

Negative Theology and Theophany in Dante's *Paradiso*

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Abstract: Dante's *Paradiso* presents a gothic theophany realizing the divine vision (*visio Dei*) in poetic language. Specifically, Dante's vision of a line from Scripture (DILIGITE IUSTITIAM QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM) in the Heaven of Jove (Canto XVIII) gives a concrete form of written letters to his vision of God. Yet all that Dante actually sees is only a sign of the invisible, metaphysical reality of God and the supersensible universe of pure being or love. This tension between the sensory plenitude of his vision and the transcendent truth that Dante envisages lends his poem its extraordinary force and attractive power. The paradoxes of negative theology and its inevitable relation with an affirmative theology expressed as poetic vision are worked out with matchless subtlety in Dante's descriptions and reflections, some of which are expounded in a speculative key in this essay drawn from a more detailed and comprehensive inquiry into the subject. The immediacy of Dante's vision of letters of Scripture in the Heaven of Jove serves as a metaphor for an unmediated vision of God, but the vision's content turns out to be nothing other than mediation – concretely, language as the medium mediating his relation to God as Logos. Dante's vision from beginning to end of the *Paradiso* is placed under the sign of the ineffability topos, yet what he sees are words and language and ultimately letters. Dramatically displaying the mediations in which language consists becomes itself a metaphorical realization of divine revelation. The mechanisms of signifying in language made visibly manifest in writing and specifically as the first line of the Book of Wisdom in Scripture are unveiled as a negatively theological revelation of divinity.

Keywords: negative theology, theophany, Scripture, revelation, DILIGITE, Dante, *Paradiso*

Prolegomenon

In Canto XVIII, in one of the most extraordinary passages at the heart of the *Paradiso*, Dante sees thirty-five letters of Scripture – DILIGITE IUSTITIAM / QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM – “painted” (“dipinto”) one after the other in the sky. After a dazzling song and dance, each of the incandescent letters breaks up into its component sparks, each spark a blessed soul. These soul-sparks then regroup to form the next letter in the series. The last letter, M, finally metamorphoses into a figure – the emblematic sign of the Roman Imperial Eagle outlined in its head and wings. Considered specifically from a literary-theoretical point of view, this scene is arguably the most

This essay is extracted and adapted from Franke, *The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradiso*, ix, 138–142, 170–179, 183–187, in the main from Chapter 5: Sense Made Sensuous and Synaesthesia in the Sight and Sound of Writing.

challenging and intriguing in the poem. In some vertiginous regards, this epiphany encapsulates the *Paradiso* as a whole by staging its ultimate goal – the divine vision – self-reflexively in a *mise-en-abîme* as an instance of the writing of letters.

That God should be “seen” in the form of writing, however, already hints at the impossibility of the vision of God that motivates the trajectory of the *Commedia* as a whole and of the *Paradiso* in particular. Writing, language, poetry are means for mediating experience and not its end or object in themselves. That the vision turns out to be a vision of writing hints that it is actually objectless and that only its literary vehicle and means are concretely present and perceived. There is thus a negative theological message implicit in Dante’s “vision.” What Dante sees enables him to intuit what he cannot see, and the latter is the ultimate “revelation” conferred by the poem. The miraculous revelations to which the poem witnesses are thus couched in an acknowledgment of God’s transcendence of all that finite being and intellect see and know.

1. Sense Made Sensuous in the Sight and Sound of Writing

The apotheosis of sense or meaning as the final moment of language, whether in the stream of speech or in the sequence of writing, is dramatized spectacularly in the explosive transformations of the last letter –M– of the theme-sentence that Dante selects from the Book of Wisdom and lights up with the soul-sparks in the Heaven of Jupiter. Once the conceptual sense of the sentence has been realized with the appearance of the final letter, this Gothic insignia M metamorphoses into two successive pictorial emblems – first, the lily and then the eagle’s head and neck (“la testa e ’l collo,” XVIII, 108) and wings or body, as depicted. The latter pictogram sensuously and holistically displays, in visual phantasmagoria, the meaning and majesty of Empire. It means, and superessentially is, Justice: it emblemizes Dante’s utopian vision of the ideal state.

In Dante’s ideal vision, World Empire is itself made in the image of the perfect order of the created universe. Dante’s ideal of a universal World Government is modeled on God’s own intrinsic order and unity in the spiritual heaven. Monarchy alone, Dante believes, can guarantee justice in history and society. He demonstrates this at length in the logical syllogisms of Book I of his political treatise *Monarchia*, as well as in his construction of universal history in *Convivio* IV, iii–v, and he recurs to this theme obsessively as a leitmotif throughout the *Commedia*.

The sense of the Scriptural sentence on justice and love addressed to the rulers of the earth is thereby rendered concrete in a symbolic language of imperial heraldry. The message of Scripture is converted into – and is transmitted by – the emblem of the eagle and its historical realization by Rome. Emerging as a metamorphosis of the M, this textual eagle is a transformation of writing in the final character

that, literally, “takes off” once the letters of the sentence are complete. The sense of the sentence – its meaning – is put into play and on display through sensations both visual and audible. Dante’s description insists on this, with its persistent pairing in a sustained parallelism of impressions in each of these sensory modalities. Dante pursues this transformation of sense – or meaning – into a supersensory type of sensation and presence by the alchemy of poetic language further in the subsequent cantos, XIX and XX, of the heaven of Jove that flesh out the intellectual meaning of the vision presented in XVIII, 70-117 by elaborating on its phenomenal form.

For Dante, the signs in the heaven of Jove are important as presences that can be sensed – that can be perceived by his physical senses. Marguerite Chiarenza calls the sign of the eagle a “real presence.”¹ This is true primarily in a metaphysical sense. Still, we must also recognize that, considered poetically, this presence is sensuously real in the modality not only of sight but also of hearing. The letters are presented throughout this heaven as sights in constant and explicit conjunction with sound and, furthermore, with movement. The holy creatures sang, but they also formed their collective shapes into choreographed flights of letters, “now D, now I, now L”:

sì dentro ai lumi sante creature
 volitando cantavano, e faciensi
 or D, or I, or L in sue figure.
 (XVIII, 76–78)
 (so within the holy lights creatures
 flying sang, and made themselves
 now D, now I, now L in its figures.)

This suggests that sight and sound and kinetics belong originally together and are only artificially, or analytically, distinguished. Nothing more specific is said as to what the holy creatures sang. Presumably it was, in one way or another, the ineffable God. In any case, we can assume that it would have been integral to what they then make visibly manifest, especially considering the symmetrical coordination of sight and sound that governs the *cantica* all throughout, from the first canto – with its flood of light taken in together with the music of the spheres (I, 82). Dante’s senses of both sight and hearing are overwhelmed by such novel sensations beyond what is normally possible for human perception. A desire unprecedented in its acuteness to know their cause awakens in him:

¹ Chiarenza, “Canto XX,” 301. These terms are made even more resonant by George Steiner’s *Real Presences*, an eloquent rebuttal to Jacques Derrida’s attack on the metaphysics of presence. Steiner is inspired by the power of presence as demonstrated in literature just such as this scene insisting on language as present through its literary form.

La novità del suono e 'l grande lume
di lor cagion m'accesero un disio
mai non sentito di cotanto acume.

(I, 82–84)

(The newness of the sound and the great light
ignited in me a desire to know their cause
never before felt with such acuteness.)

Taken as experience of the superessential reality of Paradise, what Dante records here as sensation is ambiguously intellection that can be expressed in diverse sensory modalities. The principles of such poetic composition, as well as of such a metaphysics and theophany, favor the song and its uncomprehended meaning's being as closely bound in unity as possible with what is then shown visually: meaning almost seems to dissolve into sensation. The grammar here, moreover, suggests that the letters are first sung and that subsequently each is made into "its" figure and becomes a written form and shape. The immediately following lines clearly distinguish two such moments or phases – the resolution into song and then into a figure that is sustained momentarily in silence:

Prima, cantando, a sua nota moviensi;
poi, diventando l'un di questi segni,
un poco s'arrestavano e taciensi.

(XVIII, 79–81)

(First, singing, they moved to its note,
then, becoming one of these signs,
they paused for a little and kept silent.)

The souls, singing, move first in time to its ("sua") – that is, the letter's (or possibly the song's) – note. Whatever it may mean for a letter to have "its" own note, such individual attunement of letters is familiar from the Kabbalah's letters, with their numerical valences, and is not unlike certain Pythagorean conceptions of universal harmonics. This lyrical, melodic, and rhythmic manifestation of the letter then metamorphoses into a spatial image recognizable as one of the chosen letters of the alphabet. At this stage, stasis and silence are reached, which consistently mark the moment in which meaning can finally be construed, even in the representations of heaven.

Music and motion culminate in silence and stasis: the phenomenon is consummated by its own negation. This must be the case in order to signify supersensory perception, since such perception can only be constituted dialectically by a negation of ordinary sense perception. Dante's text does not offer unequivocal resolutions but rather vibrates between voice and written character or inscription, between sound and sight. The two are perceived as inextricable from one another, each somehow

necessarily referring to and calling forth the other. The coextension, coordination, cohesion, and apparent coincidence of the sensory modes here hint that they are metaphors for supersensory experience such as Dante's intellection of Paradise can only be.

When Dante actually presents in his text the letters that are given to his vision in Paradise, the vision by which he beholds them is not simply vision in a literal sense. Ordinary empirical vision needs to be transcended or deconstructed in order that Dante's "visionary" experience, his written vision, can take place. Vision and audition here become finally metaphors for a supersensory experience of intellection. As merely physical, both sight and sound are equally inadequate and become self-destructing sensations.

Sight and sound in heaven, as intellectual sight and sound, are indeed interchangeable. In *De trinitate* XV, Augustine remarks that, "When, then, these things are done outwardly through the body, speech and sight are different things; inwardly, however, when we think, both are one. Similarly, hearing and seeing are two mutually diverse things in the bodily senses; however, in the mind, seeing and hearing are not different."² This inner relation of sight and sound in the mind becomes focused particularly in relation to the use of synaesthesia in Canto XX.

A theological grounding for Dante's undertaking can be found in the miracle of the Incarnation, whereby the ineffable divine Word becomes accessible to being seen and heard and touched. In many instances in the Gospels, Jesus's sensuous contact with others is treated with marvel and produces miracles. However, the Scriptural divine Word, too, in certain traditions, is held to produce sensory miracles. Dante's synaesthetic treatment of the supersensible becomes most intelligible within the tradition of the spiritual senses discerned in religious experience and particularly in reading Scripture.³ There is, in this tradition, some speculation on the ineffable divine Word's being neither properly visible nor audible, though both sensory channels can be valid as ways of translating metaphorically what cannot be properly expressed. Talk of "vision" of the divine Word has the advantage of connoting an immediate apprehension of a totality. This is one essential aspect of how the illumination of the Word is understood to occur theologically. Of course, precisely the check to realizing total vision is what makes the finite created intellect transcend itself and jump to a higher sort of apprehension of what it cannot adequately know. The first reason or ground of things ("prima cagion") is exactly what created intellects do not see totally ("non veggion tota," XX, 132).

² Augustinus, *De trinitate*, XV, x, 18. "Foris enim cum per corpus haec fiunt aliud est locutio, aliud uisio; intus autem cum cogitamus utrumque unum est. Sicut auditio et uisio duo quaedam sunt inter se distantia in sensibus corporis, in animo autem non est aliud atque aliud uidere et audire."

³ Traditional texts and backgrounds are presented in Gavrilyuk – Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses*.

Indeed, the *Paradiso*, in a peculiarly strict and conspicuous sense, is precisely about the invisible. The visual image is an index of something that is not properly visible. As with all imagery of Paradise, we must ask: Is the object then a kind of writing? It is, in the sense that it is significant, in the end, not for its perceptual qualities, but only for that which they index by virtue of the differences that signification engenders. This interpretation might seem to be dispelled by the lavishness and elegance and energy of this “writing” in images. Dante’s writing in the sky, moreover, neutralizes what we ordinarily expect as the property of all writing, namely, the interrupting of the transparency of speech. Dante’s skywriting conjures divine meaning (or presence) immediately and transparently out of the self-referentiality of signifiers and their highly performative signifying. Instead of relying on the conception of writing as a conventional, purely arbitrary, effaceable sign for bearing intellectual meaning, the concept of writing in play or at work in this heaven conspicuously mobilizes a sensory orgy of the written character shown off with “calligraphic” flourish.

Dante, of course, in ways recalling and at least indirectly influenced by Augustine, is generally anxious that the signifier not block or delay access to the signified. God, the ultimate significatum, must not be deflected or obscured by any opacities of language. And yet, here the opaque signifiers themselves become identical with the divine vision. The heaven of Jupiter in particular, and Dante’s poetry in general, give great emphasis to the sensible form of signifiers: they enact an apotheosis of the written letter. In this respect, Dante agrees with much contemporary theory of poetic language since Mallarmé, for which the materiality of the signifier is recognized as essential to the poeticality of language and to its visionary truth.

2. Metaphor and the Poetic Making of the Linguistic Substance of Paradise

The extraordinary status of the *Paradiso*’s signs as hypersensational is realized in the metaphors of Canto XIX. What they refer to is not always easily determinable, but their force lies in their sense rather than in their reference.⁴ Dante’s imagery in this heaven, as in the *Paradiso* generally, is attenuated in its representational or referential application. By hypothesis, its ultimate object is unrepresentable. This does not mean that Dante is not speaking in perfectly definite terms about clearly conceptualizable objects but rather that these objects are themselves mentioned always only in

⁴ A distinction between sense or meaning (“Sinn”) and reference (“Bedeutung”) is made by Gottlob Frege (“Über Sinn und Bedeutung,” 25–50). Up to a certain point, this is the difference between connotation and denotation in terms of the Anglo-Saxon linguistic theory inaugurated by John Stuart Mill. The first is a meaning intrinsic to the word, what it conjures up and suggests to the mind when presented as word alone. The second is the extralinguistic object that the word denotes.

order to evoke further ineffable and unrepresentable “things.” Leveraging Neo-Platonic negative theology, Marco Ariani has explained this most cogently with regard to Dante’s use of metaphor or, more exactly, “transumptio” as a dissimilar similitude. Concerning the Heaven of Justice, specifically cantos XIX and XX, Ariani writes:

We are facing a true and proper imaginative system, a long, complex *transumptio* that crosses and connects the two cantos centering on a nuclear image from which the verbal texture radiates, that of an unimaginable liquid light occulted in the inscrutable splendor of divine Justice. Synaesthetic technique thus dominates the weave of these tentacular metaphorical systems with which Dante attempts the impossible: to “syllable” the emanation of being through domestic comparisons in the form of *dissimilar similitudes* taken from the metaphorical legacy of Neo-Platonism (plenitude, the sea, the fountain, the wave, the root). This technique is without recognizable precedents in the poetic tradition. One can find something analogous only in philosophical and theological sources, even if we must clearly realize that Dante surpasses their tendency to antimetaphorical diffidence by his intrepid exercise of fantasmatic images, convinced as he is that they are always impressed with the seal of informing divine light.⁵

Dante actually goes well beyond simple negation and enriches this first-order Neo-Platonic, or more exactly Plotinian, negative theology in creating a positive sensorium of his experience of Paradise. Indeed, there always has to be a positive theology working in tandem with every negative theology. This has remained a key postulate of Christian negative theology ever since Dionysius the Areopagite, who is often recognized as its founder. However, Dante creates a metaphorical universe based on the negative experience of finding himself face to face with the ineffable God. His positive theology thus lies on the far side of this negative experience, which he expresses and elaborates in the exquisite and intoxicating fantasies of the *Paradiso*. Dante uses the resources of poetry to elaborate a metaphorical paradise, or

⁵ “Siamo di fronte ad un vero e proprio sistema immaginale, una lunga, complessa *transumptio* che travalica e connette i due canti accentrando su un’immagine nucleare da cui irradia la testura verbale, quella di un’inimmaginabile luce liquida occultata nell’imperscrutabile splendore della Giustizia divina. La tecnica sinestetica domina dunque la filatura di questi tentacolari sistemi metaforici con i quali Dante tenta l’impossibile, sillabare il mistero dell’emanazione dell’essere con domestiche comparazioni in forma di *dissimiles similitudines* tratte dal lascito metaforico del Neo-Platonismo (il ripieno, il mare, la fontana, l’onda, la radice). Tecnica senza riconoscibili precedenti nella tradizione poetica, per la quale si può trovare qualcosa di analogo solo nelle fonti filosofiche e teologiche, anche se si deve avere ben chiaro che Dante ne supera la tendenziale diffidenza antimetaphorica per un impavido esercizio delle immagini fantasmatiche, convinto come è che vi siano sempre impressi i sigilli dell’informante luce divina” (Ariani, *Lux inaccessibilis*, 260–261).

a paradise of poetic metaphor, that is positively sensual, following up on his passage through the negative-theological moment of the ineffable. Comparable in this regard is John of the Cross, who arrives at sensuous poetic expression in and through his dark night of the soul in “La noche oscura.”

The Letter to Can Grande uses the word “metaphorismorum” to describe a mythic style of representation characteristic of Plato. A closely related aspect of Dante’s understanding of figurative language is captured in another term current in the Middle Ages: “transumptio.” The Letter to Can Grande elencates also “transumptivus” (XIII, 9.27) among the rhetorical modes employed in the *Paradiso*. Considered rhetorically, the *transumptio* is a fine flower of ornate style, both *ornatus facilis* and particularly *ornatus difficilis*.⁶ The *transumptio* was often taken as master trope in the Middle Ages, following indications in the *Rhetorica nova*, attributed to Cicero. It is discussed at length by Geoffrey de Vinsauf in his *Poetria nova* (vv. 765–1093).⁷ As a consequence, *transumptio* is studied intensively also in the thirteenth-century Bolognese school of *ars dictaminis* rhetoricians, particularly by Bene da Firenze and Boncompagno da Signa. *Transumptio* connotes especially a capacity to absorb all the figurative powers of language into one. Its basic metaphorical operation consists in “sumere ex alio” – summing up under another head.⁸ This suggests that it is by the transfer to the improper that it becomes possible to unify a multiplicity. Pushing this to the extreme case, Buoncompagno’s *Rhetorica novissima* derives the *transumptio* originally from the Word of God.⁹

Fiorenzo Forti’s researches bring out the extent to which Dante’s use of the *transumptio* is far more vital than that of the rhetorical tradition. Forti compares it particularly with Boncompagno’s rhetorical use of *transumptio* for decorative purposes (“De transumptionibus que fiunt per imagines”): “With all the panache of Boncompagno, the rhetorical devices he disassembles and reassembles appear always mechanical in comparison with the most pallid instances in the Comedy” (“Con tutto l’estro di Boncompagno, i congegni retorici che egli va smontando e rimontando appaiono sempre meccanici a confronto del più pallido luogo della Commedia,” 122). Rather than codified images that belong to the immense medieval repertoire of symbolic systems, for example, those linking animals to moral qualities, Dante furnishes new metaphorical inventions, genuinely live metaphors.¹⁰ Dante’s place of unparalleled originality in the history of literature needs to be accounted for also by his rediscovery and activation of the lively invention of metaphor. Dante makes this

⁶ Forti, “La magnanimità verbale,” 106.

⁷ Geoffrey de Vinsauf, “Poetria nova,” 221–231.

⁸ Forti, “La magnanimità verbale,” 110.

⁹ Buoncompagno, *Rhetorica novissima*.

¹⁰ Giuseppe Ledda (*Il bestiario dell’aldilà*) studies the immense richness and complexity of animal images in the Commedia. For ample background particularly on the series of bird similes brought to focus in the preceding section, see chapter 9: “Parole, visioni, scacchi: Immagini aviarie nel cielo di Giove,” 233–245.

codified rhetorical schema for the first time fully poetic, indeed the essence of poetry as the invention of a world in desire. As such, metaphor becomes tantamount to the “reinvention” of Paradise – literally, coming (venire) back (re) into (in) it. Dante's Paradise is, in effect, a paradise of poetic metaphor.

A model of Dante's use of *transumptio* singled out for citation by Forti is the description of the river of light said by Dante to deliver “shadowy prefaces” (“umbriferi prefazii”) of the divine vision:

E vidi lume in forma di rivera
fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive
dipinte di mirabil primavera.
Di tal fiumana uscian faville vive
e d'ogni parte si mettean ne' fiori
quasi rubin che oro circunscrive.
Poi, come inebriate da li odori
riprofondavan sé nel miro gurge
e s'una intrava, un'altra n'uscita fori.

(XXX, 61–69)

(And I saw light in the form of a river
refulgent with lightning, between two banks
painted with miraculous springtide.
And from this torrent stormed living sparks
and in every part they produced flowers
like rubies that gold circumscribes.
And then, as if inebriated by the fragrances,
they plunged back into the miraculous gorge,
and if one entered in another came back out.)

This elaborately ornate passage certainly displays Dante's gothic sensibilities. But it also intimates the kind of knowledge of substantial, spiritual meaning that Dante's metaphors embody.

It had been observed already by early commentators such as Benvenuto da Imola that Dante's metaphors are all figural, that is, they are not just pleasing to aesthetic taste but have a substantive, didactic meaning as well. It was typical medieval exegetical practice to interpret all the elements of a complex imagined scene according to their discrete meanings. Dante's images seem susceptible of this sort of interpretation, though they also tend to remake all previously established meanings in light of the new whole that they themselves forge.

Dante's complexes of metaphor are also effectively mixed together, branching out into organic – even if uncontainable and only equivocally identifiable – wholes. The experience of God in Paradise is described as a feast, according to the recurrent

convivio motif, and also, most intensively, as a metaphorical seeing. The two semantic fields are fused together when Dante's eyes are said to drink from the river of light so as to be annealed for the vision of God: "as soon as from the water the eaves of my eyelids drunk" ("e sì come di lei bevve la gronda / de le palpebre mie," *Paradiso* XXX, 88–89). "Eaves" adds in a further architectural motif to this fusion of metaphorical constructions.

Metaphor is traditionally understood as "picture language" – "bildliche Sprache," as German says. Meaning is mediated by image and becomes sensuously concrete in untold and untellable ways. The transfers and transfusions typical of metaphors are forms of mediation, even mediation of an unattainable Immediacy. And mediation, as we have been arguing all along, becomes a master metaphor for the unconditional im-mediacy of divinity. Metaphor, to this extent, performs divinity in Dante's poem. The letter, taken as icon, as visible speech, becomes such a metaphorical performance in Dante's vision of writing.

3. Geometrical Imagery and Perspective Opening to Infinity in the Heaven of Jupiter

Dante's metaphorical imagination is also specifically geometrical in this sixth heaven, which features God as a Geometer turning his compass in the act of creating the world:

"Colui che volse il sesto
a lo stremo del mondo, e dentro ad esso
distinse tanto occulto e manifesto . . ."

(XIX, 40–42)

("He who turned the compass
at the limit of the world, and within it
distinguished so much that is hidden and manifest . . .")

Dante associates the sixth heaven with geometry programmatically in the *Convivio's* system of correspondences between the seven planetary heavens and the seven liberal arts. We must realize that these arts are not merely circumscribed areas of technical knowledge. They open upon the contemplation of the infinite. The geometrical point provides an image of the infinitely small and indivisible – and therefore not measurable. The impossibility of squaring the circle offers another (anti-) image of the impossible and, in principle, imageless, and therewith also another figure for divinity.

Si che tra 'l punto e lo cerchio sì come tra principio e fine si muove la Geometria, e questi due alla sua certezza repugnano: ché lo punto per la sua indivisibilitade è immensurabile, e lo cerchio per lo suo arco è impossibile a quadrare perfettamente, e però è impossibile a misurare a punto. E ancora: la Geometria è bianchissima, in quanto è senza macula d'errore e certissima per sé e per la sua ancella, che si chiama Perspettiva. (*Convivio* II, xiii, 27)
 (Thus, Geometry moves between the point and the circle as between beginning and end, and these two are antithetical to its certainty, since the point on account of its indivisibility is immeasurable, and the circle because of its curvature is impossible to perfectly square and is thus impossible to measure exactly. Furthermore, Geometry is superlatively white inasmuch as without stain or error and superlatively certain in itself and through its handmaiden, which is called [the science of] Perspective.)

Space is the dimension and the medium of representation that geometry in its perfection employs in order to represent that which is, in principle, unrepresentable or “impossible.” It creates for the eye a perspective on what remains otherwise ungraspable for the mind. Geometrical imagery is concretely visual and spatial, and yet geometrical concepts open this spatial reality to an infinite dimension that cannot be concretely represented. This is what makes geometry apt for figuring divine Justice as incomprehensible. Justice is imagined by Dante as a matter of symmetries and balance, and geometrical figures furnish some of its most precise and intuitive expressions. Linear or central perspective, as it begins to enter medieval art with Giotto and his follower Pietro Cavallino, raises this issue acutely as the issue of divine versus human vision of justice.¹¹ Giuseppe Mazzotta intriguingly suggests that Dante reconciles the new modern aesthetic of painting based on the perspective of the subject, which begins to emerge in Giotto, with the medieval, Byzantine, theocentric aesthetic realized in the mosaics of Ravenna.¹² The perspective of the subject as first-person protagonist is affirmed with unprecedented force in Dante's poem. Yet true perspective remains God's rather than the human protagonist's. In the still medieval perspective of the mosaics, which has validity also for Dante, the direction of the regard is reversed so that the viewer is scrutinized by the divine view of the saints and Christ as Pantocrator looming above on the ceiling of the Ravennese Basilica Sant'Apollinare in Classe.

Perspective for Dante is thus instrumental to the realization of infinite, divine vision rather than simply replacing the latter by humanly calculable and controllable artifices. And yet, even if justice is divine, nevertheless its representation remains

¹¹ For a reading of this important transition in art history, see Parronchi, *Cavallini*.

¹² Mazzotta, *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 84, chapter VI: “Spettacolo e geometria della giustizia (Paradiso XVIII–XX): L'Europa e l'universalità di Roma,” 81–96.

human. In response to this predicament, Dante represents God himself as drawing, designing, and painting. Can God be apprehended as the source of our own representations? Can the limits of their human mediation, in some way, be neutralized and overcome? Can justice on earth, as done by humans, succeed in executing the divine will? How can the particularity of their perspectives be transcended? These questions are posed and made to be pressing issues by Dante's text.

Virgil's and Ovid's Roman epics remain national epics of a certain race or people. But Dante, as Mazzotta pertinently comments, takes up "a position beyond the idolatrous fascination with any particular place" and beyond the purview prescribed by the "myths of a specific culture" ("una posizione di estraneità da ogni fascinazione idolatrica con un particolare luogo o con i miti di una particolare cultura," *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 94). The Heaven of Jupiter's economy of salvation, with its references to pagans (Riphaeus and Trajan) and Hindus (XIX, 70–72), relativizes Christian and Roman cultural chauvinism and turns Dante's work into a self-critical, open, dynamically global vision. The virtuous Ethiopian and the Persian are able to put to shame the righteous hypocrisy of those who "call out Christ, Christ!" ("gridan Cristo, Cristo," XIX, 103–14). These "outsiders," finally, are not overlooked: instead, they will themselves look down with the blessed in judgment on damned Christians. The opening of partial perspectives of particular peoples and civilizations, including the Roman and Christian, to reconciliation with universal humanity and cosmic destiny extends infinitely the scope of Dante's calling. Ensnared within his own well-defined Catholic Imperial culture, Dante nevertheless projects a self-critical, self-subverting universality open to other peoples and cultures and trained upon absolute otherness.¹³

Dante is certainly seeing and writing from a European perspective, yet he sees Europe as in relation to its others and as intrinsically penetrated by alterity. Christian European society is put to scorn by the Jew within, laughing at its typical hypocrisies (*Paradiso* V, 81), and it is defined from without, emblematically by Justinian's legal code, the *Corpus iuris civilis*, which Dante reminds us was forged in Byzantium at the extreme confine with Asia ("ne lo stremo dell'Europa," *Paradiso* VI, 5). This legal constitution is framed by an Emperor under the sway of the Eastern heresy of Monophysitism. Europe is constituted by heterogeneity not only outside its porous borders but also from within and at its own core. It is characterized not by static, seamless, self-identity but by the intrinsic contradictions and limits of its own-most characteristics.

In Dante's vision, as Mazzotta understands it, Europe is defined spiritually by its characteristic philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence but also by the flaws and

¹³ Dante's peering beyond Europe, anticipating our own contemporary critiques of Eurocentrism, is documented and analyzed by Brenda Schildgen in *Dante and the Orient* and in "Dante and the Crusades," 95–125.

limits of a civilization for which knowledge is transgressive (Ulysses's passage) and love violent (Europa's rape). It is especially the self-critical knowledge of these limits that Dante underscores and that distinguishes him and the European *Geist*. Dante is acutely conscious of the bias built into any perspective, not least the European. Mazzotta elicits such insight from Dante: "since every perspective brings with it a self-limitation, he reflects on his own no less inevitable limits and on his own possible errors" ("perché ogni prospettiva comporta un'autolimitazione, egli riflette sui suoi non meno inevitabili limiti e sui suoi possibili errori," *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 84).

The concluding sentence of Mazzotta's chapter on Jupiter and geometry, linking with the previous heaven of Mars and Dante's encounter with his great great grandfather Cacciaguida reviewing the Florentine past, expresses this deliberate delimitation of perspective within an open horizon in lapidary terms: "On the basis of Roman and Christian universality, the gaze of Dante rises up, and his poetry, which is the very voice of Western spirituality, exposes nakedly the belonging of every familiar, subjective perspective to the vast latitude of the Earth" ("Sulla scorta dell'universalità romana e cristiana, lo sguardo di Dante si solleva, e la sua poesia, che è la voce stessa della spiritualità dell'Occidente, mette a nudo l'appartenenza di ogni prospettiva familiare e soggettiva alla vasta latitudine della Terra," *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 96).

This naked self-exposure brings Dante's vast visionary outlook home to its rootedness in his own personal experience and encapsulates Dante's universalism without abstraction from his particular historical situatedness. Dante owns up to his own human and historical particularity in some disarming ways that are virtually unprecedented in the thoroughly Greek-influenced culture and language of his medieval civilization still based, to a large extent, on the idealism of Platonic ideas and Aristotelian essences. However, these admissions and acknowledgments become, paradoxically, means of fulfilling his universal vision.

Geometry is about perspective and, just like theology, enables us to distinguish between our own perspective, based on our own measures, and the incommensurable that lies beyond our coordinates. The limits of human measures and reason are self-critically met with and acknowledged in confronting that which is in "infinite excess" ("infinito eccesso") of them. We cannot measure the divine judgment with our short vision ("con la veduta corta d'una spanna," XIX, 81), just the span of a handbreadth (literally "spanna") in geometrical terms. Our lines and circles and spheres never comprehend the Whole. We cannot, with our short receptacle, fathom the Good without end that measures itself with itself alone:

E quince appar ch'ogne minor natura
è corto recettacolo a quel bene
che non ha fine e sé con sé misura.

(XIX,49-51)

(and thus it appears that every lesser nature

is an inadequate receptacle for that good
which has no end and measures itself by itself alone.)

Yet the divine abyss, nevertheless, adheres to and informs the surface that we can map and draw – analogously to the way that theology, with its incalculable “ultimate concern” (Paul Tillich), subtends the measured reasoning of philosophical discourse (“l’abisso inerisce alla superficie, così come la teologia sottende il discorso filosofico”¹⁴). Human arts pushed to their limit collapse and open to unfathomable divine knowledge. An ungraspable depth undergirds any finite subject’s inevitably perspectival knowing.

Mazzotta emphasizes that the divine Geometer is an Artist and that an aesthetic outlook forges some kind of contact of this divine geometry with the human world. The design of the cosmos infinitely surpasses us, and yet we have our perspective for receiving it as an aesthetic experience. Our perspective does not, like God’s, command unlimited vision, nor does it enable us to create the universe. We are rather within it – under the mobile gaze of the divinities figured in the mosaics in Ravenna. Their infinite gaze follows us as viewers wherever we go and from whatever strictly limited angle we might choose to look.

This awareness of limitations makes the universal perspective of salvation history, which historically emanates from Europe, unable to totalize and close itself off as European but, instead, opens gateways upon other regions and cultures. The idea of salvation history itself, so dear to Western Christianity, derives from the Holy Land in Asia Minor. Thus the purported universality of its civilization breaks down in Europe’s own internal contradictions stemming inevitably from divergent human perspectives. Still, the projection of a truly universal divine perspective has been a persistent and irrepressible aspiration of European culture. Perspective, as *perspectiva artificialis*, is already announced in Giotto and Cavallini, but it is not yet confined by the limits of the subject. It remains open to a mobile and all-enveloping divine perspective that is envisaged and imagined, even though it is unattainable for a finite human subject – just as Dante reminds us in admonitions delivered from the height of the Heaven of Jupiter.

Geometries of self-enclosure break apart in Dante’s heavens: they are burst open to a Justice that is superhuman. It is not that Dante does not express the desire for completeness and perfection, but these values are imagined as attainable only in a comprehensiveness that includes everything that geometrical, geographical, and ideological or cultural limits would exclude. Dante’s “uni-verse” is a “turning into one” of the All that follows a curvature that only God can master. Thus, human perspective needs to be kept always open to infinite vision, to the vision of the Infinite,

¹⁴ Mazzotta, *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 91.

and that type of vision is always other than our own defined in finite terms, though we can indeed participate in it.

4. From Representation of Mediation to the Unrepresentable and Im-mediate

Through the intricacies of the imagery of Dante's vision, God's appearing as letters in the theophany of the heaven of Jupiter thus transforms itself into God's appearing in the mediations of language. Usually mediation operates unobserved, as attention is focused on what is mediated, but Dante's linguistic, poetic, and theological vision features the means of mediation as its direct object. Nonetheless, it is not exactly the medium, or writing as such and as an object, that most fascinates him – and us – in the end. It is rather something that is not objectifiable – mediation itself in its infinity – that is the source of unlimited power and fascination both in the poetic *mise-en-scène* and in the universe that it models and enacts.

Grammar, as an analysis of language into its component parts, is ultimately aimed at letting the wholeness of sense spring forth from an articulation of the seamless stream of speech into the complexity of differentiated parts. Grammar is presented, in Dante's vision, not as a law governing its expressions, but as figuring in a playful display – the random play of sparks in speech, or of material elements in the inscription of letters. Miraculously, from these irrational sparkings and shootings, apparently just random scribbblings, the rational order of language in grammar rises up in all its ordered configuration of components comprising a spectacular unity and universal wholeness. The uncontrollable dynamism of the letter reveals itself to be the generating source of order in language. And this order presents an analogy for divine order in the universe as a whole, despite its apparent chaos from our inevitably limited perspective. By reflecting on itself in this way, language reflects a total order that ensures, however encrypted, an inscrutable justice in the universe. Writing, as the paradigm par excellence of such endless self-mediation, which is alone what can be a revelation of the whole and total, becomes the revelation of God, his self-manifestation here and now in the Heaven of Jupiter.

To my mind, what this text is saying is that the mediation taking place in language and specifically in writing, as projecting a unity of sense, is itself the presence of God such as it can be experienced and expressed in letters. In the vision of Dante's poem, God is directly experienced not as a distinctly representable individual but rather in and through the mutual connections of things that the poem brings home to us, the relations in and through which all things are created and become what they are (“ciascuna cosa qual ell'è diventa,” XX, 78). This kind of unity through interconnectedness is experienced paradigmatically in the case of writing as a differential

system. The structural linguistics of Saussure and the deconstructive critical reflection of Derrida are both discernible here in embryo and still as squarely ensconced in their originally theological matrices.

What Dante envisages in his vision of writing in the Heaven of Jupiter is indeed the presence or the appearing of God. God is present as the mediation that operates at every point in our language, as well as in the differential grammar of the Creation and of History as culminating in the providential Justice established by the Roman Empire as the image of a World Government that remains, however differently, imaginable still for us today. Divinity is made visible by Dante, above all, in writing, but that is because, qua mediation, writing is also essentially the substance of what we live in our lives as finite, signifying, sense-making creatures. We deal with one another and our world always only through mediations that are traversed by what to us is unmasterable contingency, and yet these mediations and contingencies, Dante maintains, belong to a higher unity or synthesis that is beyond what we can comprehend.

God is envisaged in the mediation of all things by one another, and the vision of God is attained through our experience of mediation. By presencing mediation in language as an object directly of vision – indeed of a prophetic, visionary experience – Dante expresses the recognition, which is made explicit in his declarations of ineffability, that the true nature of the divine in itself cannot but be imagined as im-mediacy. His vision of mediation negates itself and awakens him to the not-to-be-mediated absolute simplicity of the divine nature. When he exclaims to the sweet star (Jupiter) that it demonstrated to him how our (human) justice is actually the effect of heavenly justice, of “the heaven that you bejewel” –

O dolce stella, quali e quante gemme
mi dimostraro che nostra giustizia
effetto sia del ciel che tu ingemme!

(XVIII, 115–17)

(O sweet star, what gems, and in what numbers,
demonstrated to me that our justice
is the effect of the heaven that you bejewel!)

– what Dante presents is not simply mediation (the visible interplay of parts of speech, etc.), but also its negation in a (non-)vision, a declaration, of immediacy. What he actually sees is only an “effect.” Dante does not simply identify the divine with the mediations he sees – which would lead to a sort of idolatrous pantheism, or else to a secular atheism in the manner of Spinoza or Hegel, or perhaps, in our own age, to a totalizing informatics. Instead, he represents mediation in its own inherent negativity (like everything belonging to the created universe, the world of beings) as

pointing to an unrepresentable immediacy (Being, God), Whom he directly apostrophizes.

The letters in their immediacy as presences show Dante God's just ordering of the universe. This he cannot actually see, but the immediate presence of God's Word assures him of it. His direct address of the heaven mirrors its demonstrating to him immediately by its speaking presence that human justice is an effect of divine Justice – despite the manifest breaking up of the sentence and the composition of its letters out of apparently incoherent sparking. The presence of divinity in direct address, in the immediacy of language – more than any objectively formulated mediations of meaning – is the “demonstration.”¹⁵

In Dante's vision, and most forcefully through this linguistic address, the mediations of language are negated as mediations and are made rather to appear as immediate presences. Mediation and immediacy are thus made practically to coincide. In the terms of a tradition running exemplarily from John Scott Eriugena to Nicolas Cusanus, Dante's vision here presents a *coincidentia oppositorum*. This is the tradition that also informed Hegel's dialectical thinking in its theistic version as based on the “negation of negation” (*negatio negationis*).¹⁶

By presenting mediations of language in the place that has been prepared supposedly for the unmediated vision of God, Dante suggests that God, the Unmediated, is to be seen in the mediations of language. At least this is so when the latter are seen in a perspective of infinity – *sub specie aeternitatis*. Still, the Unmediated does not finally appear per se in these mediations, which are only finite phenomena, but rather in their effacing themselves as mediations in order to gesture towards what they are not and cannot represent or mediate. God is, indeed, “seen” in mediation, but only in the moment in which it fails as mediation and opens up, breaking open from within, to the Unmediated.

What is seen of God are mediations – language, letters, writing, sparks. But these mediations are not content simply to be mediations. Taken as a whole, they call for and refer to the unmediated. God is what you do not see in the phenomena of the universe and of language. Nevertheless, these phenomena allow you to see that there is something more in relation to which they, as a whole, are negations. Mediations are revealed as transitory and negative in their own being, as dependent upon and referred to something other than themselves – the Unmediated and Whole. This Unmediated, paradoxically, becomes manifest as a material presence of the medium. In other words: Incarnation. The Roman Imperial Eagle incarnates, with the immediacy of an image, the whole history of the world as culminating in a universal order of divine Justice. In the eagle, Justice itself, which is normally but

¹⁵ I elucidate this link between language and im-mediacy by leveraging the ultraphenomenological thinking of Levinas in Excursus Six of *The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradiso: The Metaphysics of Representation*.

¹⁶ Grotz, *Negationen des Absoluten*.

an abstract attribute, speaks presently as a kind of concrete presence or persona. Although just an abstract and emblematic sign in itself, the Eagle becomes a metaphor for the heightened reality of universal Justice incarnated historically, according to Dante's ideal, by the Roman Empire. Such trans-substantiation becomes possible, and is made actual, by the Eagle's real presence in Dante's vision.

Nevertheless, the mediation achieved in and performed by writing is inextricable from contingency and materiality. The order that writing displays is not just an ideal form of the mind but rather penetrates an intractably external and material reality. This order cannot simply be imposed by a subjective act of consciousness. Its creation requires and witnesses to the unlimited power of the divine Creator over all being, starting from its material roots.

Conclusion

With its vision in the Heaven of Jove of the incipit of the Book Wisdom – DILIGITE IUSTITIAM / QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM –, the poem di-sports and dis-plays its Scriptural medium in order to stage-manage an experience through metaphor of the Unmediated, which is the Divine Vision. Dante witnesses the articulation of his medium into incomprehensible complexity. He nevertheless sees it as inscribing a higher order and as the best, or perhaps the only, means of conveying the transcendent wholeness and simplicity – the vision of God – that he has been given to envision and has thereby been incited to believe. His flaunting of his medium is designed, ultimately, to make it disappear as medium so that we are left face to face with at least the place prepared for the Unmediated.

Only mediation that subverts itself as mediation in order to become the metaphor of unmediated presence can produce (or rather prepare for) the appearing of God – theophany. The unmediated presence of God is the non/showing of the Unrepresentable that Dante never tires of acknowledging through obsessively repeated rehearsals of the ineffability topos. However, in this case, the Unrepresentable coincides with, or at least appears as, the negation of the totality of representations mediating the divine message and meaning of the whole poem. The technical virtuosity of Dante's descriptions runs through and plays out all the possibilities of representation to the limit where representation exhausts its possibilities and points beyond itself to what it cannot represent or even fathom – the ineffable. Yet, neither does the ineffability topos simply remain in place: it, too, has been made to turn vertiginously around the center that moves the sun and the other stars. Dante's poem thereby becomes a veritable performance of negative or apophatic theology dancing together with a cataphatic theology that lends God a phenomenologically appearing form as writing, as Holy Scripture. In this sense, the poem is a theophany.

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