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## AQUINAS' THREE LEVELS OF DIVINE PREDICATION IN DANTE'S *PARADISO*

Eileen Sweeney

John Freccero, in his introduction to John Ciardi's translation of the *Paradiso*, characterizes the poem as "an accommodation, a compromise short of silence. . . .<sup>1</sup> Because Dante's experience is outside language, Dante the poet must accomplish the impossible: he must *represent* in *poetry* (i.e. language) an experience which is unmediated by language. According to Freccero, the attempt in the *Paradiso* to create non-representational, non-referring art, is of particular interest to the modern reader, who does not believe in Paradise. Dante, however, did believe in Paradise and did try to *represent* it. His imitation of his journey, then, must *refer*, but it must refer to a reality which is beyond the referential power of language. How is such an enterprise possible?

Dante's attempt to represent the unrepresentable is possible to the degree that any language, poetic or theological, may be said to speak truly of God. The difficulty of creating a poem that retells Dante's journey and vision is, in effect, the very same difficulty that confronts philosophers and theologians trying to construct a language that may refer to God. For the medieval theologian, our language must try to say what God is, but it cannot completely represent Him. Language is, in principle, inadequate to this task. But the theologian must try, like Dante, both to understand God and to communicate this understanding, ever knowing that he must fail. Since this problem was common to Dante and to medieval theologians, it is helpful to study the language of God used in the *Paradiso* in relation to medieval theories of theological language. The way in which Dante alters the language and images used to refer to God in the *Paradiso* to reflect different stages in the Pilgrim's understanding of the God he is journeying toward, can be correlated with St. Thomas Aquinas' three levels of divine predication: affirmative, negative, and supereminent predication.<sup>3</sup>

Although Thomas' theory of ideological language is helpful in understanding some of the difficulties of the poem, my investigation will not focus on the

question of whether Dante was a Thomist. Instead I will examine one example of how Dante has woven a strand of medieval tradition into the *Commedia*. This three-fold structure, Thomas' three levels of divine predication is one *topos* through which we can view the stages of the Pilgrim's journey to God. Dante, seen in this light, gives the complicated problem of theological language new life and impression by making it work with the actual journey of the pilgrim to his home in God through Christ.

This reading of Dante addresses a problem present in recent Dante scholarship. The literature that deals with the sense in which the *Paradiso* represents Dante's version is divided on this issue; some critics focus exclusively on either the success or the failure of the poem to retell the story accurately. John Denis Costa's view is perhaps the most extreme. He argues that Dante felt that his poetic imitation of the Pilgrim's journey was a complete success. Dante was for Costa, a "Christian gnostic" who adheres to a specifically Christian theory of poetry. In Costa's view, Dante believed that his "trope can be an accurate, effective expression of divine mystery."<sup>4</sup> John Leavey, on the other hand, argues that Dante's trope is and must be in principle a failure.<sup>5</sup> He uses Derrida's concept of "differance" to explain the paradoxes of language that mark the cantos of the *Paradiso*. If the signified were wholly present, he claims, there would be no need for the mediation of language which always defers and temporalizes presence. He implies that "differance," the chasm between sign and signified, makes impossible the ultimate signification of Presence, that of God. Costa's and Leavey's opposing views of the poem are, when placed in the context of theological language, analogous to completely positive and negative theologies. Costa, even though he is unsympathetic to Dante's project, implies that since Dante has written his poem, Dante must have believed it to be a straightforward, rational affirmation of God's nature. Leavey, on the other hand, more sensitive to the paradoxes of language, sees the poem as a necessary failure and, therefore, as a *misrepresentation* of God, just as the negative theologian holds that all affirmations of God must misrepresent Him.

Neither of these views does justice to Dante's poem. For, if the poem fails absolutely to refer to that wholly present yet transcendent reality, Dante should have remained silent. If the poem claims to succeed, Dante has contradicted the transcendent nature of God whom he concedes to be beyond language and reason. Dante takes full account of the paradox within which his poem must speak. He continually draws attention to the failure of language to capture what he has experienced. He constantly points outside the poem by drawing attention to the fact that the experience is beyond the poem. The poem begins and ends with expressions of its failure. In the last lines of the poem, Dante

laments that "the power of high fantasy fails," (All'alta fantasia qui manco possa").<sup>6</sup> Equally, at the beginning of the *Paradiso*, Dante tells his reader that "[t]he passing beyond humanity cannot be set forth in words." (I, 70-71) ("Transumanar significar per verba / non si poria.") Dante continues, "Let the example suffice therefore, for him to whom grace reserves the experience." (I, 71-72) ("[P]erò l'esempio basti / a cui esperienza grazia serba.") Dante's "example" may be seen to "suffice" by looking at the poem in light of Aquinas' theory of theological language, showing that Costa's "positive" view and Leavey's "negative" view of Dante's representation are incomplete explanations of his project. Neither a purely negative nor a purely positive theology is sufficient by itself. Like Aquinas, Dante combines these two views, placing them in dialectical opposition to each other, pointing to the resolution of the contradiction on a third level. In the poem, the "resolution" is the direct experience of God in the beatific vision, an experience that is outside the poem. I will begin by giving a brief explanation of Aquinas' three levels of divine predication, then I will show how these levels are reflected in the movement of the poem.

### I.

In question seven of the *Questiones disputae de potentia* Thomas asks whether or not names predicated of God signify the divine substance. Thomas repeats Pseudo-Dionysius' objection that no names signify what God is because God's effects (His creation and operation in the world) are all we know of Him. They do not accurately express God, their cause. When man generates man, the effect, the new life *does* adequately represent its cause. So the effect may *univocally* be called human just as its cause is called human. This, however, is not the case with God and His effects. Creatures are imperfect and finite; God is not.<sup>7</sup> Whatever perfections exist in God exist in Him simply and absolutely. Our ways of speaking and signifying will never be able to express the unity and simplicity of these perfections in God and will always represent what He is imperfectly. We come to know God through His Creation which does not possess these perfections absolutely or wholly, but in diverse and imperfect ways.

Pseudo-Dionysius concludes that all names are predicated of God *equivocally*. There is for him a radical difference in the meaning of 'wise,' for example, when applied to both God and His creatures. Thomas finds, on the other hand, that names are predicated of God analogically. God possesses things like goodness and being in a way proper to His Being; creatures possess God's goodness, wisdom, life, etc. in a way proper to their being. But the

goodness, wisdom, and life in man or creation are not completely unrelated to God's possession of these perfections because the creature receives as much of these perfections as it possesses *from God*. So our names for God express what He is *analogically*— not *equivocally*. God is both perfect possessor and *source* of these perfections; the creature participates in these perfections in a creaturely (which is to say, imperfect) way. (*ODP*, q.2, a.11)

Thomas appropriates Pseudo-Dionysius' "three-fold way" of predicating names of God, having added that the relationship is "analogical" rather than "equivocal" when we transfer names proper to the effect (creation) to the cause (God).

Et ideo secundum doctrinam Dionysii tripliciter ista de Deo dicuntur. Primo quidem affirmative, ut dicimus Deus est sapiens; quod quidem de eo oportet dicere propter fleuntis: quia tamen non est in Deo sapientia qualem nos intelligimus et nominamus, potest vere negari, ut dicatur, Deus non est sapiens. Rursum quia sapientia non negatur de Deo quia ipse deficiat a sapientia, sed quia supereminetius est in ipso quam dicatur aut intelligatur, ideo oportet dicere quod Deus sit supersapiens. Et sic per istum triplicem modum loquendi secundum quem dicitur Deus sapiens, perfecte Dionysius dat intelligere qualiter ista Deo attribuantur. (*OPD*, q.7, a.5, ad.2)

First, we may say, for example, that God is wise. What it is to be wise we have come to understand from God's creation, and because He is the source of everything in His creation we may affirm it of Him. However, because we understand wisdom from the limited wisdom of created things, we must say that God is not wise, since He is not wise as creatures are wise. Moreover, our very way of knowing and predicating makes a distinction between subject and predicated, between the possessor and the property possessed. But in God no such separation exists between His Being and His wisdom, for example. Thus, because of the way we know and name, we must negate any affirmative statements made about God.

However, Thomas, following Pseudo-Dionysius, goes on to say that we do not mean by saying "God is not wise" that God has any deficiency, any *lack* of wisdom. For Thomas and Pseudo-Dionysius the simple negation "God is not wise" is not sufficient to express what we mean without further interpretation. Thomas further argues that simple negations purport to say what God is in a way our language cannot. All negative statements are based on an affirmation. Since we cannot simply or flatly affirm anything of God, neither can we simply negate anything of God. (*ODP*, q.7, a.5) We negate wisdom of God because

we want to say that wisdom exists in God "supereminently," that is, in a way over and above any possession of wisdom on the part of a creature. So we must then say that God has or is *supersapiens*.

However, the synthesis attained by the union of the affirmative and negative predication in the statement that God is *supersapiens* is imperfect. When we say that God is *supersapiens*, we cannot quite know what that means. Our language is trying to go beyond what it can legitimately signify. We mean some sort of excess of wisdom, a kind of excess and supereminence can have no real meaning except that of pointing beyond and above. The content of these expressions is that of hope, a looking ahead towards completeness. In this way they both tell us *less* and give us *more hope* than the negation alone can.

Though the third step can never capture its object, for Thomas (and Dante) this three-fold structure still manages to represent more accurately what we can know about God than a simply positive or negative theology can. Creation and creator are neither completely alike nor completely unlike each other; they are *both* like and unlike; they can only be metaphorically or analogically (rather than univocally or equivocally) identified.

## II.

Canto's X-XIII affirm that God is reflected in the world and emphasize the ability of man's reason to understand God from His creation. The view of human reason and language in these cantos corresponds to Aquinas's affirmative level of predication. Dante chooses the sphere of the Sun to affirm God's presence and knowability in the world. The sun, because it is the most apt earthly metaphor for God, is a symbol of the extent to which man can understand God and His relationship to the world.

The imagery that dominates these cantos is natural imagery — the sun and plants, the order of the stars in the universe. They are reflections of Divine order and reason. Insofar as these *can* be reflections of their Creator, they are praised and cherished. Dante praises creation for the worth given it by its Creator: "The greatest minister of nature, which stamps the world with heavenly worth. . . ." (X, 28-29) ("Lo ministro maggior della natura / che del valor del ciel lo mondo imprenta. . . .") Dante asks the reader to look to the workings of the heavens to have a foretaste of the glory and art of the master. (X, 22-23) ("Or ti riman, lettore, sovra 'l tuo banco, / dietro pensando a ciò che se si preliba.") Canto XIII begins with the instruction to the reader to imagine the orderly movements of the stars in the heavens so that we may have an idea of the *real* constellation Dante experienced. (XIII, 19-21) (" . . . e avrà quasi

*l'ombra della vera / costellazione e della doppia danza / che circolava il punto dov'io era. . . .*")

God as artist and creator is another dominant theme of these cantos. God's creation is ordered to reflect His reason and wisdom. To Dante the most magnificent reflection of this order is in the heavens. The theologian and astronomer are studying the same thing, the reflection of order and rationality in the created world. The link between theology with astronomy may seem strange to us, but it is a familiar association for the medieval mind. Kenelm Foster explains that here:

. . . the celebration of Christian dogma is at once related as closely as possible to the physical world. Theology combines with astronomy. The intricately ordered motions of the heavenly bodies are shown as the outward sign of a pre-existing order in the Creator, which alone renders them intelligible."<sup>8</sup>

In these cantos, Dante tells us that, "it is Beatrice who leads"; it is theology that leads us in understanding God's revelation of Himself in the order of the earth and heavens. (X, 37) ("È Beatrice quella che sí scorge. . . .")

The medieval view of God as artist and creator is different from the God presented in 18th century arguments for God's existence from design. That God sets up the laws of nature and then leaves the world to run on its own. Here God takes pleasure in His work and He ". . . so loves it in His heart that His eye never leaves it." (X, 11-12) (" . . . a sè l'ama, / tanto che mai da lei occhio no parte.") Not a single thing exists that is not under His care and a part of the order of the whole. (X, 16-21)

Canto X also marks the first of many mentions of the mystery of the Trinity:

Looking on His son with the Love which the One and the Other eternally breathe forth, the primal and ineffable Power made with such order all that revolves in mind or space that he who contemplates it cannot but taste of Him. (X, 1-6)

(Guardando nel suo Figlio con l'Amore / che l'uno e l'altro eternalmente spira, / lo primo ed ineffabile Valore, / quanto per mente e per loco si gira / con tant' ordine fe, ch'esser non puote / senza gustar di lui chi ciò rimira.)

Far from contradicting the theme of the ability of reason to understand God, the order of creation becomes an analogue for the "order" of the Godhead. Thus, from creation we may understand to some degree the mystery of the Trinity. The Father loves the Son; from this Love proceeds the Holy Spirit. Foster explains this order and its relation to the human and physical level as follows:

Hence the implicit theme of these cantos X-XIV is that "order" intrinsic to the Godhead itself, whereby intellectuality issues into love, knowledge into ecstasy; which, transposed to the human level, becomes the theme of ideal human wisdom, the coherence of intellect and love, which is precisely what the moving and surging circles of the solar heaven represent. . . .<sup>9</sup>

In medieval theology, God the artist is linked in a special way with the second person of the Trinity, the Word, the Son. The Son is linked with God's creation in two ways. First, God's sending His Son into the world is the supreme mark of His continued love of and presence in the world. It is through the Son that creation is redeemed and made ready for union with God. Aquinas refers to St. Paul's view of Christ as the "new Adam" who redeems the fault of Adam (XIII, 37-42). Second, the Son as Word is re-expressed in God's creation of the world. All that is present eternally in the Son, the World, is represented in the temporal creation. Both the eternal and the temporal worlds are signs of the Trinity and love of the Father for the Son. "That which dies not," Dante says, "and that which can die are nothing but the splendour of that Idea which our Sire, in Loving, begets." (XIII, 52-54) "Ciò che non mor e ciò che può morire / non è se non splendor di quella idea / che partorisce, amando, il nostro sire.").

The souls shown in the sphere of the sun express another aspect of these same themes. Whatever the difficulties involved in understanding the placement of any one sage, it seems clear that the twenty-four sages represent the diverse sorts of human wisdom — spanning the practical and the speculative realms. They were united for the good of society in their earthly lives and are united here in the divine life, showing the unity and simplicity of the divine wisdom. Aquinas speaks of the souls as plants in the heaven of the Sun (X, 91-92) ("Tu vuo' saper quai piante s'infiora / questa ghirlanda. . ."). As plants grow without hindrance towards their source in the sun, so these human plants of wisdom, freed from the shadow of earthly imperfection, show the true end of human wisdom fulfilled by the correct ordering of desires and union with God. Plants may not stray from their natural end, but man can. When he freely chooses to desire union with God, he becomes as a plant that cannot choose otherwise. In the divine love and light man's wisdom is made whole; it cannot stray from the path or choose not to reflect and turn towards its source. St. Thomas tells Dante that he can no more choose to refuse his thirst for understanding than water can refuse to fall to the sea. (X, 88-90) ("[Q]ual ti negasse il vin della sua fiala / per la tua sete, in libertà non fora / se non com'agua ch'al mar non si cala."))

The sages of canto X form themselves into the shape of a crown, showing that reason is "crowned" by faith. (X, 64-65) It is a "Thomistic" vision celebrating the union of faith and reason. It is no wonder that Fr. Foster and Etienne Gilson find these cantos especially appealing; they are at ease with the message and tone here. Nonetheless, they are puzzled by the appearance of Siger de Brabant the controversial proponent (if not in fact, at least in reputation) of the "double truth" — the contradiction of faith and reason.<sup>10</sup> The appearance of Siger de Brabant and the implied allusion to his well-known doctrine undercuts the optimistic tones of these cantos where faith is seen, not as contradicting reason, but as completing it. By introducing Siger Dante tells us that the relation of faith and reason and of our language and God is not as simple and straightforward as it seems in these cantos, and St. Thomas' last words of caution, not "yea or nay where thou doest not see clearly," sow the seeds of the contradictory side of the dialectic of faith fulfilling reason — reason negated by faith. (XIII, 112-114). ("... per farti mover lento com' uom lasso / e al sì e al no che tu non vedi.")

The Pilgrim has completed the first stage of his journey; he understands God as He can be known by reason through His works. Having seen how man can know God from and in the world, he can now move to the next stage, refining his understanding to see that God is not comprehended or circumscribed by His creation.

### III.

After the light and optimism of the Heaven of the Sun, cantos XVIII-XXI are a dark and pessimistic account of the transcendence of God and our inability to understand His ways. If before we saw the justification and praise of the universe as a reflection of the work of the divine artist, here we are reminded that creation is important only as a sign of reality, not as reality in itself. The images in these cantos seem to exist only for their significance. Once understood, they disappear, just as the world as we know it will lose any reality it now possesses once its significance is made clear. Dante is told that he cannot understand the mystery of divine justice, because human reason is such an imperfect and pale shadow of God's wisdom and omniscience. Our knowledge of human justice is merely one *effect* of divine justice.

The imagery that surrounds the formation of the Eagle that speaks to Dante of God's justice in cryptic and harsh tones is equally enigmatic. The souls in the sphere of Jupiter form different figures in succession, each figure disappearing once its significance is made known. First they form the letters of the opening verse of the Book of Wisdom. Dante withholds the meaning, citing only the first three individual letters; only later does he put them together

so we may understand their significance. They settle in the "M" of the last word, a lily forming below it, and the eagle who will speak to Dante above it. Dante's only comment on this strange appearance here is on the transcendence and unlimited power of God the artist. "He that designs there has none to guide Him. He Himself guides. . . ." (XVIII, 109-110) ("Quei che dipinge li, non ha chi 'l guidi, / ma esso guida. . .")

Marguerite Mills Chiarenza, in "The Imageless Vision and Dante's *Paradiso*, classifies the eagle with "shapes in which symbolic meaning overshadows concrete form."<sup>11</sup> The significance, rather than the shape, is what is stressed as each letter disappears after it has been comprehended. Further, when the letters disappear, Chiarenza explains, "their meaning, now in the form of the symbolic eagle, emerges, and again Dante could say he saw no eagle but only the meaning of justice shining forth from the formless souls of the just."<sup>12</sup> Although Chiarenza was interested in tracing the stages of the imagery in the *Paradiso* in terms of Augustinian modes of vision, her insights also support the view that the language in these passages is a pessimistic account of the ability of language, a natural creation, to signify a supernatural reality. Language here is caught in a labyrinth of signification from which it cannot escape to signify reality. In these cantos, signs merely point to other signs.

Freccero echoes this same observation of signification over form:

In this dramatic sequence, there is no reality that is not a sign, pointing to another level of meaning. The words of the poem point to men of history, the men are lights that are words of a text from the Bible, which in turn unfolds to its meaning, the eagle. But the eagle also points beyond itself to the words of the text we read, where the series began.<sup>13</sup>

This eagle, unlike any real eagle, is described using real birds only as metaphors. The normal relation between sign and signified, signs referring to things, has been reversed. Here *things* (real birds) refer to a sign, the eagle. The movement is from the poem itself, to a text of the Bible, to an unreal eagle which in turn is the eagle of divine justice which refers back to the biblical text. Because this chain of reference folds back on itself and never reaches that to which it refers, Freccero argues that "there is no ultimate reality signified beyond the text itself."<sup>14</sup> But for Dante there *is* an ultimate reality beyond the text itself, God, but this reality cannot be represented or signified. This is the "problem" of Dante's *Commedia* and of theology in general. In this section, Dante illuminates this paradox in a special way, by creating images that use

“real” things as signs, yet designing them to fail to signify that of which they are signs.

The Eagle’s speech reiterates the theme of the gap that divides human from divine justice and understanding, human from divine creativity. The blessed in Heaven have been given the power to see that the origin of all things is far beyond what we see and know of all things. “Thus our vision,” one of the souls explains, “. . . cannot by its nature be of such power that it should not fail to perceive its origin to be far beyond all that appears to it.” (XIX, 52-56) (“Dunque nostra veduta . . . non pó da sua natura esser possente / tanto, che suo principio non discerna / molto di lá quel che l’è parvente.”) The double negatives in this passage and others here carry out the negative theme of these cantos; the language is difficult to follow in the same way that reason’s failure to understand God is difficult to comprehend. In speaking of the relationship between God’s ways and our own, Dante is told only that, “[t]here is no light but that which comes from a clear sky that is never clouded. . . . (XIX, 64-65) (“Lume non è, se non vien dal sereno / che non si turba mai. . . .”) Human justice, for example, has for its source God’s justice. Thus human justice is defined in terms of divine justice; it is the light of the ‘clear sky’ that serves as the standard against which to measure all other lights. Our eyes, however, are too clouded or too overcome to look directly into that light.

The eagle compares our ways of understanding God to the eye that attempts to see to the bottom of the ocean in the open sea:

Therefore the sight that is granted to your world penetrates with the eternal justice as the eye into the sea; for though from the shore it sees the bottom, in the open sea it does not, and yet the bottom is there but the depth conceals it (XIX, 58-63).

(Pero’ nella giustizia sempiterna / la vista che riceve il nostro mondo, / com’occhio per lo mare, entro s’interna; / che, ben che dalla proda veggia il fondo, / in pelago non vede; e nondimeno / è lì, ma cela lui d’esser profondo.)

Human understanding knows such a fraction of the depth that it cannot help but make mistakes about what is beyond its depth. The Eagle tells Dante that without the scriptures we would be completely adrift without a clue as to God’s being and justice (XIX, 82-84). “Oh earthly creatures, gross minds!” he calls us (XIX, 85) (Oh terreni animali! oh menti grosse!). Even Aquinas, often accused of being a rationalist, exhibits the same sentiment, stating that our minds are too crude and obtuse (“imbecillitatis intellectus nostri”) to find the small portion of significance which creation really contains (*ODP*, q.5, a.2, ad.11).

In contrast with the rationalistic, optimistic vision of cantos X-XIII, the tone of these cantos is one of fideism. We are told to turn to scripture for guidance and understanding. We are told that God's ways are ultimately inscrutable and that we must be careful not to transfer our mistaken human ways of understanding to God. Dante's question about divine justice is presumptuous not only because it is difficult and beyond our way of understanding, but also because it asks for a justification of God's ways on our terms, something He is not in any way bound to do.

However we may try to redeem or lessen the eagle's attack on human reason, even Fr. Foster must admit that "the general tone and stress of the Eagle's speech in the canto is surely unfavourable to Dante's question; the plea to God to make His justice intelligible is met, in the main, by an assertion of its inscrutability."<sup>15</sup> The eagle and his speech are hardly congenial to us and our tendency to make man the center and source of all understanding. This strange bird is distant and cold to the pilgrim in contrast to the other souls in heaven who literally light up at the opportunity to reveal God to Dante.

The eagle does make an attempt to answer Dante's question. He gives a list of those present in Heaven who were not explicitly believers in the risen Christ, as if to say that not all those who have never heard of Christ will be denied Paradise. The eagle also explains that it is only through God's freely given grace and love that we understand Him to the degree we do. ". . . [F]ervent love and lively hope conquer the Divine will, not as man masters man, but conquers it because it would be conquered, and being conquered, conquers with its own goodness." (XX, 94-95) (*Regnum coelorum violenza pate/ da caldo amore e da viva speranza, / che vince la divina voluntate; / non a guisa che l'omo a l'om sobranza, / ma vince lei perchè vuole esser vinta, / e, vinta, vince con sua beninanza.*) This is obviously a reference to the death and resurrection of Christ, Christ who let Himself be conquered so we might be redeemed; He then returns as Christ victorious at the Last Judgment. Through the grace available to men in Christ, they are saved. The possibility of salvation, however, is not strictly dependent upon explicit recognition of Christ as this redeemer. The only answer given in response to Dante's desire to understand God's justice — why He saves some and damns others — does not justify God in human terms. It answers the question in terms of a mystery even more baffling to human reason, that of the Incarnation. Human beings do not *merit* this freely given grace; there can only be the hope that this grace may be given and that we may be open to it.

Rather than try to rationalize away the Eagle's difficult message, it should be seen in dialectical opposition to the affirmation of reason's power and creation's worth in cantos X-XIII. The answer to the question of whether

reason is crowned by faith and revelation or dethroned by it is, of course, "both."

#### IV.

Having said that reason is both crowned by faith and dethroned by it, that both affirmative and negative statements of God are true, Dante must show poetically how this contradiction is resolved. The contradiction can only be truly and finally resolved in the Beatific vision which is outside the poem. But Dante can and does point to a solution that is itself a pointing beyond to the vision. The final cantos have two different ways of speaking of this vision. The vision is portrayed in some sense, but the portrayal is constantly undercut by the reminders that in the poem, as in a dream, only the incomplete and scattered remembrances of the vision can be recalled. The language that calls attention to itself as a memory rather than the experience is related to Aquinas' third level of supereminent predication. This level of predication attempts to represent God by removing the limitation and finitude which marks our language and knowledge. But because it names God as the supereminent possessor for all goods and perfections, it is a kind of predication that can only point beyond the mere words to the experience which is beyond words.

Before Dante can move to this level where the parallel lines of expression and experience converge, he must balance the affirmation and negation of creation's worth and reality. In canto XXII, Dante is given a look back at the earth. He tells us he "smiled at its paltry semblance," saying, "that judgment which holds it for least I approve as best." (XXII, 134-137) (" . . . [E] vidi questo globo / tal, ch'io sorrisi del suo vil sembiante; / e quel consignlio per migliore approbo / che l'ha per meno. . . .") St. Benedict tells Dante that Dante's wish to see his face unveiled, to see him as he really is, "shall be fulfilled above in the last sphere, where is fulfillment of all others, and my own." (XXII, 61-63) (" . . . Frate, il tuo alto disio / s'adempierà in su l'ultima spera, / ove s'adempion tutti li altri e'l mio.") Dante must come to see that knowing and loving things as they really are is knowing and loving them in God. He has begun to see the deficiency of the world when compared to God; he must still come to understand its reality fulfilled in God. Dante is given the power to see Beatrice as she is in canto XXIII. He strives to describe her but breaks off, saying his description "would not come to a thousandth part of the truth." (XXIII, 58-59) (" . . . al millesmo del vero / non si verria. . . .") "[P]icturing Paradise," Dante says, "the sacred poem must make a leap like one that finds his path cut off." (XXIII, 61-63) ("e così, figurando il paradiso, / convien saltar lo sacrato poema, / come chi trova suo

cammin riciso.'') To move from the description to the reality is to leap across an abyss.

Dante is examined on faith, hope and love (in cantos XXIV-XXVI). Dante is blinded by the light and hope and proceeds to his examination on love with only words as his guide. Beatrice tells Dante, "Till thou recover the sight thou has consumed in me thou shalt do well to make up for it with speech." (XXVI, 4-6) ("Intanto che tu ti risense / della vista che hai in me consunta, / ben è che ragionando la compense.") Dante, whose speech is cut off from vision, is in the same situation as the theologian. Nonetheless, Dante is given the power to speak of God and creation in their proper order and love them for what they are even though he has not experienced this reality.

During Dante's examination on love he shows that he now sees "the holy purpose of Christ's Eagle." (XXVI, 52-53) ("Non fu latente la santa intenzione / dell' aguglia di Christo. . .") Dante explains that the end of God's actions are his salvation and the salvation which all believers hope for, however difficult God's ways may be to understand. All creation is united in this goal, and Dante understands that he should love all creation to the degree that it realizes this goal. (XXVI, 55-66) Having reached this degree of understanding, Dante's blindness is cured by Beatrice and he now can see better than before. (XXVI, 79) Dante has expressed the proper love for the created world, the garden, and for its source, the gardener. Also in the examination on love, Dante understands the preeminence of the good in God which is reflected in every created good. (XXVI, 31-33) ("Dunque all' essenza ov'è tanto vantaggio, / che ciascun ben che fuor di lei si trova / altro non è ch'un lume di suo raggio. . .") In these latter cantos the number of exclamations about the failure of language to reproduce his vision are more frequent and express the excess and overabundance of light that affects Dante with a series of blindnesses which are overcome by grace.

The last preparation the Pilgrim undergoes is the final reversal from an earthly center to a divine center. Canto XXVIII opens with Beatrice "imparadising" ("imparadisa") Dante's mind, revealing to him the true and just life we are to live as opposed to "the present life of wretched mortals." (XXVIII, 1-3) (" . . . vita presente de' miseri mortale.") Dante likens his past vision to the vision of one who has been looking in a mirror; now he turns from the mirror image to the reality. (XXVII, 4-8) ("Come in lo specchio fiamma di doppiero / vede colui che se n'alluma retro, / prima che l'abbia in vista o in pensiero, / e sè rivolge per veder se 'l vetro / li dici il vero. . .") The reversal or inversion of the human point of view is not new in the *Paradiso*; but the difference between human understanding and divine truth is emphasized in this canto. The center shifts from the earth to God. Dante strives to understand how "the pattern [the Divine Idea] and the copy [creation from the idea] do not

follow the same plan." (XXVIII, 55-56) ("... come l'esempio / e l'esemplare non vanno d'un modo. . .") He wants to understand how the divine perspective differs from the human one. The only answer to such a question is the beatific vision itself. Human understanding is like one of the many broken mirrors reflecting the "Eternal Goodness remaining in itself one" and unbroken. (XXIX, 142-145) ("... l'eterno valo . . . uno manendo in sè. . .")

Dante must be taken up beyond himself to union with the divine. He is surrounded in a light that blinds him. "[A] vivid light shone round me and left me so swathed in the veil of its effulgence that nothing was visible to me." (XXX, 49-51) ("... così mi circumfulse luce viva; / e lasciommi fasciato di tal velo / del suo fulgor, che nulla m'appariva.") From the light he receives a new vision beyond his own powers. (XXX, 56-60) ("... io compresi / me sormontar di sopra'a mia virtute; / e di novella vista mi raccessi / tale, che nulla luce è tanto mera, / che li occhi miei non si fosser difesi.") Dante receives the answer to all his questions only when he is lost in the depth of the sea rather than seeing from the shore all the way to the bottom of its depth. From this new perspective, Beatrice's complicated answers mean nothing and yet are fulfilled in his vision. Now that he understands their significance, he can dispense with them for the reality, as one leaves behind a ladder after climbing to a summit.

Without the vision, the arguments and anti-images really have no reference. But even with the vision they fade into insignificance. Once Dante *experiences* rather than merely speaks of the excess, supereminence and fulfillment, he sees that the mere speech of such things is no more than hope now fulfilled.

At the very climax of his vision, Dante, as he tries to retell it, describes himself as "him that sees in a dream and after the dream the passion wrought by it remains and the rest returns not to his mind;" his speech "fails at such a sight, and memory too at such excess." (XXXIII, 55-60) ("Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio / che 'l parlar nostro, ch'a tal vista cede, / e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio. / Qual e colui che somniando vede, / che dopo il sogno la passione impressa / rimane, e l'altro alla mente non riede.") Once he returns to language of failure and excess we know he has lost his vision before we have even experienced it through his poetry. He can only return to the signifiers of hope, citing the excess and beyond-ness of his experience, kindling, he hopes, in his reader the desire and hope for such a vision. True to his word in the opening cantos, Dante has fashioned his "example" not to give us the experience he has had, but to bring us to the desire and hope of such a vision. This is the only way Dante's example may "suffice." It can legitimately claim no more. Before he finishes, the leaves of his volume are scattered as "in the wind on the light leaves the Sibyl's oracle was lost." (XXIII, 64-66)

("... così al vento nelle foglie levi / si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla.") Freccero points out the essential difference between ancient oracles and Biblical revelation:

The Coming of Christ . . . provide[d] a point of closure, an ending of time within time. . . . It has therefore a death-and-resurrection perspective on the oracular utterance, at once an understanding and a survival.<sup>16</sup>

Whereas ancient oracles are never understood until death, the message of Christ's coming and resurrection is clear enough for us to read that we may survive its revelation. Dante, recalling in this image the ancient oracles and the truth they reveal only too late, perhaps tells us that it is a "closure" wrought by God and not man. He can understand and represent it only imperfectly; however, he can believe in it firmly and hope for it fervently.

Dante, as he must, undercuts the worth and completeness of his own text. The Eagle's speech calls into question the ability of any temporal reality to signify its source correctly. Temporal things have no true "reality" of their own; they are only a faint shadow of a reflection of true reality. This is all Dante claims from the opening canto to be able to do: "O power divine," he prays, "if Thou grant me so much of Thyself that I may show forth the shadow of the blessed kingdom imprinted in my brain . . ." (I,22-24) ("O divina virtù, se me ti presti / tanto che l'ombra del beato regno / segnata nel mio capo. . .")

The way Dante's testimony calls itself into question shows that Dante's poem is neither a success nor a failure. Dante's text is a success that ultimately fails and a failure that succeeds in doing all it can do. If we claim too much for Dante's text, assuming glibly that the entire experience and final vision are wholly given to us in its pages, we have trivialized the magnitude of the mystery of the Incarnation. He can talk about God; he can talk around the myster in images that deny themselves. But talk is no substitute for real vision. In the final canto of the poem, Dante likens his project to the attempt to square the circle. (XXIII, 134) Chiarenza points out that this "is the one shape in the universe which can be defined but cannot be seen."<sup>17</sup> The definition always strives to reproduce the vision, but it cannot. They are different. On the other hand, if we assume that Dante's poem utterly fails to signify the reality it seeks to present, we have made of the poem a meaningless exercise that only folds back on and refers to itself. This denies that the poem can in any way function as testimony of the experience. And though sign and signified, the poem and the experience, are separated from each other through the mediation of language, it is the difference between sign and signified that makes meaning possible. Thus, for Dante as for Aquinas, our language can never completely or

adequately express God's nature, but it can, by passing through the stages of affirmation, negation, and super-eminence, express how God is like and unlike His creation and is ultimately beyond and above it. The excess of the experience is represented in the language of excess that points beyond the language to the experience. The difference between sign and signified is never transcended in the poem. The *Paradiso* moves toward the union of sign and signified only as a limit; like union with God, if reached, its result is silence.

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#### NOTES

1. John Freccero, Introduction to the *Paradiso*. John Chiardi, trans. (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1970), p. xi.
2. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
3. My explanation of St. Thomas Aquinas' views is taken mainly from question 7 of *Questiones disputatae de potentia*.
4. John Denis Costa, "Dante as Poet-Theologian," *Dante Studies*, LXXXIX, (1971), p. 61-62.
5. I am summarizing the argument in John Leavey's article "Derrida and Dante: Differance and the Eagle in the Sphere of Jupiter," *MLN*, 91, Jan. 1976, p. 60-68.
6. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, vol. III, *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 142. Italian text with translation and comment by John D. Sinclair. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Hereafter, both Italian and English references to this edition and volume will be quoted in the text by the canto number and line.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones disputatae de potentia* in *Questiones disputatae*, Vol. 2. (Taurini: Marietta Editori Ltd., 1949). Hereafter, references to *De potentia* will be quoted in the text as *ODP* followed by the question and article number (and response to *sed contra* number where applicable.).
8. Kenelm Foster, O.P., "The Celebration of Order: *Paradiso X*," in *The Two Dantes*. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1977), p. 123.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

10. Fr. Foster reaffirms Gilson's answer to the problem of Siger (as well as Gilson's reading of all the cantos in the Heaven of the Sum). Siger is a symbol of pure philosophy and reason shown in canto X to represent the union of all human reason in God. This argument is made in Etienne Gilson's *Dante the Philosopher*, David Moore Trans., (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948, p. 272-274).

11. Marguerite Mills Chiarenza, "The Imageless Vision and Dante's *Paradiso*," *Dante Studies*, XC, (1972), p. 86.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 85

13. Freccero, p. xv.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Kenelm Foster, "The Son's Eagle: *Paradiso* XIX," in *The Two Dantes*. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1977), p. 152.

16. Freccero, p. xvii.

17. Chiarenza, p. 86.