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**The Problem of Theophany in
Paradiso 33¹**

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Now to discover the poet and father of this all is quite a task, and even if one discovered him, to speak of him to all men is impossible. . . . But if we provide likelihoods [εικότας] inferior to none, one should be well pleased with them, remembering that I who speak as well as you my judges have a human nature, so that it is fitting for us to receive the likely story [εικότα μύθον] about these things and not to search further for anything beyond it.

Plato, *Timaeus*²

In the first of the *Paradiso*'s direct addresses to its readers,³ Dante offers a warning that seems to recall the one that Ulysses failed to acknowledge as he left behind the confines of the Mediterranean Ocean to set out on the final, “folle volo” [“mad flight”]⁴ that Dante invented for him in *Inferno* 26:

O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,
tornate a riveder li vostri liti:
non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.
L'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse;
Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo,
e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse. (*Paradiso* 2.1-9)

[O you who in little barks, desirous of listening, have followed after my ship that sails onward singing: turn back to see your shores again, do not put out on the deep sea, for perhaps, losing me, you would be lost; the waters that I enter have never

before been crossed; Minerva inspires and Apollo leads me, and nine Muses point out to me the Bears.]

But while *Paradiso*'s first direct address warns of the poem's power to seduce and destroy, its second offers a hope of a safe wake for those who crave "the bread of angels:"⁵

Voi altri pochi che drizzaste il collo
per tempo al pan de li angeli, del quale
vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,
metter potete ben per l'alto sale
vostro navigio, servando mio solco
dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna equale;
que' gloriosi che passaro al Colco
non s'ammiraron come voi farete,
quando Iasón vider fatto bifolco. (*Paradiso* 2.10-18)

[You other few, who stretched out your necks early on for the bread of angels, which one lives on here though never sated by it: you can well set your course over the salt deep, staying within my wake before the water returns level again; those glorious ones who sailed to Colchos did not so marvel as you will do, when they saw Jason become a plowman.]

As other commentators have noted, the allusion to the Argo in this second direct address is recalled in the culminating canto of the *Commedia* when Dante's poetic persona is represented as reflecting on the Pilgrim's prior vision of "la forma universal" (*Paradiso* 33.91) in which

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
legato con amore in un volume,
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:
sustanze e accidenti e lor costume
quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo
che ciò ch' i' dico è un semplice lume. (*Paradiso* 33.85-90)

[In its depths I saw internalized, bound with love in one volume, what through the universe becomes unsewn quires: substances and accidents and their modes as it were conflated together, in such a way that what I describe is a simple light.]

In reflecting on this experience, the poetic persona recalls the allusion to the Argo, claiming:

Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo
che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa
che é Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo. (*Paradiso* 33.94-96)

[One point alone is greater forgetfulness to me than twenty-five centuries to the

enterprise that made Neptune marvel at the shadow of the Argo.]⁶

In a certain sense, then, both the warning to the many and the promise to the few in *Paradiso* 2's direct addresses are fulfilled in *Paradiso* 33, for the poet here describes his *un punto solo* as a point of *letargo*—as Peter Dronke puts it, “the coma of oblivion” and “a divine ailment, a self-forgetfulness in ecstatic wonder, which is not an obstacle to the highest seeing but its very condition”⁷—a single point in time that, though forgotten, is nevertheless greater in being forgotten than even the voyage of the Argonauts that had already been marveled at by a god and remembered in human history for twenty-five centuries by the time Dante's Pilgrim began his own poetic voyage. The interpretive *aporia* posed by this juxtaposition is not, however, simply that the *letargo* was forgotten while the voyage of the Argonauts was remembered. Instead, the interpretive *aporia* is a consequence of an irony that attempts to control the fundamental instability of the image. This irony, which compels some kind of response from the reader, is that the significance of the theophantic moment can only be measured by the Pilgrim's *letargo* in the face of it; that is, the significance of the *punto* is measured only by the reader's awareness of the poet's inability to capture the continually vanishing trace of its effect on the Pilgrim. As Teodolinda Barolini aptly put it,

The instability of the analogy is structural, since the “punto solo” is analogous both, as object of the vision, to the Argo and, as duration of the vision, to the twenty-five centuries; making the tercet even more impossible to hold onto is the fact that its main action is forgetting: active continual, endlessly accreted forgetting. Infinitely fascinating and suggestive, infinitely impenetrable and dense, conceptually and syntactically illogical, but somehow offering a glimpse into the dialectic between simultaneity and eternity, point and duration, conflation and extension, the Neptune analogy is a fitting emblem for the poetics of *Paradiso* 33, its ability to conflate all time into “un punto solo” unmatched even by the canto's final verses.⁸

Therefore, on the assumption that the *Paradiso* offers the representation of the attempt to recall and communicate something either about this *punto* or by use of this *punto* as a poetic device, I would like to turn to the perplexing conclusion offered by Dante in *Paradiso* 33. Specifically, I would like to discuss the last 22 lines of the poem beginning with the poem's final apostrophe to God.

O luce eterna che solo in te sidi,
sola t'intendi, e d'ate intelletta,
e intendente tea mi e arridi!
Quella circolazion che sì concetta
pareva in te come lume riflesso,
da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,

dentro da sé, sal suo colore stesso
 mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
 per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.
 Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
 per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
 pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige.
 Tal era ieo a quella vista nova;
 veder voleva come si convene
 l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova.
 Ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne,
 se non che la mia mente fu precossa
 da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
 A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa,
 ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l *velle*,
 sì come rota ch' igualmente è mossa,
 l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle. (*Paradiso* 33.124-45)

[O eternal Light, who throne only within yourself, solely know yourself, and known by yourself and knowing, love and smile: that circulation which seemed in you to be generated like reflected light, surveyed by my eyes somewhat, within itself in its very own color, seemed to me to be painted with our effigy, by which my sight was all absorbed. Like the geometer who is all intent to square the circle and cannot find, for all his thought the principle he needs: such was I at that miraculous sight; I wished to see how the image fitted the circle and how it enwheres itself there. But my own feathers were not sufficient for that, except that my mind was struck by a flash in which its desire came. Here my high imagining failed of power; but already my desire and the *velle* were turned, like a wheel being moved evenly, by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.]

Although I am especially interested in the significance of the poetic persona's failure to recall and represent the Pilgrim's experience,⁹ I am obliged to begin by recapitulating the theology that appears to structure these experiences. That is, I will begin with a brief summary of the theology that would be confirmed by the experiences—both those of the Pilgrim and those of the poetic persona who later attempted to recall and represent the Pilgrim's experience—described in the final canto of the poem.

As a consequence of its representational instability, the canto has generated a wealth of interpretations, including attempts to ascertain the specific theological doctrines that would be confirmed by the experience it describes. Many of these interpretations have offered plausible claims for the influence upon Dante of theologians such as Augustine,¹⁰ Pseudo-Dionysus,¹¹ Boethius,¹² Bonaventure,¹³ Alan of Lille,¹⁴ Hugh of St. Cher,¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas,¹⁶ and, especially, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux.¹⁷ It is not my intention in this essay to adjudicate between these

interpretations. In any case, I believe that Dante is such a synthetic thinker that it is only reasonable to assume that the experiences—both those of the Pilgrim and those of the poetic persona who is reflecting on them—described in the canto draw upon various aspects of these theologies.¹⁸ However, because my ultimate aim is to discuss the philosophical significance of some of the poetic tactics employed in this canto, I will do no more than lay out a rough interpretation of the theological framework that lends a certain degree of stability to the otherwise unstable representations in the lines quoted above.

I believe that, at the most basic level of interpretation, these final 22 lines of the poem describe both an intellectual and affective state for the Pilgrim—a perfection of both intellect and will together. I am, moreover, convinced that the commentators are correct who have identified this experience as modeled on that of a Pauline *visio*—a *raptus* in which the Pilgrim saw God in the same way in which many of Dante’s theological predecessors argued that Moses and Paul did.¹⁹ To begin with, Dante has established as early as *Inferno* 2 the grounds on which this comparison to Paul can be made. There, of course, the Pilgrim was unworthy of the experience;²⁰ now, however, through the course of his journey, his soul has been prepared to receive by divine grace the glory of the divine light. Moreover, when we recognize that the entire poem establishes many direct correspondences between Christ and the Pilgrim—e.g., that the *Commedia* is set “nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita” [“in the middle of the journey of our life”] (*Inferno* 1.1), the same age as Christ when he was crucified; that the setting of the *Commedia* is around Easter; and so on—it seems likely that the poem is preparing the Pilgrim for the kind of epiphany that, in a general sense, would be involved in a Pauline *visio*. Finally, the idea that the Pilgrim experiences a full vision of the divine essence would also be confirmed by Kathleen Verduin’s contention that the theophantic experience of *Paradiso* 33 is patterned as the conceptual opposite of the Pilgrim’s experience of “the union and commingling with the Satanic essence”²¹ suggested by *Inferno* 34.25 in a direct address to the reader—“Io non mori’ e non rimasi vivo” [“I did not die and I did not remain alive”]—in that, whereas the *contra-visio* of Satan would be an impossibly empty vision of impotence, chaos, division, emptiness, and fear, the *visio* of *Paradiso* 33 would be the impossibly full vision of power, harmony, unity, joy (*fruitio*), and love. As Verduin puts it: “these two culminating visions toward which the Pilgrim is led and by which he is momentarily absorbed, that of Satan the Destroyer and of God the Creator, loom before Pilgrim and reader as the ultimate polarities of the universe” (213-14).

What is also relatively clear in the canto is that part and parcel of the experience is its excessiveness. Indeed, in the passages quoted above, the descriptions of the impossibility of the representation of the experience receive greater emphasis than the attempted representations of the experience itself. For instance, in discussing the *punto [di] maggior letargo* above, I mentioned that there is an interpretive *aporia* in the irony that the very measure of the significance of the theophantic

moment is that it cannot be remembered. A parallel irony is also invoked in Dante's simile comparing his experience to the geometer attempting to square the circle. As in the case of measuring the significance of an event by the fact that it is utterly obliterated from ordinary memory, so too does Dante's simile of the inability to square the circle—literally to “measure” (*misurar*) the circle—offer itself ostensibly as an approximation of the inability to recall and represent the theophantic moment. That is, just as the *Paradiso*'s author recognizes that he cannot measure the circle with the square, he recognizes that he cannot measure the effect of the vision of God.²²

But, again, the *aporia* constituted by the instability of the representation is deeper. By Dante's estimation, the voyage of the Argonauts had been remembered for more than twenty-five centuries, and the memory of an event across twenty-five centuries, as a continuous magnitude of years in human history, surely indicates its importance. However, precisely because no single point can be measured by a continuous magnitude, the *punto solo* of his vision of the divine is of an incomparably different order of significance. As Dante maintains in *Convivio* 2.13.27,²³ the point cannot be measured at all—let alone measured by something finite—and so the significance of the voyage of the Argonauts and the significance of the *punto* can indeed be said to be meaningless in relationship to each other. By the same token, the inability to find the principle that would allow a geometer to square the circle is used in a simile that is wholly inadequate to measuring the supposedly analogous impossibility of measuring the significance of the theophantic moment. That is, the difficulty of measuring the *punto solo* is not, in fact, well-approximated by the analogy to the difficulty of measuring the circle with the square since the inability of the geometer to construct a square measuring the area of a given circle is not incommensurate to the same degree or even in the same way in which the finite is to the non-finite. Turning, then, to the final lines of the poem, the Pilgrim's *disio* (“desire”) and *velle* (“will,” in the verbal infinitive, a common but technical term in scholastic discourse), we are told, have entered into harmony with the divine. Or, as John Freccero famously argued:

The souls who have seen God enjoy a perfect equality of powers, for the twin powers of the soul reach their own specific perfection when the soul beholds *la prima equalità* in His essence. The intellect, which desires unceasingly to know, is at last satisfied, because in knowing God it knows all that it possibly can know. The will, the perception of which is to love, celebrates the Primal Love in an eternal fruition.²⁴

This conversion would, therefore, necessarily have been preceded by an intellectual insight that allows the Pilgrim to see, without the aid of *fantasia*—which is to say without any images²⁵—the cosmos as a fundamental, undifferentiated unity. But precisely because this vision of unity can admit no difference, it cannot be measured by anything other than itself.

I would now, however, like to turn away from the theological underpinnings of the canto in order to offer a different perspective on how we might navigate in the wake of *lo sacro poema*. In trying to explain the cause of the dissolution of the memory of the theophantic moment, the poet provides two significant similes:

Così la neve al sol si disigilla;
 Così al vento ne le foglie levi
 si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla. (*Paradiso* 33.64-66)

[Thus the snow comes unsealed in the sun, thus in the wind, on the fluttering leaves, the Sibyl's meaning was lost.]

The first of these similes relies on the metaphorical association between God and the sun. Accordingly, the process of forgetting described by the melting of snow in the rays of the sun functions metonymically to stand for the effects of the theophantic moment on the poetic persona's memory of that moment. Thus, the paradoxical experience of the theophany as *un punto solo [di] maggior letargo* seems to suggest that the melting away of memory is like the melting away of tracks in the snow.

The second simile is more complicated. Here Dante is invoking Virgil's description in *Aeneid* 3 of how the Sibyl allowed the leaves on which her prophesies were written to be scattered by the wind. Piero Boitani assesses this allusion as follows:

Dante, then, recreates an image which another poet had labored on, and presents this image as an event he himself has witnessed. The poet being Virgil, and the relation of Dante to Virgil being what it is, this is hardly surprising. But the power of evocation that it makes us feel in Dante's poetry is enormous: when poetry is about to fail together with language and thought, Dante sails through thirteen centuries of written word, of Western tradition, and rewrites—in the final revolution of intertextuality—an ancient poem to signify the end of poetry.²⁶

John Ahern has suggested that this second simile for forgetting is countered in a certain sense by the very act of binding the *Commedia* as a book—a process that is aided by the various symmetries within and between the *cantiche*.²⁷ With respect to the simile established in *Paradiso* 33.65-66, Ahern suggests that the allusion to the Sibyl's leaves “plays on the reader's fear of losing and scattering the patiently acquired text,” which fear is then relieved by the introduction of a metaphor for book binding in *Paradiso* 33.85-90.²⁸ This metaphor, along with Dante's employment of *stelle* as the final word of each of the three *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, functions to render the “poem in its material format a unity, a *totum simul*, rather than a tentative and easily disordered sequence”—i.e., these stratagems “safeguard the poem's textual integrity.”²⁹ In my own view, reading *Paradiso* 33 as the act of binding the *Commedia* may also, perhaps, offer instruction in how to read the *Commedia* in the

sense that, just as the binding of the book provides a preliminary (though not fully determined) order to the possible senses of the book, so, too, might *Paradiso* 33 provide an ordering principle for reading the *Commedia*. If so, then beyond limiting ourselves to a discussion of the theological framework that has been the vehicle for the voyage, *Paradiso* 33 ought also to be noted for its value for a consideration of what the poem tells us about how to distinguish the vehicle from the voyage itself. Or to make my own mixed metaphors a little more clear, what I am suggesting is that not only does the final canto reveal Dante's attempt to stabilize the narrative unity of the *Commedia* in a distinct theology, but it also offers instructions in how to read that narrative, instructions that expose important considerations regarding the relationship between poetic expression and human praxis.

In order to discuss this aspect of the canto's significance, I will begin simply by noting that no other canto in the *Commedia* offers so many repeated warnings concerning the limitations of poetic representation. There are other concentrated discussions of the poetic and fictive nature of the poem, to be sure. But I can think of no other canto in which Dante is so relentless in calling our attention to the limits of his poetic persona's capacity to recall, represent, or understand the Pilgrim's experience. These poetic tactics do not, however, indicate that Dante has abandoned the careful symmetry of his book in order personally to experience the *ecstasis* of his protagonist. As I have already suggested, the poetic constructions of *Paradiso* 33's obstacles to recollection, representation, and understanding may simply be read as confirming the theological conception of Pauline vision I have summarized above. But these poetic constructions should also be read as indications of Dante's carefully deployed strategy to establish his own poetic *auctoritas* by tapping into this theology.³⁰ This second way of reading the final canto does not so much contradict or undermine the theological interpretation summarized above as it does shift attention to the significance of this theology for the practical implications of the *Commedia*. This way of reading the canto would, I contend, compel us to understand that the instability of representation in the final canto indicates a reason to be wary of the intrinsic significance of the metaphysical and theological material that constitutes the narrative through which the poem comments on the value and importance of its own poetic medium. My hypothesis, in short, is that although the final canto does, in fact, encourage the illusion that the *Commedia* illustrates a distinct metaphysics and theology, Dante's poetic strategy in this canto also compels us to read the poem against the grain of the theological framework that it otherwise seems to defend. If this hypothesis is tenable, then what we should find is that *Paradiso* 33's supposed representation of a rapture in which the Pilgrim experiences a vision of God might be read less as the defense and espousal of that theology than as poetry's conversion of the impossibility of grounding the requisite metaphysical or theological doctrines or insights into the *sustanza e argomento*—the substance and evidence—of practical reasoning.³¹

To understand why this hypothesis might be tenable, we first need to remember that the form of the *Commedia* is neither philosophical nor theological

in the narrow sense; rather, the poem, as the author of the epistle to Can Grande della Scala insists, is quite literally fictive in form.³² It does, of course, demand that we read it as something more than a fable, and it includes frequent and overt discussions of metaphysics and theology. But our recognition that its literal form is a fiction must necessarily make us wary of how literally we want to read these metaphysical and theological discussions. Consider, for instance, Dante's frequent depictions of his Pilgrim in a mode of incredulity or confusion at what he is witnessing (e.g., *Inferno* 3.10-12,³³ 13.22-51,³⁴ *Purgatorio* 33.82-84,³⁵ *Paradiso* 4.7-9,³⁶ and *Paradiso* 20.79-84³⁷). As Teodolinda Barolini has argued, this tactic helps guarantee its readers' suspension of disbelief by compelling them to identify with the Pilgrim in their own conversion from incredulity to belief in the process of generating meaning from the poem. The abstractness of Dante's representations throughout *Paradiso* function similarly. That is to say, the credibility of *Paradiso* on theological and metaphysical matters is less a function of its dialectical or analytic probity so much as it is of its poetic tactics. The theological reading, for instance, is convincing not because Dante has offered irrefutable demonstrations or a dialectically persuasive case for his premises. Rather, the theological reading is convincing because readers are compelled by poetic stratagems to put themselves in the fictional space inhabited by the Pilgrim—and this strategy begins, after all, in the very first line of the *Commedia* by representing the journey as taking place *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*.

Turning, then, from the general deployment of tactics such as these throughout the *Commedia* to the specific tactics of *Paradiso* 33, it is clear that the chief tactic in the final canto involves Dante's sustained focus on the failure of his poetic persona's memory and *fantasia*. To secure our belief that the Pilgrim saw what he saw, and therefore as if to convince us of the underlying theology, the poetic persona simply insists that the moment was beyond memory. Thus, the difficulty of comprehending and interpreting the underlying theological framework—a process that occurs for the reader not poetically but through analysis of poetic discourse—maintains the illusion that Dante is indeed offering the bread of angels promised or hoped for in the direct address to the reader in *Paradiso* 2. After all, just as the poem represents itself as having been written by a divine author (see especially *Purgatorio* 24.52-54³⁸ and *Paradiso* 1.13-15³⁹), so too does it maintain the illusion that it can only be read and interpreted fruitfully—safely even, if the first direct address of *Paradiso* 2 is to be believed—by one fully prepared by the infusion of grace in the perfection of both will and intellect for the theophany Dante invents for his Pilgrim. One might even go so far as to say that the success of the *Commedia*'s illusion resides in part in its ability to give rise to a narcissistic satisfaction in reflecting oneself into the narrative Dante supplies.⁴⁰

In any case, although the poem often all too easily compels assent to what seems to be its underlying conceptual framework, when one attempts to derive and articulate coherent theological or metaphysical doctrines from the poem, one is

continually frustrated by glaring paradoxes and self-contradictions. For instance, leaving aside the difficulties of *Paradiso* 33 for the moment and returning to the *terra firma* of *Purgatorio*, we may recall that almost immediately after the Pilgrim and Virgil have safely traversed Hell, they are confronted by Cato, who demands to know whether the laws that govern the afterlife have been violated by Virgil's presence. Virgil reassures Cato that, because he has been appointed the Pilgrim's guide by a heavenly emissary, no such laws have been violated (see *Inferno* 2.52-120 and *Purgatorio* 1.40-99). But this hardly satisfies. In particular, it raises the question of how it is that Cato himself may be the guardian of Purgatory since he is no more Christian than Virgil!⁴¹

Of course, these inscrutable theological ironies are not the result of sloppiness on Dante's part. Although theological paradoxes abound in the *Commedia*, Dante's construction of them follows a consistent narrative logic that compels the reader to seek for the significance of the doctrines on which the poem implies or pretends⁴² it has been founded. Consequently, if we are willing to say that Dante is engaged in theology at all, we must recognize that the kind of knowledge his theology is intended to provide cannot resemble the kind of *scientia* that Albertus and Thomas, for instance, offer in their *Summae*. Indeed, Rachel Jacoff was undoubtedly right to note that "paradox, in fact, is constitutive of the *Paradiso* both theologically and poetically."⁴³ Accordingly, I acknowledge that it is possible to argue that the poem celebrates and gives meaning to a theological unity precisely through irony and paradox since, in its most explicit sense, *Paradiso* 33, as I have summarized above, offers what appears to be an attempt to represent the experience of a *visio* that could be neither corporeal nor even, fundamentally, imagistic. At this level, then, I recognize why many are inclined to interpret the final canto as, for instance, exposing "the limits of philosophy which must yield to poetry in evoking a wonder that surpasses the navigation of the Argo. *Paradiso* transgresses the limits of scientific discourse through the exhaustion of analytical methods in the volitional delight of the beatific vision."⁴⁴

I do not here want to swim into the vast ocean of debate concerning whether or how the poem might constitute an imitation of Scripture or an allegory of theology. Suffice it to say that I am partial to, for instance, Freccero's assessment of the major difficulties involved in maintaining such interpretations.⁴⁵ But I should say that I think recognizing the importance of Dante's poetic tactics for convincing his readers allows us to see that, intrinsically—as if hidden behind a veil⁴⁶—the *Commedia* subordinates the value of speculative (metaphysical and theological) inquiry and contemplative (mystical) experience to ethical deliberation—a project which aims not at delivering to its readers a *scientia*, *sapientia*, or even *visio* concerning the objects of metaphysical or theological inquiry so much as it does a practical wisdom that aims at the regulation of human judgment in ethical *praxis*. Put differently, I think it is probably not quite as correct to say that the *Commedia* belongs to the tradition of vision literature so much as it is to say that the *Commedia*

depends on the allegorical instability of its imitation of vision literature in order to open a space for ethical deliberation.⁴⁷

Thus, to bring my own voyage back to port, what I believe *Paradiso* 33 emphasizes in its culminating representations is that poetic expression is, for Dante, a species of ethical deliberation intended to help lift humans from a state of misery to a state of happiness. According to its theological underpinnings, the canto provides an attempt to capture what the ultimate fulfillment of human desire might be on the assumption that salvation is possible. And it may even be true that human beings are ontologically constituted in such a way that they must represent to themselves the possibility of a final happiness or blessedness (whether of a Christian type or not) as the ground for a coherent normative logic. If so, then perhaps, too, Dante is not far off the mark in the *Convivio*'s claim that our highest happiness would be the joy of *visio* and contemplation of the divine.

Veramente di questi usi l'uno è più pieno di beatitudine che l'altro; sì come è lo speculativo, lo quale senza mistura alcuna è uso della nostra nobilissima parte, la quale, per lo radicale amore che detto è, massimamente è amabile, sì com'è lo 'ntelletto. E questa parte in questa vita perfettamente lo suo uso avere non puote—lo quale averà in Dio che è sommo intelligibile—se non in quanto considera lui e mira lui per li suoi effetti. . . . E così appare che nostra beatitudine, [cio]è questa felicitade di cui si parla, prima trovare potemo quasi imperfetta nella vita attiva, cioè nelle operazioni delle morali virtudi, e poi perfetta quasi nella [vita contemplativa, cioè] nelle operazioni delle virtudi intellettuali. Le quali due operazioni sono vie espedita e dirittissime a menare alla somma beatitudine, la quale qui non si puote avere, come appare pur per quello che detto è. (4.22.13-18)⁴⁸

[Furthermore, of the two activities [practical and contemplative] mentioned one brings happiness more fully than the other. I am, of course, speaking of contemplative activity. This is in pure form the activity of our most noble part, that is, the intellect, which the root love spoken of draws us to love as what is most lovable in us. This part cannot in this life attain the truly perfect exercise of its activity, which would be to see God, the highest object of the intellect, face to face; here the nearest one can come to this is to reflect on Him and perceive Him through His effects. . . . We may conclude, then, with respect to bliss in this life (which is the happiness with which I am at present concerned), that it can be attained in its imperfect form in the active life, that is, in the realization of the moral virtues, and then in its perfect form in a loose sense in the realization of the intellectual virtues. These two modes of activity are the quickest and most direct ways leading to supreme happiness, which we cannot attain here, as is by now apparent from the above discussion.]

But the key thing to note here is that, even were we to accept the practical necessity of positing the possibility of an ultimate human happiness, on Dante's terms its fulfillment would place the one experiencing it beyond any temporal capacity to recollect, represent, understand, and therefore to communicate its fulfillment. In the poetic fiction of the *Commedia*, the poetic persona speaks of this rapture by speaking of his own failure to represent it. That is, what the problem of theophany in *Paradiso* 33 seems to reveal is that, regardless of whether or not such a blessedness were possible for human beings, the *Commedia* nevertheless sacrifices its own ontologized notion of the good to the practical ethical significance of representing it. It is in this way that perhaps it is not a mistake to think that the *Commedia* offers itself as a new kind of scripture—as a form of revelation that constructs its own authority rather than positing it outside of the temporal world. After all, just as Beatrice points out that scripture speaks in a human language accommodated to the practical needs of potential believers, so too does the *Commedia* accommodate itself to its readers' practical needs by employing the poetic tactics I have discussed above. Thus, the *Commedia* itself works in the realm of ethical philosophy in a way analogous to the way in which the appearance of Piccarda and Costanza in the sphere of the Moon are said to be accommodated to the practical needs of a Pilgrim whose will and intellect are not yet capable of a Pauline *visio* (see *Paradiso* 4.37-48).

In short, the poetic strategy of *Paradiso* 33 (and by extension, that of the entire *Commedia*) necessitates a sacrifice of theological and metaphysical knowledge to the ethical project enabled by its poetic strategy for the deployment of theology and metaphysics. The canto therefore reveals that theology and metaphysics are less relevant to ethical improvement for the knowledge that they would offer about the ontological conditions of our happiness than they are as the *sustanza e argomento* of poetic representations of our practical needs with respect to any such conditions. Because the representations of *Paradiso* 33 maintain the illusion that the poet-Pilgrim has indeed experienced a *visio* that would literally be beyond the limits of his *fantasia*, they ironically also emphasize the fictional nature of the theological and metaphysical framework in which such an experience is represented. In other words, although it may not be entirely accurate to say that the *Commedia*'s theology and metaphysics are false, because the experience described in Canto 33 is represented only as if to allow its readers access to the poet's attempt to remember and represent the Pilgrim's rapture, the subtending theology and metaphysics nevertheless function as fictions—perhaps *non falso errore* (*Purgatorio* 15.117)—which only offer hope for a better life in temporal deployments of these representations in projects of ethical self-reflection.

Notes

1. This paper is expanded from a version delivered at the 2011 Illinois Medieval Association conference in a session on "Virtue, Reason, and Will: The Heritage of Medieval Representations." I owe thanks to the following individuals for feedback on this paper in its various stages of development: Shannon Am-

- brose, Michael Bathgate, Aaron Canty, Peter Casarella, John Casey, Gerard Delahoussaye, William Fahrenbach, Molly Sturdevant, and Thomas Thorp.
2. Trans. Peter Kalkavage (Newburyport, MA, 2001), 28C-29D.
 3. There are seven direct addresses to the reader in *Paradiso* if we count two (lines 1-9 and lines 10-18) rather than one in this canto. The five other addresses in *Paradiso* are 5.109-14, 10.7-27, 13.1-21, 22.106-11, and 23.64-69.
 4. *Inferno* 26.125. Italian references to *La Divina Commedia* follow the Edizione Nazionale sponsored by the Società Dantesca Italiana, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan, Italy, 1966-67); this edition can be found online at both the Dartmouth and Princeton Dante Project websites. Translations are those of Robert M. Durling (Oxford, 1997-2010). The warning Ulysses failed to heed is mentioned at *Inferno* 26.108.
 5. See *Convivio* 1.1.1-7 for Dante's use of "bread of angels" as a metaphor for the knowledge (*scienza*) necessary for attaining our highest happiness (*ultima felicitade*). For a discussion of the metaphor's resonance with other invocations of liturgical practice in *Paradiso*, see W. J. O'Brien's "The Bread of Angels' in *Paradiso* II: A Liturgical Note," *Dante Studies* 97 (1979), 97-106.
 6. Concerning the link between the reference to the Argo in *Paradiso* 2 and Dante's allusion to it in *Paradiso* 33, see especially Piero Boitani, *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, UK, 1989), pp. 275-78 and Eugene M. Longen, "The Grammar of Apotheosis: Paradiso XXXIII, 94-99," *Dante Studies* 93 (1975), 209-214.
 7. Peter Dronke, "The Conclusion of Dante's *Commedia*," *Italian Studies* 49 (1994), 21-39 at 31 and 32; rpt. in *Sources of Inspiration: Studies in Literary Transformations, 400-1500* (Rome, 1997), pp. 131-155.
 8. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, 1992), p. 254.
 9. Joseph Mazzeo has pointed out that "whether or not Dante the man had a vision of God's essence in the mortal state is really a meaningless question. But that Dante as author of and character in the *Divine Comedy* claims and describes such a vision is beyond doubt" ("Dante and the Pauline Modes of Vision," *Harvard Theological Review* 30 [1957], 275-306 at 300-301; rpt. in *Structure and Thought in the Paradiso* [Ithaca, NY, 1958], pp. 84-110). When one accepts that whether Dante personally had such a vision is a meaningless question, then it is also possible to see that the distinction I have made above between the Pilgrim and the authorial persona of the *Commedia* is basically unnecessary: the poetic persona and the Pilgrim are artifacts of the same fiction.
 10. James T. Chiampi, "Dante's *Paradiso* from Number to Mysterium," *Dante Studies* 110 (1992), 255-278.
 11. Molly Morrison, "Looking at God: Imagery for the Divinity in Dante's

- Paradiso*,” *Forum Italicum* 35 (2001), 307-317.
12. Peter Dronke, “The Conclusion of Dante’s *Commedia*” and Francesco Tateo, “Il ‘punto’ della visione e una reminiscenza da Boezio,” *Questioni di poetica dantesca* (Bari, 1972).
 13. Edward Hagman, “Dante’s Vision of God: The End of the Itenerarium Mentis,” *Dante Studies* 106 (1988), 1-20.
 14. Peter Dronke, “The Conclusion of Dante’s *Commedia*” and Dronke, *Fabula: Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (1974; rpt. Leiden, 1985)], pp. 151-3.
 15. Marguerite Mills Chiarenza, “The Imageless Vision and Dante’s *Paradiso*,” *Dante Studies* 90 (1972), 77-91.
 16. Piero Boitani, “The Sibyl’s Leaves: Reading *Paradiso* XXXIII,” in *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, UK, 1989), pp. 223-307.
 17. Steven Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the “Commedia”* (Cambridge, UK, 1994); Raymond D. DiLorenzo, “Dante’s Saint Bernard and the Theology of Liberty in the *Commedia*,” in *Bernardus Magister*, ed. John R. Sommerfeldt, Cistercian Studies Series 135 (Kalamazoo, MI, 1992), pp. 497-515; John Guzzardo, “*Paradiso* XXXIII: St. Bernard’s Prayer,” *Italian Culture* 12 (1994), 45-57; Richard Kay, “Dante in Ecstasy: *Paradiso* 33 and Bernard of Clairvaux,” *Medieval Studies* 66 (2004), 183-212; Richard Kay, “Dante’s Empyrean and the Eye of God,” *Speculum* 78 (Jan. 2003), 37-65; Giorgio Petrocchi, “Dante e la mistica di san Bernardo,” in *Letteratura e critica: Studi in onore de Natalino Sapegno*, Vol. 1 (Rome, 1974), pp. 213-29.
 18. For a brief but useful survey of Dante’s theological sources, see Ammilacare Iannuci, “Dante’s Theological Canon in the *Commedia*,” *Italian Quarterly* 37 (2000), 51-56.
 19. Mazzeo’s “Dante and the Pauline Modes of Vision” offers a treatment that is more attentive than most to Dante’s generally innovative and synthetic approach to these sources.
 20. The *locus classicus* arguing for this interpretation is John Freccero’s “Dante’s Firm Foot and the Journey without a Guide,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 52 (1959), 245-281; rpt. in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA, 1986), pp. 29-54.
 21. “Dante and the Sin of Satan: Augustinian Patterns in *Inferno* XXXIV, 22-27,” *Quaderni d’italianistica* 4 (1983), 208-217 at 211.
 22. Detailed discussions of this simile can be found in Ronald B. Herzman and Gary W. Towsley, “Squaring the Circle: *Paradiso* 22 and the Poetics of Geometry,” *Traditio* 49 (1994), 95-125 and Robert Levine, “Squaring the Circle: Dante’s Solution,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 86 (1985), 280-284.

23. “[T]ra ’l punto e lo cerchio si 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.” [“Geometry moves between the point and the circle as between its beginning and its end; and both of these are antithetical to the certainty characteristic of this science, for the point cannot be measured at all, since it cannot be divided, and the circle cannot be measured precisely, since, being curved, it cannot be perfectly squared.”] Italian references to *Convivio* follow the Edizione Nazionale sponsored by the Società Dantesca Italiana, ed. Franca Brambilla Ageno (Florence, 1995); this edition can be found online at the Princeton Dante Project website. Translations are those of Christopher Ryan (Stanford, CA, 1989). It should also be remembered that Dante refers to the problem of squaring the circle in *Monarchia* 3.3.2.
24. “The Final Image: *Paradiso* XXXIII, 144,” *Modern Language Notes* 79 (1964), 14-27; rpt. in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 245-57. Although I think there are problems in some of the specific conclusions Freccero offers in this famous essay—e.g., concerning his emphasis on the physicality of the aspects of the revolutions that are described in the canto—his general line of interpretation seems right to me.
25. See especially Marguerite Mills Chiarenza’s discussion of this in “The Imageless Vision and Dante’s *Paradiso*.”
26. Boitani, *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature*, p. 236.
27. Concerning these symmetries, see Ahern’s discussion of the final term “stelle” at the end of each *cantica* in “Dante’s Last Word: The *Comedy* as a *Liber Coelestis*,” *Dante Studies* 102 (1984), 1-14.
28. “Binding the Book: Hermeneutics and Manuscript Production in *Paradiso* 33,” *PLMA* 97 (1982), 800-809 at 802.
29. “Binding the Book: Hermeneutics and Manuscript Production in *Paradiso* 33,” p. 804.
30. Albert Russell Ascoli’s recent *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge, 2008) provides a masterful analysis of Dante’s appeals to and transformations of a variety of traditional understandings of “authority.” My own claims about Dante’s role as an authority for his readers are much more limited, and, in this essay, I am primarily concerned with the ramifications of Dante’s practical deployment of metaphysics and theology in the theophantic moment of *Paradiso* 33.
31. I am deliberately taking certain liberties here by borrowing Dante’s invocation in *Paradiso* 24.64-66 of the definition of faith in the Vulgate’s version of Hebrews 11.1. I discuss the relationship between revelation and practical reasoning at greater length in “The Aporetic Ground of Revelation’s Authority in the *Divine Comedy* and Dante’s Demarcation and Defense of Philosophical

- Authority,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 26 (2010), 1-14.
32. “Forma sive modus tractandi est poeticus, fictivus, descriptivus, digressivus, transumptivus, et cum hoc diffinitivus, divisivus, probativus, improbativus, et exemplorum positivus” (§ 27). [“The form or manner of treatment is poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, and figurative; and further, it is definitive, analytical, probative, refutative, and exemplificative.”] The Latin reference and section number follows the *Testo critico della Societa’ Dantesca Italiana*, ed. Ermenegildo Pistelli (Florence, 1960). This edition can be found online at the Princeton Dante Project website. The translation is from *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1966).
33. “Queste parole di colore oscuro / vid’ iō scritte al sommo d’una porta, / per ch’io: ‘Maestro, il senso lor m’è duro.’” [“These words I saw written with dark color above the gate, and I said: ‘Master, their sense is hard for me.’”] See John Freccero’s discussion of this example in “Infernal Irony: The Gates of Hell,” *Modern Language Notes* 99 (1984), 769-786; rpt. in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, pp. 93-109.
34. “Io sentia d’ogne parte trarre guai / e non vedea persona che ’l facesse, / per ch’io tutto smarrito m’arrestai. / Cred’ iō ch’ei credette ch’io credesse / che tante voci uscisser, tra quei bronchi, / da gente che per noi si nascondesse. / Però disse ’l maestro: ‘Se tu tronchi / qualche fraschetta d’una d’este piante, / li pensier c’hai si faran tutti monchi’” (*Inferno* 13.22-27). [“I heard cries of woe on every side but saw no person uttering them, so that all dismayed I stood still. My belief is that he believed that I must believe that so many voices, among those thickets, came forth from people hidden from us. Therefore my master said: If you break off some little twig from one of these plants, the thought you have will all be cut off.”]. For a discussion of this example, see p. 139 of Teodolinda Barolini’s “Q: Does Dante Hope for Vergil’s Salvation? A: Why do We Care? for the Very Reason We Should not Ask the Question (Response to Mowbray Allan),” *Modern Language Notes* 105 (1990), 138-144; rpt. in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York, 2006), pp. 151-157. For a sustained discussion of Dante’s formal tactics for securing the reader’s suspension of disbelief, also see Barolini’s *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*.
35. “Ma perché tanto sovra mia veduta / vostra parola disiata vola, / che più la perde quanto più s’aiuta?” [“But why does your speech, so much desired, fly so far above my sight that the more my sight strives, the more it loses it?”]. For a discussion of this example, see p. 466 in Lee W. Patterson’s “‘Rapt With Pleasance’: Vision and Narration in the Epic,” *ELH* 48 (1981), 455-475.
36. “[P]er che, s’ i’ mi tacea, me non riprendo / da li miei dubbi d’un modo sospinto, / poi ch’ era necessario, né commendo.” [“[T]herefore if I was silent, urged in equal measure by my two doubts, I do not reproach myself, since it

was necessary, nor do I condemn myself.”]

37. “E avvegna ch’io fossi al dubbiar mio / li quasi vetro a lo color ch’el veste,
/ tempo aspettar tacendo non patio, / ma de la bocca: ‘Che cose son queste?’
/ mi pinse con la forza del suo peso, / per ch’io di coruscar vidi gran feste.”
[“And although, up there, I was to my doubt like glass to the color beneath, it
brooked no waiting in silence, but from my mouth: ‘What things are these?’
it impelled with all its force, whereat I saw great rejoicings flash forth.”]
38. “E io a lui: ‘I’ me son un che, quando / Amor mi spira, noto, e a quell modo
/ ch’e’ ditta dentro vo significando.” [“And I to him: ‘I in myself am the one
who, when Love breathes within me, take note, and to that measure which he
dictates within, I go signifying.”]
39. “O buono Appollo, a l’ultimo lavoro / fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso / come
dimandi a dar l’amato alloro.” [“O good Apollo, for this last labor make me
such a vessel of your power as you require to bestow the beloved laurel.”]
40. Dante hints that this might be the case in suggesting in *Paradiso* 3.17-18 that
the Pilgrim’s vision in the sphere of the Moon caused him to fall “a l’error
contrario corsi / a quell ch’ accese amor tra l’omo e ’l fonte” [“into the error
contrary to the one that kindled love between the man and the fountain”]. The
Pilgrim’s error, of course, is the mirror image (the contrary) of that of Narcissus.
But insofar as the reader is the one who is transfixed in the task of interpret-
ing Dante’s poem, it seems to me an open question whether the fascination is
narcissistic or of the “contrary” sort.
41. It is, of course, the usual strategy to avoid the notion that this raises the ques-
tion by insisting that Cato’s death at his own hands allows him to be read
typologically as a Christ-figure since, otherwise, his presence in Purgatory
also contradicts the rules established in *Inferno* 13 for the sin of suicide. Be
that as it may, the response to the Pilgrim’s own doubts about the possibility
of salvation for pagans in the Eagle’s discussion of the salvation of Trajan and
Ripheus in *Paradiso* 20 is not intrinsically satisfying. Rather, I am persuaded
that Barolini is correct in arguing that the point of Dante offering salvation
to Cato, Trajan, and Ripheus is not to defend a particular doctrine of implicit
faith but to make more palpable and significant the narrative role of Virgil. See
Barolini’s “Q: Does Dante Hope for Vergil’s Salvation? A: Why do We Care?
for the Very Reason We Should not Ask the Question (Response to Mowbray
Allan),” as well as her *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy*
(Princeton, 1984), pp. 254-56.
42. I do not want to argue that Dante would hesitate to affirm the central doctrines
of Christianity, however mysterious they may be. However, it is significant
that, when his Pilgrim first sees Ulysses in the twin flame with Diomedes,
he must grab “un ronchion” [“a projection”] to prevent himself from falling
into the flame himself (*Inferno* 26.44). In other words, even though I believe

that Dante's *Commedia* fundamentally affirms a Roman Catholic worldview, I nevertheless think that it offers itself as a poetic reflection in a way that destabilizes the role of doctrine in its affirmation of this world view.

43. "Introduction to *Paradiso*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 2nd ed., ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, UK, 2007), pp. 107-124 at 119.
44. Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, "Closure in Paradise: Dante Outsings Aquinas," *Modern Language Notes* 115 (2000), 1-12 at 5.
45. See, for instance, "Autobiography and Allegory" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, pp. 161-180.
46. Dante refers to the *Commedia* as a "veil" in two of the poem's direct addresses to the reader: *Inferno* 9.61-63 and *Purgatorio* 8.19-21.
47. For a persuasive discussion—with which my own comments above are only slightly at odds—of reasons for reading the *Commedia* in light of the tradition of vision literature, see Teodolinda Barolini, "'Why Did Dante Write the *Commedia*?' or the Vision Thing," *Dante Studies* 111 (1993), 1-8.
48. Also see *Convivio* 4.17.9-11 concerning the distinction between the relative superiority of the contemplative life to the active life. Whatever one thinks about arguments concerning possible palinodes of the *Convivio* in the *Commedia*, the passage above suggests at least a rough agreement between these texts' conceptions of the relationship between the contemplative and the active life. For that matter, so, too, does Dante's *Monarchia* insist in its culminating chapter that "Duos igitur fines providentia illa inenarrabilis homini proposuit intendendos: beatitudinem scilicet huius vite, que, in operatione proprie virtutis consistit et per terrestrem paradysum figuratur; et beatitudinem vite eterne, que consistit in fruitione divini aspectus ad quam propria virtus ascendere non potest, nisi lumine divino adiuta, que per paradysum celestem intelligi datur." ["Ineffable providence has thus set before us two goals to aim at: i.e., happiness in this life, which consists in the exercise of our own powers and is figured in the earthly paradise; and happiness in the eternal life, which consists in the enjoyment of the vision of God (to which our own powers cannot raise us except with the help of God's light)."] Latin and translation both from Prue Shaw's edition (Cambridge, UK, 1995).