ See Durling and Martinez, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's Rime Petrose*, pp. 72-74; Durling, “Seneca, Plato, and the Microcosm” in *Dante*, pp. 113-131.

²⁶ Paul Harvey, *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford: The Clarendon press, 1937) p.256.

²⁷ Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 313n.

²⁸ See William Harris Stahl, introduction to Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 45-46, 108n.

²⁹ See *Inf.* 4:141.

take up philosophy.³⁰ The *Somnium Scipionis* is a literary source for Dante, in that it offers a description of a complete and ordered cosmology, and provides a model of the celestial journey of the soul; yet there is another possibility. There is insufficient space here to fully elaborate the details of this argument, but it should be noted that adequate parallels exist to suggest that Dante has deliberately used the *Somnium Scipionis* as a source for his construction of the crucial “Cacciaguida” episode in *Paradiso* XV-XVII. While the obvious base for Dante’s set-piece is the meeting between Aeneas and his father Anchises in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, it is worth also noting the debt owed to Cicero – the pilgrim’s meeting with his noble grandfather Cacciaguida, where the elder man discourses on the nobility of his lineage while escorting his grandson through a stellar journey, draws heavily upon the structure of the *Somnium*.³¹

Of initial interest in the *Commentary* is the extended concern to establish a connection between the symbolic language of mathematics and the structure of the physical universe. Macrobius upholds numbers to be something akin to a pathway to the divine mind: “But this attribute of perfection is common to all numbers, for in the progress of our thought from our own plane to that of the gods they present the first example of perfect abstraction.”³² In a rather confused argument, Macrobius states that the three-dimensional objects of the world are necessarily constructed by the prior existence of plane surfaces that in turn are constructed from the assemblage of lines, which in turn are dependent upon geometrical laws determined by numbers. “Thus it becomes clear that numbers precede surfaces and lines (of which surfaces consist), and in fact come before all physical objects”.³³ We may anticipate here Dante’s positive response to such an idea, since it is obvious that a mathematically harmonious structure underpins the narrative of both the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*, and that, as we shall see, such structures endeavour to contain within them a reflection of microcosmic principles. It can also be seen how Macrobius’ following example, in which he attempts to equate the merging of the numbers 7 and 8 to produce the life of Scipio in Cicero’s text with the merging of the odd and even numbers to produce the World-Soul according to Plato’s account in the *Timaeus*³⁴, would have resonated strongly with Dante’s own adherence to the medieval belief in the divinely-ordained and often mystical symbolism

³⁰ See *Convivio*, 2.12.

³¹ See Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, ‘Scipio’s Dream’, pp. 69-77.

³² Ibid. I.V.4.

³³ Ibid. I.V.12.

³⁴ Ibid. I.VI.1-32.

of numbers, and the way in which they could, if required, be subtly manipulated for the fulfilment of particular purposes. This is particularly the case, given that two of the numbers under Macrobius' gaze are three and seven, both of which hold high claims on Dante's own imaginative use of numerology. Multiple examples of such use, read as manipulative or not, can be found throughout the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*.

Yet what would have aroused Dante's interest was Macrobius chose to express the significance of the number three by referring to Plato's doctrine of the three-part division of the soul, as set out in his *Republic*.³⁵ Although Dante does not grant assent to the concept of a divided soul, and does not have the benefit of direct access to Plato's text, he does admit to the soul having three distinct levels of operation. Nonetheless, it is the symbolic reference in the context of Macrobius' work that holds appeal, for it re-enforces the notion that the tripartite arrangement or division of the human, whether in body or soul, is part of man's innate understanding of himself, a concept strong enough to overcome difference of philosophical or doctrinal outlook. It is the tripartite arrangement of the vices in the *Inferno*, and the overall schema of the *Commedia*, that owe their debt to this Platonic conception. This idea perpetuates through a long transmission of authors. That the *Commedia* contains within it microcosmic representation of itself, centered on the symbolism of the arrangement of the human body, is considered elsewhere.

Scattered throughout the remainder of Macrobius' text are various images or analogies that inspire Dante. In the continuation of his discourse on the import of the number seven, the Roman embarks upon a small excursion into embryology, making the starting claim that "seven is the number by which man is conceived, developed in the womb, is born, lives and is sustained, and passing through all the stages of life attains old age; his whole life is regulated by it."³⁶ This alone is of significance, given Dante's obvious fascination with the way in which the pattern of number can underwrite our certainty of the rules of physical existence, and his own attempt at embryological theory in Canto XXV of the *Purgatorio*. But the amusing metaphor Macrobius uses to describe insemination – "Once the seed has been deposited in the mint where man is coined"³⁷ – had its own particular reminiscence. As strange as this metaphor may sound to modern ears, traditional thinkers ascribed particular

³⁵ See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Henry Desmond Pritchard Lee (London: Penguin, 2003), IX,580d-e, IV,434e-441c.

³⁶ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, I.VI.62.

³⁷ Ibid. I.VI.63.

influential powers to the common metals, freely used the metallic elements in metaphorical senses, and had little difficulty in equating the wellbeing or otherwise of man with the balance of metals within the body. The traditional man is, in this sense, “coined”, brought into being as a volatile compound of base elements that were comparable to the qualities of metals. Dante clearly adheres to these ideas in the *Commedia*, particularly in his portrayal of the deformed body of the counterfeiter Adam of Brescia in *Inferno* XXIV; and the wholly unexpected moment in *Paradiso* XXX when Dante himself produces a valid testimony of faith before the presence of St Peter that is compared to a perfectly minted coin.³⁸

In chapters X-XII of the first part of the *Commentary*, Macrobius engages in a lengthy discourse on the topic of the “death” of the soul as it enters the body. This section of the work is clearly designed to restrengthen the arguments for the Platonic conceptions of the soul’s nature, and its relationship to the body in which it becomes incarnate, against the doctrinal position of the later Roman Church.³⁹ It is quite clear that Dante implicitly rejects the Macrobian argument, yet lying within this section of the work are two persuasive ideas from which he is comfortable in drawing. At XII,5 Macrobius suggests that as the soul makes its (degrading) descent from the perfect celestial realms to its new bodily inhabitation, it traces out the shape of a *spiral*: “The soul, descending from the place where the zodiac and the Milky Way intersect, is protracted in its downward course from a sphere, which is the only divine form, into a cone.”⁴⁰ The indivisible, circular soul is “extended” as it passes through the celestial spheres, being drawn out, like a line from a point, until it is conical in shape. The temptation here is to imagine that Dante has deliberately constructed an inversion of Macrobius’ image. In the *Commedia*, the geometrical form of the spiral is laden with powerful significances, most notably in the physical path taken by the pilgrim as an expression of his spiritual state, and the ways in which Dante uses the spiral as an attempt to accommodate both the Platonic conception of the circular nature of all reality and the linear arrangement of temporal time as expressed in the Scriptures.⁴¹ For the most part, Dante’s spiral is a positive movement. It is a spatial expression of the lost, static soul at the story’s beginning and his yearning to reach and fall into perfect accord with the great wheel of heaven that moves the entire universe.

³⁸ See *Inf.* 30 and *Par.* 24:79-87.

³⁹ For an analysis of the historical identity of the author of the *Commentary*, and issues relating to his possible interaction with Christianity, see Stahl Introduction, pp. 6-9.

⁴⁰ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* I.XXII.5.

⁴¹ For an analysis of the spiral as a controlling image in the *Commedia*, see Freccero, ‘Pilgrim in a Gyre’, in Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 70-92.

Macrobius also imports the idea that the descending soul receives the qualities particular to each individual sphere as it passes through them; in Saturn, reason and understanding; in Mars, a bold spirit, and so on:

By the impulse of the first weight the soul, having started on its downward course from the intersection of the zodiac and the Milky Way to the successive spheres lying beneath, as it passes through these spheres, not only takes on the aforementioned envelopment in each sphere by approaching a luminous body, but also acquires each of the attributes which it will exercise later.⁴²

This is also accommodated, in an inverted fashion, in Dante's construction of the spheres in the *Paradiso*. Dante too assigns qualities to each of the planetary spheres, but the ascent of the individual soul to its particular spherical "home", metaphorically speaking, is determined by the nature of the defining virtue of the individual.

Finally, Macrobius inserts two incidental references that fit our theme. At the commencement of the *Commentary's* cosmological section, he says, in reference to Cicero's descriptions of the geocentric arrangement of the cosmos:

In this passage we have an accurate description of the universe from top to bottom; the whole 'body' of the universe, so to speak, is represented, the *to pan* of the Greeks, for he begins with the words, *The whole universe is comprised...* Virgil, indeed, spoke of the universe as a great body:

And mingles with its great body.⁴³

And, in a final recapitulation of the arguments concerning the nature of the soul, near the work's conclusion, Macrobius produces the standard analogy:

Consequently, when at the death of the creature its quickening force has departed, the body is prostrated, deprived of its lord, and this is the part that is mortal in man; but the soul, which is the true man, is completely free of mortality; so, you see, it rules the body in the same manner that God rules the universe, being self-moved. That is the reason why philosophers called the universe a huge man and man

⁴² Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, I.XXII.13

⁴³ Ibid. II.XVII.5.

a miniature universe; and by way of alluding to the other prerogatives in which the soul seemed to copy God, the early philosophers and Cicero spoke of the soul as a god.⁴⁴

The “philosophers” to which he refers include Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, Philo Judaeus, Porphyry and Proclus. Of these it is only Aristotle to which Dante has complete access, and Macrobius evidently has in mind here the *Physics*, Book VIII,2, where Aristotle is considering possible refutations for his arguments on the nature of “change” as a physical phenomenon. He takes the fact that living creatures can be still at one time and moving at another and extrapolates it to apply to the entire universe as a general principle:

But if this can happen in an animal, why should it not also be true of the universe? If it happens in a microcosm, why not in the macrocosm as well? And if it is true of the world, it might be true of the infinite too, if the infinite is such that it can be in motion and at rest as a whole.⁴⁵

Though modern scholarship has cast considerable doubt on whether Macrobius actually had direct knowledge of the works of Aristotle (or indeed, those of Plato, whom Macrobius spends much time defending), the *Commentary* reads as though this was in fact the case, and is surely also the way Dante must have understood it. That Macrobius makes reference to an idea already ancient by his time, detected by Dante as present in a key work of Aristotle, whom Dante upholds as *the Philosopher* and a thinker of unquestionable authority, must make the Roman a key link the transmission of allegorical-microcosmic thinking.

The life and thought of the influential 7th century Byzantine theologian and scholar Maximus the Confessor should also be considered in this survey, although again the difficulty arises that Dante neither mentions Maximus directly nor alludes to him in any of his work. What we can say for certain is that Maximus holds an important place in the history of the transmission of neoplatonic philosophy, since he was, at least in the Greek stream of neoplatonism, the theological successor to the highly influential figure of Dionysius the Areopagite. Maximus composed *scholia* on the works of Dionysius, while directly quoting him consistently and freely throughout his own work. Indeed, one of Maximus’ primary achievements has been described as “the rescue of Dionysius through his orthodox

⁴⁴ Ibid. II.XII.10-11.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) VIII.2.252b.

restatement and reinterpretation of the Dionysian structure both in his theology and even more in his spirituality.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, the subsequent transmission of the texts of *both* Dionysius and Maximus into the Western Latin canon was initiated by the translations of the 9th century Irish theologian and neoplatonist philosopher John Scotus Erigena. This suggests that the texts of Dionysius and Maximus must have travelled similar paths through the intellectual world of the Middle Ages. It is beyond any doubt that Dante was intimately familiar with the work and thought of Dionysius, since he refers to him directly in two epistles, places him among the circle of wise theologians in *Paradiso* X; and directly imports the angelology of Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy* into the structure of the *Paradiso*, and appears to adopt wholesale Dionysius’ apophatic approach to the ineffable and mystical qualities of the Divine. Coupling these two facts, it seems difficult to accept that Dante did not at some point have access to the texts of Maximus, even in annotated or truncated form. Across the gap that is the absence of evidence for Dante’s direct knowledge of Maximus we may simply say that they both stood squarely within a philosophical and literary tradition, such that the influence of one, known or not, affects the other.

Given this supposition, it is worth considering how Maximus’ work would be of interest to Dante. I want to chiefly examine the *Mystagogia*, or *The Church’s Mystagogy*, a fascinating attempt to render into symbolic meaning the various elements of the church’s liturgical and architectural traditions. The unique feature of this work, in comparison to the others in this survey, is that Maximus sets out with the sole purpose of rendering a set of known realities into an allegorical schema, as opposed to the incidental use of such techniques in the other literary forms under consideration. This may have been influential in Dante’s construction of certain allegorical set-pieces in the *Commedia*, for example the opening scene of the three beasts, or the grand procession at the summit of Mt Purgatory, in which, it seems everything is deliberately designed to be a symbol of something else.

The microcosmic thinking behind Maximus’ work is presented in a direct way that focuses on a series of parallels between the church as spiritual entity, the church as an architectural construct, the soul of man, the body of man, the liturgical rituals, and how all of these in their turn reflect the nature of God. But before commencing the work proper, he introduces three elements that grant the work an air of authority – he admits to the prior superiority of

⁴⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, introduction to *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, p. 6.

Dionysius' *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* on the same subject; he claims that the entire work is merely the recording of a verbal tradition passed on to him by a "blessed old man", and he performs the traditional invocation for God to be the guide of his hand.⁴⁷

Chapter One of the work contains a magnificent opening statement which will provide the foundation for all his subsequent parallels. All beings, says Maximus, are bound into a common existence of shared identity held together by the providence of God, in such a way that the complete unity and abundant diversity of creation can exist in perfect harmony:

For God who made and brought into existence all things by his infinite power contains, gathers, and limits them and in his Providence binds both intelligible and sensible beings to himself and to one another. Maintaining about himself as cause, beginning, and end all beings which are by nature distant from one another, he makes them converge in each other by the singular force of their relationship to him as origin. Through this force he leads all beings to a common and unconfused identity of movement and existence, no one being originally in revolt against any other or separated from him by a difference of nature or of movement, but all things combine with all others in an unconfused way by the singular indissoluble relation to and protection of the one principle and cause.⁴⁸

There is a clear resemblance here to Dante's famous image of the "Book of the Universe" in the climax of the *Paradiso* – the entire contents of the universe contained within a singular point of vision. Refining this image to refer exclusively to the members of the spiritual church, Maximus says that the believer enters into a new form of incorporation: "To all in equal measure it [the spiritual Church] gives and bestows on divine form and designation, to be Christ's and to carry his name."⁴⁹ Fittingly, he then supports his image with a Pauline reference: "For all...had but one heart and one mind."⁵⁰

In Chapter Two Maximus compares how the physical structure of the church, as an architectural entity, is a microcosmic representation of the spiritual church, and of the entire world. Emphasising relationship over difference, he says that the two-fold division of the building into sanctuary and nave is a reflection of the separation of the body of the church into the priesthood and the laity; and the separation of the "entire world of beings" into both

⁴⁷ See *The Church's Mystagogy*, Introduction.

⁴⁸ Ibid, I.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Gal. 3:28.

incorporeal essences and sensible natures.⁵¹ But he is careful to ensure against any notion of dualism in the human form, or indeed in the created world at large. Both spheres of being are reflections of the other, both “fill the same whole as parts fill a unit”.⁵² He caps this argument with a statement that serves as an appropriate motto for the whole enterprise of allegorical representation in literature and the other creative arts of man:

For the whole spiritual world seems mystically imprinted on the whole sensible world in symbolic forms, for those who are capable of seeing this, and conversely the whole sensible world is spiritually explained in the mind in the principles which it contains. In the spiritual world it is in principles; in the sensible world it is in figures.⁵³

Marvellously for Dante, Maximus then describes the operation of these two worlds in terms of an analogy drawn from Ezekiel’s vision of the flaming cherubim: “like a wheel within a wheel”⁵⁴. That Dante uses the geometric figure of concentric circles to analogously demonstrate a metaphysical principle is well stated.⁵⁵ It is a fundamental image in the *Paradiso*, where it takes central place in several key moments, such as the arrangement of the two circles of philosophers in the Sphere of the Sun, the apparently concentric arcs of colored light that represent Dante’s vision of the Trinity, and most importantly the final image that would seem to involve the lesser “*rota*” – the “wheel” of the pilgrim turning in perfect unison with the greater “wheel” of the Creator. It presents as irresistible that Maximus should elect to see the interaction between the spiritual and the sensible as akin to two concentric wheels.

Maximus goes on to make a series of elegant analogies that seem in turn to reflect each other as the work develops. The church is a microcosmic symbol of the sensible world since it has a divine sanctuary that resembles heaven and a nave that resembles the earth.⁵⁶ The church is an image of man, because “for the soul it has the sanctuary, for mind it has the divine altar, and for body it has the nave.”⁵⁷ The church is also an image of the soul considered by itself, for the soul is comprised of a contemplative aspect that is represented by the sanctuary, and

⁵¹ *The Church’s Mystagogy*, II.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, I.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, II. See also Ez. 10:9-17.

⁵⁵ See J Freccero ‘The Dance of the Stars: *Paradiso* X’ in Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 221-244.

⁵⁶ *The Church’s Mystagogy*, III.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* IV.

an active aspect that is represented by the nave. In an “elevated contemplation”, the entire corpus of the holy Scripture is comparable to a man, in that the Old Testament is his body, and the New Testament his spirit and mind. At a layer above this, the literal level of the scriptural text is its body, while the “meaning of the letter and the purpose to which it is directed is the soul.”⁵⁸ The whole world can be said to be a man, for it contains intelligible things that are comparable to a man’s soul, and sensible things that are comparable to a man’s body.⁵⁹ This chain of analogies is concluded with another reassurance against any conceptions of dualism, in an exclamatory declaration of hope in the final reunification and perfection of the human form in the bodily resurrection that bears similar hallmarks to the speech of Solomon in Canto XIV of the *Paradiso*. Maximus says:

Then the body will become like the soul and sensible things like intelligible things in dignity and glory, for the unique divine power will manifest itself in all things in a vivid and active presence proportioned to each one, and will by itself preserve unbroken for endless ages the bond of unity.⁶⁰

The work continues with an extended analogical rendering of the various symbolic objects and human actions used in the ritual of the church’s liturgy, but I want to select just the first of these for consideration, due to its evocative use of a particular term. Maximus says that the physical entry of the people into the entrance of the church has a particular symbolic meaning. It “represents the *conversion* of the unfaithful from faithlessness to faith and from sin and error to the recognition of God as well as the passage of the faithful from vice and ignorance to virtue and knowledge [my italics].”⁶¹ A connection should be made here between physical human movement and spiritual development, for *conversion*, as an act of the will, is here typically expressed as a turning from one attitude and the crossing of a threshold to orient oneself to another attitude. Conversion equals turning, and readers of the *Purgatorio* should find resonance here, since Dante takes great care to continually portray the realm of Purgatory as one in which its inhabitants are *turning*. They are literally turning, since they make their way along a series of circular terraces, yet they are also turning internally, gradually purging themselves of the residual effects of sin and heading through continual regeneration to a state of physical perfection. But Maximus’ reference to the door

⁵⁸ Ibid. V.

⁵⁹ Ibid. VII.

⁶⁰ Ibid. VII.

⁶¹ Ibid. IX.

of the church is also of a piece with this reading, since the *Purgatorio* is also a narrative marked by symbolically important thresholds, such as the angelically-guarded door at the entrance to Purgatory proper, and the final, purifying wall of flame that closes off the terrace of the lustful. The placing of these thresholds is crucial to both the narrative structure and meaning of the *Purgatorio*. That Maximus should turn his attention to the hidden symbolism of the rituals of the liturgy is also significant, for, as has been shown elsewhere, the meaning of the Christian liturgy is intricately woven through the symbolic pattern of the *Purgatorio*.

There is a further and final element to Maximus' influence, which turns upon a particular interpretation of our controlling image – “*la nostra effigie*” (“our human form”)⁶² – as being that of the Incarnate second person of the Christian Trinity.⁶³ In this reading, the “actuality of the Incarnation is seen as belonging to the Trinity in its economic aspect, which is to say as it interacts with space and time.”⁶⁴ It is Maximus who introduced the unique concept that the “hypostasis” of Christ, the fact of his having a completely human and completely divine nature, can express itself as the that part of the trinity from which all creation proceeds. The human body, then, as the image in which all elements of the Godhead make their highest manifestation, can itself become the vehicle for participation in divine realities.

That Dante remained silent concerning some of his sources remains a point of some contention, and may be re-considered in the case of the 12th century German abbess and polymath, Hildegard of Bingen. The absence of direct access to texts cannot be argued here, since it seems certain that copies of Hildegard's work were available in Italy during Dante's lifetime, for example in the library of Florence's Santa Croce, the very place where Dante is thought to have spent his formative years of education.⁶⁵ It is perplexing that a figure of such immense intellectual energy, innovation and influence does not merit a single reference in any of Dante's works, and that therefore there is almost no English-language scholarly

⁶² *Par.* 33:131.

⁶³ For this idea see Davies, “World and Body: A Study in Dante's Cosmological Hermeneutics” in *Dante and the Human Body: Eight Essays*, pp. 208-213.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p.211.

⁶⁵ See Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, pp. 296-297, for a suggestion of Hildegard's possible influence on Dante, particularly as it may relate to his depictions of higher states of consciousness: ‘We fortunately possess a clear and precise account by a medieval writer of these two higher states of consciousness written before Dante's time. This is in a letter of the Rhineland prophetess and poet, Hildegard of Bingen. Like Dante, she had an intense visual imagination and she experienced numerous visions which she described in writing and in pictures. Copies of certain of her works are known to have been circulating in Italy in Dante's time, for example in the library of Sante Croce.’

attention given to the possible links between the two thinkers.⁶⁶ This is compounded by the fact that Hildegard shares with Dante both the rare status of being a recipient of divine visions, and a fascination with microcosmic imagery. The key text for consideration here is Hildegard's *Liber divinorum operum*, or *Book of Divine Works*. This is Hildegard's "*Commedia*", in that it represents the mature summation and unification of her entire world-view. It has been described as:

...a triumph of synthesis in which Hildegard brings together her theological beliefs, her physiological understanding, her speculations on the working of the human mind and of the structure of the universe, into a unified whole. The simplifying idea by which she binds the universe together is that of the relationship of man and universe as microcosm and macrocosm.⁶⁷

This work begins with the description of a universal image, an angelic figure that has a human form but is a representation of the primal energies of the world. The figure itself says "I am life, whole and entire"⁶⁸, and eventually is revealed as being a manifestation of Divine Love, the fundamental principle by which everything is brought into being. The second book goes on to describe how the human figure representing Love is revealed to be holding an enormous wheel, containing within it a series of circles of fire, in the centre of which is another human figure that extends its limbs to reach the outermost points of the wheel, like a radius. The message of this representation, Hildegard says, is thus:

Humanity stands in the midst of the structure of the world. For it is more important than all other creatures which remain dependent on that world. Although small in stature, humanity is powerful in the power of its soul. Its head is turned upward and its feet to the solid ground, and it can place into motion both the higher and the lower things. Whatever it does with its deeds in the right or the left hand permeates the universe, because in the power of its inner humanity it has the potential to accomplish such things. Just as, for example, the body of a human being exceeds in size the heart, so also are the powers of the soul more powerful than those of the body. Just as the heart of a human being rests hidden within the body, so also is the

⁶⁶ This absence of historical identities who by their reputation and/or influence seem more than worthy of mention is an unexplainable feature of Dante's thinking. He is so consistently attentive to directly quoting or naming his philosophical sources, and seemingly fanatical about cataloguing exempla from human history in the moral schema of the *Commedia*, that such absences seem all the more obvious. For example, how can we account for the fact that Dante may give seemingly undue attention to a minor character from contemporary Florentine politics, who would otherwise be lost to history, and yet make no mention whatsoever of two of the most important Europeans of his own lifetime – Meister Eckhart and Marco Polo?

⁶⁷ Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179: A Visionary Life* (London: Routledge, 1989) p. 142.

⁶⁸ *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*, trans. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1987) I, 2.

body surrounded by the powers of the soul since these powers extend over the entire globe.⁶⁹

With this image does Hildegard begin her allegorical work, by setting up a pictorial framework that posits the Godhead as a perfectly poised and spinning wheel, while within the great wheel of existence the central, defining figure is the body of man, fully extended and balanced, a figure in which all of the created order is both contained and understood.

The most direct microcosmic representations in the work are to be within Book IV, which is appropriately titled *On the Articulation of the Body*. This is an extended meditation, in richly allegorical and pictorial language, of the ways in which the operations of the heavens exert their influence upon the earthly realms, with particular emphasis on the “humour” of man. A standard technique of Hildegard is to apply the form of the so-called Hermetic Axiom – “as above, so below” – in a descriptive way that repeats the formula “just as...so the...” The fourteenth chapter of Book IV begins this process, starting with the overarching image of the universe contained within the central figure of man:

And God formed humanity according to the divine image and likeness. God already had it in mind that this very form should enclose the holy Godhead. For the same reason God delineated all of creation in the human species, just as the whole world emerged from the divine Word.⁷⁰

Hildegard then produces the first of many analogies that compare the structure of the human body with that of the earth, a selection of which is as follows:

The Divinity has provided us with flesh and blood, filled us out and strengthened us with bones, just as the Earth is strengthened with rock. For just as the Earth could not exist without rock, we humans could not exist without our bone structure.⁷¹

Next, she produces a prototypal image of the human figure as it corresponds to the perfect geometrical forms that comprise the cosmos, but also includes an appropriate moral dimension:

⁶⁹ Ibid. II, 15.

⁷⁰ Ibid. IV, 14.

⁷¹ Ibid.

...the human form has the same length and width, if we extend both our hands and arms out from the chest, just as the firmament is also as tall as it is wide. And thus the fact that we are as tall as we are wide gives us a way of measuring our knowledge of good and evil.⁷²

The implication here is that observing the roundness of the arc traced by the extension of our arms, like drawing an arc in the air above our heads, will in fact remind us of both the spherical form of the heavens and the roundness of the human head, which, Hildegard mentions beforehand, is the “beginning of the soul’s action, which orders and plans all human deeds in accord with prudent reason.”⁷³ As we have seen, this idea extends back to Plato’s account of the human head in the *Timaeus*, where he argues that the roundness of the human head is an expression of form of the cosmos.

Hildegard goes to form an analogy that explains the relationship between the human head and the rest of the body as it may compare to the influence of celestial powers upon the earth:

Our body as a whole is associated with the head, just as the Earth and all its structures are adapted to the firmament. And we humans as a whole are guided by the sensory organs of our head, just as earthly functions are fulfilled by the firmament.⁷⁴

The fundamental idea is that the stream of influences in the body is vertical, and commences from the top of the body, and progresses downwards. This is also the path taken by the text of Book IV itself, considering the nature and behaviour of the head first, and progressively making its way down through the various parts of the body, to conclude with a discussion of the feet. Therefore, the literary form of the book takes on a microcosmic appearance, as it mirrors in parallel the subject matter it attempts to describe. Hildegard continues with her own version of the standard neoplatonic analogy that the human head is microcosmic representation of the heavens, stating that the orbits of the various planets can be seen in its shape, although precisely how this is so cannot be clearly ascertained:

From the very top of our cranium to the outer edge of our forehead, seven points are found, separated from one another by equal intervals. This symbolises the planets, which are also separated from one another in the firmament by like intervals...The uppermost planet is symbolised by the cranium, because this planet has the

⁷² Ibid. IV, 15.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid. IV, 2.

widest orbit among the planets. The forehead is compared to the moon because, just as shame appears on our forehead, the tides and other characteristics of time are distinguished on the moon, which at its ascent looks like a forehead.⁷⁵

Hildegard then moves to consider the operation of the soul within the body, comparing the waters of the earth, (both sea and rivers) with the veins in the body and the moral action of virtuous perseverance:

In union with the watery air, the atmosphere stirs up the sea, out of which the different rivers flow separately to moisten and fortify the whole body with blood. The soul, which is of an airy nature, is the agency by which all the human works are accomplished, just as all the Earth's fruits are produced by the air. Now the soul presents all actions to us as humans through the grace of the Holy Spirit so that we can distinguish what is useful from what is harmful by our thinking process, which surges like the sea...And just as our blood system holds the body together by means of sinews so that the body cannot fall apart, the virtuous power of humility binds and preserves the good works lest they be scattered by pride.⁷⁶

In a continuing descent from the ethereal element of man, the head, to the watery components being the blood, she then attends to the fleshly constituents of man, again being careful to impress that the analogies drawn have a moral meaning:

The Earth is strengthened by rocks and trees. Like it, we humans are created because our flesh is like the Earth; our bones without marrow are like rocks; our marrow-containing bones are like trees...Those of us who do well are like an orchard full of the fruit of good works. Such persons are like the Earth, which is strengthened and adorned by rocks and trees. But if we do evil works in the stubbornness of sin, we shall remain sterile in God's eyes, like the stubborn Earth that bears no fruit. Human flesh indicates the good conscience that displays a fruitful kind of softness. Our bones indicate the bad conscience that is hardened against God. Bones without marrow indicate the evil works them.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid. IV, 22.

⁷⁶ Ibid. IV, 59.

⁷⁷ Ibid. IV, 82.

Hildegard continues by comparing the winds of the earth and their various effects, to different parts of the body, in chapter 95; before offering something of a summatory exclamation of the entire work, exalting the human form as the centrepiece of creation in the (noticeably, given Dante's pre-occupation with the symbolism of numbers) 100th chapter of the work:

When God looked upon the human countenance, God was exceedingly pleased. For has not God created humanity according to the divine image and likeness? Human beings were to announce all God's wondrous works by means of their tongues that were endowed with reason. For humanity is God's complete work...And thus the human species sits on the judgment seat of the world. It rules over all creation. Each creature is under our control and in our service. We human beings are of greater value than all other creatures.⁷⁸

There is much here that finds a home in Dante's intellectual world-view. The logical framing of an extended allegory across the image of the human body; the analogies drawn between the operations of man and those of the earth's natural systems; the keen observation of the behaviour of the planetary system and the biology of the earth; the love of metaphor that expresses the operation of the soul within the body; the final triumphant declaration of the supremacy of the human form in the created world.

The lengthy *Policraticus* (*Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*), by the 12th century English bishop John of Salisbury, presents us with another case study. Dante does not name directly nor allude to John of Salisbury in any of his writings, yet his influence can clearly be felt in the *De Monarchia* and the more political passages of the *Commedia*. It seems certain that Dante was familiar with this text, given its subject, and its status as "the first extended work of political theory written during the Latin Middle Ages."⁷⁹ Dante would have been deeply attracted to, and influenced by, John's work, for its deft interweaving of scriptural and classical sources (particularly his allegorical rendering of Virgil's texts); its striking use of *exempla* to demonstrate moral principles; and its insistence that political thought and activity ought to be integral to an individual's pursuit of the good, both for himself and his community. The weight Dante afforded to this text is evinced in his portrayal of the Roman Emperor Trajan as a model of humility on the Terrace of the Proud in

⁷⁸ Ibid. IV, 100.

⁷⁹ Cary J. Nederman, introduction to John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*, p. xv.

Purgatorio X. In a theologically difficult example, Dante endorses the medieval tradition, treated at length in the *Policraticus*, that Trajan was not only an ideal leader and a highly virtuous man, but was especially privileged to have been retrospectively granted salvation through the later intercessory prayers of Pope Gregory the Great.⁸⁰

In Book Five of the *Policraticus*, the author elects to employ the by-now standard topos of human society as being ordered according to an analogical view of the human body. Citing as his own inspiration a pamphlet published by Plutarch entitled *The Instruction of Trajan* (subsequently shown to be fictitious), John builds his analogy, again in a way attractive to Dante's affection for such methods, in a tripartite arrangement. Initially, he provides a broad outline:

For a republic is, just as Plutarch declares, a sort of body which is animated by the grant of divine reward and which is driven by the command of the highest equity and ruled by a sort of rational management.⁸¹

Then, and once more in accordance with Dante's decidedly non-dualist idealisation of the human complex, (although not, it should be pointed out, in complete accord with the argument that Dante will develop in the *De Monarchia*) John makes a crucial distinction:

...that which institutes and moulds the practice of religion in us...acquires the position of the soul in the body of the republic. Indeed, those who direct the practice of religion ought to be esteemed and venerated like the soul in the body...just as the soul has rulership of the whole body so those who are called prefects of religion direct the whole body.⁸²

Finally, he delineates the way in which the body politic can be divided according to the traditional trisection of the human body, and provides a more elaborate version of the Pauline image that compared the functions of a human organisation to the workings of human body parts:

The position of the head in the republic is occupied, however, by a prince subject only to God and to those who act in His place on earth, inasmuch as in the human body the head is stimulated and ruled by the soul. The place of the heart is occupied by the senate...The duties of the ears, eyes and mouth are claimed by the judges and governors

⁸⁰ See *Policraticus*, V.8; *Pur* 10:73-93. For Dante's presentation of the saved Trajan, see *Par.* 20:43-45.

⁸¹ *Policraticus*, V.2.

⁸² *Ibid.*

of provinces. The hands coincide with officials and soldiers. Those who always assist the prince are comparable to flanks. Treasurers and record-keepers resemble the shape of the stomach and intestines; these, if they accumulate with great avidity and tenaciously preserve their accumulation, engender innumerable and incurable diseases so that their infection threatens to ruin the whole body. Furthermore, the feet coincide with peasants perpetually bound to the soil.⁸³

This version of anatomical analogy is somewhat inventive, since it moves away from the established “three estates” of medieval society, equating the head only with the monarchy, the chest with the political function of human society, and proposing a new image that assigns those in public officialdom to the functions of the senses and the hands, alongside the traditional “second tier” of the aristocracy. To the lower portion of the body John gives the common assignation of the peasantry, to which we would also include all unskilled labourers and the lower crafts. Dante may also have included in this register the new mendicant religious orders; since they were committed to poverty, were itinerant, often went barefoot, and took seriously the onus of ritual pilgrimage.

That John desired his readers to draw out the intended meanings of his analogy are made obvious in the passage that follows, where he states: “One who follows everything in the text syllable-by-syllable is a servile interpreter who aims to express the appearance rather than the essence of an author.”⁸⁴

Consideration must be given to the important *Cosmographia* of the 12th century neoplatonist philosopher and poet, Bernardus Silvestris. Again, there is no direct reference to Bernardus in any of Dante’s work, yet the apparent similarities between the *Cosmographia* and the *Commedia* give it an impression of influence worthy of examination. Such influence as Bernardus may have had on Dante has been summarised thus:

The *Cosmographia* reflects nothing less than the attempt to create a new poetic world, taking the Platonic cosmology with its neo-Platonic accretions as a model, but at the same time keeping all of this continually in perspective, using it as a foil to the presentation of a larger view of reality. It is on the basis of this enterprise, this imposition of new and lofty responsibilities upon poetry, that Bernardus merits comparison with Dante...And the work of Alain and Bernardus, the intuition and definition of an archetypal pattern in the

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*

works of the great *auctores* and the use of this pattern as the basis for new departure anticipated in profound ways the structure and themes of the *Divine Comedy*, and the use of the figure of Vergil as a foil to that of Beatrice.⁸⁵

The essential development in Bernardus' work is to construct a completely original poetic universe, following to its limits the Platonic model to which he was inheritor but extending it in a new version that incorporates the element of human struggle and endeavour, in which the place of man is assuredly still the centrepiece. Everyman has entered into the myth of creation.

The structure of the *Cosmographia* also presents a novelty in that it is organised along explicitly microcosmic principles. The first half of the work, the *Megacosmos*, describes the creation of the universe: the separation of the primordial matter into the four basic elements; the arrangement of the angels, stars, zodiac and planets in the firmament; the landscapes of the universally-centred earth; the various animals and plants that populate the earth. Of more interest is the work's second section, the *Microcosmos*, in which Bernardus' myth explains how the figure of man is constructed according to the structural principles of the celestial realms. Several key moments in the *Microcosmos* are worth presenting for the similarity they display to elements of Dante's work. Firstly, the figure of Nature, the active creative presence in the narrative, proclaims that all the creatures of the earth should take note of her creation, beginning with the *topos* of the sky as a book in which can be read profound significances: "I would have you survey the heavens, inscribed with their manifold array of symbols, which I have set forth for learned eyes, like a book with its pages spread open, containing things to come in secret characters."⁸⁶ This provides an explicit anticipation of the book as all-containing symbol that Dante will employ in the *Paradiso*.

Nature goes on to make several references to the standard neoplatonic conception of the human body as a prison or restraint upon the eternal soul of man, and also constructs an analogy of the three tiers of being – God, angels, man – that we will see in a similar speech by the "Nature" of Alain of Lille.⁸⁷ Later, in Chapter Ten, the figure of Noys delivers a speech in which the three characters Urania, Physis and Nature are given three tasks: creating the soul of man, creating the body of man, and the fusing of the two. The third task is given

⁸⁵ Winthrop Wetherbee, introduction to Bernardus Silvestris, *The Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris*, p. 59.

⁸⁶ Bernardus, *Microcosmos*, I.

⁸⁷ Ibid, VII.

to Physis, who has for her tool a Book of Memory, which was written not in words but signs and symbols, as if it is a representation of the created order. In this book is the “plan” by which all living things are to be generated and held in harmonious relationship to each other. And at the end of this magical Book of Memory, Bernardus says:

Here was shown the beginning of all that generation draws forth to substantial existence and the passing away of those things whose substance corruption destroys. Amid so great a host of earthly natures Physis discovered only by a great effort the image of man, faintly inscribed at the very end of the final page.⁸⁸

Though the context and intended meaning are different, this image is remarkably similar to the “*nostra effige*” – “our image” – that Dante describes at the very conclusion to the *Commedia*. At the end of a great book that purports to show within it the plan of all creation, and indeed after all of those elements of creation have been successively left behind or dematerialised, and after considerable effort, comes a vision of man on the very last page. Does not this similarity argue for an influence upon Dante?

On more general ground, Bernardus then proceeds to conclude the *Cosmographia* with an actual construction of man. Firstly, there is the careful work of Physis to skilfully arrange in proper proportion the four humours. Then, we read of the building of the form of man in the traditional tripartite arrangement. Taking directly from the model of the microcosmic man in the *Timaeus*, Bernardus proceeds as follows:

And since this fully realized solidity demanded the further development of form, Physis carefully divided the bodily material into three portions. These she gave the rough outline of lineaments, and soon shaped them into the form of members. The first she called the head, the second the breast, and the third the loins, according to the properties she observed in them. These three in particular of the body’s many parts, these narrow chambers out of its general extensiveness she chose to receive the brain, the heart, and the liver, the three foundations of its life. Physis knew that she would not go astray in creating the lesser universe of man if she took as her example the pattern of the greater universe.⁸⁹

Here is the classic representation of man as a ternary creature divisible into head, torso and abdomen, that will prove to be fundamental to the arrangement of Dante’s physical and moral

⁸⁸ Ibid. XI.

⁸⁹ Ibid. XIII.

world in the *Commedia*. The body is divisible according to purpose and function, each division is controlled by a particular organ of influence, and the entire entity is constructed upon a celestial pattern, in this instance the separation of the godhead, the atmosphere and the earth. God is to the head just as the air is to the chest and the earth is to the loins. The corresponding actions of the three parts of man are described as soul (by which we may interpret as intellect), vitality, and appetite, but Bernardus also emphasises that the apparent linear ordering of the three parts has a specific purpose, namely to separate as far as possible the highest from the lower functions of man:

So Physis, skilled artist as she was, prepared the brain as the future seat of the soul, the heart as the source of vitality, and the liver as the source of appetite, and took pains to prepare a divine dwelling place for divine guests. For she gave a rounded shape to the head, which occupied the chief position, following the example of the firmament and the sphere of the heavens...She placed this noblest part of the body, charged with the duty of understanding, furthest away from the cruder organs of digestion, lest its perceptions be affected by that waste which comes from the digestion of food.⁹⁰

For Dante, this conveys the obvious spatial arrangement by which the spheres of Heaven and the pit of Hell are placed at the furthest possible extreme from one another. Purgatory, while apparently a bridge between the two, is in these terms far closer to the realm of Hell, since it is terrestrial like the torso, and its inhabitants are still far closer in moral state and physical form to that of the damned in Hell, although they are capable of progressing away from that state and are recipients of a promise that eventually they will be freed from it. Bernardus continues with a further three-fold division: that the “soul” of the head is comprised of the anterior imagination, the posterior memory, and the middle placing of reason, which operates between the two.

Bernardus concludes with a detailed description of each of the three parts of the human form, including more imagery that finds easy accommodation in Dante’s world – the human eye is the highest and most valuable of the sense organs, and in its nature and behaviour resembles the sun; the heart is the animating source of the body’s vitality; the accompanying element to the heart is that of fire, which importantly has a pyramidal shape, always tending upwards (a feature of fire that resembles the heat of the heart, and which in its turn has much implication

⁹⁰ Ibid.

for the symbolism of the holy mountain in the *Purgatorio*, which has been considered in Chapter Four); the heart, or chest, is the seat of the emotions; the lower ends of the body are hidden from sight in a remote region.

There is much here to indicate that Dante was not only familiar with Bernardus' work, but was highly influenced by it, for the *Cosmographia* contains particular motifs found nowhere else in Dante's known sources; and if in fact Dante is to be held to his reputation as a great synthesiser of ideas and traditions, then account must be given as to how it is possible that he was not influenced by Bernardus.

The 12th century French theologian and poet Alain de Lille (aka Alanis de Insulis) would have also been of immense interest to Dante, particularly the content and structure of his satirical allegory, *De Planctu Naturae* or *The Complaint of Nature*, a work which seemingly has escaped detailed attention within modern Dante scholarship.⁹¹ Following closely the format of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, it is a first-person account of a man brought low by his despondence over his own descent into the worldliness of humanity, who receives a visitation from a heavenly female being, Nature. She appears as a personification of the complete perfection of the heavenly realms and the abundant diversity of the earthly habitat of living creatures; and exhorts the narrator to diligently pursue wisdom and forsake the vices of this world. Again, Dante does not mention Alain of Lille in any of his extant writings, yet once more we can see how the content of Alain's work provides imaginal material from which Dante can draw.

Of primary interest in Alain's work, however, is the way in which he creates a version of the universal object, in this instance the emblematic figure of Nature, within a female human form. As the descriptions of Nature unfold, it becomes apparent that Alain is painting a microcosmic representation of the universe. It is not precisely clear whether Nature is of essentially human or divine composition, or perhaps a combination of both, but in the opening prose section of the work, Alain describes the sensuous and richly physical beauty of Nature in human terms that echo the imagery of the biblical Song of Solomon; and can be read as a preview of the way in which Dante would come to trace the beatified physical

⁹¹ For possible general influences of Alain on Dante, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Bollingen Series 36 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 353, 360-361; Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, pp. 90-91, 292; Lansing and Barolini, eds., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, pp. 25, 613, 852.

appearance of Beatrice, in the closing sequences of the *Purgatorio*, as an expression of her spiritual virtue.⁹² Alain relates how Nature wears a “regal diadem”⁹³ that is an emblem of the heavens – it is made of pure gold, an analogous reference to the all-powerful and creative energy of the Sun; and it incorporates the Platonic topos of the two celestial circles of the Same and the Different. The diadem itself is said to travel “with marvellous revolution and ceaseless turning...and then by backward motion was continually restored to its rising”⁹⁴, a picture of the circling of the fixed stars. The diadem is also described as prominently featuring on its front a band of twelve jewels, each inscribed with a picture representing a symbol of the zodiac. Under this prominent band is a “sevenfold array of gems”⁹⁵ that performs, in imitation of the Circle of the Different, “a continual circling, a marvellous sort of play and pleasing dance.”⁹⁶ Alain goes on to equate each of the gems with one of the seven planets, where the particular attributive quality of the planet, as it relates to the nature of the gem, is articulated.

Furthermore, the figure of Nature is clothed in a kind of magical garment that has woven into it what Alain calls “a parliament of the living creation”⁹⁷, an imitation of all the created order of the earth, and which, most importantly, is shown to be a *living thing*, for it is, according to Alain’s vision “being held”⁹⁸. It is a genesis – a living, moving representation of the world. Alain thus creates his Nature’s garment in the tradition of the Homeric Achilles’ Shield. The author will go on to describe, consistently utilising past-tense verbs, how the garment is adorned with a quasi-encyclopaedic catalogue of the natural world’s creatures, as though they were moving before his very eyes – an assortment of birds perform their ritual habits and make their distinctive calls, marine life of all kinds fulfil their place in the hierarchy of the oceans, land animals move about. But before this his initial vision of this supernatural object is described in terms that contain strong resonance for all readers of the *Commedia*:

Its appearance perpetually changed with many a different color and manifold hue. At first it startled the sight with the white radiance of the lily. Next, as if its simplicity had been thrown aside and it were

⁹² For an overview of Dante’s sources in regard to his portrayal of Beatrice as an emblematic figure, see Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, pp. 87-102.

⁹³ Insulis, *The Complaint of Nature* Prose I.57.

⁹⁴ Ibid. Prose I.61-64.

⁹⁵ Ibid. Prose I.143.

⁹⁶ Ibid. Prose I.143-144.

⁹⁷ Ibid. Prose I.217-218.

⁹⁸ Ibid. Prose I.217.

striving for something better, it glowed with rosy life. Then, reaching the height of perfection, it gladdened the sight with the greenness of the emerald.⁹⁹

The wonderment inherent in the description, and the richly symbolic imagery, both unmistakable features of the opening prose section of Alain's work, are exemplified here. But, read retrospectively, the power of this image derives from its striking similarity to Dante's account of his first meeting with Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise atop Mt. Purgatory:

*così, dentro una nuvola di fiori
che da le mani angeliche saliva
e ricadeva in giù dentro e di fòri,
sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva
donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto
vestita di color di fiamma viva.*

So now, beyond a drifting cloud of flowers
(which rose up, arching, from the angel's hands,
then fell within and round the chariot),
seen through a veil, pure white, and olive-crowned,
a lady now appeared to me. Her robe was green,
her dress the colour of a living flame.

(*Pur.* XXX, 28-33).

Further enhancing the symbolic meaning intended in both passages, the images are "revealed" as being an un-named woman arriving unexpectedly in a particularly diaphanous form. Alain says that "a woman glided down from the inner palace of the impassable heavens, and appeared, hastening her approach to me."¹⁰⁰ Dante says that Beatrice "appeared to me."¹⁰¹ Alain says that the garment worn by Nature is "spun exceedingly fine, so as to escape the scrutiny of the eye, it was so delicate of substance that you would think it and the air of the same nature."¹⁰² Dante says that Beatrice is "*sovra candido*" ("seen through a veil").¹⁰³

The congruent imagery of colors, robes, flowers and incandescent light, and the revelatory quality of the woman being "unveiled", bears such close parallel that it is difficult to conceive

⁹⁹ Ibid. Prose I.206-213.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Prose I.2-4.

¹⁰¹ *Pur.* 30:32.

¹⁰² Insulis, *The Complaint of Nature*, Prose I.213-216.

¹⁰³ *Pur.* 30:31.

that Dante did not have this image in mind when constructing what is one of the most powerful and beautiful moments in the *Commedia*. It is therefore not an exaggeration of argument to claim that Dante has deliberately drawn upon Alain's work in a previously unrecognised way. Further parallel evidence in each set-piece lends support to such a claim. We can, for example, compare that both Nature and Beatrice are depicted as arriving in a chariot powered by a supernatural force. Alain has Nature's chariot "drawn by the birds of Juno herself, which were not disciplined in the service of the yoke, but were united by their own unwillingness."¹⁰⁴ Dante has Beatrice's chariot pulled by the famous allegorical figure of the Gryphon.¹⁰⁵ So too the responses of each protagonist to the appearance of the heavenly woman are remarkably similar – Alain is shown "collecting my rays of sight...to contemplate the height of this beauty, they not daring to meet such grace and majesty, and weakened by the blows of splendour, fled, very fearfully, to the tents of the eyelids."¹⁰⁶ Dante, too, cannot bear to look upon the brilliance of his *donna*, granted that the context also includes a moral element absent from Alain's account. And what of the initial behaviour of the heavenly women so described? Again, there is a remarkable resemblance. Both Nature and Beatrice deliver direct condemnations to their charges, lamenting that each has strayed from the example and governance provided for them. Nature exclaims thus:

Alas! What blindness of ignorance, what delirium of mind, what failing of the senses, what infirmity of the reason has placed a cloud on thine understanding, has forced thy spirit into exile, has dulled the power of thy feeling, has made thy mind to sicken, so that not only thine intellect is cheated out of its quick recognition of thy Nourisher, but that also thy power of discerning, as it were smitten by a strange and monstrous sight, suffers a collapse at my very appearance? Why has recognition of my face strayed from the memory?¹⁰⁷

The admonition delivered to Dante by Beatrice follows similar lines:

*Alcun tempo il sostenni col mio volto:
mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui,
meco il meneva in dritta parte vòlto.
Sì tosto come in su la soglia fui
di mia seconda etade e mutai vita,
questi si tolse a me e diessi altrui:
quando di carne a spirto era salita,*

¹⁰⁴ Insulis, *The Complaint of Nature*, Prose II.14-16.

¹⁰⁵ *Pur.* 29:106-114.

¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁷ Insulis, *The Complaint of Nature* Prose III.21-31.

*e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,
 fu' io a lui men cara e men gradita,
 e volse I passi suoi per via non vera,
 imagini di ben seguendo false,
 che nulla promession rendono intera.
 Nè l'impetrare ispirazion mi valse,
 con le quali e in sogno e altrimenti
 lo rivocai, sì poco a lui ne cale!*

I, looking on, sustained him for a time.
 My eyes, when bright with youth, I turned to him,
 and led him with me on the road to truth.
 Then, on the threshold of my second age,
 I changed, took different life, and he at once
 drew back and yielded to another's glance.
 Risen from body into spirit-form,
 my goodness, power and beauty grew more strong.
 Yet I to him was then less dear, less pleasing.
 He turned his steps to paths that were not true.
 He followed images of failing good
 which cannot meet, in full, their promises.
 And when I prayed that he might be inspired,
 seeking to call him back – by dreams and other ways –
 all that came to nothing. He paid little heed.'

(*Pur.* XXX, 121-135).

Thus it can be inferred that the *purpose* of the two women are similar – to reach down from heaven to offer a correction and re-orientation of Man, personified in the individual protagonists of each narrative. But if Nature is to be read as a microcosmic figure, does the present context allow us to see Beatrice in the same way? An affirmative answer may involve the understanding that Beatrice is a twofold creature. As one who actually lived and breathed in Florence in Dante's own lifetime, she is a real human being. As one who carried exceptional physical beauty and died at a young age she is an image of the perfectibility of the human form. Beatrice is, we might say, the best of all possible women. She is an image of wisdom and truth. In having her arrive to greet him *while the pilgrim is still part of the terrestrial realm*, Dante grants affirmation to the idea that Beatrice, in effect already fully restored in the physical resurrection that is promised to come, is an exemplar of humanity. In her is contained all the possibilities that lie within human beings, the same possibilities that are shown to be so tragically laid to waste in the *Inferno*. In Beatrice, the microcosmic image of Alain's Nature is expanded to include the spiritual virtues that will lead to salvation.

A final point of comparison confirms such a reading. The two women have been expressed as supreme examples of the physical beauty of the human form – a summative gathering together and perfecting of all the possibilities latent in the creative energies of the world. The extension of this idea is that they themselves become the gatherers and carriers of the physically beautiful elements of the natural order. In short, they are the bringers and sustainers of spring, the eternal season. Alain declares that the arrival of Nature brings about a supra-spring, wherein all things are re-invigorated to become the very best versions of themselves, like a return to a new Eden:

At the virgin's coming you would have thought that all the elements were keeping solemn festival, renewing, so to speak, their own natures. The firmament ordered its stars to shine more brightly than their wont, and lit the virgin's path, as it were, with candles...The air put away the tearful visage of clouds, and with the favour of a clear face smiled upon the maiden's approach...The sea, until then torn in tumultuous floods, now observed the coming of the virgin with solemn ceremony...The earth, lately stripped of its adornments by the thieving winter, through the generosity of spring donned a purple tunic of flowers...And the spring, like an artisan skilled in weaving, in order the more happily to welcome her approach, wove garments for the trees...Flora generously presented the virgin with an undergarment of fine linen...And the animals of the earth, taught by some natural instinct, on learning of the virgin's approach sported with glad gaiety. So was the sum of all things in attention to her, and with wonderful rivalry strove to gain her favour.¹⁰⁸

This compares favourably with the similar description of Dante's entrance into the Edenic realm of the Earthly Paradise in the twenty-eighth canto of the *Purgatorio*. Here, Dante draws the reader into a sensual, dream-like sequence, as he depicts his exploration of a primal, perfect forest and encounter with an unknown woman singing and picking flowers as she walks beside a stream. The canto vibrates with images of the natural world in a state of full realisation of its potentialities – a teeming forest, gentle breezes, sighing trees, a stream of the purest waters, colourful flowers, soft grass, multiple and abundant fruits – and is consummated with the articulation of Matelda, a dream-like figure who is not unlike Alain's "Nature", that Dante has made a terrestrial homecoming to the place where all things are perfect:

*Quelli ch'anticamente poetaro
l'età de l'oro e suo stato felice,*

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.* Prose II.27-96.

*forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.
 Qui fu innocente l'umana radice;
 qui primavera sempre e ogne frutto;
 nettare è questo di che ciascun dice.*

Those who, in times long gone, composed these poems
 That sang the Age of Gold and all its joys
 Thought, maybe here's Parnassus when they dreamed.
 Here, once, the root of man was innocent.
 Here, there is always spring and every fruit.
 And that's the nectar they all speak about.

(*Pur.* XXVIII, 139-144)

This is the only appropriate environment in which Beatrice can make her appearance, and Dante's key term here is "*primavera*" – "spring". This is the choicest of seasons, when the burgeoning behaviour of the natural world best represents, in symbolic terms, the perpetual renewal that marks the regenerate inner man. It is forever spring in the Earthly Paradise, because spring is the season of the heavenly Paradise, a place of everlasting renewal, refreshment and delight. In Canto XXVIII of the *Paradiso* it is Beatrice, the living emblem of eternal human beauty, who declares heaven to be "*questa primavera sempiterna*" ("this sempiternal springtime season").¹⁰⁹ If the temporal season of *primavera* is the microcosmic representation of the eternal state of perfected beatitude, then its parallel in human form is Dante's spotless *donna*, whose appearance in the gardens of complete repose at the summit of Mt Purgatory is marked by what one commentator has rightly called "the dazzling fullness of her existence."¹¹⁰

Subsequent to Alain's own presentation of dazzling fullness in the figure of Nature, he proceeds to employ all of the standard *topoi* present in the long tradition of neoplatonic allegorical literature. In Prose II, he calls earth the "lowly dwelling of the suffering world"¹¹¹, a position to which, of course, Dante cannot grant his assent. Similarly, in the long speech that comprises the larger part of Prose III, Nature declares to Alain, utilising an analogy of unequal or inappropriate marriage that she has worked to adorn and protect the human body such that it might be a suitable home for the soul:

¹⁰⁹ *Par.* 28:116.

¹¹⁰ Robin Kirkpatrick, introduction to *Purgatorio*, p. lvii.

¹¹¹ Insulis, *The Complaint of Nature*, Prose II.13-14.

So would the material part of the whole body, being adorned with the higher glories of nature, be united the more agreeably when it came to marriage with its spouse the spirit; and so would not the spouse, in disgust at the baseness of its mate, oppose the marriage.¹¹²

Almost immediately after this, however, Nature proceeds to present, in a neatly encapsulated form, a series of key ideas, which we can easily recognise as being accommodated within Dante's allegorical schema – man as a microcosmic representation of the universe, the earth as a temple, the body also as an architectural entity, and the standard presentation of man as being comprised of the same compound of base ingredients as the rest of creation:

I am she who has fashioned the form and eminence of man into the likeness of the original mundane mechanism, that in him, as in a mirror of the world itself, combined nature may appear. For just as, of the four elements, the concordant discord, the single plurality, the dissonant consonance, the dissenting agreement, produce the structures of the palace of earth, so, of four ingredients, the similar unsimilarity, the unequal identity, the unformed conformity, the separate identity, firmly erect the building of the human body. And those qualities which come together as mediators among the elements – these establish a firm peace among the four humors.¹¹³

He follows this with the metaphor of the “Book of the Universe”, a major device in Dante's armoury: “From Him eternally has gone forth the command that every individual thing should be known and written in the book of His providence.”¹¹⁴ Written by whom? Alain suggests that the angels are the recorders of the world, “doing service” to the Divine Will, yet reduced to human terms this idea can serve as the seed for Dante's own project. The notion that “every individual thing should be known and written” can be seen as an intensely motivating force, given that Dante declares a divine authority for his work. The attempt to ingather all the various elements of human experience into a single literary work is a fundamental feature of the *Commedia*. Alain's emphasis on the angels as recorders of the world's things is part of his attempt to portray the operations of the world as a three-fold chain of influence and response, working within an imaginary city-state, and proceeding from God to angels to man, a Dionysian idea that would also have been attractive to Dante: “Hear how in this universe, as in a great city, order is established by the control of a majestic

¹¹² Ibid. Prose III.48-53.

¹¹³ Ibid. Prose III.72-84.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. Prose III.124-126.

government.”¹¹⁵ Appropriately, and in what will serve as a proper conclusion to our survey of Alain’s work, he attempts to support his idea of the three-fold division of the operations of providence – “In this state, then, God is commanding, the angel administering, man serving”¹¹⁶ – by comparing it to the three-fold organisation of the human body:

Now a likeness to this most excellently ordered state arises in man. In the citadel of the head rests wisdom, who commands...In the heart, as in the midst of the human city, magnanimity has established her dwelling-place...The loins, like outlying districts, give over the extreme parts of the body to passionate pleasures...In this realm, then, wisdom assumes the place of commander, magnanimity the likeness of the administrator, passion acquires the appearance of the servant. In other parts, also, of the human body is shown the likeness of the universe.¹¹⁷

Nature’s speech goes on to elaborate how parts of the body are equivalent in behaviour to the celestial objects – sun to heart, moon to liver – and how the journey of an individual human life is comparable to the cycle of the earthly seasons. The intertwining imagery of celestial influences, organisation of a citadel city-state, and tripartite arrangement of the human form places this speech of Nature as a precursor to the literary construction of Beatrice as the wise guide in the *Commedia*, and gives Alain’s work a central place in the stream of Dante’s allegoric sources.

The second half of the *De Planctu Naturae* is less ordered and less satisfying as the first, and this in its own way could have been influential. While the extended fulminations against human vice and the exhortation to paths of wisdom which comprise the ending to *De Planctu Naturae* are in accord with Dante’s moral schema, the use of prosopopeia to represent human sins and virtues – Avarice, Lust, Gluttony, Truth, Genius, and so on – do not convey the literary force intended for them. It is significant that Dante shies away from the use of such representational figures in the *Commedia*, preferring to employ the realism that can be delineated in actual historical personages.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* Prose III.120-122.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* Prose III.124-126.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* Prose III.144-163.

These texts are the main classical and Christian neoplatonist sources that perpetuate, up until Dante's lifetime, the long-standing literary tradition that seeks to portray man, divisible according to spiritual principles, as a microcosmic representation of creation. Man is the centrepiece of creation and a representational figure that contains all the elements and structure of the universe inside himself. This ancient idea, permeating many cultures and literary forms, enjoyed a survival in various forms until Dante took the established tradition to its ultimate fulfilment.

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