

Knowledge and Wisdom. Aristotle, King Solomon and Dante

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This essay will examine Dante's conception of knowledge, and trace his original development of the Aristotelian idea of knowledge (the desire for understanding that characterizes man in *Met.* I.1) in a Christian sense—that is, in terms of the understanding-love poetically expressed in the Psalms, and theorized by Paul of Tarsus in the first letter to the Corinthians. This reelaboration of the concept of knowledge, developed in the *Convivio*, provides the necessary premise to the human path from sensual love to love for God explained in *Paradise* VIII-XIX, and to the complex theory of wisdom as realization of divine justice in *Paradise* XX. Only through these connections may we fully distinguish the structural and doctrinal links between *Inferno* XX and *Paradise* XX: the violence unsuccessfully attempted on divine will by the soothsayers in *Inferno* XX is contrasted with the image and concept of sweet violence victoriously realized by prayer in *Paradise* 94-95.

The Conception of Knowledge in the *Convivio*

What is knowledge for Dante? The answer given to this question in the *Convivio* remains the same in the *Comedy*: Dante's conception of knowledge thus does not confirm the rift traditionally identified between the philosophic treatise and the poem. If anything, a strong shift is perceptible within the *Convivio* itself, between the first and the third books.

In book one, the definition of knowledge is based on the opening sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* followed by an explanation of the syllogism it produces, which appears in the commentary by Alexander of Afrodisia. The argumentative scheme of Alexander's gloss (*everything tends towards its own perfection; knowledge is the perfection of the specifically human, rational soul; therefore all men desire knowledge*), widely used as an exordium in the scholastic treatises, is employed by Dante in the first paragraph of the *Convivio*.¹ In the first book, therefore, in line with the Aristotelian norm, knowledge is described as the realization of a psychological impulse of the human species itself: instinctual, natural, and impersonal.

The Aristotelian knowledge described in the first book of the *Convivio* is, however, invested with a new, Christian meaning in book three, where it is identified with the divine Wisdom loved by King Solomon (chapters xi-xv). The juxtaposition of Philosophy with divine Wisdom dates back to antiquity (Gilson, 116-119), and the iconographic contamination of Solomonic Wisdom with Boethian philosophy is not unusual in biblical manuscripts. The scriptural-Boethian convergence seems to have enjoyed great popularity in florentine culture, as witnessed, for example, by the brief poem by Arrigo of Settimello, *Elegia sive de miseria* (circa 1193). The combination of Aristotelian Philosophy and biblical Wisdom effected in book three of the *Convivio* is a striking integration of the Boethian model, in whose stamp (with adaptations that I have analyzed elsewhere) Dante explicitly establishes his own encounter with the *donna gentile* in book two (Gentili 2016, 303-325).

¹ An important instance in the vernacular was recently discovered by Salvador Cuenca in the *Trattato di logica in volgare*, ms. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, ms. 10124 (Cuenca 69-82).

In the narration of the *Convivio*, the adaptation of the Boethian scene in an amorous and autobiographical key—framed as the author’s enamourment with Lady Philosophy—motivates Dante’s veer from Aristotelian universal desire to Solomon’s personal love for Wisdom². On a conceptual plane, however, the instinctual impulse by which “men have their proper love for things that are perfectly virtuous” (*Conv.* III iii, 5) is enlarged by the very personal register of Christian love, such that it structures the affective bonds between every man and his native tongue, between the author and his work, and between human beings generally.

In the third book, therefore, knowledge is no longer the instinctual impulse to actualize the rational faculty described in the first book; here, rather, like Solomonic Wisdom, knowledge is a beloved woman in whose virtue one desires to participate and with whom one must establish a bond of reciprocal love. Although it goes unmentioned in the commentaries, the canzone *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* is also based on a Solomonic source. Its principle concepts correspond to those of *Wisdom 8*: both Dantean Philosophy and Solomonic Wisdom are loved for their beauty by first person speakers (*Convivio* III xi 10-12).

Having interpreted philosophy etymologically as “love for wisdom” (III xi 8), and having explicitly identified the latter with its Solomonic source, Dante repeats both the concepts here underlined, namely, the concept of use (“certamen loquela illius”), and the concept of participation (“communicatio sermonum illius”): philosophy is “a loving *use* of wisdom” (III xii 12); moreover, “human intelligence partakes of philosophy” (*Conv.* III xiii 8).

But how do they come about, the “participation” and “use” which, according to *Wisdom 8*, constitute the exercise of wisdom? Having clarified through etymology that philosophy is the love of wisdom, and having proved through Aristotelian ethics that virtuous love is disinterested, Dante notes the reciprocity of the love between the human being and knowledge, affirmed by Solomonic Wisdom (*Proverbs 8, 17*: “ego diligentes me diligo”). From this principle he deduces that, just as in friendship the content is virtuous action and the form is desire for it, so in knowledge the content is understanding and the form is love.

What is the meaning of *Proverbs 8.17*, in which Wisdom says that she loves whoever loves her? What is the relationship between this verse and Dante’s subsequent argument, which posits that knowledge relates to love as matter relates to form?

For a Christian reader like Dante, the above-mentioned identification between love and knowledge in *Proverbs 8.17* should be interpreted in light of the New Testament elaboration offered by the first Letter to the Corinthians. In his famous opposition between knowledge and charity, Paul essentially contrasts two different understandings of knowledge: the Greek model, according to which knowledge is the simple possession of concepts, and the Christian model, in which love and knowledge coincide. Those who think they know, says Paul, do not really understand knowledge: rather, he who loves God is known by God (“Si quis autem diligit Deum, hic cognitus est ab eo”) and, after death, will be able to know Him in the way that he himself has been known (“tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum”)³.

² The biblical book of Wisdom is of Judaic-Hellenistic origin, and therefore internal to the Greek philosophical tradition. Formally it is a panegyric to wisdom (Leproux 2007). This is true also of Boethius’ book, although Boethius mixes the panegyric genre with that of the Senecan, and in general Latin, *consolatio*.

³ *1 Cor 13, 12*. The two terms of this activity/passivity, which coexist and reciprocally define one another on an ontological level, evolve progressively on a historical and existential level: in worldly life, one loves and one is known (*1 Cor 8,1*), while, in eternal life, one will love and one will know inasmuch as one has been loved and known (*1 Cor 13,12*).

Building on the Solomonic concept of wisdom, Paul develops a radically innovative conception of epistemology. Inasmuch as it is interpersonal and reciprocal, it is simultaneously active and passive: loving and understanding imply being loved and being understood⁴. From this point of view, Pauline epistemology entails a structural break with theories of knowledge in the Greek tradition, which are centered on the clear distinction between subject and object. Instead, Paul posits two subject-objects, ontologically anchored in a relationship of reciprocal subjectivity. Whereas Aristotelian natural desire is the subject's pure potency with respect to an inert object, Christian love-knowledge is an ongoing relationship between two subjects, ontologically founded upon its reciprocity. Indeed, According to Paul, the original and exemplary instance of such a relationship is the bond between the human being and God. The second significant difference between the Aristotelian desire to know, on the one hand, and Christian love-knowledge, on the other, lies in the relationship between the two terms. In the Aristotelian framework, desire is the means (on the level of causes, it is in fact the efficient cause) that determines the passage from potency to the act of knowledge; in the Christian framework, by contrast, it is love that plays this role. As explained John's First Epistle, God is love: he who loves Him knows Him, while he who does not love Him cannot know Him ("qui diligit ex Deo natus est et cognoscit Deum, qui non diligit non novit Deum, quoniam Deus caritas est"). Dante employs this same reasoning: the love between the human being and Wisdom-Philosophy must be reciprocal, since wisdom-love is divine essence:

Philosophy is a loving use of the wisdom which exists in the greatest measure in God, since supreme wisdom, supreme love, and supreme actuality are found in him; for it could not exist elsewhere, except insofar as it proceeds from him. Divine Philosophy is therefore of the divine essence because in him nothing can be added to his essence (*Convivio* III xii 12-13)

Desire is no longer, as in Aristotle, the efficient or final cause. In Paul's Christian elaboration adopted in the *Convivio*, it is itself the essence of the truth and God. Therefore, Dante can define desire as the formal cause of knowledge. Thus in the *Convivio*, and even more so in the *Comedy*, Aristotelian desire, as pure principle of movement, makes way for the Christian love which is the essence of God and the ontological foundation of man. The transformation of Aristotelian desire into Christian love effected in the Dantean crucible of the *Convivio* and the *Comedy* consists of a transformation of a physical agent into an ontological essence which is, primarily, a relationship. The cognitive act does not consist of a concept but of a totalizing relationship—ontological, ethical, affective, epistemological—with divine truth.

Thus, the *Convivio* arrives at a definition of knowledge that reinvents Aristotelian understanding—the desire to acquire an object intellectually—in a Christian and Pauline sense, as the reciprocity of love between the human being and the Creator. This love is the ontological and epistemological essence of the human subject, anchored in the relationship with the subject that is God.⁵ From the *Convivio* on, this perspective informs the way in which Dante conceives many aspects of human psychological activity. The following section will focus on the fundamentals of being and knowing.

⁴ Cf. also I *Gv* 4, 7 e 16.

⁵ Obviously, this in no way weakens the tension present here between earthly practice of philosophy and the otherworldly dimension of the truth.

God ‘causes motion inasmuch as He is loved’: the transmission of being

In *Paradise* the similitude between creator and creatures established in *Genesis* is extended to the cosmos, inasmuch as scholastic Aristotelianism presents God, man, and nature in a structurally analogous framework⁶.

In the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmology of the *Comedy*, the cosmos is divided into nine concentric spheres, or heavens. The most external sphere, called the Prime Mover (*Primum Mobile*), transmits its own rotational motion from one sphere to the next until it reaches the most internal one. To Ptolemy’s nine spheres Dante added a tenth, the “catholic” heaven encircling all the others (*Convivio* II iii 8). This is the Empyrean, the seat of God, the angels, and the blessed, inspired on a physical plane by the Aristotle’s unmoved Prime Mover, and on a spiritual plane by the Christian God, cause of being and of universal motion. In order to explain the way in which the Christian God transmits His own being, medieval philosophers integrated this new element into the Aristotelian cosmos, borrowing the causal and dynamic authority of the Neoplatonic One.

The Empyrean is totally spiritual and has no concrete location; it includes the other spheres not physically but in a causal sense. The *topos* (place) and the *typos* (form-giving model) transmit the divine being, complete and imperceptible, to the starry sphere lying below. Here it is divided into singular essences, star by star, and transmitted again, further diversified and multiplied, from sphere to sphere, ultimately generating the multiplicity of things.

In this new framework, the *synolon*, which for Aristotle is an unalterable and impenetrable union of matter and form, must “open itself” to an external cause or mover. According to Albertus Magnus, for example, the soul, form of the body, has in turn its own formal cause: God, in whose image the soul was created. This concept is related to the model outlined in the *Convivio*⁷. For Dante, as for Albertus, the soul is a form that draws its own cause or form from God⁸. The soul proceeds from the divine form according to a Neoplatonic causal principle, confirmed for medieval thought by the biblical principle whereby the human soul is made in the image and likeness of God. Dante’s concept of the human soul manifests this combination of Aristotelian hylomorphism and Neoplatonic causality.

Transmitting being through the heavens, the Empyrean sparks celestial motion not only through its descent (that is, in the moment of its emanation), but also in an ascendent and newly unifying sense, through the creature’s love for the Creator.⁹

⁶ *Par.* I, 103-105: “Le cose tutte quante / hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma / che l’universo a Dio fa simigliante”

⁷ Albertus Magnus, *Summa Theologica, sec.*, tr. 12, q. 74, solutio: ‘anima rationalis quae forma est et actus corporis, habet formam exemplar unius essentiae divinae in tribus personis, ad quam facta est.’ Compare *Convivio* III vi 11-12: ‘ÈE’ da sapere che, sì come dice lo Filosofo nel secondo dell’Anima, *l’anima è atto del corpo: e s’ella è suo atto, è sua cagione*; e però che [...] ogni cagione infonde nel suo effetto de la bontade che riceve da la cagione sua *infonde e rende al corpo suo de la bontade de la cagione sua, ch’è Dio*’ (my emphasis).

⁸ *Conv* III ii 4: ‘Ciascuna forma sustanziale procede da la sua prima cagione, la quale è Iddio, sì come nel Libro di Cagioni è scritto’; *Conv* III vii 2-3: ‘E’ da sapere che la divina bontade in tutte le cose discende, e altrimenti essere non potrebbero [...] Onde scritto è nel Libro de le cagioni: La prima bontade manda le sue bontadi con uno discorrimento. Veramente ciascuna cosa riceve da quello discorrimento secondo lo modo de la sua virtù e de lo suo essere’.

⁹ Indeed, according to *Metaphysics* 72b 3, the prime mover ‘causes motion inasmuch as He is loved’, an affirmation that, through the *recensio italica* of William of Moerbeke’s version («movet quasi desideratum»), reaches *Par.* I, 76-77: ‘la rota che tu [o Dio] sempiterni / desiderato’. On the historical genesis of the notion of Empyrean adopted by Dante cfr. Bruno Nardi, ‘La dottrina dell’Empireo’, in *Id. Saggi di filosofia dantesca*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1965, pp. 167-214.

Once produced, creatures move towards their own end, which leads them back to God: the Platonic-Aristotelian doctrine of the return of beings towards their celestial cause accords perfectly with Christian thought, which affirms this principle from Augustine onwards. But the love which leads the creature to God may be impeded by tangible forms of love and hence remain entangled in the world, not just according to Christian ethical principles, but also according to the relationship between passion and reason that the Middle Ages derived from Aristotle.

The *Nicomachean Ethics* teaches that neither the vegetable nor the sensitive soul can communicate with reason; but the sensitive soul, abode of love and other passions, can be subjected to the control of reason through the virtue of temperance¹⁰.

Already in the *Vita Nova*, Dante affirms on this basis that the image of Beatrice by which he was dominated “tuttavia era di così nobilissima virtù, che nulla volta sofferse che Amore” lo “reggesse senza lo fedele consiglio de la ragione” (“was of such a pure quality that it never allowed” him “to be ruled by Love without the faithful counsel of reason” *Vn* II 9). The notion of the soul as a form or idea created by God in His image, and the soul’s resulting desire to return to its origin, thus permits Dante to resolve worldly love in theological terms.

In *Convivio* IV xii 14-17, Dante propounds his own theory of natural desire by framing it within the theological context of similarity between the soul and God. The soul understands its desire for God through its love for secondary goods which, tempered by reason, becomes ‘a very direct (‘dirittissimo’) route,’ like Aristotle’s ‘rectus appetitus’ (*Eth. Nic.* 39 a 22-4).

In the cantos VIII and IX of *Paradise*, love as natural desire guided by temperance and free will is framed within a larger presentation of the human journey in the “gran mar dell’essere” (“great sea of being”)—that is, within the universal teleology affirmed by *Paradiso* I.

First and foremost, Dante dismisses the theory of love held by “ancient peoples,” according to which the star of Venus ignites an insane love in the human subject, enslaving the will (as exemplified by Dido in *Paradise* VIII.9). Although astral influences do indeed act upon the human mind, the individual can and must respond through free choice (as *Purgatory* XVI 67-78 makes clear).

In *Paradise* VIII and IX, the theme of correct realization of natural desire which, supported by free will, fulfills a part of the universal purpose and leads the creature back to God, naturally raises the question of the earthly and political purpose of humanity. Dante presents this purpose through images and concepts drawn from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle

synthesizes the way in which diverse purposes of human activity fall into hierarchies and shape themselves within the unifying order of the *polis* (*Nic. Eth.* 94a23).

Charles Martel opposes the genealogical and naturalistic interpretation of individual inclinations, implied by the question Dante asks him: ‘how from sweet seed, can come bitter fruit?’ (‘com’esser può, di dolce seme, amaro?’), to an interpretation founded in the spiritual and theological order: through the motion of the spheres, divine love confers universal purpose upon individual elements and creatures. Through this motion, God “divides” Himself in a process of ontological transmission and diversification that coincides with the constitution of various, individual, unrepeatable natures. Divine love, Charles Martel explains, causes and contains the within itself the motion of the heavens, and, through the action of the heavens, it transforms providence into the formative principle of individual natures and their ends (vv. 97-99). The motion of universal purpose, caused by divine love, materializes in an image that condenses its multiplicity and precision. The arrows of Cupid and earthly love, evoked by the mention of Dido,

¹⁰ *Ethica Nicomachea*. Trans. Roberti Grosseteste Lincolniensis, textus purus, ed. R. A Gauthier, Brill, Leiden 1972, («Aristoteles Latinus», vol. XXVI, fasc. 3), 02 b 13-31 / 18 b 28-9 (= *Eth. Nic.*, transl. Grosseteste),.

by tradition are quick but uncertain in their direction and results (“veloces” but “incertae,” says Servius); the divine arrow, by contrast, based on the Aristotelian model, strikes swift and true “as a shaft directed to its mark”¹¹.

The image of the Aristotelian arrow was already employed at the beginning of *Paradise*, in the famous tableau of the “gran mar dell’essere” (“great sea of being” *Par.* I.113) wherein the manifold motions of the universal purpose unfold. In both passages, Dante’s vocabulary seems to echo the vulgarization of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* undertaken by Taddeo Alderotti during the second half of the thirteenth century. Beatrice’s ‘brief words’ (‘parolette’, *Par.* I 95)—which justify the pilgrim’s ascent to paradise as a movement towards his own purpose, imprinted by God in every being (vv. 116-120)—correspond to expressions coined by ‘Thaddeus the Hippocratist’ (‘Taddeo ippocratista’) in the version of Aristotle’s *Ethics* mentioned in *Conv.*, I 10 10 (e.g. ‘saettare’, ‘to flash’; ‘dirizzare a segno’, ‘direct to the target’).¹²

In the exordium of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the diversity of individual ends is contained within the shared order of social life. A hierarchical relationship exists among the arts; the art of governance, structuring and unifying, stands above them all. In Dante’s elaboration, of course, the first element in the reunification of various individual ends is the theological process of the individuals’ return to God, from whom their natures were “separated.” This principle is presented in *Paradise* I. For Dante too, however, the reunification of human ends in worldly life is necessary. It is guaranteed, as Aristotle teaches, by politics; or, in Dante’s terms, by the necessary figure of a universal governor. Charles Martel treats this second point in *Paradise* VIII, 118-120, once again citing the *Nicomachean Ethics* (man is ‘cive’, ‘citizen’ by nature, and could not be so if man below does not ‘live in *diverse* ways for *diverse* tasks’, ‘se giù non si vive / *diversamente* per *diversi* officii’, my emphasis), his words echoing those of Taddeo in the passage of his vulgarization referred to above (‘secondo *diverse* arti sono *diversi* fini’, ‘different arts mean different ends’).

The characters that Dante encounters in canto IX personify two elements of the correct realization of individual purpose that are theoretically delineated in canto VIII: the return to God through love, and the reconstruction of individual purpose within a political synthesis. But while the first element is realized positively in the cases of Cunizza da Romano and Folchetto di Marsiglia, both devoted to carnal love and then reconverted to the love for God, the politics of this canto confirm the statement with which Charles Martel closed Canto VIII: the human path deviates from correct desire both in the case of Cunizza’s brother, the tyrant Ezzelino da Romano, and in the case of Folchetto’s fellow citizens, the inhabitants of a Marseille that had been reduced to a lake of blood (cfr. v. 93). Cunizza predicts that ‘the waters that bathe Vicenza’ (‘l’acqua che Vicenza bagna’, v. 47) will undergo the same transformation. The passage conforms to Homeric and Virgilian portrayals of political degradation brought about by war, already echoed in relation to the battle of Montaperti (cfr. *Inf.*, X 86).

Dante ends the canto with two great syntheses. The first appears in the paradisiacal tableau of individual desires realized correctly by each individual’s free will, which they fulfill in their return to God. In *Paradise*, Folchetto explains, one contemplates ‘the [divine] art that makes beautiful the great result, and discerns the good for which the world above wheels the world below’ (‘l’arte [divina] ch’addorna / cotanto effetto, e discernesi ’l bene / per che al mondo di sù quel di

¹¹ *Par.* VIII, 103-105: ‘quantunque quest’ arco saetta / disposto cade a proveduto fine, / sì come cosa in suo segno diretta’

¹² On the thirteenth-century vulgarization, the translation of an epitome of the *Nicomachean Ethics* translated from the Arabic into Latin and, then, by Taddeo Alderotti into Tuscan see Gentili 2014 (2- 22) and Gentili 2016 (315-19).

giù torna', vv. 106-108). In other words, one contemplates the divine art that produces universal purpose. The second synthesis is personified by Raab, an example of an individual nature whose return to God has been fulfilled. Initially a prostitute, Raab turned her sensual inclinations not only to God, but also to the realization of the political conditions necessary for the triumph of Jesus. (Indeed, her collaboration in the fall of Jericho is referred to in *Hbr* 11, 31.) This is why Folchetto says: 'since she is joined to our order, it is sealed with her in its highest rank' ('a nostr' ordine congiunta, / di lei nel sommo grado si sigilla», vv. 116-117). As Charles Martel explained, God is the 'suggello', 'seal', to individual nature through the action of secondary causes, represented by the angelic intelligences that move the spheres (*Paradise* VIII 127). Thus, it is the Thrones, the angelic movers of the sphere of Venus, that seal each individual's specific virtue (i.e. the desire for God, which acts as the instrument uniting individuals in Him and realizing providential order on earth) and offer their form and power to Raab, who actualizes this virtue to the highest degree. Against the backdrop of Raab's glorious eternity, and of the spiritual realization of human freedom in God, Dante-pilgrim's own historical moment looms threateningly: the present is completely enclosed in a biological reality that reproduces itself with mechanical consistency, and is, therefore, incapable of correcting its own evil. Lucifer's 'plant' ('pianta'), designating Florence (*Par.*, IX 127 and following), fulfills the grim eventuality that 'begotten nature would always take a like course with his begetters if divine providence did not overrule' ('Natura generata il suo cammino / simil farebbe sempre a' generanti, / se non vincessse il proveder divino', *Par.*, VIII 133-135).

To love and to know: the “new knowledge” of Paradiso

The conceptual nexus of the relationship between creator and creature (from the ontological foundation of individual lives and purposes in God in *Paradise* I, 103-114, to creation's return to God as suggested in *Paradise* XXXIII, 145) runs throughout *Paradise*. Almost at the centre of the cantica, in the diptych of cantos XIX-XX, this is explained as an epistemological and ontological process based on the two Letters to the Corinthians, in which Paul affirms that the fulfillment of the love between God and the human being is “ministerium iustitiae” ('ministry of justice') and that its 'profunda' ('profundities') are revealed to the eye of the believer in the 'tunc; ('then') of eternal life, while non-believers have no access to them due to the 'velamen' ('veil') that impedes them. The 'sea of being' (the patristic 'pelagos ousias' of *Par.* I.113) and the image of singularities united in the divine whole become, in this way, the 'deep sea' of divine justice (*Par.* XIX, v. 63) (Gentili 2016, 321-25).

Dante is grappling with 'God's profundities' ('profunda Dei', *I Cor.*, 2, 10), God's 'wisdom' and 'justice', which Paul contrasts with the those of the 'princes of this world' and the 'ministry of justice'; this is where the ontological and epistemological relationship between man and God is fulfilled. But these concerns are not are not treated by Dante's commentators, who are deaf to the complete and organic doctrinal structure revealed through precise quotations (Gentili 2018).

It is within the Pauline framework, which insists upon the eventual clarification of *ministerium iustitiae* for Christian eyes, that Dante problematizes the destiny of nonbelievers. As noted above, Paul resolves the problem in terms of the sheer persistence of the *velamen* that obstructs the vision of divine truth (Inglese 315-29).

In both epistles, Paul opposes divine to earthly wisdom, which he attributes to the mysterious, variously interpreted 'princes of this world' ('principes huius saeculi», *I Cor.*, 2, 6).

According to Thomas Aquinas, these include necromancers and sorcerers.¹³ Dante takes his cue from the Thomistic gloss, turning its negative valence against the classical past in *Inf. XX*, which, as we shall see, presents a human-divine relationship in opposition to the Christian model. The episode provides a *Gegenbild* to *Par. XX*, where, conversely, Dante exploits the literal meaning of “principes saeculi” (also contained in the Thomistic gloss: “reges et potentes saeculare”) and reinterprets it in a positive sense.

In the following canto, in a veritable *mise en abyme* of Pauline images of divine justice (the mirror and the eye, and the ‘nunc’ and the ‘tunc’), just souls form the eye of the Eagle, emblem not only the heaven of Jupiter, but also of the sharpness of the gaze introduced and lauded in the preceding canto through the anaphora “lì si vedrà”, “there shall be seen”, which indicated the manifestation of divine justice.

Just as the sightless eye of *I Cor 2, 6*, cited by Dante in the previous canto, finds its contrasting image here in the eagle’s eye, so the ‘princes of this world’ mentioned in this Pauline passage find their diametrical opposites in the kings forming the eye, evidently not bearers of the ‘wisdom [...] of this world’ like those condemned by Paul, but rather informed by divine knowledge.

The complementary symmetry between light and conclusion of the human time is the concrete sense of the canto, entirely dedicated to the way in which human action and its consequences take place, first on Earth and, then, in the splendor of God’s judging glory. The hymn-like “là si vedrà” (‘there one shall see’) of canto XIX here receives a doctrinal elaboration: each king’s work of justice is first narrated and then celebrated as a complete otherworldly vision, through a tercet always beginning with the phrase ‘ora conosce’ (‘now he knows,’ vv. 40, 46, 52, 58, 64, 70). The just acted according to their free will, but without fully knowing the meaning and consequences of their actions, which are now revealed by divine vision.

This ‘now he knows’ is the literal translation of *I Cor 13, 12*¹⁴, where the future ‘tunc’ (the ‘then’, or ‘allora’, pronounced on earth and referring to eternal life) is transformed into the present and paradisiacal ‘nunc’ (now’).

At least two of the ‘princes of this world’ transformed by Dante into just princes are pagans, Ripeus and Trajan, but they were saved by grace and prayer respectively. By virtue of his justice, Ripeus was illuminated by grace *ante litteram* and baptized directly by the Holy Spirit; thanks to Gregory the Great’s intervention, the pious Trajan was able to return to life after his death and convert. Both figures represent wisdom as love for the Christian God:

Regnum celorum violenza pate
da caldo amore e da viva speranza,
che vince la divina volontate
non a guisa che l’omo a l’om sobranza :
ma vince lei perché vuole esser vinta,
e, vinta, vince con sua beninanza.(vv. 94-99)

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Secundam Epistulam ad Corinthios*, cap 2. lec. 1: ‘Secundo possunt dici principes Daemones. Io. XIV, 30: venit princeps mundi huius, et in me non habet quicquam, et cetera. Et ab his principibus venit sapientia culturae Daemonum, scilicet necromantia, et magicae artes, et huiusmodi’.

¹⁴ Videmus nunc per speculum in ænigmate: tunc autem facie ad faciem. Nunc cognosco ex parte: tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum’.

The violence endured by the kingdom of the heavens (*Mt* 11, 12), lies, in the case of Trajan, in the fact that Gregory's prayer allowed the emperor to return to his body. In this way Dante makes clear that this is the violence of love as opposed to human violence.

The contrast generically referred to here applies specifically to the case of the necromancers in *Inf.* XX, whose trace first appears in *Inf.* IX with the illicit reanimation of a dead person's body by Erichtho (23-23)¹⁵, who called the shades back to their bodies and thus transgressed the limits imposed by the gods through *la minatio*, through violently threatening them.

The 'now he knows'—the Pauline 'then' of the realization of love-knowledge that Dante transforms into 'now'—finds its model opposite in *Inf.* XX, in the soothsayers' relationship temporality, knowledge, and God. Their claim to know in advance, in the worldly now, entails a violation of divine will and the elimination of *pietas*.

To underscore this point, Dante makes use of the literary and conceptual nucleus (i.e. characters and sentences put into verse) embodied by two figures who mediate the relationship with the divine in the works of the greatest epic Latin poets: Virgil's Sibyl and Lucan's Erichtho. These two women represent the two faces, pious and impious, of the classical priestess. Both present characteristics that are incompatible with the Christian model of the relationship between the human being and God, and, for this very reason, Dante builds an entire canto around the symbolism offered by these two figures, a veritable monograph comparing classical and Christian prayer.

In *Pharsalia* VI 493-96, Lucan takes the figure of Erichtho as a point of departure for reflection on the relationship between sorcerers and gods. Sorcerers win divine favor either through threats, or through their unique relationship with piety:

'Of what compact do the bonds keep the Deities thus bound? Is it obligatory, or does it please them to obey? For an unknown piety only do the witches deserve this [*Ignota tantum pietate merentur*'], or by secret threats do they prevail?'

Two competing interpretations of the expression 'ignota pietate' are still under debate today: either sorcerers earn the gods' support 'with a form of piety that is unknown to us', or 'because piety is unknown to them' (Timpanaro 317-31). Both readings imply the same paradoxical and enigmatic structure, and both are consistent with verse 28 of *Inferno* XX, which marks the entrance into the pouch of the soothsayers: 'here piety lives when it is quite dead' ('qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta'). Dante rewrites and explores Lucan's paradox—*Here [among the soothsayers] lives piety [in their own peculiar form, as respect for the inflexibility of fate] when it is quite dead [that is, when Christian piety, love for God, is unknown]*—while at the same time showing the *contrappasso* it entails: since the sorcerers acted '*ignota pietate*,' they are condemned never to know Christian piety, and never to receive compassion from others.

Pity, which they did not know, will be for them eternally impossible: not only from God, since this holds true for all the damned, but also from whoever might witness their pain, since the compassion of others is always also the language of piety which remains eternally unknown and inaccessible to the soothsayers. For Christian readers, after all, piety is the structure of the love relationship with God. Thus, the absence of piety is implicit in the Stoic conception of divine will as an inescapable, predetermined fate, which is the premise of divinatory art. The Stoic principle of divine imperturbability accords with Christian thought inasmuch as both entail the

¹⁵ '[Q]uella Eriton cruda / che richiamava l'ombra ai corpi sui', vv. 23-24. (Gentili 2013, 646-681).

unquestionability of a superior judgement (on the basis of this convergence, Dante gives his Virgil the possibility to correct the point of view presented in the *Aeneid*). Stoicism stands in sharp contrast, however, in its elimination of every personal aspect of the relationship between God and humanity. The Christian conviction that God created the human being by a free act of love, and that the individual may freely choose to act according to His law or against it, entails a concept of providence that, since it leaves room for the freedom of future contingencies, is not fixed by the mechanics of celestial motions. Instead, it is only present in God's mind, from which the rational soul immediately derives. Thus, man's inability to see into the future coincides with his freedom. His natural piety coincides with the very possibility of recognizing God and reality.

Here the circle between Dante and his classical sources closes: where there is no piety in the Christian sense, that is, love for God, the unconditional nature of the divine is affirmed, but not its freedom. Divination rejects God not in His general impassivity (which is also admitted by Erichtho and the Sibyl) but in His freedom, which is the freedom to love man and to fulfill his prayers. Thus, through the radical freedom of piety and love, Dante chooses to represent the relationship between man and God in opposition with the 'legalist' but impersonal, necessary, and self-interested relationship implied by classical divination.

Lucan's verse takes up Virgil's major theme of prayers and their possible fulfillment by the gods: the phrase 'if we deserve piety' ('si pietate meremur') appears in the prayer that Anchises directs to Jupiter. Aeneas' father asks his God two questions: on the one hand, whether, in principle, the gods can be persuaded by prayer and, on the other hand, whether *pietas* deserves to be heard by the gods¹⁶.

As Servius observes, the first of the hypotheses expressed by Anchises's shade – 'if you are moved by any prayers' ('precibus si flecteris ullis') – refers to another part of the poem in which Virgil alludes once again to the imperturbability of the gods. When Palinurus's soul is impeded on his way to the underworld because his corpse remains unburied, he asks Aeneas to take it with him across the Stygian swamp; the Sibyl, reproaching the impiety of the request, urges him to 'cease to hope that divine fate can be tempered by prayer' ('desine fata deum flecti sperare precando', *Aen.* VI, 376). This famous verse, which was initially well received by the Stoic readers, underwent an intense exegesis in the hands of the Scholastics as it contradicts the principle of 'future contingencies' (Normore, 358-381). Given the Christian connection between fate and providence, and given that divine will is the first expression of the *potentia Dei absoluta*, the Scholastics needed to reject the concept of fate as a wholly necessitating law linked to astral mechanics; such a law would deny, on the one hand, the human exercise of free will and, on the other, the absolute freedom of God's will. The soothsayers' conviction that they are able to see into the future, notes Robert Grossatesta, rests on this absurd conception of fate according to *De libero arbitrio*, chapter 11. Precisely this, according to Benvenuto, is the root of the sin for which the soothsayers and necromancers are condemned in *Inferno* XX.

Dante had already given the character Virgil opportunity to redeem himself of this conceptual error, asking his guide directly how divine inflexibility, understood in the terms expressed by the Virgilian formula, was compatible with the prayers that souls in purgatory raise to God ('I started: "O my light, it seems to me / that in one passage you deny expressly / that prayer can bend the rule of Heaven, yet" "io cominciai: 'El par che tu mi nieghi, / o luce mia, espresso in alcun testo /che decreto del ciel orazion pieghi" *Purg.* VI 28-30). And indeed, Virgil replied that, at the time he conceived of the formula, he was speaking of prayers not addressed to the true

¹⁶ *Aen.* II, 689-91: 'Iuppiter omnipotens, precibus si flecteris ullis, / aspice nos, hoc tantum, et, si pietate meremur, I da cleinde auxilium, pater, atque haec omnia firma'.

God ('Where I asserted this— / that prayers could not mend their fault —I spoke / of prayers without a passageway to God'; "là dov'io fermai cotesto punto, / non s'ammendava, per pregar, difetto, / perché 'l priego da Dio era disgiunto" vv. 40-42).

If the Pauline framework here reconstructed is, for Dante, the order of divine justice¹⁷, then the normative and juridical dimension of the Comedy must not be conceived as absolute; to do so is to treat as an exception that which, in reality, only constitutes the application of another order of judgement: the divine. While it is certainly worthwhile to investigate the juridical forms that Dante uses to construct individual aspects of the moral structure of the afterlife, it is not possible to interpret divine justice in the Comedy in wholly juridical turns (Steinberg 2013). The so-called "secularization" of theological discourse—that is, the translation of *potentia Dei absoluta* into human power—is a theme of tragic significance in the twentieth century, and much debated in present-day studies. And yet the love-wisdom of the Pauline-Dantean God is constitutionally, magnificently foreign to this perspective.

¹⁷ The discourse of the Eagle on predestination (*Par.* XX, 130 ess.) is also reflected in *ICor* 2, 6, "Gloria preparata da Cristo per coloro che lo ameranno."

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