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DANTE AND REALITY/DANTE AND REALISM (*PARADISO*)**Abstract**

*The heuristic intersection of Dante and reality with Dante and realism leads to the observation that the part of the Commedia that most meditates upon reality (Paradiso) is the part perceived by readers as the least realistic. Dante is in fact just as committed to realism in the Paradiso as in the Inferno and Purgatorio, but there are different types of realism in the Commedia: realism of place and realism of character diminish in the Paradiso. In the third realm Dante devises a “conceptual realism” through which he attempts to assist the reader in the imaginative work required to understand what he has to say about being – “lo gran mar dell’essere” – and reality. But Dante has no illusions; he knows that reality is a harder sell than realism, as he tells us at the beginning of Paradiso 2.*

The invitation to contribute to this issue of “SpazioFilosofico” begins with a distinction, one that turns out moreover to be quite hermeneutically useful when applied to Dante: “Il numero non si occupa di ‘realismo’, ma di realtà”. What made the invitation even more enticing is that the description of realism that follows seems to have been tailor-made as a definition of who Dante is as a poet: “Il realismo, in un senso molto ampio, è l’atteggiamento di chi non è disposto a tradire la realtà, o a voltare le spalle all’essere”. The heuristic intersection of Dante and reality with Dante and realism is the starting point for this investigation.

In thinking of Dante and reality my thoughts went immediately to the *Paradiso*, but also to the resistance that many readers express with respect to the third *cantica*, a resistance rooted in its perceived lack of realism. Indeed, through writing this piece I came to the realization that the response of many readers to the *Paradiso*, the widely held belief that it is the least “realistic” of the three *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, is intimately connected to the fact that the *Paradiso* is the part of the poem that most emphatically and continuously meditates upon reality. This observation – *the part of the Commedia that deals consistently with the question of reality is perceived by readers as the least realistic* – would seem to expose a human weakness: that most of us prefer realism to reality.

I have dedicated many years to the study of Dante’s realism, to the analysis of the precise modalities or techniques devised by Dante as a means of securing his faithfulness to reality. As I have shown, these modalities are so successful that the centuries-old reception of the *Commedia* is compromised by an excessive credulity with respect to the *fictio* of the poem. I will take the liberty of directing the reader interested in a reading of the poem from this perspective to my book *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*, in Italian *La ‘Commedia’ senza Dio: Dante e la creazione di una realtà virtuale*. The Italian subtitle,

*Dante e la creazione di una realtà virtuale*, is an accurate description of the book's contents. Through "detheologizing", which I define as "a way of reading that attempts to break out of the hermeneutic guidelines that Dante has structured into his poem", I attempt to grasp "a textual metaphysics so enveloping that it prevents us from analyzing the conditions that give rise to the illusion that such a metaphysics is possible".<sup>1</sup>

Dante is explicit about art as mimesis, explaining in *Inferno* 11 that art imitates nature which imitates God, a precept that is restated with respect to the divine art of *Purgatorio*'s terrace of pride. Divine art reverses the usual mimetic hierarchy, since it puts to scorn not only the greatest of human artists but also nature herself: "di marmo candido e addorno / d'intagli sì, che non pur Policeto, / ma la natura li avrebbe scorno" (*Purg.* 10.31-33). Although Dante declares humbly that this is God's art, not his own – "Colui che mai non vide cosa nova / produsse esto visibile parlare, / novello a noi perché qui non si trova" (*Purg.* 10.94-96) – in practice the poet has set himself the task of representing the divine *visibile parlare* with his human language, even using an acrostic in *Purgatorio* 12 to "engrave" into his text a *visual* analogue to God's visual speech.<sup>2</sup>

The work of analyzing Dante's realism rhetorically must be correlated with an enriched historical context that embraces the visionary tradition, a tradition that boasts a profound and complex relationship with the dynamic between realism and reality.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Dante's realism is a feature of his art that we can study along a chronological arc of development: Dante's realism is a feature of his earliest lyric poetry. Thus, as I show in my commentary to Dante's youthful lyric poems, *Rime giovanili e della "Vita Nuova"*, the very early sonnet *Ciò che m'incontra nella mente more* is already visionary and uses visionary tropes.<sup>4</sup> In my commentary I attempt to isolate the first precocious manifestations of those typical techniques of verisimilitude that permeate all facets of the *Commedia*: even in the purely lyrical context we can find incipient signs of Dante's realistic art.

On this occasion I will begin with some thoughts on Dante and reality, before moving to the inevitable links to his realism. They are inevitable because for Dante reality exceeds time, but he is a human in time – "ond'io, che son mortal, mi sento in / questa disagguaglianza" (*Par.* 15.83-83) – who represents reality with human means and resources. Unlike angels, who see all things simultaneously in the Transcendent One and are not interrupted by the new things that emerge one by one along the line of becoming – "non hanno vedere interciso / da novo obietto" (*Par.* 29.79-80) – he is obliged to "rememorar per concetto diviso" (*Par.* 29.81).

All of the *Commedia*, and in particular all of the *Paradiso*, is a paean to reality, constructed by a man who was not only not immune from but in fact particularly prone to questions/uncertainties/doubts (the various connotations of the *Paradiso*'s "dubbio"),

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<sup>1</sup> TEODOLINDA BAROLINI, *The Undivine Comedy*, Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1992, citations p. 17 and p. 20; in Italian *La Commedia senza Dio*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 6 of *The Undivine Comedy*, which is devoted to the ecphrases of the terrace of pride and the representational issues there foregrounded.

<sup>3</sup> On the visionary context, see chapter 7 of *The Undivine Comedy* and the essay "Perché Dante scrisse la *Commedia*? Dante e la tradizione visionaria" in TEODOLINDA BAROLINI, *Il secolo di Dante*, Milano: Bompiani, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Rime giovanili e della "Vita Nuova"*, Milano: Rizzoli, 2009.

but who, buoyed by a remarkable epistemological robustness (not shared, for instance, by his intimate friend Guido Cavalcanti), insists: first, on “lo gran mar dell’essere” (*Par.* 1.113); and, second, on the capacity of the intellect to comprehend the great sea of being, or – changing metaphors – to “repose in the truth”, in other words, to arrive at the comprehension of reality. The intellect reposes in the truth like the wild beast that returns to its lair: “Posasi in esso [il vero], come fera in lustra, / tosto che giunto l’ha; e giugner puollo: / se non, ciascun disio sarebbe *frustrà*” (*Par.* 4.127-129).

Dante’s extraordinary linguistic resources are stunningly showcased in his treatments of reality: the metaphors just cited are merely two examples of a metaphoric richness that allows Dante to capture and transmit at least some of the essence of reality as he sees it – and as he feels it. (The distinction is a meaningful one for Dante, invoked for instance in “La forma universal di questo nodo / credo ch’i’ vidi, perché più di largo, / dicendo questo, mi sento ch’i’ godo” [*Par.* 33.91-93].) And *Paradiso* is, I repeat, the *cantica* of reality: here we encounter the use of the word “essere” as a noun, as in “lo gran mar dell’essere”, a usage that with very few exceptions is concentrated in the last *cantica*.<sup>5</sup> *Paradiso* is infused with a meditation on reality and it is infused with extraordinary metaphors; it is like a fourteenth-century poetic version of a work undertaking to explain the discoveries of modern physics, in some ways analogous to the book of the English physicist Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the XIIth Conference on the Dynamics of Molecular Collisions, held in 1999, featured on its program the following verses from *Paradiso* 30, where Dante conjures the river of light:

e vidi lume in forma di rivera  
fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive  
dipinte di mirabil primavera.  
Di tal fiumana uscian faville vive,  
e d’ogne parte si mettien ne’ fiori,  
quasi rubin che oro circunscrive;  
poi, come inebriate da li odori,  
riprofondavan sé nel miro gurge;  
e s’una intrava, un’altra n’uscìa fori. (*Par.* 30.61-69)

The organizer of the conference was my husband, James Valentini, who asked me if there were verses in the *Commedia* that he could use for a conference on light: the primary way of studying molecular collisions uses light to interact with the molecules. The verses from *Paradiso* 30 were perfect, he explained: a laser beam is like a river of light; the photons in it are the sparks; the molecules that absorb the photons are like the flowers; the molecules re-emit the photons, in the way that the sparks plunge back into the *miro gurge*.

For Dante the question of reality or being leads inevitably to the question of creation, which carries with it two indispensable features: creation requires difference, and

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<sup>5</sup> Of the over 200 uses of *essere* or *esser*, I count two occasions on which it appears as a noun in *Purgatorio* (*Purg.* 17.110 and *Purg.* 18.22) and eleven such occasions in *Paradiso* (*Par.* 1.113; *Par.* 2.114; *Par.* 2.116; *Par.* 4.33; *Par.* 7.132; *Par.* 24.73; *Par.* 26.58 (twice); *Par.* 29.23; *Par.* 29.26; *Par.* 29.29). The Latin *esse* appears as a noun only in *Paradiso*: *Par.* 3.79 and *Par.* 13.100.

<sup>6</sup> New York: Bantam, 1988.

creation requires love. The creation of the Many from the One – “*distinctio et multitudo rerum est a Deo*” wrote St. Thomas (*ST* 1a.47.1) – is described by Dante as an erotically-tinged Big Bang, an explosion of ardor that bursts forth into flaming sparks of being:

La divina bontà, che da sé sperne  
ogne livore, ardendo in sé, sfavilla  
sì che dispiega le bellezze etterne. (*Par.* 7.64-66)

The “bellezze etterne” are unfolded in an act of love, an act in which the Eternal opens itself in order to create the New: “s’aperse in nuovi amor l’eterno amore” (*Par.* 29.18). This act of primordial opening is a radical affirmation of being. The Transcendent chooses to enter the flux of time and affirms itself as the ground of all that is in the declaration *Subsisto* (the use of direct discourse is perhaps the most ancient of Dante’s techniques of verisimilitude, already present in the *rime giovanili*):

Non per aver a sé di bene acquisto,  
ch’esser non può, ma perché suo splendore  
potesse, risplendendo, dir ‘*Subsisto*’,  
in sua eternità di tempo fore,  
fuor d’ogne altro comprender, come i piacque,  
s’aperse in nuovi amor l’eterno amore. (*Par.* 29.13-18)

*Paradiso* is indeed the story of creation and of time: a premodern and stunningly beautiful poetic analogue to Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*. It is worth noting that two of the thinkers whose physics and metaphysics Dante most absorbs, Aristotle and Augustine, are frequently cited by Hawking. He cites Dante too, but referring to Hell rather than Paradise: “One could well say of the event horizon what the poet Dante said of the entrance to Hell: ‘All hope abandon, ye who enter here’. Anything or anyone who falls through the event horizon will soon reach the region of infinite density and the end of time”. And yet in his last words Hawking reminds us of the *Paradiso*, although he probably (no criticism is implied) had not read it: “However if we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God”.<sup>7</sup>

Is the discomfort that many readers experience confronting Dante’s *Paradiso* the discomfort that many of us feel in front of a resolute and unblinking attention to reality? Certainly Dante knew what his project was in the *Paradiso*, and he also predicted the response of his readers. He understood very well that the ontological meditation of the third *cantica* offered him few opportunities to make the path of his reader less arduous. Indeed, what other great work of poetry begins with the injunction to the reader to go back, to read no further? Knowing well that the path ahead will offer few of those

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<sup>7</sup> STEPHEN W. HAWKING, *A Brief History of Time*, citations p. 89 and p. 175.

blandishments of realism that readers crave (or better: of *the types of realism* that readers crave), Dante begins *Paradiso* 2 with this stern warning:

O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,  
 desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti  
 dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,  
 tornate a riveder li vostri liti:  
 non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,  
 perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti. (*Par.* 2.1-6)

When readers respond to the *Paradiso* as the least “realistic” of the three *cantiche* of the *Commedia*, they are in fact responding to the lack in the *Paradiso* of those specific modalities of realism by which they are most entertained (and let us keep in mind the etymology of “entertain”, with its root in the Latin *tenerē*). Dante is always attempting to be realistic, in my view; but realism about the ontological ground of being is not as entertaining as realism about the landscape of hell. It is harder work, because we are given very little to hold on to.

Let us consider the different modalities of realism that we find deployed in the *Commedia*. Dante’s realism with respect to place generated an immediate pictorial tradition devoted to illustrating the landscapes described by the poet: both the landscapes of the afterworld and the landscapes evoked by the souls as they recount their lives on earth. In our own time this tradition of illustrating especially the *Inferno* continues, and has found recent new expression in the Dante video game that – while completely distorting the basic premises of the poem (turning Dante for instance into a crusader at the siege of Acre) – does borrow the macro-structure of his hell. Realism of place is also reflected in the degree to which Dante’s description of purgatory for centuries inspired conceptions of the second realm, including Thomas Merton’s 1948 religious autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*.<sup>8</sup> Purgatory was a relatively recent idea in Dante’s time, compared to hell or paradise, and as a result Dante’s realist *inventio* – which in the case of purgatory includes the very idea of a mountain, Dante’s own contribution to the cultural imaginary – was able to considerably condition later religious thought.

Realism in the delineation of character – the telling detail by which a character is “revealed” – is also in greater supply in the first two *cantiche*, and especially in the *Inferno*, where a *passato remoto* can cause the consternation and pathos of the pilgrim’s dialogue with Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti. Delineation of character is certainly present as long as Virgilio is present in the poem, for in him Dante has created a character who draws readers to love him as the pilgrim does. Dante does not delineate Beatrice as a character, in the way that he does Virgilio – purposely, in my opinion. He does not allow a character to cohere in his depiction of Beatrice, but instead disrupts any possible character delineation with contradictory signifiers: one moment she is described in eroticized lyric language, then as an admiral on a ship, then as a stern mother, and so on, always oscillating in such a way as to disrupt cohesive character development. In this

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<sup>8</sup> New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948.

way Beatrice is indeed the gateway to the Transcendent, which is not simplifiable, is not comfortable, is not consoling, and is not necessarily likeable.

So how does realism function in the *Paradiso*? The social realism and the realism of place that is so strong in other parts of the *Commedia* is now miniaturized, relegated to similes. There are many similes in the *Paradiso* that are little miniatures of the daily life that is now so distant, seen as though through a telescope. In the *Paradiso* these similes based on human social intercourse are frequently destabilizing and counter-intuitive with respect to the reality of paradise that they are illuminating. For instance, in order to describe the movement of the spirits of the heaven of the sun – who are all male – Dante compares them to ladies who pause while dancing, as they wait for the new melody to begin: “donne . . . non da ballo sciolte / ma che s’arrestin tacite, ascoltando / fin che le nove note hanno ricolte” (*Par.* 10.79-81). An even more detailed and incongruous *vignette* of human society (and of women in society) is offered by the simile that describes the arrival of Saint John, who joins his comrades Saints Peter and James as though he were a maiden rising up to join the other dancers at a wedding, not through any fault of excess eagerness but as a way of honoring the bride:

E come surge e va ed entra in ballo  
vergine lieta, sol per fare onore  
a la novizia, non per alcun fallo,  
così vid’ io lo schiarato splendore  
venire a’ due che si volgieno a nota  
qual conveniesi al loro ardente amore. (*Par.* 25.103-108)

The non-miniaturized realism to be found in *Paradiso* is much more abstract, as befits the philosophical nature of the enterprise. In this category I would put the fundamental representational strategy of the third *cantica*, by which I refer to the decision to display the souls in various heavens for the benefit of the pilgrim while simultaneously insisting that the souls are “in reality” all together in the Empyrean. Here we have an excellent example of how in the *Paradiso* realism is at odds with reality: the souls are displayed distributed in their heavens in order to represent them more “realistically”, to give them differing connotations and psychological/moral characterizations that the pilgrim (and we the readers) can hold on to, but at the same time we are told that this distribution has no relation to reality. Reality is that the souls of the blessed are all together in the “primo giro”:

D’i Serafin colui che più s’india,  
Moisè, Samuel, e quel Giovanni  
che prender vuoli, io dico, non Maria  
non hanno in altro cielo i loro scanni  
che questi spirti che mo t’appariro,  
né hanno a l’esser lor più o meno anni;  
ma tutti fanno bello il primo giro,  
e differentemente han dolce vita  
per sentire più e men l’eterno spiro. (*Par.* 4.28-36)

Another example of the more abstract realism of the *Paradiso* is the inverted universe of *Paradiso* 28, a canto where Dante sees the universe not as we have known it thus far, with the earth at the center and the heavens revolving around it. Rather, all of a sudden God is the central point from which “*depende il cielo e tutta la natura*” (*Par.* 28.42), and the angelic intelligences are circling around the divine point. In this way Dante literalizes and demonstrates visually – that is, he attempts to render realistically – the paradox that he will ultimately express verbally, when he defines the point as being “*inchiuso da quel ch’elli ’nchiude*” (*Par.* 30.12). In order to understand the paradox we must hold the two different universes together in our minds. In his article “Dante and the 3-Sphere”, the physicist Mark A. Peterson suggests that in *Paradiso* 28 Dante accurately represents a 3-sphere, anticipating Einsteinian cosmology:

I came upon this suggestion about Dante and the 3-sphere in wondering how Dante would treat an evidently unsatisfactory feature of the Aristotelian cosmology when he, as narrator in the *Paradiso*, got to the ‘edge’ or ‘top’ of the universe. How would he describe the edge? It is the same problem every child has wondered about: unless the universe is infinite, it must (the argument goes) have an edge – but then what is beyond? Dante faces this very problem at the end of the *Divine Comedy* where he must describe the Empyrean not in terms of principles or abstractions, as the standard cosmology did, but as someone actually there.

The Empyrean is first seen and described in Canto 28 of the *Paradiso* in a passage I found, and still do find, surprising. The image is a 3-sphere – as good a description of one as I have ever seen anywhere. Dante thereby resolves the problem of the edge and at the same time completes his entire cosmological metaphor in a most astonishing and satisfactory way. I have since gathered that this passage is considered obscure by critics, but a relativist will at once see what is going on, and I will give the necessary mathematical background in Sec. II.<sup>9</sup>

According to Peterson Dante has intuited a space that is three-dimensional, “yet it has no boundary; every point is interior” (p. 1032): in other words, it is “*inchiuso da quel ch’elli ’nchiude*”. Peterson explains further:

When I first read Dante, I was impressed that he attempted to describe the stars as they would appear from the southern hemisphere (in *Purgatorio*). I am now enormously more impressed to find that he has done something like the same thing one dimension higher – described how a 3-sphere would appear from its equator. The overview of the 3-sphere is made completely explicit in the action of Cantos 27 and 28. In Canto 27 Dante looks down into the first semi-universe and sees the earth (“this little threshing floor”) far below him. At the beginning of Canto 28 he *turns around and looks up* into the second semi-universe. This means the two hemispheres are positioned exactly as they should be. Consult Fig. 7 and imagine looking first one way, then the other, from the point *P*. Standing at the top of the Primum Mobile and looking first one way, then the other, is the way to see the entire universe in one sweep. (p. 1034)

Peterson notes that Dante’s new idea had no effect on cosmological thinking – that it went unnoticed, not understood: “it has probably been dismissed by readers with less geometrical aptitude than Dante as mysticism” (p. 1033). If you consult Peterson’s essay you will see that its real argumentation is conducted in the language of mathematics and geometry. How gratifying those geometric figures would be to a poet who concludes his

<sup>9</sup> MARK A. PETERSON, “Dante and the 3-Sphere”, *American Journal of Physics* 47, n. 12 (Dec. 1979), pp. 1031-1035, citation p. 1031.

vision by comparing himself to a (frustrated) geometer: “Qual è ’l geomètra che tutto s’affige / per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova, / pensando, quel principio ond’elli indige” (*Par.* 33.133-135). Peterson’s article and his geometric drawings help us to further define the realism of the *Paradiso* as the realism of a mathematician, of a geometer, of a physicist.

Perhaps we could call this a “conceptual realism”; certainly it is a realism that is struggling to represent ideas – not people, places, or things. Dante’s attempt to be faithful to reality, in other words, takes him to the mimesis of ideas. And, again, let me stress that he is quite conscious of the effort that his intellectual adventure requires from the reader. At the beginning of *Paradiso* 13 Dante gives the reader a task of visualization which is in effect a lesson in how to apply conceptual or geometric realism – how to make realistic the non-realistic (which is of course not the same as the non-real). In order to visualize the twenty-four souls dancing around him, the reader must imagine stars: first fifteen stars of the first magnitude followed by the seven stars of Ursa Major, followed by the two brightest stars of Ursa Minor, thus reaching a total of twenty-four stars. Dante orders the reader to imagine – “Imagini” – and to do the work of holding the image in the mind, in other words the work of making the real become realistic, and in that way more “com-prehensible” (“hold-on-to-able”):

**Imagini**, chi bene intender cupe  
 quel ch’i’ or vidi – e ritegna l’image,  
 mentre ch’io dico, come ferma rupe –,  
 quindici stelle che ’n diverse plage  
 lo ciel avvivan di tanto sereno  
 che soperchia de l’aere ogne compage;  
**imagini** quel carro a cu’ il seno  
 basta del nostro cielo e notte e giorno,  
 si ch’al volger del temo non vien meno;  
**imagini** la bocca di quel corno  
 che si comincia in punta de lo stelo  
 a cui la prima rota va dintorno (*Par.* 13.1-12)

In the above passage the reader is commanded to do the work of the imagination – the work of giving plasticity and reality to what Dante saw – with three imperatives (“imagini”) and a series of precise mental instructions, which are in effect instructions for self-entertainment: the reader must hold onto the first image as though to a firm rock (“e ritegna l’image, / mentre ch’io dico, come ferma rupe”), while Dante on his side of the collaboration proceeds to unfold the second image and then the third. If the reader can hold the sequential images in his mind he then has an opportunity to create the composite image, still but a shadow of what Dante saw: “avrà quasi l’ombra / de la vera costellazione” (*Par.* 13.19-20).

In thinking about Dante’s realism, and the nature of his commitment to realism, we might consider the issue of time and eternity and the complex ways in which Dante grapples with rendering these ideas. When teachers and commentators of the *Commedia* repeat the well-worn cliché whereby hell and paradise are eternal, while purgatory is temporal, we conflate a very careful distinction that Dante made between eternity as duration (hell) and eternity as simultaneous presence (paradise), and consequently we



lose an opportunity to see his conceptual realism at work. True eternity, the eternity of paradise, as Dante learned from Boethius, is not the same as endlessness, because eternity requires simultaneity: “Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae *tota simul* et perfecta possessio” (*Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6.9-11). Over and over, Boethius stresses that what is not “simul” is not eternal: endlessness is one thing, and God’s ability to embrace the full presence of an endless life together and at the same time is another. Endlessness should be called “perpetual” (*perpetuum*), while only the plenitude of presence in a never fading instant may be called “eternal” (*aeternum*).

Dante has conceptualized his hell and heaven according to Boethius’s distinction between perpetual endlessness and eternal timelessness: the air of hell is “without time” – “*sanza tempo*” (*Inf.* 3.29) – because it is starless and therefore endless, deprived of the measured time produced by the motion of the spheres, not because it is truly timeless and eternal, altogether outside of time, in the way that the divine mind exists “*in sua eternità di tempo fore*” (*Par.* 29.16). In other words, with respect to the question of eternity, Dante’s treatment of hell and heaven is not symmetrical, with hell the *in malo* version of heaven and heaven the *in bono* version of hell, as scholars have implied; rather he treats the two realms in an asymmetrical fashion that is ontologically and theologically precise.

In the context of hell eternity is duration, as Aquinas notes: “The fire of hell is called eternal only because it is unending” (*Summa Theologiae* 1a.10.3). And so, consummate realist that he is, this is the eternity that Dante renders. Thus, in his representation of hell Dante never problematizes the concepts of space and time as he does in his representation of paradise, where he has Beatrice explain that all the souls are “in reality” in the Empyrean and only appear in different heavens as an accommodation for the pilgrim’s limited understanding. Never in hell does Dante say – the idea seems ridiculous but to say it as a thought-experiment helps us to conceptualize the problem that Dante is dealing with – that all the souls are really with Lucifer in Cocytus and only appear in the various circles of hell for the benefit of the pilgrim.

The reason Dante handles hell so differently from paradise is that he is faithful to reality: the two states of being are “in reality” not at all symmetrical. Hell is not beyond space and time. Spatially, hell is treated as tangible and concrete, while temporally, the fact that it is eternal means specifically and only what is captured by “*ed io eterno duro*” (*Inf.* 3.8): that it will last forever, that its torments are perpetual.

Dante’s methods for not betraying reality thus include a conceptual realism that attempts to faithfully render in time and space a condition outside of time and space. The wonder is not that he failed at what is a literally impossible task, an “*ovra inconsummabile*” (*Par.* 26.125): *concetto diviso* cannot render *concetto indiviso e indivisibile*. The wonder is that for over thirty-three canti of *terza rima* Dante found ways to place being at the center of his poesis, to make reality the focal point of his poetry.

Dante’s experiments with realism are far-reaching and beyond brilliant – so much so that when I read later authors I am always struck by how much he anticipated. One can test this hypothesis by reading *Fictional Truth* by Michael Riffaterre and noting that the tropes and methods used by nineteenth-century realist novelists were indeed used by

Dante many centuries earlier.<sup>10</sup> Now we use the phrase “virtual reality” – and Dante seems to have anticipated that phrase as well, describing the “virtual” bodies of the souls in the afterlife, the bodies that he invented to inhabit his virtual reality:

così l'aere vicin quivi si mette  
in quella forma ch'è in lui suggella  
**virtualmente** l'alma che ristette (Purg. 25.94-96)

Dante constructed a virtual reality – a “visibile parlare” (Purg. 10.95) – so compelling that there is no medium into which it has not been translated. Even the most distorted appropriations of his vision, even the most banal over-simplifications, are testaments to the enduring power with which this realist confronted reality: “sì che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso” (Inf. 32.12).

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<sup>10</sup> MICHAEL RIFFATERRE, *Fictional Truth*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1990; for an application of Riffaterre’s categories to a specific passage in the *Commedia*, see the essay “La coda di Minosse: come si crea l’Inferno (Eneide VI, 431-433 e Inferno V, 1-24)” in TEODOLINDA BAROLINI, *Il secolo di Dante*.