“THE PLANET THAT LEADS MEN STRAIGHT ON EVERY ROAD:”
THE SUN, SALVATION, AND SPIRITUAL ALLEGORY IN DANTE’S

COMMEDIA

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J.P.
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Preface: Reading the *Divina Commedia*: Walking Before Running

Centuries of scholarship on the *Divina Commedia* provides the 21st century scholar with ample footing upon which to approach the poem; but this footing is, despite its fortitude, admittedly intimidating. Much as Dante-poet builds the poem in true medieval tradition by collating and adapting the work of classical authorities, any modern scholar of Dante works shoulder-to-shoulder with contemporaries and medieval commentators alike. This environment can be claustrophobic and confusing; a reverent scholar is torn between a desire to respect the poem and its maker and the desire to say something unsaid about the work, often at the cost of failing to engage with the contexts in which the work was written and initially received. Before exploring the poem as a medieval work, readers must first understand something about Dante as a historical figure—a medieval figure—and must also understand the role of the poem as a simultaneous work of fiction, autobiography, and spiritual meditation. Only in considering these polyvalent roles will the reader be able to make sense of Dante’s creative use of the sun to describe experience of God.

Born in 1265, Dante spent his youth in the penumbra of the so-called renaissance of the twelfth century, a time of unbridled cultural growth, and died in 1321, around the beginning of the end for the High Middle Ages. Living in the period between the height of medieval culture and the beginning of its slow crawl into the early modern period, Dante was allowed the chance to create—particularly in the *Divina Commedia* but also in his other works—a survey of medieval culture, from its beginnings to Dante’s own time. His literary and philosophical influences began with
classical authorities such as Cicero and Boethius, but also included the Bible and the work of more recent minds, such as St. Thomas Aquinas or Joachim of Fiore. The influence of classical culture on medieval thought, particularly after the advent of scholastic, Aristotelian models of inquiry, is difficult to state adequately. European output from Cicero’s time into the thirteenth century was part of an unbroken canon of authority that Dante makes extensive use of in his work. Added to this classical erudition is intimate familiarity with Scripture, which Dante likely knew by heart from study and liturgical service.

Dante’s own life was a collision of ideas and perspectives, moving through different phases and careers as the volatile world of medieval Italy spun around him. His father, Alighiero di Bellincone, was a middle-class member of the Florentine community and was allowed to remain in Florence after the Ghibelline victory at Montaperti in 1260, despite his status as a Guelf1. Dante was educated privately, either by tutors or in a chapter school, gaining considerable proficiency with Latin. Many have attempted, without much evidence, to suggest that Dante was educated at the universities of Bologna, the Sorbonne, or even Oxford after his exile; it is more likely that his considerable breadth and depth of knowledge was an autodidactic consequence of his natural curiosity (Bemrose 13-14). It is this same curiosity,

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1 The Guelfi and Ghibellini were factions in medieval Italy which, roughly speaking, supported the power of the Pope or of the German Holy Roman Emperor, respectively. Italy was politically fractious after the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century C.E., and during Dante’s own time, was divided between the wealthy city-states of the north, the Papal lands in central Italy, and the large but unstable kingdom of Sicily to the south. The names of the two factions originate in the names of rival dynasties of German Emperors, the Welfs and the Waiblingens (i.e. the Hohenstaufens), the former variously backed by the Pope against the latter (Bemrose xix-xxi).
coupled with a talent for self-expression, that would lead a young Dante into new realms of poetry.

Italian vernacular literature was still very much in its infancy at the time of Dante’s birth. A poem in an early Umbrian dialect, *Laudes Creaturarum* (“Praise of the Creatures,” also known in English as “The Canticle of the Sun”) is popularly ascribed to St. Francis, presumably written in the early thirteenth century. A more formal and courtly school of poetry had originated in the south in the court of the Sicilian King and Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, around the same time. This body of poets, *la scuola Siciliana*, revisited romantic and chivalrous themes already popular in French and Provencal poetry, and also invented the poetic form of the sonnet. Various northern poets—including Guittone d’Arezzo, Brunetto Latini, and others—experimented with synthesizing this new, courtly Italian poetry with northern dialects and sensibilities, passing it along to later generations in Dante and his peers. Dante’s efforts, along with those of his contemporaries and friends, comprise the *stil dolce nuovo* or “Sweet New Style,” a form of romantic, vernacular poetry brought to its fullest in Dante’s collection of poems and expository prose, *La Vita Nuova*.

The focus of *La Vita Nuova* is the fabled Beatrice, a Florentine noblewoman Dante claims to have met while both were still adolescent. His first poems date from 1284, and during his early adulthood he developed and honed his skills in amorous verse in playful exchanges with friends and fellow poets, including Dante’s close friend, Guido Cavalcanti. Dante may have only known her as an acquaintance, and as was typical of courtly romances of the time, admired her from afar without much
reciprocation. With her death in 1290, however, Dante’s poetry—and indeed the scope of his entire literary output—was thrust into deeper, more mature realms. *La Vita Nuova*, composed between 1293 and 1295, is the first of many vernacular Italian works in Dante which blurs the distinction between creative fiction and spiritual autobiography. In the text, he records the circumstances under which he met and fell in love with Beatrice, attributing to her miraculous and near-mystical qualities, describing the captivation of his soul in the hands of a near-saintly figure that anticipate Dante’s later portrayal of her in *Paradiso*:

> Since this was the first time her words had ever been directed to me, I became so ecstatic that, like a drunken man, I turned away from everyone and I sought the loneliness of my room, where I began thinking of this most gracious lady and, thinking of her, I fell into a sweet sleep, and a marvelous vision appeared to me. I seemed to be a cloud the color of fire and, in that cloud, a lordly man, frightening to behold, yet he seemed also to be wondrously filled with joy. (Vita Nuova 591)

The lordly man holds a flaming object in his hand, declaring to Dante “vide cor tuum” (“behold your heart”), and he then feeds it to a sleeping, naked Beatrice (*Vita Nuova* 591). This passage illustrates the first mixtures of allegorical, spiritual language and amorous subject-matter for which Dante would become famous.

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2 Trans. Musa. I have endeavored to translate most of the Italian and Latin material in this text myself; on occasion, however, I have turned to better existing translations for their strength and clarity. All translations, unless I otherwise mark them, are my own.
Far from the French *tensons* and Provencal *troblars leu* of the courtly traditions from which Dante descended, these new poems thematically seek to elevate the narrative of the soul from stories of frustration and sex that typified the poetry of earlier generations; instead, Dante’s incorporates into vernacular, lay texts those features that would have most typified more serious, spiritual literature of the period. Because of this creative admixture of autobiography and fictional tableaux, it is necessary for scholars and readers alike to distinguish from this point forward the historical Dante, the narrating Dante-Poet, and the fictional character of Dante, who in the *Divina Commedia* is commonly called the Dante-Pilgrim.

The historical Dante was as much of a polysemous figure as the literary reflections; before Beatrice’s death, he fought as a *cavaliere* in the Battle of Campaldino, in June, 1289. This battle reversed the Guelf defeat at Montaperti in 1260 and launched Dante into a career in service of the Republic of Florence. Constitutional reforms after Campaldino allowed middle-class, non-aristocratic families to run for political offices, but only with membership in one of the city’s many mercantile and vocational guilds; Dante enrolled in the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries. Despite lack of any obvious medical training, he seems to have possessed great knowledge of astrology—then significant in diagnosis of disease due to the supposed influence of the stars—and may have also sold books in his pharmacy. He also appears to have married in or around 1289; his wife, Gemma Donati, was daughter of the prominent rival Donati family, and appears to have carried at least four children. After 1295,
Dante had a meteoric rise in the city’s many councils and assemblies, eventually achieving the rank of prior—one of the city’s six chief magistrates—in 1300.

1300 marked the Papal Jubilee of Pope Boniface VIII (d.1303), an aggressive and dynamic pope who had greatly polarized Italian politics in his attempts to expand the temporal influence of the papacy in Italy. Dante, like his father, numbered among the Guelfs of Florence and therefore supported the power of the Pope against that of the Emperor; but there had not been an Emperor in Germany since Frederick II’s death in 1250, and instead the kings of France had courted Boniface’s favor in northern Italy, especially King Philip IV the Fair (d.1314). Dante was one of the so-called “White Guelfs,” a faction supporting the continued autonomy of Florence, against the “Black Guelfs,” who advocated greater Papal control over Tuscany. In 1301, Charles of Valois, brother of King Philip, entered northern Italy with an army at the Pope’s invitation, presumably to stabilize the region from incessant war among the city-states. Florence was not the greatest power north of Latium, but was, after Campaldino, certainly the greatest regional power in Tuscany; Dante and two others were dispatched by the Republic to negotiate with the Pope for the continued neutrality of Florence. While in Rome, however, the Black Guelfs of Florence, supported by the French army, deposed the government and exiled or killed many prominent White Guelfs; the newly-appointed podestà, or chief magistrate, passed in absentia a sentence of death on Dante, declaring his property forfeit. His family seems to have survived and escaped the condemnation; Dante, however, was left poor and homeless at the age of 36, and would never see his beloved home city again.
Dante’s subsequent exile, which was to last for the remaining twenty years of his life, was a period of considerable personal darkness. Much as after the death of Beatrice in 1290, after his exile in 1301 Dante began again to shift the philosophical and thematic focus of his literary work, abandoning the political strife that had so damaged him to become a solitary, artistic figure. Boethius’ sixth century work *De consolatione philosophiae* (hereafter *The Consolation of Philosophy*) had demonstrated to Dante the usefulness of speaking of personal pain as both a method of catharsis but also as a means of conveying universal truths useful to everyone, not merely the sufferer. It was through spiritual and philosophical means, therefore, that Dante was to illumine his difficult situation, and his years in exile proved to be his most prolific.

Dante began to compose the *Divina Commedia* while a guest at the court of the della Scala family, prominent Ghibellines and the Dukes of Verona. Under the patronage of Bartolomeo and later his brother, feared warlord Cangrande I della Scala, Dante began *Inferno* around 1310. Before this, he had crafted a treatise, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, in which he argued that the Italian language, while still in relative infancy, possessed natural qualities which made it a far superior language for certain poetic compositions than latin or even Provencal. While Dante continued to compose in Latin—and did not oppose its use in many other functions—the emphasis on vernacular poetry reflects Dante’s concern, as present in much of his later work, for making accessible to readers the meditative and redemptive qualities of poetry, especially those works which expiated spiritual angst. The *Divina Commedia* ranks
first among such works, especially in the lines where Dante explains that, despite the
terror he feels in recounting his descent into Hell, he will recount the experience for
the benefit of others:

Ah quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
Esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
Che nel pensier rinnova la paura!
Tant’è amara che che poco è piu morte;
Ma per trattar del ben ch’io vi trovai,
Dirò de l’altrre cose ch’io v’ho scorte.

[Ah, how hard it is to speak of what it was like, / this wild forest, hard
and stubborn, / so that the thought of it renews my fears! / It is so bitter
that death is little worse; / but to give of the good that I found there, / I
will tell of the other things I found there] (Inf. I.4-9).

Dante revisited the themes and styles of *La Vita Nuova* in another vernacular
collection of lyric and prose, *Il Convivio* (“The Banquet”). As in *La Vita Nuova*, Dante
presents a series of lyric poems with accompanying explication; unlike *La Vita Nuova*,
however, the *Convivio* represents a movement toward a spiritual, Christian conception
of love, strongly influenced by theology and philosophy, in deep contrast to the more
overtly amorous or erotic verses of Dante’s earlier days. Once again, the work is
highly autobiographical; while the narratives speak of fantastical visions of God and
Beatrice in Heavenly splendor, the narrative is of Dante’s own spiritual and
philosophical maturity into an individual concerned with the condition of the soul and
the mind. His treatise *De Monarchia* (“On Monarchy”) advocated for the truncation of papal power in Italy, and for the restoration of the influence of the Holy Roman Emperor, insofar as the Emperor would administer worldly justice, while the Pope would deliver spiritual salvation. In 1310, as Dante wrote *Inferno*, a new Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VII, entered Italy with an army for the purpose of reestablishing imperial control in the north; he might have proven successful, had he not died suddenly of disease in 1313, leaving the Empire once more in a state of chaos. Dante wrote to the Emperor prolifically, beseeching him to expel the Black Guelfs from Florence; while Henry’s compatriots did manage to secure this change, the new administration of Florence maintained Dante’s sentence and even extended the death sentence to Dante’s now adult sons.

His reputation as a diplomat and profound poet increasing, Dante continued to travel among the city states from court to court. He finished *Purgatorio* and began *Paradiso* while still with Cangrande in Verona, accepting an invitation to visit the court of Prince Guido da Polenta, lord of Ravenna, sometime before 1321. While in Ravenna, he finished the *Commedia*. The Prince called on Dante’s skills as an ambassador to negotiate a treaty with the Republic of Venice in the summer of 1321; as Dante returned, he contracted malaria in the swamps around the city, and died on September 14, at the age of 56. His remains were buried in Ravenna where, despite efforts on the part of Florence to have them returned, they still rest in an ornate tomb—his sarcophagus in the cathedral of Florence remains empty to this day. In 2008, nearly 680 years after the poet’s death, the city council of Florence rescinded his
death sentence, seeking to have the remains returned. Ravenna refuses, however, and there is little indication that this will change in the immediate future.

In his long and varied life, Dante the historical figure experienced a survey of medieval lifestyles and roles: as an aristocrat and a pauper, a vernacular and spiritual poet, a layman and prophet, knight and diplomat, philosopher and theologian, and as a lover and a family man. In a letter he wrote to Cangrande later in life, Dante explains the allegorical significance of *Paradiso*, describing the work as “polysemous” (*Epist. XIII*, 7.22). Dante’s works are equally rich in identities and meanings, reflecting the author whose life was a survey of medieval professions and mindsets. The *Commedia*, therefore, reflects the literary and personal perspectives of a man with a uniquely comprehensive understanding of what we now call medieval life; his insatiable curiosity brought him wide scientific and philosophical knowledge of his world, his power for emotional expression demonstrated his deep meditations on love and loss, and the volatile world into which he was born gave him an unprecedented opportunity to feel the highs and lows of violence, triumph, exile, and salvation.

With the life of the poet in mind, modern readers must then consider the challenge of reading the text of the *Commedia* itself. This challenge is the same one that confronts any reader under any circumstance. Textual criticism, especially for a work as old and as heavily transmitted through copying and re-copying such as the *Commedia*, is always of vital importance. Engaging with a fixed text requires recognition that the text is, in reality, not fixed at all. This is not exclusively a product of changes within the letter of the text itself, but includes changes within the reader;
noted dantista Steven Botterill describes the poem as “Heraclitean river, into which no reader can ever step twice and find it unaltered” (Botterill 2). With a work as vast and as emotional as the *Commedia*, readers constantly find their approach to the text changed from reading-to-reading, as new metaphors and new revelations constantly come to light with consideration of the text. The reader must never forget his or herself in reading this poem.

As individual readers change with time, so does the perspective with which they approach the poem. Textual critic James Thorpe notes that such changes can happen quickly and are often highly significant: “No clock can measure the rate at which a man [or woman] becomes different, a little, a lot. Enough might happen in a day or even in a flash to require that a man [or woman] rediscover himself [or herself] and make a poem over in a new way” (Thorpe 189-90). This also applies to the composition of a text; readers ought to bear in mind the circumstances under which an aging Dante wrote the poem: in exile, wandering from court to court under the patronage of various northern Italian noblemen, separated from his family and haunted by feelings of disgrace but also tempered by redemptive hope. Without a doubt, his conception of the text changed as he wrote it, and the *Commedia of Inferno* is vastly different from the *Commedia of Paradiso*. The poem transforms the reader’s perspective as it transforms itself—it is in a constant state of change, and has been for centuries. Much as Dante-pilgrim engages the souls of the dead in the poem, so do readers commune with the poet and his creative endeavor now centuries after his death.
Dante does not, however, leave his readers without hope of understanding. Indeed he encourages engagement with the text, directly challenging readers to consider and reconsider some passages rich in multi-layered meanings: “Aguzza qui, lettor, ben li occhi al vero, / ché 'l velo è ora ben tanto sottile, / certo che 'l trapassar dentro è leggero” [Hone your sight well here, Reader, for the truth; / for here the veil is least subtle / and is easiest to see through directly] (Purg. VIII. 19-21). Dante’s allegorical scheme, in fact, is meant to help illuminate truths in this way, rather than obscure them with parable and metaphor. Dante subscribes to the theory of St. Thomas Aquinas that metaphor can be useful in conveying complex ideas. Spiritual truths, Aquinas argues, can be difficult to grasp when one is immersed in the corporeal world. It is fitting, therefore, “that spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from corporeal things, in order that thereby even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it” (Summa theol. 1.1.i.9). Indeed, between La Vita Nuova, Il Convivio, and his letter to Cangrande, Dante provides modern readers with many paths to understanding his work; daunting as the task may seem, every modern reader and critic may look to Dante, poet and pilgrim, as their guide up the mountain.
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Sun and Dante’s Allegory

The moment is one of promise; in the first canto of Inferno, Dante-pilgrim seeks to climb the Mount of Joy, crowned in the sunrise: “I raised my head and saw the hilltop shawled / in morning rays of light sent from the planet / that leads men straight ahead on every road” (Inf. I.16-8). The image of the rising sun—and the hope it engenders in the pilgrim—appears again the first two cantos of Purgatorio, as Cato explains to Dante and Virgil how to climb the mountain: “When you are ready to begin to scale / the mountainside, do not come back this way; / the rising sun will show you where to climb” (Purg. I.106-08). By the time Dante-pilgrim and his new guide Beatrice have reached the sun in Paradiso, the brilliance of the planet—Dante supposed the sun to be a planet—is outdone by the brilliance of God, who shines like a sun in the universe: “And suddenly it was as if one day / shone on the next—as if the One Who Could / had decked the Heavens with a second sun” (Par. I.61-63). After seeing souls without such hope in Inferno, Dante begins his journey toward spiritual redemption in Purgatorio with contemplation of the stars and planets, including the rising sun: “Dawn was gaining ground, putting to flight / the last hour of the night” (Purg. I.115-17). Thus Dante-poet associates the sun with God and salvation, and it is one of the strongest and most consistent images throughout the Commedia.

The sun, much like the pilgrim, remains a constant figure in the narrative, but it undergoes changes to indicate the spiritual progress of the pilgrimage. At first it is the far-off goal, the light that guides hard work and expiation; finally, the sun is seamlessly absorbed back into the light of God, as is the pilgrim’s vision of Heaven.
As an indicator of salvation, a constant motivation for Dante-pilgrim, the sun is an important symbol; as a symbol of God and object of contemplation for Dante-poet, the sun is an even more important symbol, and one which helps readers map Dante’s theory of allegory in the *Commedia*. I will argue that as Dante-pilgrim experiences God more directly throughout the narrative, the sun as an image reflects that directness, first as a symbol for God’s transcendent presence in the physical world, then itself later transcended so that God’s unmediated light—spiritual light, unintelligible to normal, physical senses—takes the place of the sun in the earlier part of the narrative.

Dante’s understanding of theological allegory is the theory developed by St. Thomas Aquinas near the beginning of his *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas argues that God, manifesting himself both in and through creation, requires no verbal agent in transmission of meaning; the universe itself is a book held open to the faithful, and the created object is as much a letter of signification as it is the idea signified:

> The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. (*Summa theol.* I.1.10)

God needs no intercessory scribe to prove the facts of his creation, Aquinas argues; in transmitting complex spiritual wisdom to reach salvation, however, theologians and the writers of Scripture require metaphorical language to convey their
meanings. Human beings are limited by their physical natures and require sensible approximations of spiritual truth to begin to understand it:

It is befitting that Holy Writ to put forward divine and spiritual truths by means of comparisons with material things. For God provides for everything according to the capacity of its nature. Now it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from sense. Hence in Holy Writ, spiritual truths are fittingly taught under the likeness of material things. This is what Dionysius says "We cannot be enlightened by the divine rays except [that] they [are] hidden within the covering of many sacred veils." It is also befitting Holy Writ, which is proposed to all without distinction of persons — "To the wise and to the unwise I am a debtor"— that spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from corporeal things, in order that thereby even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it. *(Summa theol. 1.1.i.9)*

Aquinas is consonant with St. Augustine in this respect, recalling the latter’s meditation on the historically factual nature of Scripture in considering the spiritual. Metaphors can be used to convey spiritual truth with the understanding that, in Scripture at least, the literal message of the story, as record of creation, was not

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3 *On the Celestial Hierarchy* i.
4 Romans 1:14.
fiction: “There is no prohibition against such exegesis, provided that we also believe in the truth of the story as record of historical fact” (De Civitate Dei 13.22).

The sun in the Commedia is a symbol that allows readers to grasp the deeper spiritual meaning of Dante’s pilgrimage; it is unusual, however, for Dante to have appropriated Aquinas’ allegorical theory since Aquinas intended spiritual metaphors to be used in Scripture or theology, not fictional verse. It is unusual, in fact, for Dante to relate serious spiritual meanings in his poem at all, since most medieval writers and theoreticians of allegory—including Dante himself—agreed with Aquinas and argued that allegory for poetic fiction and theology should be markedly different.

In an earlier work, the Convivio, written beginning in 1304, Dante similarly expresses spiritual themes through vernacular canzone [“songs,” or “brief poems”], which exalt the speaker’s lady (Bemrose 89). In the first book, Dante declares his intention to explicate the rime petrose [“stony verses,” suggesting difficult or dense poems] of the text in such a way that they may be more fully appreciated by an undereducated reader: “Wishing now to set their table, I intend to present to all men a banquet of what I have shown them and of the bread which must necessarily accompany such meat, without which it could not be consumed by them” (Convivio I.1). This primary conceit of the Convivio—that the poems form the “meat” of the banquet and the explanation of the figurative meanings the “bread”—seems to establish a two-layered structure of allegory which thus far mentions nothing of theology. Furthermore, in the explicatory passages concerning the first canzone, titled from its incipit “Voi che ‘ntendendo il terzo ciel movete” [“You whose will moves the
third Heaven”), Dante respectfully observes the limitations of poetry as fiction, not accorded that same level of historical truth or truth in facto as accorded to Scripture by St. Augustine:

As I stated in the first chapter, this exposition must be both literal and allegorical. [...] The first is called the literal, and this is the sense that does not go beyond the surface of the letter, as in the fables of the poets. The next is called the allegorical, and this is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction. [...] Why this kind of concealment was devised by the wise will be shown in the penultimate book. Indeed the theologians take this sense otherwise than do the poets; but since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets. (Convivio II.1)

That Dante understood Aquinas’ theological exegetical theory is quite clear. In a letter written after the completion of the Commedia to his patron, Duke Cangrande della Scala, Dante explications Psalm 113 (114) in a perfectly conventional fashion:

If we look at it from the letter alone it means to us the exit of the Children of Israel from Egypt at the time of Moses; if from allegory, it means for us our redemption done by Christ; if from the moral sense, it means to us the conversion of the soul from the struggle and misery of sin to the status of grace; if from the anagogical, it means the leave taking of the blessed soul from the slavery of this corruption to the
freedom of eternal glory. And though these mystical senses \[isti sensus mystici\] are called by various names, in general all can be called allegorical, because they are different from the literal or the historical.

\[(Letter to Cangrande I.7)\]

Despite having made this distinction in the letter, in the \textit{Convivio}, Dante bafflingly explains the meaning of his poems using theological terms and theories:

The third sense is called moral, and this is the sense that teachers should intently seek to discover throughout the scriptures, for their own profit and that of their pupils. […]The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is to say, beyond the senses; and this occurs when a scripture is expounded in a spiritual sense which, although it is true also in the literal sense, signifies by means of the things signified a part of the supernal things of eternal glory, as may be seen in the song of the Prophet which says that when the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made whole and free. \textit{(Convivio II.1)}

Dante seems to have drawn a line for himself and then immediately crossed it, suggesting that his work is endowed with the same level of spiritual significance as Scripture, which itself describes the divinely wrought face of creation. Aquinas suggested that poetry had its uses but was not as effective as spiritual metaphor in bringing readers closer to truth: “Poetry makes use of metaphors to produce a representation, for it is natural to man to be pleased with representations. But sacred doctrine makes use of metaphors as both necessary and useful” \textit{(Summa theol. 1.1.i.9)}. 
The sun of the *Commedia*, even though it evokes the real body itself, is not one that rises for anyone other than in the imagination of the Poet and his readers. But why should fiction impose such stark limitations on the conveyance of spiritual truth?

The *Commedia*, to Dante as much as his readers, is fiction; it cannot be taken, as Psalm 113 would have been taken, as a description of historical fact. While it is certainly autobiographical—both Dante-pilgrim and Dante-poet feature predominately as characters, and many other characters were persons with whom Dante had personal contact—it is descriptive of an imaginative journey for spiritual purposes; it does not and cannot describe a literal metaphysical pilgrimage. Yet the metaphysical universe of this pilgrimage, as Dante describes it, reflects a popular perception of the universe as created according to Scripture and patristic interpretations of it. Art more than imitates life in the *Commedia*—Dante effectively creates a *speculum mundi* of creation, allowing readers to see in its fictional surface the reflection of true reality. In the process, he mystically draws the readers closer to God. While still safely within the confines of Augustinian and Thomist understanding of what is God’s creation and what is humanity’s, Dante’s project is a revolutionary one; tantalizingly, he declares his intention to create “a new sun to rise where the old shall set and to give light to those who find themselves in shadows and in darkness because the old sun no longer casts its rays upon them” (*Convivio* 1.13).

The God of reality and the God of Dante’s universe are thus fundamentally the same entity—Dante could not have recreated God *in verbo*, but could evoke Him in describing fictionally and allegorically objects that manifested God *in facto*. Dante’s
text thus shares much in common with contemplative and mystical treatises of preceding centuries, particularly those that attempted to inspire, through meditation upon specific imagery, a close or even immediate understanding of God by transcending reality. Both Dante-pilgrim and Dante-poet draw close to God, drawing readers along with them, through the course of the poem: so close, in fact, that Dante’s description of God in *Paradiso* effectively collapses under the burden, in such a way that the poem concludes with the Poet conveys immediate experience rather than a more concrete description:

Se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
A l’alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
ma già volgeva il mio disio e ’l velle,
si come rota ch’igualmente è mossa,
l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle

[Then a great flash of understanding struck / my mind, and suddenly its wish was granted. / At this point power failed high fantasy / but, like a wheel in perfect balance turning, / I felt my will and my desire impelled / by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.] (Par XXXIII.140-45)

This surrender, as it exists on the page, is a contemplative moment. But the moment the Poet describes is not a moment of transcendence, but of God’s immediacy. So immediate, in fact, is God’s light that Dante-poet is unable to describe
Him not only because of the majesty of the moment, but also because reality and fiction have arrived at the same point in the brilliant existence of the creator himself, for which words are inadequate tools of description. In the process, naturally, Dante-poet loses the ability to describe what he sees with human language, pleading “Trasumanar significar per verba, / non si poria” [To describe in words what it is to go beyond being human / cannot be done] (Par.1.70-1). Effectively, he pleads that same plea of the inadequacy of language that compelled Aquinas to recognize that humans required their imperfect methods of parable in relating his spiritual truth.

The sun, more than any other device in the *Commedia*, embodies this transition from transcendence to immanence. In the first *cantiche*, the sun illuminates the world as an expression of the transcendent presence of God—where the sun is, so is divine grace; where it is absent, so is that same grace, particularly in *Inferno*. When Dante ascends into Heaven, however, he is travelling through what we understand to be outer space; moving beyond the sun in its geocentric orbit, he experiences the presence of divine grace directly. The eschatological significance of this immanence is clear from a passage in Revelation that describes Christ’s manifestation after the Second Coming: “And night shall be no more: and they shall not need the light of the lamp, nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall enlighten them, and they shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:5).

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Dante would choose to focus so intently upon certain corporeal objects in the *Commedia* as vehicles for spiritual understanding; the sun is one such allegorical vehicle. During the Middle Ages, life revolved around the
sun—it was crucial to the agrarian lifestyle of nearly all Europeans and, in the absence of electricity and central heating, provided the most heat and light that many could expect during the year. Most of Europe was, furthermore, undeveloped and rural; the dark forest in which Dante-pilgrim begins Inferno was a real place for most Europeans, and the terror that the Pilgrim feels there reflects contemporary angst toward darkness and the wild. The first poem verifiably written in the Italian language, composed in the Umbrian dialect (distinct from Dante’s Tuscan) and attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, praises God for creating the sun, even going so far as to compare the sun to God himself:

Laudato sie, mi Signore cum tucte le Tue creature,
spetialmente messor lo frate Sole,
lo qual è iorno, et allumini noi per lui.
Et ellu è bellu e radiante cum grande splendore:
de Te, Altissimo, porta significatione.

[You are praised, my Lord, with all of Your creatures, / especially my lord, the brother Sun, / because of whom it is day; ane we are illuminated by him, / he is beautiful and radiant in / great splendor! / Of You, my Lord, he bears great resemblance] (“Laudes Creaturarum” 5-9).

Dante’s emphasis in the Commedia upon the nature of light and the importance of the sun, therefore, has great meaning for the medieval perspective; to see the sun as hope is not a tired metaphor for Dante, but a powerful image with which all medieval Europeans could identify. The sun brought life, brought light, and allowed easier
travel through the wild forests of the countryside. To compare the sun to God, as St. Francis does, is not difficult for Dante. In fact, it is a symbol already closely associated with God and one which readers would not have to work toward understanding too intently. Dante thus begins the narrative with an accessible image; as the work progresses, however, the complexity and meaning of the image of the sun changes to suit Dante’s own ever-deepening intellectual and spiritual quest to describe the glory of God.
Chapter 2: The Invisible Light of Inferno

The sun is almost completely absent from Inferno, present mostly in the first, introductory canto. Attempting to scale a hill at the end of a valley—a representation of salvation and the ascent to knowledge of God—Dante observes the sun rising as it inspires hope: “Guardai in alto, e vidi le sue spalle / Vestite già de’ raggi del pianeta / Che mena dritto altrui per ogni calle” [I looked on high, and I saw its shoulders / clothed in the rays of the planet / that leads men straight on every road] (Inf. I.16-18). Here, Dante-pilgrim’s initial interaction with the sun is distant and brief, frustrated by the three beasts that embody sin; finally frightened by the she-wolf, the Pilgrim wavers and descends to a place without the comfort of sun or God: “Mi ripigneva là dove ‘l sol tace” [I returned to a place where the sun is mute”] (Inf. I.60). In this silent place, except for numerous allusions made by the Poet, Virgil, or the souls of the damned, the sun does not appear again until Purgatorio. This absence creates a state of permanent physical and spiritual darkness that is central to Dante’s vision of Hell as a place of spiritual ignorance, “nel cieco mondo” [the blind world] (Inf. IV.13).

Nearly all scholarship on Dante, from the 14th century to the present, agrees that one of the principal, defining qualities of Hell is its darkness, indicative of spiritual and intellectual poverty. This spiritual darkness is so central to Hell’s nature that it is not an incidental darkness, caused merely by the sun’s absence; instead, it is akin to Milton’s “darkness visible,” a radiant darkness that characterizes the totality of the sinner’s failure to feel the love of God. Dante’s Hell is more than punitive in nature; the more active and omnipresent affliction of the damned is their distance from
God and from hope of divine joy. Even while in the company of the shades of the richest poets and philosophers of pagan antiquity in canto IV, the reprieve for the Pilgrim and the pagans is brief and followed quickly by a return to an utter hopelessness: “E vengo in parte ove non è che luce” [“And I venture to where there is no light”] (Inf. IV explicit). Even Goodness, without God, is meaningless to stop the darkness of this place.

Dante-pilgrim experiences this darkness directly—the darkness of the first canto is Dante’s own risk of damnation in consequence of his sins. But where Dante-pilgrim may be at risk, Divine grace intervenes and permits experience of the darkness of Hell almost with impunity; Dante-pilgrim is allowed to experience the darkness once in Hell proper without also feeling the same sense of hopelessness. The sun’s absence symbolizes the sinner’s inability to see or comprehend God, but does not represent God’s absence altogether. Dante-pilgrim undertakes the journey through Hell at the behest of Beatrice, who acts on behalf of God; Dante-pilgrim experiences the absence of perception of God, but does so while observing firsthand the effects of God’s divine justice and love, even in the lowest parts of the universe. In one passage in particular, Virgil reminds the Pilgrim and the reader alike that God is present in all of creation—including Hell—and the light of his glory radiates through all creation: “Colui lo cui saper tutto trascende / Fece li cieli, e diè lor chi conduce, / Sì c’ ogni parte ad ogni parte splende, / Distribuendo igualmente la luce” [“He whose knowledge transcends all / made the Heavens, and gave each a guide / so that each part upon each part shines, / equally distributing the light”] (Inf. VII.73-6).
The symbol of the sun in *Inferno* thus illustrates understanding of the divine on a basic, literal level; presence and absence of the sun indicate presence and absence of God as He is perceived. Yet as Dante learns throughout the instructive journey through the depths, God permeates existence transcendentally in such a way that divine truth is present whether perceived or not. Joseph Mazzeo notes: “the whole of the *Divine Comedy* is a translation into terms of sensible light of a timeless vision of a spiritual or intellectual light; an adaptation for physical eyes of what was seen by the eyes of the soul” (Mazzeo 42). It is the mission of the Pilgrim to learn how to perceive God’s transcending light even in the absence of more obvious indicators; in effect, he must learn how to perceive what seems to a soul steeped in sin an invisible light.

The beginning of perceiving this light is worldly knowledge. Virgil, Dante’s guide, is the primary embodiment of this knowledge, and Dante’s educational journey begins as soon as he descends the Mount of Joy in failure and meets Virgil. As Dante is driven to a place where the sun does not speak or shine, Virgil appears, dim from what Dante-poet describes as silence: “Mentre ch’ i’ rovinava in basso loco, / Dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto / Chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco” [“While I hurtled into that low place, / before me my eyes revealed / One who from long silence appeared faint”] (*Inf.* I. 61-63). *Fioco* may also indicate hoarseness of voice in this instance though *parea*, from *parere*, ‘to seem’ or ‘to appear’, denotes a more visual impression5. Whether or not it is Virgil who has been silent is unclear; that he appears precisely as Dante ventures into a place where the sun does not speak suggests at this

5 -My own reading.
stage that it is the sun—and thereby God—whose failure to speak or shine has caused
the dimness.

This clever synesthetic moment underscores the fact that perception of God
and perception of the sun are both crucial to maintaining spiritual vitality. At the same
time, however, Dante exalts Virgil as a guiding figure among guiding figures, first
among literary role models: “O degli altri poeti onore e lume” [“Oh light and honor of
other poets”] (Inf. I.82). Despite his hoarseness or outward dimness, Virgil is still
esteemed by the Pilgrim for his inward intellectual brilliance. Virgil, a pagan, exudes a
figurative light of his own, sufficiently bright to guide the Pilgrim through the paths of
vice. By the time Virgil’s luminous powers are no longer necessary, however, the
meaning of light with relation to the spirit will have greatly changed within the
Commedia.

Just after the beginning of the descent into Hell, Virgil leads Dante into the
circle of the virtuous pagans and the unbaptized, a realm of encouraging intellectual
luminosity. Virgil warns Dante-pilgrim even before this stage that the whole of Hell—
including its brighter spots—are beyond grace and therefore beyond hope for salvation
or understanding: “‘Or discendiam qua giù nel cieco mondo’ / cominciò il poeta tutto
smorto. / ‘Io sarò primo, e tu sarai secondo’” [“Now we descend from here into the
blind world’ / began the poet, fully pale. / ‘I will go first, and you will come second”]
(Inf. IV.13-15). Their first encounter with the damned beyond Acheron’s shores in
Limbo takes place within a small sphere of light, the only arguably pleasant spot in the
entirety of Hell: “Non era lunga ancor la nostra via / di qua dal sonno, quand’ io vidi
un foco / ch’emesperio di tenebre vincia” [“We were not yet far in our journey / from where I woke, when I saw a fire / bound by a hemisphere of darkness”] (Inf. IV.67-69). While many interpret vincia in this passage as related to the verb vincere, ‘to conquer,’ Grandgent suggests that it is from vincire, ‘to bind,’ with emesperio as its subject; thus the light does not conquer the darkness, but the darkness binds the light (Grandgent 39).

While still arguably some of the best and most enlightened minds that ever lived, these pagan shades are still ominously bound by the fact of their refusal to accept Christ. Dante-poet neatly contrasts himself with the greatest poets of antiquity in this moment—Ovid, Lucian, Virgil, and Homer—suggesting that he is one among their number though somehow distinguished by his redeeming faith. As Dante-pilgrim’s journey was willed by God, his eventual success is guaranteed despite the obstacles he encounters; embedded within the failure to reach the sun in canto I is the promise of an eventual second try. Thus the darkness that binds the pagan greats does not similarly bind the Pilgrim. Even at this early stage, Dante-poet reveals through light the ambition of his poetic project.

The suffering of these intellectual greats is poena damni, characterized by a sense of loss, rather than poena sensus, active torment and pain. Peter Abelard, expanding upon Augustine’s suggestion that unbaptized infants could not be saved, coined the terms to distinguish between a passive form of damnation, characterized by lack of salvation, and a more active damnation characterized by pain (cf. Expositio in Epist. Pauli ad Rom. II). Gregory of Nazianus also provided some semblance of the

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6 - Grandgent’s reading.
idea in one of his orations: “For from the fact that one does not merit punishment, it
does not follow that he is worthy of being honored, any more than it follows that one
who is not worthy of a certain honor deserves on that account to be punished” (Orat.
XL.23). The condition of the pagan intellectuals is not punitive; as their fire, bridled
by darkness, indicates, they are enveloped in a world without the active, perceptible
presence of God.

Indeed none of Hell is actually punitive in nature; God is an entity of pure and
unadulterated carità or ‘love’ to Dante and could never actively repudiate his creation.
Rather it is failure to engage with God spiritually—which leads to failure to perceive
God—that leads to defective love and eventually, damnation. This is what sets the
damned apart from the repentant souls of Purgatory and the blessed souls of Heaven;
they have gone so far in their refusal to accept God that they have lost knowledge of
God and have become alone in the universe. In some cases defective love, wrongly
directed toward things other than God, will assume a malevolent and independent
quality, mirroring the substantive darkness of Hell itself. In some places, in fact, this
counterfeit love almost goes so far as to mimic the light of God.

The light found in the realm of the virtuous pagans is a product of their reason
in the absence of God; in other places, the active absence of God and the false love it
engenders produce a strange, incandescent light. Giovanni Scartazzini, in his
renowned Enciclopedia Dantesca, argues that Dante’s use of cieco, or ‘blind’, is not
limited to the darkness but may also include whatsoever lack of perception may lead
to lack of knowledge of God: “Che non conosce il vero, il bene, o simili; Che è come
privo della luce della mente, or per difetto di senno naturale, o di dottrina, o per eccesso di passione” [“That which does not know the truth, the good, or the like; that which is without the light of the mind, or without natural judgement, or doctrine, or with an excess of passion”] (Scartazzini 374). The damned need not be physically unable to see to be blind in this sense. Therefore the lights of Hell are projections of sin, light that further obscures the path to divine truth.

The heresiarchs of canto X project their own lights; their imprisonment in tombs filled with fire signifies their actively defective perception of God to the point that they are entombed by their own falsely produced passion, condemned thereby to eternal death after the Final Judgment. This contrapasso is significant in Dante-poet’s valuation of light as an expression of divinity; where theology is supposed to draw humanity toward God, heretical teachings provide false love. Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti, a former political enemy of Dante’s, numbers among the entombed. He misinterprets a statement by the Pilgrim and believes mistakenly that his son Guido has died, lamenting not only that his son is dead, but that he has died without a purer form of light: “Di subito drizzato gridò: “Come? / dicesti ‘elli ebbe’? non viv’ elli ancora? / non fiere li occhi suoi lo dulce lume?” [“Immediately he cried out, standing: ‘What do you mean? / You say he was? He lives no more? / His eyes no longer feel the sweet light?’”] (Inf. X.67-69). This sweet light is one which the Pilgrim still possesses potential of sensing, despite the dark environment; it is a privilege accorded those who still live with the possibility of redemption, though Dante must complete his journey through Hell before he is in a position to experience purgation. The fires of
Hell are not purifying; Dante portrays them as offshoots of sin, as cancerous
generations or conditions of irreversible impurity.

Before the flames of the heresiarchs, however, is another sort of internally
generated fire. The ramparts of Dis, which enclose the tombs, incandesce with an
internal fire that illuminates the entire sixth circle of Hell:

E io: “Maestro, già le sue meschite
là entre certe ne la valle cerno,
vermiglie come se di foco uscite
fossero”. Ed ei mi disse: “Il foco eterno
ch’entro l’affoca le dimostra rosse,
come tu vedi in questo basso inferno.”

[I said: “Master, already I discern its mosques / there beyond the valley, / red
as though they were freshly pulled / from fire.” He said to me: “The eternal fire
/ that within them burns glows red, / as you see throughout this lower Hell.”

(*Inf:* VIII.70-75.)

In effect, Dis and the tombs within it are static antitypes of the sun of God. They
radiate a false, evil light, though the light only illuminates the particular region of Hell
through which the travelers pass, bound still by darkness much like the fire of the
virtuous pagans in canto IV. Dante even provides a parallel with the image of the
rising sun over the Mount of Joy in canto I: “Ma poi ch’i’ fui al piè d’un colle giunto, /
là dove terminava quella valle / che m’avea di paura il cor compunto” [“Then I stood
before a hill that joined / the place that ended that valley / the fear of which had seized
my heart’’) (Inf. I.13-15). Like the sun above the mount in canto I, Dis also burns at the end of a valley; yet unlike that sun, Dis does not rise and offers no hope of ever moving, stuck as it is like a graveyard for those awaiting the *seconda morte* or ‘second death’.

Virgil, until now an authoritative source of confidence for the Pilgrim, is afflicted with doubt when the demons of Dis refuse to open the doors to the travelers, despite his knowledge that the journey was ordained by grace and is therefore irresistible. In a moment of weakness, he betrays his hesitations to the Pilgrim: “‘Pur a noi converrà vincer la pugna’, / cominciò el, ‘se non … Tal ne s’offorse. / Oh quanto tarda a me ch’altri qui giunga!’” [“‘Even we were assured of victory in this struggle’ / he began, ‘or not … but such help was offered. / Oh how late he is coming here!’”] (Inf. IX 10-13). The “he” that Virgil anticipates is an angel from Heaven who will force open the doors; some interpretations, however, suggest that Virgil is ambivalently referring to God. As Dante-pilgrim is learning, God is present even in Hell—sinners are incapable of perceiving him. Similar to the Poet’s description of the pagans bound by an ominous darkness of ignorance, Virgil here reveals his inability to intuitively or spiritually perceive God. He only understands God rationally and intellectually; Dante-poet suggests here that this understanding has crucial limits.

Compounding such doubt is the mortal risk posed to the Pilgrim by Medusa, who mounts the ramparts of Dis to petrify him; her eyes provide a visual dynamic to sin that is not merely obfuscating but potentially deadly. Virgil, in contrast to his failure in doubting God, quickly exhorts Dante to turn his back to avoid making eye
contact with her but doubts the Pilgrim’s self-control, covering Dante’s eyes with his own hands: “Così disse ‘l maestro; ed elli stessi / mi volse, e non si tenna a le mie mani, / che con le sue ancor non mi chiudessi” [Thus spoke my master; he then / turned me around and did not trust my hands / but with his own kept my eyes shut] (Inf. IX 58-60). Dante-poet has indicted pure intellect in Virgil’s hesitancy but reminds readers that without some intellect—even perhaps a great deal of it—faith is equally powerless to stop sin. Spiritual vision is vital to searching out God, but intellectual vision is the safeguard against ruination.

The Gorgon’s eyes further illustrate that some of the people of Hell, not only the places, radiate imperfect knowledge of God. Medusa’s eyes radiate paralyzing sin just as the eyes of Beatrice will later reflect beatitude in Paradiso. Even the boatman who carries Virgil and Dante across the Styx, Phlegyas, contains his own unGodly, internal fire. Dantista Ettore Romagnoli, in his commentary on canto VIII, notes the stem *fleg-* in the name, suggesting heat: “Flegiàs nel cui nome suona la radice *fleg*, ardere; adatto, dunque, alla città del fuoco” [Phlegyas, in whose name appears the root *fleg*, ‘to burn’; suitable, therefore, in the city of fire] (Romagnoli 145). *Fleg-* in this instance is from Latin *phlegma*, which is itself from Greek φλέγμα, etymon of *phlegm* and similar terms (OED). This fire is, therefore, unmistakably internal and related to the same notion of phlegm that informs irritable behavior in the theory of humors, unchallenged in medieval medicine. Charon, who ferries Virgil and Dante-pilgrim across the Acheron, has glowing eyes that radiate his internal fire as well: “Caron
The souls of the damned, unlike these demons, do not produce such light but are only acted upon by the elements; their defective love affects themselves the most, and as such they do not actively radiate their sin. According to Dante-poet’s contemporary view of doctrine on free will, sin is elected in spite of grace and God’s readiness to forgive and love. The election of sin over virtuous behavior therefore, is entirely self-directed; the contrapasso of each condemned soul is not punishment but the expression of a lack of choice and therefore, lack of self-awareness. Dante considers this self-perpetuating cycle of false ardor-begets-sin and sin-begets-false ardor to be the most potentially dangerous both to the Pilgrim and to the Poet’s creative enterprise, charged as it is with self-importance. On several occasions, the Pilgrim fears his own potential for loving God incorrectly.

There is another figure in Hell, however, who has been more consumed by his false ardor. Ulysses, from Homer’s *Odyssey*, appears in canto 26, damned for hubris and transformed by wanderlust and deceit into a pillar of fire, an antitype of that pillar which led the Hebrews to salvation in Exodus. Allusions to the sun and a valley filled with light again set the scene, once more bringing the Pilgrim into a scene evocative of the first canto:

Quante ’l villan ch’al poggio si riposa,

nel tempo che colui che ’l mondo schiara

la faccia sua a noi tien meno ascosa,
come la mosca cede a la zanzara,
vede lucciole giù per la vallea,
forse colà dov’e’ vendemmia e ara:
di tante fiamme tutta risplendea
l’ottava bolgia, si com’ io m’accorsi
tosto che fui là ‘ve ‘l fondo parea.

[As the peasant, resting himself on some far hill / in the time when he who lights the world / hides his face least from us / (when the fly gives way to the mosquito), / sees fireflies down in the valley, / where lately perhaps he plows or harvests grapes; / thus shone with many flames / the eighth bolgia, as appeared to me / from where I saw the deep.] (Inf. XXVI. 25-33)

“He who lights the world” is, in this context, the sun; beyond this meaning, however, Dante-poet suggests that this summer is life, when God is most ready to aid in the salvation of the living soul. Ulysses, condemned, is beyond such hope; his love has trapped him down within the valley that the Pilgrim seeks to escape, perpetually denied knowledge of God.

Dante-poet then goes on to compare Ulysses’s distance from God to the relative proximity to God of the Biblical prophet Elijah, who was taken to Heaven in a chariot of fire. In both instances, the subject’s zeal burns so brightly that it obscures the subject himself, though for Ulysses it is zeal for discovery and not for God:

E qual colui che si vengiò con li orsi
vide l’ carro d’Elia al dipartire,
quando i cavalli al cielo erti levorsi,
che nol potea si con li occhi seguire,
ch’el vedessa altro che la fiamma sola,
si come nuvoletta, in sù salire;
tal si move ciascuna per la gola
del fosso, ché nessuna mostra ‘l furto
e ogne fiamma un peccatore invola.

[As he who was avenged by bears / witnessed the chariot of Elijah in flight, / when the rearing horses raised themselves into Heaven, / tried with his eyes to follow, / he could not behold more than the flame, / like a little cloud flying high; / so moved each flame in the throat / of the ditch, and none shows its theft / though each flame steals a sinner.] (Inf. XXVI. 34-42)

The chariot conveys Elijah to God, burning so brightly that his successor Elisha (“he who was avenged by bears”) cannot see it. Ulysses, however, flickers in obscurity, hidden from the Poet in his sin, surreptitiously concealed by flames that “steal” the sinner rather than benevolently guide him.

Ulysses describes his earthly fall, typical of the damned in Inferno, without acknowledging the sins for which he is condemned. Dante would not have read the Odyssey; his knowledge of Ulysses was second-hand and thus this addition to Ulysses’s life is Dante’s own invention. Speaking in Greek with Virgil, he describes how, urging his men on another adventure after the events of the Odyssey by exhorting them to sail beyond the boundaries of the known world: “non volgiate negare
l’esperienza, / di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente” [“You do not want to neglect the experience / of that which is beyond the sun, of the land without people”] (Inf. XXVI.116-17). The construction “beyond the sun” here is telling; while condemned with the deceitful, ostensibly for his invention of the Trojan horse, Ulysses recalls a tale of hubris and desire to reach beyond that which is acceptable for a man to seek in life. Consequently the voyage dooms Ulysses and his crew; after sailing five months (marked by the passage of the Moon), they encounter the isle of Purgatory, forbidden to living men, and are drowned in a whirlwind sent by God: “com’ altrui piacque” [“as pleased Another”] (Inf. XXVI.141).

Ulysses’s drive for such knowledge violates the boundaries of the Christian path to spiritual understanding; Ulysses attempts, before Christ (and thus before the possibility of salvation) to seek the shores of Purgatory while alive, without grace, and without acknowledgment of any end in such knowledge except self-aggrandizement. As Dante will later indicate in Purgatorio, he is concerned about his inclination to pride; his own empathic fright at the edge of the eighth bolgia reflects this (cf. Purg. XII). Ulysses eventually destroyed himself and his crew on account of his arrogance, as the Pilgrim’s blindness nearly damned him at the beginning of the Commedia; the encounter between the travelers and the flame is one of the most empathetic in the entirety of the cantica.

By comparing his perception with that of Elisha’s at the beginning of the canto, Dante-poet once again frames his poetic understanding with the notion that he is capable of communicating a certain understanding of God where the sinners of
Inferno cannot. This comparison elevates the spiritual significance of the Commedia considerably; Dante-poet is not merely illustrating a personal journey but, by comparing himself to a prophet, suggests to the reader that what he says about sin has the potential to guide others in their quest to salvation. Long before the Pilgrim reaches his own level of spiritual self-direction—still requiring the guiding influence of Virgil to protect him—the Poet implicitly suggests that his guidance is spiritually useful.

In fact the Pilgrim is once again at risk of succumbing to the condition of Ulysses’s sin of pride and only narrowly avoids falling into the pit with Ulysses’s flame: “Io stava sovra ‘l ponte a veder surto, / sì che s’io non avessi un ronchion preso, / caduto sarei giù sanz’ esser urto” [I stood upon the bridge, peering over, / so that had I not seized a fixed rock, / I would have tumbled below] (Inf. XXVI. 43-45). The peril is empathic but not paralyzing, as when Dante-pilgrim faints before the doomed lovers Francesca and Paolo in canto V. Rather, the fixed rock, conveniently placed, steadies the Pilgrim in his newly acquired knowledge of sin, allowing him to observe sin more closely without falling himself into the condition. This is the ultimate goal of the Pilgrim’s journey in Inferno: knowledge of sin without participation in it; by this stage, he has learned how to see beyond the imperfect emanations into the heart of sin as it is, and can protect himself from it rather than relying upon Virgil or direct divine intervention.

As Dante-pilgrim and Virgil venture to the end of Inferno not long after their encounter with Ulysses, the narrative culminates in the sight of the triune Satan,
imprisoned in the ice by his futile weeping and beating of his wings. He is a mute animal, puerile in his wailings and useless raging against God; his condition, like that of all damned souls in *Inferno*, is self-imposed; he is trapped in the ice because he seeks to free himself without the help of God.

Ending with this final, powerful illustration of Hell’s intellectual and spiritual poverty, Dante and Virgil climb down Satan’s back, encountering the center of the Earth, and climb back toward the surface. With their arrival, they are greeted by the stars of a night sky; the sun is absent, but the field is set for its return and with it, the luminous presence of God.

Chapter 3: The Earthly Light of *Purgatorio*
Dante-pilgrim and Virgil leave the doomed journey of Ulysses behind to approach the shores of Purgatory, carried by the poetic creativity of the Poet: “Per correr miglior acque alza le vele / omai la navicella del mio ingegno, / che lascia dietra a sè mar si crudele” [“For better waters now rise the sails / of the little boat of my ingenuity, / which leaves behind that sea most cruel’’] (Purg. I 1-3). This image stresses that the spiritual education of the Pilgrim is still an ongoing process; the flight across the sea evokes the flight out of Egypt in Exodus and Dante’s favorite Psalm 113, after which still threaten hardship and spiritual privation. Yet unlike the Hebrews, Dante has traveled to an alternative Israel, situated on the polar opposite end of the earth from Jerusalem, crowned by the pristine Earthly Paradise that receives the purified souls of the repentant. Inferno shows the deficiency of love that leads to damnation as an active, self-perpetuating force; Purgatory constantly works toward the manifestation of virtue and correct love. As Dante climbs the mountain among the saved souls that must be purified to reach Heaven, he instills in himself an ethos of self-correction, no longer hopelessly imprisoned by the self-perpetuation of sin through ignorance. The sun, much like the pillar of flame in Exodus, guides Virgil and the Pilgrim upward.

In the opposite hemisphere from the inhabited lands of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the mountain of Purgatory shares space in terrestrial time and space. The Pilgrim’s journey here is one through physicality, yet the inward journey is toward a spiritual state that transcends that physicality, developing certain kinds of worldly virtue but at the same time overcoming limitations of the body and its senses. Back on
what the Poet calls the *aiuola* or ‘threshing floor’ of existence (*Par. XXVII. 85*), the Pilgrim is ready to begin a more direct dialogue with God in the ascent of the mountain. The sun, rising in cantos I-III, makes clear the presence of grace; back on Earth, Dante is once again given the chance to cultivate his soul, and the sun is there to guide in the process. This is a place of life, and Dante, still living, has the potential to use that life in seeking forgiveness of his sins. The sun, therefore, is equally a physical and spiritual indicator of the journey’s progress. It lights the journey through life toward intellectual and spiritual maturity.

Unlike the canto I of *Inferno* where the Pilgrim falls to a “place where the sun is mute,” Purgatory is a place where the sun speaks. The Poet gives voice to the whole of the Heavens, in fact, as a way of stressing the omnipresence of God throughout all creation. He focuses intently upon the dramatic sunrise in order both to show the other Heavenly bodies and to stress the supreme importance of the sun as the most luminous of the Heavenly lights, as seen from earth. As the Poet has already made clear, perception of God is inextricably linked with self-awareness and, therefore, the ability to correct sin and counterfeit love. Therefore the sun has two important roles in Purgatory; it is first the light of worldly intellect and virtue and second, but more significant, the light of God and the embodiment of His grace in leading the penitent souls to Heaven. This transformation is central to the notion that Dante changes the significance of the sun throughout the *Commedia* from a conventional symbol to a spiritual manifestation of God.
Dante follows contemporary and patristic thinking on grace, mostly developed by St. Augustine and refined by Aquinas, in describing this relationship between the sun and free will. From patristic times, theologians described grace as a purely supernatural or deific phenomenon, emanating from God, part of which inheres in human beings but is not contingent upon the individual soul or free will. There are various forms of grace given to the individual by God, but one in particular, *gratia preveniens* or ‘prevenient grace,’ comes before all others and may supercede or override human actions. This grace predisposes the individual to seek or accept God before the interruption of such desire by other things, namely sin. To aid *gratia preveniens*, therefore, is *gratia coöperans*, or ‘cooperative grace,’ extended by God in a moment of difficulty or tribulation to aid the process of reaching salvation. It is the grace that works in conjunction with free will, rather than above or beyond it; prevenient grace works before decisions have been made by an individual but cooperative grace works in conjunction with made decisions—an aid, extended in love, for reaching God. St. Augustine describes the relationship between the two forms of grace neatly: “He [God] begins His influence by working in us that we may have the will, and He completes it by working with us when we have the will” (*De grat. et lib. arbitr.* 17 & 33).

Every soul in Purgatory except for one has been saved and therefore possesses grace. Contaminated with sin, however, each soul must also cleanse itself and learn to appreciate God before it can fully utilize certain forms of grace. For Dante-pilgrim the greatest challenge of Purgatory is self-correctively learning to direct desire toward
God; it is desire for God that makes the *Commedia’s* entire narrative structure move forward. This fact is true of both the narrative ascent of the Pilgrim; it is also, furthermore, the ultimate goal of the Poet to make a serious and lasting statement about God and the path to salvation. Now focusing on the souls of those who have begged forgiveness of God and have hope of salvation, the Poet contrasts their experience of God’s light—in the sun—to the blind experience of the damned in *Inferno*, frequently drawing parallels to the earlier *cantica* while also planting the seeds of ideas that will flourish later in *Paradiso*.

The *cantica* begins with the approaching light of the morning sun, a revisitation of the imagery from the first canto of *Inferno*. Dante-poet sets the stage for the spiritual path to God to begin anew under the same auspices as before, but now, having experienced the self-imposed spiritual exile of sin firsthand, Dante-pilgrim is ready to begin a more meaningful journey:

\begin{quote}
Lo bel pianeto che d’amar conforta
faceva tutto rider l’orïente,
velando i Pesci ch’erano in sua scorta.
I’ mi volsi a man destra, e puosi mente
a l’altro polo, e vidi quattro stelle
non viste mai fuor ch’a la prima gente.
Goder pareva ‘l ciel di lor fiamelle:
oh settentrïonal vedovo sito,
pou che private se’ di mirar quelle!
\end{quote}
[The beautiful planet that comforts with love / caused the whole of the East to
smile, / veiling the Fishes that were her escort. / I turned to the right, and fixed
my mind / on the other pole and saw four stars / not seen since but by the first
people. / Heaven seemed to delight in their flames: / oh widowed northern sky,
/ that is deprived of seeing them!] (Purg. I. 19-27)

Dante-poet fills the morning sky with these four stars to remind the reader that
virtue—here specifically the four cardinal virtues of Wisdom, Courage, Justice, and
Temperance—are requisite for achieving true salvation. The penitent souls of
Purgatory already possess grace but are unable to engage with it without voluntarily
accepting qualities of goodness in these virtues.

Dante-poet illustrates this point most vividly in the following scene; the light
of the four stars of virtue illuminate the figure of Cato the Younger, and opponent of
Julius Caesar who committed suicide after unsuccessfully resisting the dictator in
northern Africa in 46 BCE. As Dante-poet describes the sky, the Pilgrim and Virgil
have been unaware of Cato’s presence: “Li raggi de le quattro luci sante / fregiavan si
la sua faccia di lume, / ch’i’ ‘l vedea come ‘l sol fosse davante” [“The rays of the four
sacred lights / adorned his face with light / that he appeared as though the sun were
before him”] (Purg. I.37-39). This simile, paralleling the emesperio che tenebre vincia
in Inferno IV, reminds readers that Cato is virtuous but fundamentally beyond the
grace of God. He, like Virgil, represents virtue alone without faith; by tempering the
importance of the four stars in warning the reader that virtue alone is not enough to
reach salvation, Dante-poet reminds the reader that the path to spiritual maturity both requires faith and use of reason to elucidate the divine truth.

Cato is the only un-saved soul in Purgatory—Virgil is also temporarily permitted here but only to provide the Pilgrim with guidance. Readers may be reminded by Cato that eventually Virgil will subside and return to Hell, allowing Beatrice to guide Dante-pilgrim through the heights of Heaven. The light Cato reflects and embodies, therefore, is light of virtue and intellect alone; it is in this way that Cato understands Virgil: “Chi v’ha guidati, o che ci fu lucerna, / uscendo fuor de la profonda notte / che sempre nera fa la valle inferna?” [“Who has guided you, or who was your lantern, / coming forth out of the deep night, / that always keeps the infernal valley black?”] (Purg. I. 43-5).

In the next canto, after pausing to visit with recently arrived souls, Cato chidingly orders the pair to begin their ascent without delay: “correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio / ch’esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto” [“Run to the mountain to divest yourself of that burden / that keeps God from being manifest to you!”] (Purg. II.121-23). Cato’s command stresses that time is a vital factor in the ascent of the mount of Purgatory. This is the physical world, and Dante-pilgrim is still alive. The clock of salvation, therefore, is running; to ascend to a state of grace is vital to the Pilgrim, allowing him to share the burden of the penitent despite the disparity in timescale between his journey and theirs. Jeffrey Schnapp describes the hurried mood of Purgatory as one that eschews stasis—as exists in Inferno—in favor of constant spiritual reflection and ascent:
The case of Dante-pilgrim is telling because purgation is a time-bound, dynamic process. Unlike Paradise or Hell but in the image of our world, souls in Purgatory are on the move. They are not bound for eternity to the terrace, pouch, or celestial seat in which they appear, but rather are “strangers in a strange land,” pilgrims on a temporal and spatial journey in which, paradoxically, the course of time is reversed, sin erased, the divine image restored. (Schnapp 94)

Dante-poet makes this temporal disparity clearest when the travelers encounter the soul of the Mantuan poet Sordello, who repented only on his deathbed and is thus consigned to ante-Purgatory for a time as a late-repentant. It is he who reveals to the Pilgrim an important rule that Cato neglected to mention; souls may only ascend the mountain during the day, while the sun shines: “Ma vede già dichina il giorno, / e andar sù di notte non si puote; / però è buon pensar di bel soggiorno” [But see how already the day ends, / and one cannot go up during the night; / so it is better we consider a good rest] (Purg. VII. 43-45). Virgil is surprised to hear of this restriction. As when he expressed doubt at the grace granted the Pilgrim to survive traversing Hell, Virgil once again reveals the limits of his understanding of God. He is aware, at least, of why his understanding is limited; while introducing himself to Sordello as a fellow Mantuan, Virgil explains his damnation: “Non per far, ma per non fare ho perduto / a veder l’alto Sol che tu disiri / e che fu tardi per me conosciuto” [Not what I did but what I did not do lost / for me sight of that high Sun that you seek / and that I was late to recognize] (Purg. VII 25-27).
The daylight travel rule is not a punitive, purgative, or limiting concept. As Sordello goes on to explain, the penitent should only seek to travel by the light of the sun—and therefore with the grace of God—because without the light the sun projects, there is no desire for rising, let alone any physical barriers:

E ‘l buon Sordello in terra fregò ‘l dito,

dicendo: “Vedi? sola questa riga

non varcheresti dopo ‘l sol partito:

non però ch’altra cosa desse briga,

che la nocturna tenebra, ad ir suso;

quella col nonpoder la voglia intriga.

[Then the good Sordello drew in the ground with his finger, / saying: “See? you will not cross / over this line after the sun departs: / nothing hinders the possibility of going up / but the shadows of night / that alone impede the will”]

(Purg. VII.52-57)

This lack of will is not fear or any active agency of evil, like the counterfeit lights of Hell; rather, it is the absence of desire for God, which is itself a consequence of the absence of grace.

This restriction evokes a passage from the Gospel of John: “Adhuc modicum, lumen in vobis est. Ambulate dum lucem habetis, ut non tenebrae vos comprehendant: et qui ambulat in tenebris, nescit quo vadat” [For a while, the light is with you. Walk while you have the light so that the darkness shall not bind you; but whoever walks in shadows knows not where they go] (Iohannem 12:35). Dante-poet uses the sun
through this section of *Purgatorio* to begin an exploration of the notion of free will, central to the Pilgrim’s individual commitment to scaling the mountain.

Sordello declares that without the sun one cannot conceivably have a desire to travel in darkness. Sordello then notes that without the sun, during the figurative low tide of God’s grace, the late-repentants can even descend the mountain and wander, reinforcing the tyranny that time’s passage has over the mountain: “Ben si poria con lei tornare in giuso / e passeggiar la costa intorno errando, / mantra che l’orizzonte il dì tien chiuso” [Verily, I could descend below with the shadows / and pass down the hillside to wander / so long as the horizon shuts out the day] (*Purg.* VII. 58-60).

For Dante, this state of spiritual being without respect to time is not a blessed stasis but something very close to that which afflicts the damned in Hell; he uses this comparison between Purgatory and the conditions of Hell to illustrate the defective love that is actively purged from the souls here. Sordello certainly possesses grace—he would have been saved without it—but for the time being he is denied its help in progressing forward up the mountain and instead must reside in the material world. This condition is close to that of Hell; there, the sinner’s local pocket or ditch of suffering is characterized by static preoccupation with mundane things. Dante, survivor of intrigues, military movements, and witness to the incessant scheming of local Italian politics, could not have conceived of a more wretched state than constant immersion in the pettiness of local history.

Another figure among the late-repentant, however, demonstrates his greater understanding of the love of God and provides a necessary contrast to Sordello’s static
situation. The soul of Corrado Malaspina, formerly a northern Italian nobleman, greets the travelers and wishes them success in their journey. The way in which Corrado phrases this benediction is significant: “Se la lucerna che ti mena in alto / truovi nel tuo arbitrio tanta cera / quant’è mestiere infino al sommo smalto” [So that the lamp that leads you up / may find in your will all the oil / that will take you unto the enameled height] (Purg. VIII.112-14). For once, Dante-pilgrim’s guiding light is neither the sun nor Virgil but his own will; *arbitrio* means free will; thus Dante’s elevation of free will above all other non-divine influences in reaching salvation begins to take shape. The “enameled height” is so not merely because it is precious and appealing to the souls but also because, Corrado suggests, this enameling is a figurative way of illustrating how brightly the Pilgrim’s light will be reflected by the heights of spiritual maturity. The notion of reflectivity will prove crucial later in *Paradiso*; for now, the exhortation to find strength in the will is a necessary first step in moving forward up the mountain.

It is this precedence of free will that allows Dante-pilgrim to take more direction in his spiritual education in *Purgatorio*; the lamp of which Corrado Malaspina speaks, drawing oil from Dante’s own will, is grace by virtue of intellect, predicated on both prevenient and cooperative grace. God predisposes the individual to think good thoughts with *gratia illuminationis*, or illuminating grace, and to strive toward God with *gratia preveniens*; yet the lamp of which Malaspina speaks draws its oil from Dante’s will and is, therefore, more cooperative than prevenient. Through independently seeking and uncovering the inherent goodness of God—through use of
his own intellectual faculties, aided by free will—Dante is able to respond to cooperative grace and rise upward toward the illuminating center of the universe: God.

Another faculty along with free will that is aided by grace is the intellect. Dante-pilgrim begins to experience small moments of transcendence in which his capacity for thought or self-expression is aided by direct, revelatory light from God; in one such moment, the Pilgrim’s senses are temporarily overwhelmed by light but upon regaining his composure, he has been granted a specific and significant insight into the nature of light:

E i raggi ne ferien per mezzo ‘l naso, 
perché per noi girato era sì ‘l monte, 
che già dritti andavamo inver’l’occaso, 
quando’ io senti’ a me gravar la fronte 
a lo splendore assai più che di prima, 
e stupor m’eran le cose non conte; 
ond’ io levai le mani inver’ la cima 
de le mie ciglia, e fecimi ‘l solecchio, 
che del soverchio visibile lima.

[The rays struck us in the middle of the face, / for we had circled so far around the mountain, / that indeed we walked straight toward the cause, / when I felt weighing upon my brow / a splendor much greater than before, / and I was stupefied by my unknowing; / I then raised my hands before the peak / of my
brow, and made for myself a parasol / that files down the visible when it
overwhelms.] (Purg. XV.7-15)

“The cause” here is the sun, now setting and casting horizontal rays directly toward
the travelers. Stupefied by the light and by a sudden sense of his ignorance, the
Pilgrim makes an unexpected realization about the way the light reflects away from
the Pilgrim’s sight:

Come quando da l’acqua o da lo specchio
salta lo raggio a l’opposta parte,
salendo su per lo modo parecchio
a quel che scende, e tanto si diparte
dal cader de la pietra in igual tratta,
sì come mostra esperienza e arte;
cosi mi parve da luce rifratta
quivi dinanzi a me esser precoso;
per che a fuggir la mia vista fu ratta

[As when from water or from a mirror / the ray leaps in the opposite direction,
/ rising in much the same fashion / as it descended, and also departs / from all
over a falling stone equally, / as experience and experiment show; / thus it
appeared to me / that the light there before me struck me, / so that it sped
quickly from my sight] (Purg. XV.16-23).

That light arrives and departs at the same angle regardless of what it reflects upon—
whether a body of water or even a swiftly falling stone—suggests a universal and
constant quality of light that is even easily observable through experimentation. By recognizing that light is refracted at the same angle as it strikes an object (“rising in much the same fashion / as it descended”), Dante articulates a fundamental principle of optics that would later be proven by scientific study of light.

This sudden flash of scientific knowledge stems directly from the light from the sun that introduces the canto. It parallels Malaspina’s blessing to the Pilgrim; much as the lamp of Dante-pilgrim’s soul takes oil from his own free will, the capacity of his intellect takes truer, more-perfect knowledge of creation and the Divine from divine light itself. Both are luminous examples of grace in action; Dante-pilgrim’s intellect, correctly deducing truths about this light, receives some help from a revelation-inspiring blast. Virgil warns Dante-pilgrim that neglecting to appreciate these revelations will cause him to lose sight of the beauty and significance of God: “Però che tu rificchi / la menta pur a le cose terrene, / di vera luce tenebre dispicchi” [Since you fix / the mind upon terrestrial things, / you gather darkness from true light] (Purg. XV.64-6). Virgil’s warning is not overzealous; this concept of diaphanous light will prove crucial to understanding the dynamics of Heaven later in the Commedia. As Dante-pilgrim begins to transcend his physical sensory and intellectual limitations, he has less and less need of Virgil as his capacity for grace and his natural will and intellect provide their own guiding light. Yet Virgil still has a significant role to play in the remainder of the cantica.

Virgil explains to Dante-pilgrim for the first time in the Commedia the diaphanous quality of God’s light, which reflects and refracts between the planets—
including the sun—and then throughout all creation. All things in creation, especially human souls, reflect that light according to the individual object or soul’s capacity for love:

Tanto si dà quanto trova d’ardore;  
si che, quantunque carità si stende,  
cresce sovr’essa l’eterno valore.  
E quanta gente più là sù s’intende,  
più v’è da bene amare, e più vi s’ama,  
e come specchio l’uno a l’altro rende.

[It gives of itself as it finds ardor, / so that, although charity extends itself, / the eternal good grows upon it. / The more souls up there intend to love, / the better they love and the more they return love / to one another, much like a mirror] (Purg. XV.70-75)

This concept, which will later be the central focus of Paradiso, modifies the lamp of Dante’s soul; rather than a light that emanates purely from the Pilgrim himself, the lamp and the oil of Dante’s will actually work to transmit the light of God. God’s light shines through material objects, albeit in a physically imperceptible way. This transformation in the metaphor of the Pilgrim’s soul as a light-source sets the stage for a deeper consideration in the following cantos of how God expresses love and how the souls of the saved reflect that expression.
The sun follows the Pilgrim and Virgil into the next level of Purgatory, the realm of those who have repented of the sin of wrath or blinding anger. The wrathful penitents, dominated in life by their anger and misdirected passion, are blinded by thick, acrid smoke that permeates the terrace; as with so many other episodes in Purgatorio, part of the intellectual and spiritual condition of Inferno is once again recreated in some sense in order to test the penitents’ capacity to atone and seek the love of God. Here the travelers encounter the soul of a Lombard named Marco, who despite his inability to see his surroundings or the travelers, explains for Dante the influence that the planets bear upon destiny:

Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia;
non dico tutti, ma, posto ch’i’ l’ dica,
lume v’è dato a bene e a malizia,
e libero voler; che, se fatica
ne le prime battaglie col ciel dura,
poi vince tutto, se ben si notrica.

[Heaven began your movements; / I do not say all, but if I did say it, / light is given you for good and evil, / and free will, which, if it endures / the first battles with fixed Heaven, / then wins all, if it is well-nourished] (Purg. XVI.73-78)

“Heaven” in this instance refers not to God but to the Heavens, or the celestial spheres that comprise the sky, particularly the planets.
Marco Lombardo claims that free will guards against undue influences of the stars and planets in earthly affairs, though they may exert some influence. Dante-poet comes intriguingly close here to suggesting that the influence of planets dictates the individual soul’s ability to love, which would be an argument for predestination and doctrinally contrary to Dante’s view of free will. While he does not use the term in the Commedia, in Convivio Dante uses the term astrologia to describe the study of the Heavens (cf. 2.13.8); during Dante’s time, astrologia and astronomia were interchangeable terms for the general study of the Heavens, whether with regard to their movement and physics or their supernatural influences upon earthly events.

Yet the Lombard’s significant mention of libero voler—coterminous with arbitrio or volente throughout the Commedia for individual, self-directed will—grounds the conversation in free will. The distinction rests not in consideration of ability to love alone, for God’s prevenient grace, according to Dante, permits all souls to seek love and even encourages it. Rather than the ability to love, Dante-poet suggests, it is capax or the individual capacity for love that is significant. The planets govern how much each soul could potentially reflect the glory of God; yet through free will, each soul may either use that capacity to its fullest or else decline to do so.

This fulfillment of capacity applies to other faculties as well. As Dante-poet demonstrates, even his own considerable capacity for poetic power must be willfully curtailed occasionally to allow the divine nature of Purgatory to speak for itself. Richard Kay, in his study of Dante’s Christian approach to astrologia, notes that Dante accepts a certain level of planetary influence in the shaping of human destiny:
“Three times in the course of the *Commedia*, the poet attributes his own *ingegno* to astral influence, most unmistakably in the constellation of Gemini under which he was born” (Kay 5). Yet Dante is careful, as Kay observes, to restrain even his own astrally imparted poetic skills in order to show the preeminence of free will in the cosmological determination of destiny; before encountering Ulysses, Dante-poet informs the reader that he intends to dim his poetic power, to allow the example of Ulysses’s flawed will to appear more clearly:

> e più lo ‘ngegno affreno ch’i’ non soglio,  
> perché non corra che virtù nol guidi  
> si che, se stella bona o miglior cosa  
> m’ha dato ‘l ben, ch’io stessi nol m’invidi.

[More now I curb my ingenuity so that I do not cross the threshold, / so that it does not run where virtue does not steer it, / in such a way that if a good star or a better thing / has given me the skill, I must not begrudge me of it.] (*Inf.* XXVI.21-24)

He yields, despite Aquinas’ allowance of parable, to allow ineffable experience to remain ineffable. This is the first of many occasions in the *Commedia* where the Poet, also terrestrially bound like the Pilgrim, allows language to take a secondary role to experience.

Marco Lombardo goes on further to develop the idea of free will’s importance, chastising Dante-pilgrim, as Virgil did in the previous canto, for his limited appreciation of the power of free will before that of the Heavens. He laments that the
world, like Hell, is sightless: “Fratre, / lo mondo è cieco” [Brother, the world is blind] (Purg. XVI.64-65). He addresses Dante as among “those who live” [voi chi vivete], stressing that it is in life that this issue is most important:

Voi chi vivete ogne cagion recate
pur suso al cielo, pur come se tutto
move seco di necesitato.
Se così fosse, in voi fora distrutto
libero arbitrio, e non fora giustizia
per ben Leticia, e per male aver lutto

[You who are living affix every cause / upward to Heaven, as though
everything / moved only according to necessity. / If this were so, in you would
be destroyed / free will, and it would be unjust / to celebrate goodness, or
lament evil] (Purg. XVI.67-72)

Lombardo identifies free will as the source of the human ability to distinguish between good and evil behavior and choose the former; grace inclines humanity toward the good, but only free will may bring that inclination to fruition.

Lombardo’s discussion of free will then shifts seamlessly into an invective against the corruption of the papacy and the obstacles it creates for Dante’s sought-after scenario of a stable Empire; the sun is still a central metaphor, though its meaning has changed. Marco’s description revisits the two concurrent paths of the Pilgrim’s ascent: the earthly and the spiritual, aligned with the Empire and the papacy respectively:
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Soleva Roma, che ‘l buon mondo feo,
due soli aver, che l’una e l’altra strada
facean vedere, e del mondo e di Deo.
L’un l’altro ha spento; ed é giunta la spada
col pasturale, e l’un con l’altro insieme
per viva forza mal convien che vada.

[Once Rome, which made the good world, / had two suns, so that the one and
the other / made their way visible, the ways of the world and of God. / The one
has extinguished the other; and now is joined the sword / with the crook, and
the one and the other together / force life into the path of evil.] (Purg.
XVI.106-11)

As Dante-pilgrim will later see in Paradiso, the idea of two suns is crucial to
understanding God’s role in the universe as the source of all spiritual meaning. Dante-
poet uses the image to illustrate the corruption of the papacy by suggesting the sun of
temporal matters has wrongfully surpassed the spiritual role of the sun as a guide. As
the desired conclusion of Purgatory’s journey is immersion in spiritual truth, the Poet
leaves little guess as to which of the two suns should ultimately be more significant.

With this more exclusive shift in focus from the physical sun to the spiritual
one, the Poet rapidly begins to point readers toward the ultimate spiritual conclusion
of the entire poem in Paradiso; here, Dante-pilgrim will encounter God as the light of
the universe, fulfilling many of the same roles as a spiritual and poetic conceptual
marker for the journey toward divine truth. As Dante-pilgrim prepares to finally reach
the summit of Purgatory in canto XXVII, passing through a ring of painless fire that represents the ultimate transmutation of defective love into Godly love, Virgil declares that the preparation of Dante-pilgrim’s will and intellect is over and that the Pilgrim is ready for the blessed guide Beatrice. The passage is stirring in its warm, fatherly exaltation of the Pilgrim’s abilities; the sun, unsurprisingly, features prominently in the speech:

e disse: “Il temporal foco e l'eterno
veduto hai, figlio; e se' venuto in parte
dov'io per me più oltre non discerno.
Tratto t'ho qui con ingegno e con arte;
lo tuo piacere omai prendi per duce;
fuor se' de l'erte vie, fuor se' de l'arte.
Vedi lo sol che 'n fronte ti riluce;
vedi l'erbette, i fiori e li arbuscelli
che qui la terra sol da sé produce.
Mentre che vegnan lieti li occhi belli
che, lagrimando, a te venir mi fenno,
seder ti puoi e puoi andar tra elli.
Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno;
libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,
e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:
per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio.”
[He said: “You have seen / the temporal fire and the eternal fire, son; you have now arrived / in a place where I can discern no more. / I have led you here with intellect and with craft; / let now your own pleasure be your guide, / above the difficult paths, above the guile. / See the sun that lights on your brow; / see the tender grass, the flowers, delicate trees, / that grow here from the earth itself. / While waiting for those delightful eyes to come, / which, weeping, urged me to your aid, / you may sit here or you may wander among these joys. / Expect me no longer to speak or give signs: / free, upright, and healthy is your will, / and your sense will not lead you astray: / I crown and mitre you lord over yourself.] (Purg. XXVII.127-142)

Dante, pilgrim and poet, is ready for the light of Paradise.
Chapter 4: The Otherworldly Light of Paradiso

In the *Commedia*, Hell and Purgatory are places in the terrestrial experience. They are physical locations bounded by physical limitations, though they represent extremities of human experience of these limitations; Hell is the epitome of ignorance, wrapped in darkness, while Purgatory is the place of apotheosis for those who learn to see beyond the boundaries of sin. Dante-pilgrim wanders through both realms under the aegis of divine intervention, learning along the way to hone his perceptive powers to a more perfect understanding of God. This emphasis upon perception makes light (or its absence) a central feature of the journey, as celebrated *dantista* Joseph Mazzeo notes:

The reader of the works of Dante cannot fail to notice that one strand that runs through and unifies the *Comedy* is the continual repetition of terms of vision and light. From the beginning—“where the sun is silent”—to the end, the *Divine Comedy* is a carefully ordered hierarchy of lights and shadows. Not only are we asked to see clearly but we are asked to see “qualitatively,” to distinguish not only degrees of light and vision but kinds of light and vision. (Mazzeo 9)

In *Inferno*, Dante-pilgrim discovers the need to perceive the transcendent light of God; in *Purgatorio*, he learns to adapt his intellect to grace in order to see this light. In *Paradiso*, Dante comes directly before the light of the universe itself—God, and completes his journey toward the understanding of the mystery of creation. This is the moment in which the sun is critically transformed from a symbol of God’s presence or
absence into God himself. While prevailing scholarship focuses intently upon the role of light in this spiritual realm, few scholars have looked at the ways in which the sun is transformed; none have examined these transformations in the context of Dante-poet’s poetic project or his engagement with language and allegory.

Learning to perceive God’s light is not the only task of the *Commedia*; both Dante-pilgrim and Dante-poet experience, in their own ways, the difficulty of reflecting that light. Dante acknowledges that the lights of this realm are not the lights of Earth—they are unlike anything the Pilgrim or the reader has yet encountered in the earlier *cantiche*. The Pilgrim possesses extraordinary grace in the moment of his journey, but terrestrially bound, the Poet often lags behind, lamenting: “O divina virtù, se mi ti presti / tanto che l’ombra del beato regno / segnata nel mio capo io manifesti” [O divine virtue, if you would but grant to me / enough so that the shadow of that blessed realm / imprinted in my mind may be manifest] (*Par.* I 22-24). Dante-poet presents the reader with only a vestige of the experience; yet even the shadow of Paradise is luminous enough to yield an immensely rich vision in the Poet’s description.

The compromise between the truth of Heaven and the Pilgrim’s experience of that truth is a precarious one that the Poet must then navigate; he accepts that words will fail his powers of description: “Trasumanar significar per verba / non si poria” [To understand what it means to go beyond the human, in words, / cannot be done] (*Par.* I. 70-71). The Poet’s creative ship—which has successfully navigated Purgatory in fruitful union with the help of grace—is here set adrift in a realm of ineffability. As
the Pilgrim’s senses fail him among the indescribable experiences of Heaven, the
Pilgrim’s memories give the Poet little to work with. The Poet instead sets faith above
the power of his art to draw the reader into the experience: “Perch’io lo 'ngegno e l'arte
e l'uso chiami, / si nol direi che mai s'imaginasse; / ma creder puossi e di veder si
brami” [Though I may call upon ingenuity and art and ability, / I would never capture
that image; / to see it, one must believe] (Par. X.43-5). The Pilgrim may travel
through the cosmos, but the Poet must appeal to the common terrestrial experience of
his readers.

At first, the sun is a way to make such an appeal: “E se le fantasie nostre son
basse / a tanta altezza, non è maraviglia; / ché sopra 'l sol non fu occhio ch'andasse”
[And if our dreams are insufficient / for that height, it is no wonder; / there never was
an eye able to see beyond the sun] (Par. X. 46-8). Instead of the Poet, it is the light
itself that speaks in Paradiso. In a passage deftly blending images of water and the
sun, the Poet finds his voice in the landscape of Heaven:

Parvemi tanto allor del cielo acceso
de la fiamma del sol, che pioggia o fiume
lago non fece alcun tanto disteso.
La novità del suono e 'l grande lume
di lor cagion m'accesero un disio
mai non sentito di cotanto acume.

[I beheld the entirety of Heaven ablaze / with the flames of the sun, to the
extent that rains or rivers / could not make a lake so vast. / The revelation of
the sound and of the great light / stoked in me a desire for their cause / I had not yet felt before.] (Par. I.79-84)

“The sound” of the sun of which Dante speaks is undoubtedly a reversal of that place “dove ‘l sole tace” [where the sun is mute] where the Pilgrim finds himself in *Inferno* I. The vast lake represents the same poetic potential as found in the better waters for which the Poet sails in *Purgatorio* I. The poetic mission of the *Commedia* comes to a critical juncture in this passage; the narrative is no longer a demonstration of the Poet’s ability but a revelatory vision that will tax and use that ability to bring Paradiso to the reader. Poetry is here put to a serious cause.

But even accepting an auxiliary role to the boundless self-expression of God and Paradise, the Poet still must struggle with the fact that the Pilgrim cannot immediately make sense of everything he sees. There are still terrestrial limitations. Beatrice declares that all human perception of the Divine will be flawed, echoing Aquinas’ recognition that in describing God, human authors need to make the insensible, sensible:

```
Così parlar convieno a vostro ingegno,
però che solo da sensato apprende
ciò che fa poscia d'intelletto degno.
Per questo la Scrittura condescende
a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano
attribuisce a Dio, e altro intende
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[Thus must one speak to your mind, / which only takes from the senses / that
which the intellect allows. / On account of this Scripture condescends / to your
faculties, attributing / feet and hands to God, among other things.] (Par. IV.
40-5)

This passage in particular underscores how much work the Poet has to do in order to
relate even the barest details of the Heavenly experience. At the same time, however,
it draws the reader into a consideration, according to Dante’s suggestions in the
Commedia, the Convivio, and his epistle to Cangrande, of how Scripture works. The
truth of divinity beyond physical reality must be accessed somehow, even if
imperfectly; but how, despite the potential for human inefficacy?

The sun, once again, provides the narrative with a crucial way to move
forward. While the Poet acknowledges that the sun embodies, in one sense, a
limitation, he also makes it into a way of bypassing those same limitations when
perceived through eyes of faith and revelation. Even in the beginning of the cantica in
the sphere of the Moon, where Heaven’s lights are dimmest, the Pilgrim sees
diaphanous expanse of Heaven; the Poet remarks, “e di sùbito parve giorno a giorno /
essere aggiunto, come quei che puote / avesse il ciel d'un altro sole addorno” [And
then it appeared as if one day / was joined with the next, as if those who could / had
adorned Heaven with a second sun] (Par. I.61-63). Two passages in Revelation—
which the Poet undoubtedly kept in mind in crafting the passage—make this idea of
the second sun a crux in Paradiso’s poetic project:
Et nox ultra non erit; et non egebunt lumine lucernae, neque lumine solis, quoniam Dominus Deus inluminat illos, et regnabunt in saecula saeculorum

[And night will be no more; and they shall not need the light of the lamp, nor the light of the sun, as the Lord God will illuminate them, and they shall reign for ever and ever]. (Rev. 22:5)

Et civitas non eget sole neque luna, ut luceant in ea; nam claritas Dei inluminavit eam, et lucerna eius est Agnus

[And the city shall not need the sun nor the moon to shine in it; for the brilliance of God has illumined it, and the Lamb is its lamp.] (Rev. 21:23)

To juxtapose these two concepts as Dante himself would have done requires use of the four-fold allegorical method of theological interpretation. Since Revelation speaks prophetically of the Second Coming of Christ, the prophecy takes the value of history. But the passages are also important for the Pilgrim morally and anagogically, as they elevate the glory of God above the glory of creation, reminding readers that creation’s significance only reflects that of God’s. Still living, still experiencing the first life, this recognition is crucial to the Pilgrim. As Virgil warns the Pilgrim in Purgatorio, “Però che tu rificchi / la menta pur a le cose terrene, / di vera luce tenebre dispicchi” [Since you fix / the mind upon terrestrial things, / you gather darkness from true light] (Purg. XV.64-6).

By evoking these two passages from Revelation, Dante-poet begins to tackle larger theological considerations about God and his luminous qualities. The narrative
concern with the nature of God includes a question of how God can be manifest in all creation without being Himself diminished. In *Confessions*, Augustine asks how God fills all of creation while yet remaining independent and unmoved, in a state of Platonist stasis:

Do Heaven and earth, then, contain the whole of you, since you fill them? Or, when once you have filled them, is some part of you left over because they are too small to hold you? If this is so, when you have filled Heaven and earth, does that part of you which remains flow over into some other place? (*Confessions* I.3)

This question still provoked debate among theologians of Dante’s time. The prevailing view from before Augustine up through Aquinas—who lived only a generation before Dante—favored the idea that God, both as an intellectual and spiritual force, was luminous in nature. The Gospels certainly provided evidence for such a notion:


[In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word. The same was in the beginning with God. All was made through Him and without Him nothing was made. In him was made life, and
life was the light of men. And the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness
did not compass it] (Iohannem I.1-5).

Conprehenderunt comes from conprehendere, ‘to understand’; this more literal sense
works as well as ‘compass’, since it is from spiritual ignorance that the tenebrae fail to
understand the light. In either case, the light prevails over the darkness. The Poet
believes this light to be otherworldly and in contrast with sensible light found on earth,
including the light of the sun. Equally the Word—the intellectual expression of God—
is also incomprehensible to human faculties.

In addressing this question of how God can be omnipresent without
diminishing, Dante-poet defines his role in describing God. The sun does not speak in
Inferno I because the light of salvation it represents lacks self-expression. It gains
voice in Paradiso once again because Paradise, more than the Earth and the rest of
creation, reflects God the Creator most intensely: “e 'l ciel cui tanti lumi fanno bello, /
de la mente profonda che lui volve / prende l' image e fassene suggello” [And Heaven
whose many lights make it beautiful, / from the deep mind of Him that turns it, / takes
its image and makes of itself the seal] (Par.II.130-32). Dante-poet accordingly relates
that which was impressed in the Pilgrim, himself a bit of mondana cera or ‘earthly
wax’. More actively, however, Dante-poet makes himself into a mirror that reflects the
glory of God; rather than accepting only the shadow or the imprint of Paradise, he tries
to make himself a device for passing the light of truth more directly, rather than by
approximation:

Tre specchi prenderai; e i due rimovi
da te d'un modo, e l'altro, più rimosso,
tr'ambo li primi li occhi tuoi ritrovi.
Rivolto ad essi, fa che dopo il dorso
ti stea un lume che i tre specchi accenda
e torni a te da tutti ripercosso.
Ben che nel quanto tanto non si stenda
la vista più lontana, li vedrai
come convien ch'igualmente risplenda.

[Take three mirrors; set two apart / from yourself at the same length, and the
third, / between the first two remove furthest from your eyes. / Facing these,
see that behind your back / you set a candle that the three mirrors reflect / and
return to you all the light given. / While the mirror furthest out / will not be as
large, you will see / that the light is equally resplendent.] (Par. II. 97-105)

Dante-poet’s vision is not in the same proximity to God as the Pilgrim’s unadulterated
experience; yet like the souls reflected throughout Paradise, the light of God is as
resplendent in the poem as it was in the moment it was experienced. It is merely
smaller.

Even humbled in his powers of expression by God’s brilliance, the Poet
reminds readers that he is a powerful mirror. The reflection of St. Thomas Aquinas,
himself a brilliant light, addresses the Pilgrim as a mirror:

  lo raggio de la grazia, onde s'accende
  verace amore e che poi cresce amando,
multiplicato in te tanto resplende,
che ti conduce su per quella scala
u' sanza risalir nessun discende

[the ray of grace through which ascends / true love, that then grows lovingly, /
shines so greatly magnified in you, / that it conveys you up upon that ladder /
without which none descends but to mount again.] (Par. X.83-87)

St. Thomas does not mean that Dante-pilgrim reflects the light of God more intensely
than any other soul but rather, in union between intellect and grace, that he shines
more brightly than would otherwise be possible without some degree of pure grace.

This encounter between Aquinas and the Pilgrim takes place in the sphere of
the sun, the space in the Heavens through which the sun moves but where also appear
the reflections of intellectually great Christian souls. This is the place where the
conceptual threads of grace and intellect, wrapped around one another in Purgatorio,
are spliced into one unbroken concept. Beatrice echoes the notion of the second sun in
telling the Pilgrim to be grateful: “E Beatrice cominciò: ‘Ringrazia, / ringrazia il Sol
de li angeli, ch'a questo / sensibil t'ha levato per sua grazia’” [And Beatrice began:
‘Give thanks, / give thanks to the Sun of the Angels, that has / raised you to this sun of
sense through its grace”] (Par. X.52-4). The Sun of the Angels, who dwell in Heaven,
is undoubtedly God himself. What makes the sphere of the sun the sun of sense is the
occupants. Aquinas, the luminous speaker, stood preeminently before theologians of
the Middle Ages as one who sought to understand as much as possible about God’s
nature through the powers of intellect. His thorough dialectical survey of Christian
theology of the time, the *Summa Theologica*, is both an encyclopedia and a compression of orthodoxy into one sharp, insightful perspective. His recognition of Dante-pilgrim’s capacity to reflect God is recognition of one powerful mind by another.

The other lights of the sphere also embody this sense and are alternatively described by the Poet as suns, candles, lanterns, or other flames—each theologian’s soul large or small according to its owner’s orthodoxy. Once again, the mirror’s proximity to the source of light makes the size of the reflection, though each is equally luminous; the disparate size of each light indicates the actual soul’s proximity to God in the Empyrean. The Poet reiterates this idea time and time again in *Paradiso*, stressing with each transition from sphere to sphere that all of creation is an emanation of the mind of God:

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Ciò che non more e ciò che può morire
non è se non splendor di quella idea
che partorisce, amando, il nostro Sire;
ché quella viva luce che sì mea
dal suo lucente, che non si disuna
da lui né da l'amor ch'a lor s'intrea,
per sua bontate il suo raggiare aduna,
 quasi specchiato, in nove sussistenze,
etternalmente rimanendosi una.
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[That which dies and that which cannot die / reflects the splendor of that idea / that our Father lovingly begets; / that living light which wells / from its own brilliance does not break with it / nor from the love that reunites with them; / from its own benevolence casts down its rays / as if from a mirror, in nine substances, / remaining eternally one.] (Par. XIII.51-59)

That which dies and which cannot die is Christ reflected in the light of the Father. From the same light is a light that begets itself without separating from itself or the rest—the Holy Spirit—and from the reflection of each upon each comes nine essences, from which comes the light of the triune God as reflected in His creation.

The emphasis upon idea as a quality or dimension of the light stresses that creation is a willfully intelligent, expressive act. In John 1:1, the Evangelist asserts that God, the Word, and the Light were all present together in the moment of creation. Dante would have understood this connection clearly; poetry is self-reflective creation through the power of speech. The mixture of God’s light with the Word throughout the Commedia, therefore, is another important aspect of the idea that the sun in Paradiso speaks, or that the intellects of the sun’s sphere are primarily writers, theologians, and lights in themselves. Augustine’s contention in the Confessions that language arises through desire and that language after Babel is broken on earth—but unbroken in Heaven—argues that desire directed toward God will give a faithful soul some sense of where to seek language, namely in Scripture and subsequent faith in Christ. But Heaven, Augustine says, has no need of human language, since it is without desire: “O
God, alone in majesty, high in the silence of Heaven, unseen by man!” (Confessions I.18). How is God with the Word and the Word with God and yet Heaven is silent?

For Dante, the light of creation is the necessary medium through which expression is rendered non-verbally and thus divinely. God has no need of language because God has no need of anything as his luminous emanations are expressions of himself for the sake of his own Goodness, and thus is the most divine means of communication in the universe. This is why the Word is commonly understood to be Christ—God’s only need for language is to manifest Himself as an act of love. Not only does the Poet theologically frame this notion with Aquinas and the image of mirrors reflecting God, but the Pilgrim’s experience of language reflects this phenomenon as well.

As the Pilgrim encounters and listens to the souls stationed throughout Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, he experiences a spectrum of language’s capacity for drawing the soul to God. In Hell, words are broken; the demon Plutus cries, babbling, “Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe!” (Inf. VII incipit). Virgil upbraids Plutus, who then collapses, Dante-poet says, like “sails rich with wind / fallen deflated when the mast breaks” [Quali dal vento le gonfiate vele / caggiono avvolte, poi che l'alber fiacca] (Inf. VII.13-14). There is a parallel to the Poet’s own expressive bark; it sails on where the babbling demon cannot move. In Purgatory, the Poet encourages the singer Casella, freshly off the boat to the island’s shores, to sing his own lyric “Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona.” Cato then ends the song and scolds the souls for loitering at the base of Purgatory when their ascent is imminent: “spogliarvi lo scoglio / ch'esser non
lascia a voi Dio manifesto” [Scrub away the sloth / that prevents God from being manifest to you] (Purg. II.122-3). The lyric, one for which Dante earned fame in his earlier, secular poetic circles, is one which he must abandon for a higher form of praise. Better forms of expression rest above.

The evolution of the quest for language mirrors the evolution of the sun and of light. Hell, the sightless world, is also one where language is powerless to achieve anything for the soul other than to cry in frustration. The sighs and endless cries that the Pilgrim encounters reflect the frustrated self-expression of the damned, which itself stems from their inability to perceive or appreciate God. In Purgatory, the sun begins as a worldly object, the agent that lights the path upon which the Pilgrim walks but which, near the middle of the cantica, assumes an anagogical significance in anticipation of Heaven. Finally, by the time the Pilgrim ascends into Heaven, he experiences truth without language, as others there also experience it.

In the very same part of the Pilgrim that reflects God, the souls of Heaven see his thoughts take shape before he even voices them. In canto XI, for example, still within the Heaven of the sun, the reflection of St. Dominic anticipates Dante-pilgrim’s questions for him before the Pilgrim has even finished speaking them: “Così com’io del suo raggio resplendo, / si, riguardando ne la luce eterna, / li tuo pensieri onde cagioni apprendo” [Just as I am resplendent with His rays, / thus, as I regard the eternal light, / I understand the reason for your thoughts] (Par. XI. 19-21). Two cantos before, speaking to the soul of Cunizza da Romano, Dante-pilgrim acknowledges that his thoughts are bare to the souls of Heaven because they “see” into his soul with
“eyes” of faith: “«Dio vede tutto, e tuo veder s'inlua» / diss'io, «beato spirto, si che nulla / voglia di sé a te puot'esser fuia” [“God sees all, and your sight sees in Him,” / I said, “Blessed spirit, so that no / thought of mine can be hidden from you.”] (Par. IX.73-75).

This perception of thought, what Mark Musa calls “the notion of interpenetration of minds” (Musa 443), underscores that God and Paradise are linked cognitively in such a way that language is transcended. Dante even creates two reflexive verbs to express this concept; the Pilgrim says to Cunizza that he would reciprocate this mind-reading were he able to: “Già non attendere' io tua dimanda, / s'io m'intuassi, come tu t'inmii” [I would not wait for your question, / were I able to inyou, as you inme7] (Par. IX.80-81). Dante does not contrive these terms for the sake of art alone; the concept of mental interpenetration is difficult, and for the second time in Paradiso—the first being the use of the term trasumanar in canto I—Dante-poet is forced to spill the banks of his language in order to find a term to describe Paradise.

The spirits of Heaven themselves tend to communicate through elaborate dancing, the choreography of which forms patterns, symbols, and shapes that have spiritual meaning. In the sphere of Saturn, the souls form the shape of a giant eagle, representing rule of law and justice; the Poet begins to describe their movement with a comparison to the diminishing earthly sun and the splendor of the spiritual one, another allusion to Revelation 21:23 and 22:5;

Quando colui che tutto 'l mondo alluma

7 -As they are untranslatable, I have followed Musa’s suggestions for these terms. The rest of the translation here is mine, however.
When he who floods the whole world with his light / has sunk so far beneath our hemisphere / that day on every side has disappeared, / the sky which he, the sun, alone had lit / before, now suddenly is lit again / by many lights, reflections of the one.8] (Par. XX.1-6)

The Poet then qualifies the comparison by reminding the reader that his memory of Paradise is considerably diminished and, therefore, this description is an approximation:

[I was reminded of this Heavenly change / the moment that the emblem of the world / and of its lords was silent in its beak, / for all those living lights were

8 Trans. Musa.
now ablaze / with brighter light as they began their songs, / whose fleeting
sweetness fades from memory.\(^9\) (\textit{Par.} XX.7-12)

Dante-poet struggles to remember these songs on other occasions too, often in
conjunction with strong, luminous imagery. In the Heaven of Mars, where the souls of
militant Christians form the shape of a brightly shining cross, the souls sing hymns
which Dante-pilgrim listens to intently but cannot entirely understand:

\begin{quote}
\textit{così da' lumi che li m'appariranno
s'accogliea per la croce una melode
che mi rapiva, sanza intender l'inno.}
\textit{Ben m'accors'io ch'elli era d'alte lode,}
\textit{però ch'a me venìa «Resurgi» e «Vinci»}
\textit{come a colui che non intende e ode}
\end{quote}

[So from the spread of lights along the cross / there gathered in the air a
melody / that held me in a trance, though I could not / tell what the hymn
was—only that it sang / of highest praise: I heard “Arise” and “Conquer” / as
one hears but does not understand.\(^{10}\) (\textit{Par.} XIV.121-26)]

This struggle to remember continues for the Poet all the way to the conclusion
of \textit{Paradiso}, when the Pilgrim finally stands among the actual souls of Heaven as they
swirl around the Godhead. In canto XXII, Dante-poet looks back upon the swirling
planets, just as he turned to look upon earth from Purgatory’s heights; once again, the
Heavens seem small because of his great distance from them. In canto XXIII, having

\footnotesize
\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{9} Trans. Musa.
\textsuperscript{10} Trans. Musa.
\end{flushleft}
left the sun and its sphere behind, Dante-poet explicitly calls God himself the sun of this realm:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{vid'i' sopra migliaia di lucerne} \\
\text{un sol che tutte quante l'accendea,} \\
\text{come fa 'l nostro le viste superne;} \\
e \text{per la viva luce trasparea} \\
\text{la lucente sustanza tanto chiara} \\
nel viso mio, che non la sostenea
\end{align*}
\]

[I saw, above a myriad of lights, / the one Sun that lit them all, even as our sun / illuminates the stars of his domain; / and through its living light there poured the glow / of its translucent substance, bright, so bright / that my poor eyes could not endure the sight.\(^\text{11}\)] (Par. XXIII.28-33)

From this point forward, the Poet abbreviates more and more of what the Pilgrim sees; sometimes he does so with humorous self-awareness of his desire to finish the cantos and the *cantica* on time, but more often he does so because he does not feel his poetic powers equal to the task: “Però salta la penna e non lo scrivo: / ché l'immagine nostra a cotai pieghe, / non che 'l parlare, è troppo color vivo” [And so, my pen skips over such detail— / not fantasy nor words are good enough / to paint the subtle folds of Heaven’s light.\(^\text{12}\)] (Par. XXIV.25-27).

When Dante-pilgrim finally stands directly before God he is overwhelmed completely by the mystery of God’s nature; subsequently, the Poet’s powers fail as

\(^{11}\) Trans. Musa.  
\(^{12}\) Trans. Musa.
The Poet is, as ever, self conscious of this, lamenting: “Oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco / al mio concetto! e questo, a quel ch’i’ vidi, / è tanto, che non basta a dicer ’poco’” [How my weak words fall short of my conception, / which is itself so far from what I saw / that “weak” is much too weak a word to use!13] (Par. XXXIII.121-23). In the conclusion of the poem, the Pilgrim is stricken by a flash of grace—an echo of that flash from the setting sun in Purgatorio XV— that grants him understanding of God’s mysteries. Poet concludes the poem rather than explore this miraculous understanding, since it is inexpressible:

ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:
se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
A l’alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
ma già volgeva il mio disio e ’l velle,
sì come rota ch’igualmente è mossa,
l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle.

[But my own wings could not take me so high— / then a great flash of understanding struck / my mind, and suddenly its wish was granted. / At this point power failed high fantasy / but, like a wheel in perfect balance turning, / I felt my will and my desire impelled / by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars] (Par. XXXIII.138-explicit)
Conclusion

The gradual transcendence of language that the Pilgrim and Poet both experience reflects the Thomist notion that language must condescend to human faculties in descriptions of the divine:

The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. (Summa theol. I.1.10)

As God signifies His own meaning, when the Pilgrim experiences the Godhead he has no need of description as God describes himself without use of language. Beatrice makes clear where the Poet himself does not that the Commedia only reflects or approximates God, rather than capturing anything concrete about the divine essence in its descriptions of him:

Thus must one speak to your mind,
which only takes from the senses
that which the intellect allows.
On account of this Scripture condescends
to your faculties, attributing
feet and hands to God, among other things. (Par. IV. 40-5)

When Dante uses the sun as a symbol of God’s hope and grace in Inferno and Purgatorio, therefore, he uses what he concedes to be an ineffective symbol. This is
why, in the later cantos of Paradiso, the Poet alludes to the passage in Revelation that suggests God will become the new sun and moon of the world upon his Second Coming, when made manifest through Christ. Then, humanity will have no need of symbols to express God; he will be self-evident, self-expressive. The Poet’s “high fantasy” fails because God, the ultimate poet, has expressed himself clearly enough through Creation and the Word, Christ.

The failure of Dante-poet’s project is not, however, a true failure in the strictest sense; all throughout the Commedia, Dante-poet urges the reader to consider the spiritual significance of his poem in a way that has been, until now, urged only of readers of Scripture or theological writing. Recall Dante’s theory on this as he describes it in his Convivio:

The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is to say, beyond the senses; and this occurs when a scripture is expounded in a spiritual sense which, although it is true also in the literal sense, signifies by means of the things signified a part of the supernal things of eternal glory, as may be seen in the song of the Prophet which says that when the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made whole and free. (Convivio II.1)

It is this fourth, anagogical sense that dominates the transformation of the sun from signifier to signified throughout the Commedia. Dante-poet describes the sun in Inferno I and after both as the celestial body and as a symbol for God. As the Pilgrim’s spirit matures and the journey grows richer in spiritual meaning, however, the sun
must take on a meaning which is, as Dante says, “beyond the senses.” Therefore, when God becomes himself the light of Heaven—and therefore the light of the universe—Dante-poet finally encounters that point after which he can no longer use corporeal terms to describe the divine. God shines and expresses himself through the light. In this light comes understanding, both spiritual and intellectual, which strikes the Pilgrim and fills him without use of words or intelligible shapes. Yet the Poet notes that this entire process, this quest for ineffability, cannot have been without its delight, either for himself or for the reader. In an encouraging moment when the Pilgrim struggles to complete his journey, he takes strength from the light around him, expressing what is to become both a statement of spiritual hope but also, for the Poet, of poetic significance, worthiness, and power:

così m'ha dilatata mia fidanza,

come 'l sol fa la rosa quando aperta
tanto divien quant'ell'ha di possanza

[Allow my faith to blossom, / as when the sun makes the rose open, / fully charmed by its power] (Par. XXII.55-57)

Dante is not discouraged by his recognition that his powers will fail but instead, like the rose, is encouraged by the light. He, like many who work with words and meaning, is encouraged and delighted by their limitations and, moreover, what rests beyond those limitations. For Dante, beyond the limitation of all language is the empowerment of all meaning: God.
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