



# Dante: Into the Real

Many critics, as well as writers of more popular articles, books, and blog posts, had the life-changing experience of being introduced to Dante's *Comedy* for the first time as adults, perhaps in a college literature class and usually beginning with the *Inferno* in one of the recent translations with their abundant scholarly footnotes. My introduction was quite different: first, because it was not to the *Inferno*; second because it was not within an academic context but rather one suffused by both lived Catholicism and the natural world of God's creation; and finally because I was four years old.

I will return to that introduction in a bit, but first I would like to turn to a different one: my first encounter with Dante criticism. Fortunately, it was through Peter Hawkins at Yale, surely one of the most insightful and enthusiastic Dantisti of all time, the model of what a critic should be: as Hans Urs von Balthasar says, one who points to and illuminates what the artist has done. Not everyone is a Hawkins, however. Over time, I read many critics, a large subset of whom were oddly jarring due to their notions that Dante needed to be divested of his faith, and perhaps fitted under some overarching theory, despite postmodernism's ostensible rejection of "metanarratives". His understanding of reality is supposedly "foreign" to our own ("Speak for yourself", I often scrawled in margins). I found it hard to disagree with John Steinbeck that "the critic has no choice but to make over the victim of his attention into something the size and shape of himself"<sup>1</sup>. Many did indeed shed light on the *Comedy*; still, going from them back to Dante himself and his full Catholicism was like taking a flashlight out into the noonday sun—into the Real.

## Dante and Some Critics

A college student once began a paper

with the sentence, "Descartes would have been a great philosopher had he not been stuck in the quagmire of Cartesian Dualism." Similarly, rather than seeing Dante's Christocentric, Trinitarian faith as the source and summit of his work, all too often the notion among certain critics is that he was a great poet, but shackled by having been born when Catholicism was ascendent in the European West (some even see Dante as a subversive, rebellious dissident who disingenuously paid lip service to the Church and its doctrines while seeking to undermine them). Eminent critic John Freccero said, "the duality sensed by many" is due to Dante's theology being written for his contemporaries and thus being seen as "antiquated", and his 1965 dictum that "the duality of form and content . . . is the fundamental problem to which critics in our day have directed their attention"<sup>2</sup> has expanded to include many other dualities, particularly various iterations of the tension between unity and difference.

One way to deal with difference is to deny it; the form and content are one with each other, and they merely tell a story that itself can be merged without distinction into mystical experience, transcending all religions. Dante's experience is seen as a divinization of the self, concomitant with the self-awakening of the "godhead" in him: the person vanishes into God and vice versa. Dante's Beatific Vision, however, was an encounter with the face of Christ and a dramatic integration into the life and love of the Trinity<sup>3</sup> after a series of encounters with Christ's witnesses, the saints. He remained himself, fully creature, and God remained true God. The finite world is not dissolved as illusion: in Dante's faith the finitude of all created beings is radically positive; creation is understood sacramentally;<sup>4</sup> the physical is interpenetrated with the spiritual; and to underscore the point, Dante reminds us that Mary is physically

present in heaven.<sup>5</sup> It is salient to remember that "Nirvana" comes from a word meaning "extinguish"; the point of the Beatific Vision is to enter into *communion* with God, as in marriage ("a union that does not dissolve but rather depends upon the distinction of the two elements"<sup>6</sup>), not as a drop of water vanishing into the sea.

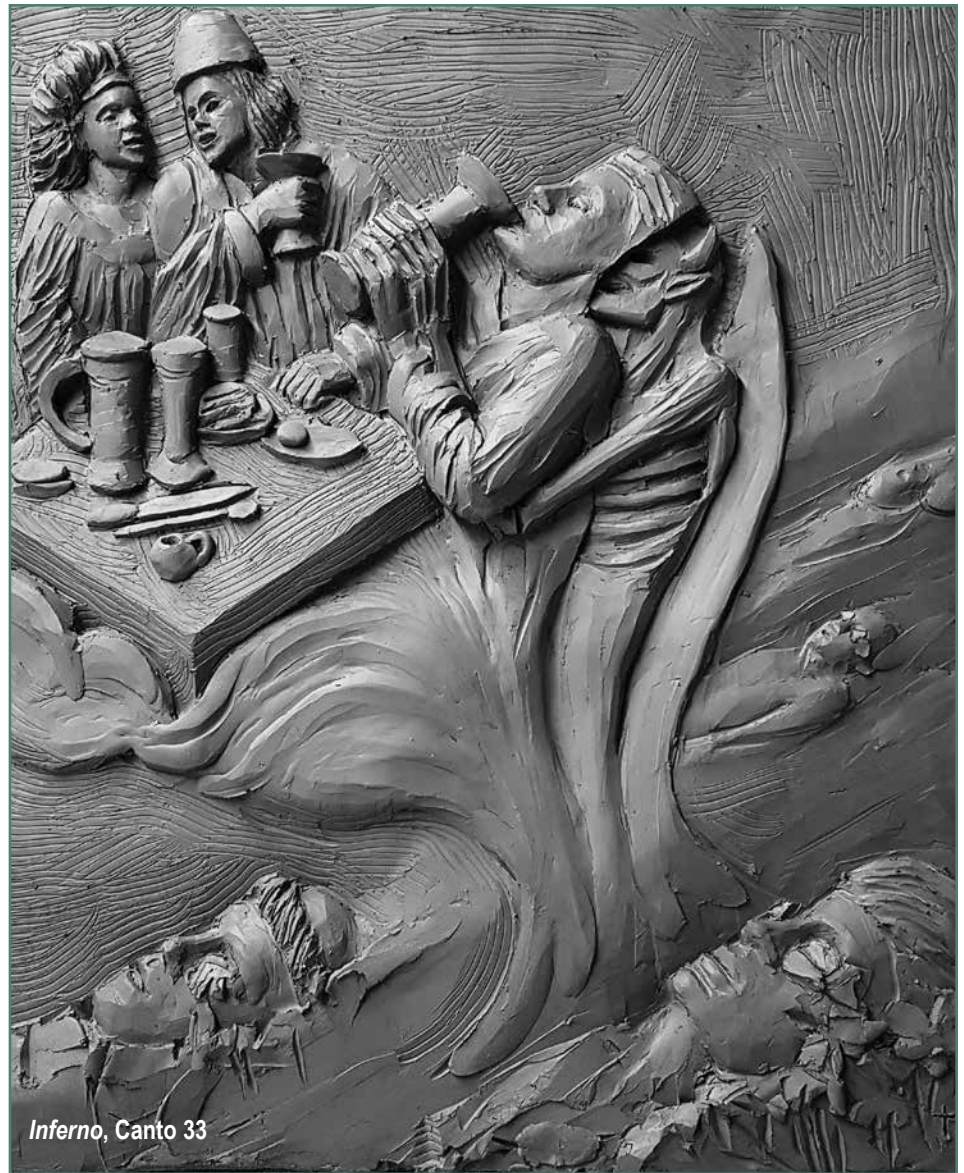
The more common response is to deny unity by stressing difference; the modernist version, as noted above, splits the religious *content* from the poetic *form*. On the one hand, one can accept the former as simply Dante's *private experience*, which can be further parsed. Regarding the "experience", his subjective state is seen as the origin of the poem and its vision; it correlates to something that cannot be expressed, and we suspend our disbelief *because* we cannot know it. This illustrates the non-Catholic conception of faith and reason as irreconcilable; faith is not a form of knowledge, and reason is truncated to be closed to transcendence and locked into a kind of calculation alone. It imagines Dante's faith as something devoid of true communicable content, as if God had never revealed himself and had no claim on us. Regarding the "private", the Beatific Vision is misunderstood as the solitary experience of a lone individual, when it is instead a *corporate* event in the very specific sense that the Church understands that word: the "both/and" sense of a person as *an-individual-in-community*, always *both* himself or herself *and* a living member of the Church as the Body of Christ—and this as *constitutively true of the human person* rather than an expression of an extrinsic, mechanical "coupling" of the individual and the social group. The poem is profoundly liturgical (etymologically, a "public work") in its irreducible and reciprocal form and content, and at the end, Dante stands in the center of the great Rose of the Empyrean in which the communion of saints, who all

fold their hands and join in prayer for him, forever gazes in love upon God. He loses neither his uniqueness as himself, nor his place in the Mystical Body.

On the other hand, one might dismiss the religious *content* entirely and simply relish the poetic *form*, parsing the minutiae of references, influences, and recurring themes. These can be fruitful, enlightening, and enjoyable additions to our reading of the poem, and the most skeptical reader would not be “offended”. However, they are ultimately not just insufficient, but falsifying. While there is no denying that anyone of any faith or no faith can fruitfully read and write about Dante, there is in the end no “faith-neutral” way to grasp the poem truly.<sup>7</sup> The Trinitarian fact of creation/incarnation/redemption is not one possibility among many to be considered, an extrinsic add-on that can be cast off without changing—or gutting—the meaning, but a claim about an historical actuality that restructures *everything*. It is Christ who catches up being and becoming, unity and difference; Christ is the *Logos*, the reason for all that is. To separate and then discard the religious “content” would be to throw out the baby, bathwater, and the mother all in one.

Postmodernist critics go further, shifting the ground from what they saw as the undecidable form-content argument and stressing “difference” itself in all its aspects. They write about Dante as “one of us” in the sense of being an anticipator of today’s “hermeneutics of suspicion.”<sup>8</sup> Paths run through the whole panoply of postmodern schools of thought, and the impression is that of the asymptotic “ever learning, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth”<sup>9</sup>. However, it is not indeterminant tensions (between revealing being and disguising it, between the sayable and the unsayable, etc.) that Dante wishes to maintain, but wonder and openness in the face of the deep mystery of things. This is best safeguarded by the Catholic metaphysics of gift and love from Scripture, the Patristic Fathers, and up through Ferdinand Ulrich, Balthasar, and others writing today rooted in Aquinas’s relationship between being and beings, and the goodness and autonomy of creation with its gift of secondary causality in light of the generosity of God.

I am not unsympathetic to those attentive to “difference”; they correctly divine that rather than an identifying mysticism there is a “rupture”, a disanalogy underlying every one of Dante’s analogies. As the Fourth Lateran Council said, whatever the



similarities between the creature and God, the differences are ever greater. But the similarities cannot be ignored; any rupture must be embraced within a dramatic notion of truth, within the return to the “ever greater” God. The choice to see modernist form *versus* content, or the postmodern rupture *versus* unity, is to privilege antagonistic oppositions over the ultimate reciprocity of union and difference which is the image and likeness of the unity-in-distinction of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and is to already make a specific ontological decision about the meaning of “unity” and “wholeness”.

We will return to that wholeness, but here will merely remark that Dante was not stuck in a quagmire of medieval Catholicism. In the end, actually entering into the *Comedy* makes it impossible to doubt that Dante understood and saw as foundational the ontological truth of the cosmos, that it was created as gift by a loving God and

permeated by the *Logos*; and he believed in the institution and teachings of the Church (even while consigning a number of its practitioners to hell).

As Balthasar said,

It would be ludicrous to say that Dante is indeed a great poet but “still” bound by the dogma of the Middle Ages or of Catholicism in general: as a poet he can be interpreted only from the center of this dogma; he identifies himself existentially with it, plunges his inspiration into its waters in order to receive that same inspiration anew from it.<sup>10</sup>

**“It is better for you to take another path”<sup>11</sup>**

To return to my own path to Dante, my mother owned a very large and very old folio of the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*. It was almost as big as I was, and so heavy that my father had to lift it onto my lap.

It had dozens of full-page, tissue-covered etchings by Gustave Dore, and they entranced me for hours on rainy days. I was enchanted by the details of trees growing in rocky clefts, of forest glades, of reeds and vines and birds. Other etchings, such as an angel hovering over a fleeing serpent, or God as a point of light with encircling orders of angels, were like icons, revealing the transcendent behind and through the natural.

The images of nature and light were all familiar to me—in a serendipitous juxtaposition, at the same time I discovered Dante, we moved to a house on the ocean, not far from a reeded marsh, and I spent many hours surrounded by beauty—wandering far out at low tide, finding starfish and spiraling moon shells, watching tadpoles in the marsh, climbing the willow tree in the yard, making hiding places among the lilac bushes, birch trees, and the medieval looking twelve-foot tall stone wall that ran the length of the property. I could see the sea and sky outside my window, and they were completely different every hour, every day, every season. I was mesmerized by sparkles (one of Dante’s favorite words!) on the water—the play of light when the sun or moon made a path on the sea.

After I learned to read, Dante’s sparkling lights and his many references to stars and oceans, to birds and bees and flowers, magnified the wonder I felt at my surroundings, for in the eyes of a child, all created things are harbingers of Beauty, everything is lit up from within and seems to be something astonishing in itself as well as the bearer of some wonderful message from beyond itself.

Later I learned to sail and to understand celestial navigation. *Purgatorio* begins, “To course over better waters the little boat of my genius now raises her sails” and in Canto II of *Paradiso* Dante speaks of moving into the open sea; out of sight of land, one navigates by the stars. Dante invents new constellations, sees spiritual meaning in the equinoctial junctures, and tells us that “the heavens call to you and circle about you, displaying to you their eternal splendors”. While some readers prefer to “skip over all that astronomy stuff”<sup>12</sup>, some of which is quite complex, my love of Dante and my

love of the stars fed each other; the stars, the ocean, and especially the *practice* of navigation—the science and the art—were concrete realities to me, both natural and transnatural, both symbols and signs of the presence of God. There are those celestial navigators who know the face of the sea, the night sky, the stars, as we know the face

of a “critical theory” about Dante that negates his Catholicism.

I don’t mean to say that I learned nothing from the critics when I finally studied Dante in school. It just seemed that rather than setting faith, private experience, or theology in opposition to reason, corporate phenomena, or poetry, rather than denying either unity or difference, rather than holding them both in an uneasy tension, someone who shared Dante’s lived faith might ask, “What if . . . ?”

What if the canticles were familiar not just because they have recognizable tropes from Greek mythology or apparent affinities with postmodern skepticism, but because of the resemblance of creation, of all reality, with the form of Christ, and the human heart’s affinity, in its deepest core, with the truth, beauty, and goodness of the Marian fiat and the Magnificat?

What if Dante’s journey through hell, purgatory and paradise wasn’t a rhetorical device, but an icon of the actual journey of confession, repentance, and growing grace of sanctification that the Church offers?

What if we did not reduce the poem to simply the epistemological or linguistic or Hegelian-Heideggerian philosophical level, but accepted the full ontological truth it so luminously portrays: creation as the gift of being/love, which are the metaphysical/theological two sides of one reality?

What if Dante is seen not in the light of postmodernism’s unlimited potentiality but of actuality; if he were not, in Paul Claudel’s words, the poet of “dreams, illusions, or ideas”, but of “sacred reality”?<sup>14</sup>

What if the Beatific Vision did not represent a vanishing into a godhead, or the apophatic inability to describe an indescribable private experience, or Levinas’s “wholly negative encounter with the wholly other”<sup>15</sup>, or the iconoclastic destruction of all images, or a “falling back”, but an incorporation into the inner life of the Trinity?

What if the true hero and protagonist of the poem was not Dante but the Triune God (a both/and of unity and difference, neither dividing the substance nor confounding the Persons), as the “meta-hermeneutical” reality that gives meaning and unity to the



of our beloved; so it was with Dante. He wrote from inside an “ec-centric” Catholic cosmos, that is, to borrow from Benedict XVI, not a closed circle but open parabola with the center of focus lying outside itself.<sup>13</sup>

Along with God’s creation was the living culture of the Catholic faith, including service to others, and the older Mass, the very hymns from the breviary, prayers, the words of the psalms, the sacraments of baptism and confession and the Eucharist, that form the scaffolding, breath, and life blood of the *Comedy*. With its descent into hell and resurrection into paradise it has the form of the Christian salvation story; the *Purgatorio*, with its recollection of the *asperges* in Canto I, its confession, liturgical hymns, and the descent of the iconic Beatrice, has the form of the Mass. Of the *Paradiso* Balthasar says it “ultimately . . . has a Marian form”. Knowing all these things from the inside, from childhood, from practice, one could never even imag-

poem, that overcomes various dualistic readings, and secures the inseparability of form and content?

In a nutshell, *pace* certain critics, the *Comedy* cannot be bifurcated. What D. C. Schindler says of Christianity can be said of Dante's poem as well:

. . . we [must] realize the critical significance of understanding Christianity as a *logos*. It is just this that makes Christianity comprehensive, or, we could say, truly catholic (*kata-holon*, in accordance with the whole): *logos*, as we said, is simultaneously subjective and objective, which means it indicates not only a discrete, explicit intelligible content, but also at the same time the implicit, because utterly pervasive, logic or form in which that content is expressed.<sup>16</sup>

Nor can the poem, as Ralph McInerney once said, otherwise be "interpreted to a fare-thee-well", open to any and all readings, with no possibility of truth in a Nietzschean all-we-have-is-interpretations manner;<sup>17</sup> there can be no way to read Dante's poem that is not catholic ("according to the whole"). Finally, it is not a metanarrative—a locked-in, circumscribed totality with "all the answers" that some critics see Catholic interpretations championing. Like Christianity itself, the poem is a specific *kind* of whole, that is, Benedict XVI's open parabola, both comprehensive and open to what lies beyond: to God, who is our center, and who can be known truly (*contra* the postmoderns), though never exhaustively.

### The Real

If I may return to sailing as both reality and metaphor, from my first time at the helm, to borrow from Elizabeth of the Trinity, "the endless horizon fascinated my spirit".<sup>18</sup> To others it may just appear to be a featureless line, but it was for me one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. It is unique in the world's geography; first, as the meeting place of sea and sky, it depends on the unity and relation of those two irreducible realities, one bounded, one boundless (this is why the human person, the meeting place of the material and immaterial, the physical and the spiritual, was a "horizon" for St. Thomas). Second, its very existence depends on something beyond itself, whose light is at the same time present within it—the sun—as God transcends our "totality" while his love is immanently

present within it. And finally, unlike other geographical realities like mountains and lakes, the horizon *depends on us*; it is relative to where the ship is at any given moment and opens as it moves forward. Unlike the event horizon of a black hole that annihilates difference, the sailor's horizon is the paradigmatic worldly example of the ever-opening, ever-deeper mystery of the Catholic "whole", of the Church's teachings as apertures into inexhaustible mystery, into (to borrow a sailing term) unfathomable truth, beauty, goodness, and love.

In the end, one does not "play" sailing as one "plays" other pastimes; the sailor must be a disciple—discipline himself—to the actuality of wind, currents, tides, underwater hazards, the sun and stars, his community (the crew, past navigators) and, yes, sailing theory (whether known consciously or not), that is, to *reality* in its fullness, not to ideas alone. If one desires to truly understand Dante, one must become a disciple of Christ: enter into and engage God's creation, the love of neighbor, the works of mercy, and the sacraments. Dante makes it clear in *Paradiso* XIV:106–8 that this is his own hermeneutical principle; while we ask authors not merely to *tell* but to *show*, Dante goes further, into the real, when he tells his reader that he will see for himself when he *takes up his cross and follows Christ*.

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### References

1. John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 60.
2. *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Freccero (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 1. Freccero himself objected to a simplistic bifurcation of the poem.
3. And the Trinity is as deep as reality gets; there is no Oneness "behind" the Threeness.
4. *Paradiso* I:1–3.
5. *Paradiso* XXV:127–29.
6. Stratford Caldecott, *The Power of the*

*Ring* (Chestnut Ridge, N.J.: Crossroad Publishing, 2012), p. 89.

7. This should be self-evident. The notion of "neutrality", whether regarding the public sphere or an academic discipline or the topic under consideration, itself contains metaphysical presuppositions, usually well-hidden.

8. . . which purports to decode and unmask, but in reality does not reach the deepest levels. "The unmasking, though it seems at least to penetrate below the surface appearances, is in reality therefore only a deceptive imitation of radical depth." D. C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* [University of Notre Dame Press], p. 65.

9. 2 Timothy 3:7.

10. *Glory of the Lord* III, 51–52. Henri De Lubac said that the revealed truths are "the very Person of the Redeemer . . . in this Person of Christ, . . . the reality of charity and the truth of dogma are indissolubly united."

11. *Inferno* I:91, author's translation.

12. Some critics have written a great deal about the "astronomy stuff", and dealing with them would require a different article. They reference appearance and being, finite and infinite, time and eternity, but Catholic theologians who could shed light on the reciprocal relations of these, and what light the Incarnation reveals, are too often passed over, as is the active role of the navigator.

13. *Dogma and Preaching* (2nd. Ed. Ignatius Press, 2011), p. 386.

14. Paul Claudel, "Religion and the Artist: Introduction to a Poem on Dante," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1995).

15. D. C. Schindler, "Restlessness as an Image of God," *Communio* 34 (Summer 2007): 281.

16. D. C. Schindler, "Beauty and the Holiness of Mind" in *Being Holy in the World: Theology and Culture in the Thought of D. L. Schindler*, eds. Nicholas J. Healy Jr. and D. C. Schindler, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), p. 13.

17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Press, 1968), pp. 267, 305.

18. Letter to Maria Luisa Maurel, in Gli Scritti, p. 10, quoted in Giovanna Della Croce, *Elizabeth of the Trinity: A Life of Praise to God* (Bedford, N.H.: Sophia Institute Press, 2016), p. 14.