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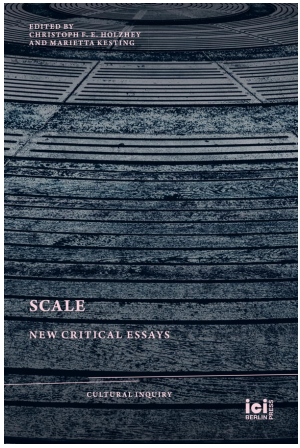

Scale: New Critical Essays, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Marietta Kesting, Cultural Inquiry, 40 (ICI Berlin Press, 2026) <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-40>

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The Scale of Love

CITE AS:

Franco Costantini, 'The Scale of Love', in *Scale: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Marietta Kesting, Cultural Inquiry, 40 (ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 91–115 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-40_fc>

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ABSTRACT: This essay seeks to demonstrate the capacity of lyric poetry to convey a heterodox ontology. In particular, I bring into dialogue medieval treatises with poetic texts in vernacular languages (mainly Dante's *Paradiso*) through the concepts of analogy (Simone Weil) and 'human cosmo-morphism' (Max Scheler). The hierarchical order of the *scala naturae* is disrupted by poetic language, which configures an open space where angels and flowers, human souls and animals coexist on the same ontological plane.

KEYWORDS: poetry; nature; Dante; ontology; attention; scala naturae

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The Scale of Love

FRANCO COSTANTINI

There exists a 'deifugal' force.
Otherwise all would be God.
Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

INTRODUCTION

What happens when we go beyond the limits of subjective experience and human knowledge and achieve, through mystical vision, what is traditionally called the union (*unio*) or conjunction (*coniuctio*) with the divine? In this essay, I present an analysis of some passages from the last cantos of *Paradiso*, the last cantica of Dante's *Divine Comedy*,[1] where philosophy, theology, and mysticism collapse into the lyrical depiction of the indescribable. I focus in particular upon experience in and of the Empyrean, the immaterial space which lies beyond the last heavenly sphere. I will examine some of the active tensions that structure the *Commedia* and reflect on the epistemic value that the poetic word can convey. Poetry has its own truth, as love does (according to the famous maxim of Gregory the Great: '*amor ipse notitia est*', 'love itself is knowledge').

1 I quote the *Divine Comedy* following the Italian edition of reference: Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Le lettere, 1994); the English translation is quoted from *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Robert and Jean Hollander, 3 vols (Doubleday, 2000–07).

I would like to explore the philosophical implications of the poet's otherworldly 'situated dislocation',[2] his being simultaneously in the 'over here' of the human poet's perspective and in the 'over there' of the pilgrim's transcendent perspective, by putting the Dantean text in dialogue with other medieval texts, but also with some modern and contemporary thinkers that have tried to meditate the relation between mystical experience, language, and the ontological structure of the world. The notion of scale therefore has several distinct meanings in this essay: as a marker of different levels of observation and understanding of an object, as a way to express a change in the resolution of the observation, but also as a hierarchical and taxonomical measurement, as in the medieval (but in a certain way still very actual) *scala naturae*, the great chain of being that orders living and non-living beings following a scalar ontology derived from Platonic emanationism and Aristotelian categories.[3]

THE ASCENSION TO THE EMPYREAN

According to one fundamental law of physical movement in the medieval understanding, every creature has its own *pondus*, its own gravity, we might say, that naturally exerts its force. This gravity is a form of love, as William of Saint-Thierry (1085–1148) writes in his *De natura et dignitate amoris* (I, 1):

> Love is a power of the soul, leading her by a kind of natural gravity to her place or destination. Every creature whether spiritual or corporeal has both a place to which it is naturally led and a kind of natural gravity by which it is led there.[4]

2 I borrow here one of the definitions given by Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. 32. See also ibid., p. 121: 'Not only is the seeming paradox of this dissolution of the subject produced by scale, but scale provides some ways of renewing and re-examining the problems of subjectivity, identity, experience, and consciousness. Scale produces a situated dislocation [...]; it dislocates the perspective from the delimited structure of the body even as it accounts for this dislocation.'

3 See Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard University Press, 1933); and *L'être et ses degrés. L'histoire de l'ontologie scalaire*, ed. by Fabienne Baghdassarian and Kristell Trego (Hermann, 2023).

4 '[E]st quippe amor vis animae naturali quodam pondere ferens eam in locum vel finem suum. Omnis enim creatura sive spiritualis, sive corporea, et certum habet locum quo

As it was already manifest at least since the first ascension of the poet within his body from the terrestrial forest of Eden to the first heaven of the Moon (*Par.* 1), love works as an attractive, gravitational force for bodies and souls. This gravity does not necessarily pull down: the stone desires to reunite with the earth and is therefore naturally drawn downwards, while fire tends towards its celestial element. So too does the human soul, which is naturally drawn towards God.

Scale is, etymologically, a ladder (lat. *scala*), as well as the steps that compose it and the relations between these physical or conceptual steps or stages. Our journey therefore begins with a sort of ladder,[5] at the near end of Dante's itinerary in the physical universe. In the twenty-first canto of *Paradiso*, in the heaven of Saturn, the heaven of contemplative souls, Dante finds himself in front of a golden staircase that ascends upwards:

> di color d'oro in che raggio traluce
> vid' io uno scaleo eretto in suso
> tanto, che nol seguiva la mia luce.
>
> (The color of gold in a ray of sunlight,
> I saw a ladder, rising to so great a height
> my eyesight could not rise along with it.)
>
> (Par. 21.28–30)

This refers, as will be specified in the following canto (*Par.* 22.70–72), to the ladder mentioned by Jacob in Genesis 28. 12.[6] Through contemplation, a person can gradually reach divine vision. Many treatises take up this idea of a gradual approach to the divine, such as Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Bernard of Clairvaux's *De gradibus*, and Richard of Saint Victor's *Benjamin minor*.

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naturaliter fertur, et naturale quoddam pondus quo fertur' (Patrologia Latina vol. MPL 184 (Migne, 1859, p. 379); William of Saint-Thierry, *On the Nature and Dignity of Love*, trans. by Thomas X. Davis (Cistercian Publications, 1982), p. 47.

5 Religious and philosophical writings using the image of the ladder are numerous; limiting ourselves to the medieval context preceding Dante, it is certainly worth mentioning the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* of John Climacus, and the *Book of Muhammad's Ladder* (survived only through two thirteenth-century translations in Latin and Old French, *Liber scalae Machometi* and *Livre de l'eschiele Mahomet*), which was probably known to Dante; see *Dante and Islam*, ed. by Jan Ziolkowski, special issue of *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 125 (2007).

6 'Viditque in somnis scalam stantem super terram et cacumen illius tangens caelum; angelos quoque Dei ascendentes et descendentes per eam.'

When the poet arrives in the *Primo mobile*, the last physical heaven of the nine that surround the Earth, we witness a vivid change of perspective: what seemed to be a destination, the 'top of the tree', turns out to be a beginning, the 'flowerpot' (*testo*) in which the roots of the tree of time reside ('How time should have its roots in a single flowerpot | and its foliage in all the others | may now become quite clear to you.' *Par*. 27.118–21). We are at a threshold between time and eternity,[7] physical space and God as universe's *locus naturalis.* In the *Primo mobile*, a homogenous and still inconceivably rapid heaven, the poet discovers 'another universe' above, mirror to the one he has just gone through, with nine angelic choirs corresponding to the nine spheres, turning at different speeds (the smaller circle being the fastest, in a symmetrical relation mirroring the movement of the physical spheres, of which the largest and outermost was the fastest). All the angels participate in the divine light,[8] following their respective capacities (in this regard, Dante departs significantly from the doctrine of the Pseudo-Dionysian source), and the *Primo mobile*, too, is moved by its love for the Empyrean (by the circle of the Seraphim specifically),[9]

7 For a definition of 'threshold' in scale theory: 'A threshold is a discontinuity in what is observed, a change in the kind and quality of information that can be perceived as one alters the scale of observation' (DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 21).

8 Through Ibn Gabirol's (known as Avicebron to Latin philosophers) *Fons vitae* and Grosseteste's *De Luce*, the so-called 'metaphysics of light' permeates all of Dante's *Paradiso*. I think that what Vincent Cantarino writes about Ibn Gabirol's cosmological doctrine is extendable to *Paradiso*'s metaphysics as well: 'a characteristic feature of any emanatistic system, namely, the lack of real distinction between the different degrees of being. Although all being is hierarchically structured by its participation in Light, from the Divine to the lowest manifestations of the Cosmos, there is no ontological distinction between the spiritual orders and the material, nor between the physical and the metaphysical' (Vincent Cantarino, 'Ibn Gabirol's Metaphysic of Light', *Studio Islamica*, 26 (1967), pp. 49–71 (p. 70) <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595232>); 'Light, therefore, [...] is not a symbol, but an expression of an ontological reality, namely, that of the Divine itself' (ibid., p. 71). On Dante's metaphysics of light, see Maria Corti, 'Metafisica della luce come poesia', in *Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante. La felicità mentale. Percorsi dell'invenzione e altri saggi* (Einaudi, 2003), pp. 284–98; and Didier Ottaviani, *La philosophie de la lumière chez Dante. Du 'Convivio' à la 'Divine Comédie'* (Champion, 2004).

9 That Empyrean was the place where angels reside was declared by a majority of theological authorities. See, for instance, the very famous and widely read *Commentaries on the Sentences* by Peter Lombard: 'Ubi angeli mox creati fuerint: in empyreo scilicet, quod statim factum, angelis fuerit repletum. [...] appellatur hic [...] caelum splendidum quod dicitur empyreum, id est igneum, a splendore, non a calore, quod statim factum, angelis est repletum, quod est supra firmamentum' (*Sent.* II, d. II, c. 4, 1–2).

the heaven of intellectual fire, the divine mind, which is perfectly still and encompasses the entire cosmos.[10]

Beatrice, the beloved lady who guides and instructs the pilgrim in the last *cantica*,[11] explains that all the angels have a direct vision of God, and not a mediated and hierarchical vision whereby every circle sees the vision as 'reflected' by the circle above, as in the Pseudo-Dionysian treatise *De coelesti hierarchia*, which was the main medieval model for the conception and representation of angelic movements and functions ('E dei saper che tutti hanno diletto | quanto la sua veduta si profonda | nel vero in che si queta ogne intelletto'; 'And you should know that all of them delight | in measure of the depth to which their sight | can penetrate the truth, where every intellect finds rest', *Par*. 28.106–108). This seems to me a fundamental point, because to celestial hierarchies is applied the same principle that was enunciated about the other beings in the sublunar world: every creature has access to the world and to the divine illumination according to its own nature,[12] as is clearly stated in the very beginning of *Paradiso*, when Beatrice employs the metaphor of the 'sea of being' to outline the existence of individual qualitative differences within a common ontological ground.

> Ne l'ordine ch'io dico sono accline
> tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
> più al principio loro e men vicine;
> onde si muovono a diversi porti
> per lo gran mar de l'essere.
>
> (In that order, all natures have their bent
> according to their different destinies,
> whether nearer to their source or farther from it.
> They move, therefore, toward different harbors
> upon the vastness of the sea of being.)
>
> (*Par.* 1.109–113)

10 The comparison between heavenly movements and lovers' desire was quite common, and already present in the Arab commentaries on Aristotle. For instance: 'Primum caelum movetur ab isto motore secundum desiderium ut assimiletur ei secundum suum posse, sicut amans movetur ut assimiletur suo amato'; 'The first sky is moved by this motor according to the desire to be assimilated (likened) to it as it could, as the lover moves towards the assimilation of her/his beloved' (Averroes, *On Arist. Metaph.*, XII, 37; my translation).

11 In accordance with the conventions of Dante scholarship, I distinguish between Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet, the *agens* and the *auctor*.

12 On this structure, see Susanna Barsella, 'Dante e la "machina mundi". Modelli cosmologici e l'Epistola XIII', *Studi Danteschi*, 84 (2019), pp. 205–65.

In a relative sense, there is a difference of intensity and 'size' in the beatitude that a Seraph, from the higher angelic choir, and an archangel can achieve (or, I might add, an oak, a fish, or a saint). Nevertheless, in absolute terms there is no sense in comparing the totality of different individual experiences, because even if for an external mensuration the full joy of an 'inferior' entity could quantitively seem lesser than the full joy of a superior one, still subjectively there is no way for any particular being to conceive or desire more than what they are experiencing, full existence and full joy.

After the last physical sphere, the largest one, cosmos ends. The ladder that the pilgrim had started climbing in the heaven of the contemplative souls brings him here:

> Ivi è perfetta, matura e intera
> ciascuna disïanza; in quella sola
> è ogne parte là ove sempr' era,
> perché non è in loco e non s'impola;
> e nostra scala infino ad essa varca,
> onde così dal viso ti s'invola.
>
> (There only all we long for is perfected,
> ripe, and entire. It is there alone
> each element remains forever in its place,
> for it is not in space and does not turn
> on poles. Our ladder mounts right up to it
> and thus its top is hidden from your sight.)
>
> (*Par.* 22.64–69)

What lies beyond the *Primum mobile* is not a larger sphere but a rather peculiar 'place' that cannot be considered part of the cosmos anymore. As Albert the Great already noted, without space and time, without a sense of before and after, cosmos (as *ordo*) cannot exist: 'For where there is no before and after, there cannot be order.'[13] What was clear to medieval thinkers, following Aristotle, was that the concept of time is intimately linked with space; the classical definition of 'objective' time was the number of motion with respect to the before and after ('hoc est enim tempus, numerus motus secundum prius et posterius', *Phys.*

13 '[U]bi enim non est prius et posterius, ordo esse non potest' (Albert the Great, *Commentary on the 'Liber de causis'*, ed. by Winfried Fauser (Aschendorff, 1993), 1.1, tr. 4, c. 5, p. 49).

IV, 10–14, 218a). The Empyrean is not in space nor a place ('*non è in loco*'), and is not a sphere ('*non s'impola*'); it is pure light,[14] and can be described with a particular *terzina*, that in a circular movement represents the interpenetration and coextension of luminosity, love, and pleasure:

> luce intellettüal, piena d'amore;
> amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;
> letizia che trascende ogne dolzore.
>
> (light intellectual, full of love,
> love of true good, full of joy,
> joy that surpasses every sweetness.)
> (*Par*. 30.40–42)

Dante had already provided a definition of the Empyrean some years before, in his philosophical treatise *Convivio*, where the Platonic influences were manifest:

> This is the supreme edifice of the universe in which all the world is enclosed and beyond which there is nothing; it is not itself in space but was formed solely in the Primal Mind, which the Greeks call Protonoe.[15]

The Empyrean is a strange place/substance: intellectual fire, love, pure light. We witness, as readers, the presence of the pilgrim-poet physically,[16] in a place that is not physical; we are in the divine mind, which encompasses everything that exists and is not encompassed by anything ('*non circunscritto, e tutto circunscrive*', *Par*. 14.30). It is not in

14 Most of Dante's contemporaries thought of the Empyrean as a corporeal body or space in a certain matter, as Aquinas: 'firmiter [...] credimus, quod idem locus corporalis, sc. coelum empireum, angelorum et animarum sanctarum erit et corporum glorificatorum' (*Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, I, 171). See Bruno Nardi, 'La dottrina dell'Empireo nella sua genesi storica e nel pensiero dantesco', in Nardi, *Saggi di filosofia dantesca* (La Nuova Italia, 1967), pp. 167–214.

15 '[L]o soprano edificio del mondo, nel quale tutto lo mondo s'inchiude, e di fuori dal quale nulla è; ed esso non è in luogo ma formato fu solo nella Prima Mente, la quale li Greci dicono Protonoè' (Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio (The Banquet)*, trans. by Richard H. Lansing (Garland, 1990), II, iii, p. 11). Empyrean is also mentioned in the Letter to Cangrande della Scala, whose attribution to Dante is still debated: 'celum supremum, continens corporauniversa et a nullo contentum' (par. 67).

16 Even if the subject was and is still debated, there is no doubt for me that Dante is making this journey within his body, as is recalled in numerous passages throughout the poem: for example, one of the last, *Par*. 27.64, where the poet's 'mortal pondo' is mentioned.

space, yet it is accessible to the body and can itself contain bodies, since it already contains, in addition to Dante's, those of Jesus and Mary, and will then contain (but actually already does, since past, present, and future are here compressed, one and the same thing) the glorious bodies of all the blessed after the end of time. It is the foundation and ontological guarantee of all existence: if the Empyrean ceased to be, all reality would immediately cease to exist too. However, this causal relationship should not be understood as a cause-effect link in the modern sense. As Christian Moevs explains: 'Causality for the medieval world is less a temporal association between events than an ontological relation between things: an effect depends on its cause to the extent that it owes its existence to it.'[17]

THE MYSTICAL VISION

Despite the fact that this is the site of the highest and uninterrupted 'thinking' of God, his own mind, or perhaps precisely for this reason, perception does not terminate here, and noetic contemplation is sensual experience. We find at the end of the poem, in canto 30, an example of what Teodolinda Barolini has famously defined as the 'jumping textuality' of *Paradiso*,[18] this kind of non-linear, metaphorical, and figurative textuality that tries to reflect the unity of the vision through the ineludible multiplicity of language. In this canto begins the last vision, the true beatific vision that will culminate in the discernment of the mystery of the Trinity:

> 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;

17 Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 28.

18 Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 218–56. See also *A World of Possibilities: The Legacy of 'The Undivine Comedy'*, ed. by Kristina M. Olson (ICI Berlin Press, 2025).

(And I saw light that flowed as flows a river,
pouring its golden splendor between two banks
painted with the wondrous colors of spring.
From that torrent issued living sparks
and, on either bank, they settled on the flowers,
like rubies ringed in gold.)

(Par. 30.61–66)

Anche soggiunse: 'Il fiume e li topazi
Ch'entrano ed escono e 'l rider de l'erbe
son di lor vero umbriferi prefazi.
Non che da sé sian queste cose acerbe;
ma è difetto da la parte tua,
che non hai viste ancor tanto superbe'.

(Then she continued: 'The river, the topazes
that enter and leave it, and the laughter of the meadows
are all shadowy prefaces of their truth,
not that these things are in themselves unripe,
but because the failure lies with you,
your vision is not yet strong enough to soar.')

(Par. 30.76–81)

What the pilgrim sees is a torrent of light, or rather light in the form of a river, whose banks are flooded with the colours of spring; sparks — angels and blessed souls — move among the flowers, becoming like precious stones. This image of living, springtime beauty is strongly connoted in the choice of vocabulary, which refers to the landscape of the earthly paradise (*Purg*. 28) and to the lyrical and amorous roots of Dante's poetic experience. For the poet, the mystical vision begins under the sign of lyric poetry; for the pilgrim, the loving gaze makes ontological distinctions collapse into a single image/substance in constant motion. But how are such transformations possible in the immobility of Empyrean? It is as if the poet were constantly changing lenses, advancing from a blurred vision to an ever more defined one. Indeed, these modifications of the object of vision are described by Beatrice as changes in resolution within a shared frame.[19] Nonetheless, Beatrice also states that these things are not '*acerbe*' (unripe) in

19 As DiCaglio writes: 'To change resolution is to change scales even if you don't move' (DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 23).

themselves; that is, even though they are 'blurry visions' of the contemplating poet, their ontological status is not diminished for this reason. In the stillness and immutability of the intellectual fire, the changes of scales are changing in resolution, which means that in the divine mind the ontological distinction that constituted the steps of the *scala naturae* reveal themselves as simultaneously coexistent configurations of spiritual substance seen at different levels of observation or with distinct resolutions.

Indeed, there can be no becoming here, not even at the level of increasing or decreasing the pilgrim's physical capacities, because this would invalidate the perfect steadiness, the wholeness of the being in which (or through which) he is located. What is described as a passage, a transformation from sparkles to flowers to gems to angels, is not an ontological metamorphosis of the object, nor should be understood as an epistemological progression in the faculties' potency of the subject, but more as a shift in resolution, due to a different attention to the object.[20] At the scale of abstraction, from the standpoint of analytical reason's understanding of things unfolded in time, these images are '*umbriferi prefazi*' (shadowy prefaces),[21] and the change of reso-

20 I suggest that Dante may have had a fairly precise image in his mind, confirmed by the homonymy between a plant and a stone: the heliotrope. The lapidaries of Marbode of Rennes (1035–1123) and Thomas of Cantimpré's (1201–1272) *De natura rerum* mention this mottled stone, which, when immersed in a vase filled with water, causes the water to boil and creates a blood-coloured sun, similar to an eclipse. It is also specified that the stone and the plant share the same name, and that the flower of the heliotrope is called by some 'bride of the sun' (*sponsa solis*). It does not seem impossible to imagine that Dante, thinking about the changing simulacra of souls and angels, had in mind this superimposition of natural images and meanings, linked to the sun as a divine symbol, to light, and also to ecstatic rapture (Thomas of Cantimpré specifies that '*videntes rapiuntur extra se*') and prophetic vision; see Thomas Cantimpratensis, *Liber de natura rerum*, ed. by Helmut Boese (De Gruyter, 1973), pp. 361–62. It is worth mentioning that Derrida, analysing the triple relationship between subject, language, and reality, speaks of the cycle of heliotropism. The sun is the supreme metaphor and source of every other figure of speech: 'metaphor means heliotrope, both a movement turned toward the sun and the turning movement of the sun' (Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 251).

21 As Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, this is not how the citizen (*cives*) of the eternal Jerusalem sees things but how exiled subjects (*exules*) see them: 'Sublimior iste praesentium ac dignior usus rerum, cum juxta sapientiam Pauli, invisibilia Dei, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciuntur. Sane hac scala cives non egent, sed exsules. Quod vidit ipse hujus sententiae auctor, qui cum diceret invisibilia per visibilia conspici, signanter

lution seems to remain related to a scalar increase or decrease of the understanding due to the progressive improvement of the subject's psychophysical faculties. However, at the scale of existence, from the standpoint of a loving subject experiencing a mystical experience (in this case conveyed by lyrical language), these forms are juxtaposed, cohabit the same entity, and metaphor and metonymy acquire an ontological dimension. This is no longer the 'as-structure' that enables analogical reasoning to get closer to the thing itself by slowly advancing in symbolic affinities.[22] In the divine mind (as in any other mind), the image of a flower and the image of a ruby are made of, and share, the same 'matter'. The rank in the chain of beings is assigned to *quidditas* (the essence, the 'whatness'), but in the Empyrean's pleroma what is manifested is more similar, in Scotist terms, to *haecceitas* (thisness), the contingent, individual, empirical existence of things and thoughts. The Dantean subject, pilgrim and poet, discovers, in his 'transumweltic' voyage, the plenitude that lies behind each individuality.[23]

The *Commedia* unfolds along both a vertical and a horizontal ontology, two dimensions that constantly intersect and cannot be disentangled: by poetic means, Dante presents '*il mar de l'essere*' (the sea of being) as inherently uniform despite the *scala naturae*, which emerges less as a genuine ontological layering than as an epistemological device. By the end of the cosmic journey, even determining where the true centre lies becomes problematic: Is it the Earth or the Empyrean?[24] And which prevails — immanence or transcendence?

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posuit, a creatura mundi (*Rom.* I, 20). Et vere quid opus scalis tenenti jam solium? Creatura coeli illa est, praesto habens per quod potius ista intueatur. Videt Verbum, et in Verbo facta per Verbum' (Bernard of Clairvaux, *De consideratione ad Eugenium papam*, V, i, 1).

22 So called by Heidegger; see Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 530–31; Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt-Endlichkeit-Einsamkeit* (Klostermann, 1983), p. 363.

23 For the concept of the 'transumweltic', see Gabriel Catren, *Pleromatica*, trans. by Thomas Murphy (Urbanomic/Sequence, 2023); and Gabriel Catren, 'The Trans-Umweltic Express', *Glass Bead*, 2016 <https://www.glass-bead.org/article/the-trans-umweltic-express/?lang=enview> [accessed 12 January 2026].

24 There is a constant tension on this subject during the Middle Ages, as Sloterdijk has identified: 'The discrepancy between theoperipheral and theocentric interpretations of the world, one could say between the Aristotelian ontology of majesty (God above) and the Platonic-Plotinic doctrine of emanation (God at the center)' (Peter Sloter-

Angels appear as separated substances, as the movers of the heavens, as a river, as flowers, as gemstones. They function unmistakably as mediators — much like language — and as principles of order. Their hierarchical distribution, described by the poet (*Par.* 28.22–39), rests once more on a purely 'intellectual' differentiation, given that they inhabit the Empyrean, where extensive quantities such as distance, length, or dimension have no significance. The roles assigned to the angelic orders by Pseudo-Dionysius (*De Coelesti Hierarchia* III, 1, 164d) — order (*taxis*), knowledge (*episteme*), and activity (*energheia*) — correspond strikingly to the functions of human language, which organizes reality, provides understanding, and performs actions upon it. Once the linguistic constitution of reality is acknowledged, even intellectual love and the immaterial Empyrean become permeated by the body of language. If the vertical *scala naturae* reflects the way we cognitively apprehend the world through language unfolded in time, poetic speech discloses reality as the synchronicity of the 'sea of being'.[25]

The metaphors scattered throughout *Paradiso* constantly bind entities located at incommensurable levels of existence: these 'scalar metaphors' do not naively humanize ineffable realities.[26] At this stage of the poem they are expressing the juxtaposition by analogy with objects that indeed share the same existential level; the affirmation of the equal plenitude of each individuality deactivates the very concept of commensurability, since no differentiating distinction persists on a quantitative level. Beatrice is literally Dante's 'sun' (*Par.* 30.75); flowers are 'the laughter of the meadows' (*Par*. 30.77) not simply in a figurative, ornamental sense but because meadows, plants, and grass truly laugh, and flowers are our understanding of this laughter. Furthermore, this reminds me of Plotinus's description of the sphere of noetic contemplation as 'being-all-faces' (*παμπρόσωπόν τι*), a commu-

dijk, *Spheres*, trans. by Wieland Hoban, 3 vols (Semiotexte, 2011–16), II, *Globes: Macrospherology* (2014), p. 450).

25 On the concept of reality in the third cantica, see Teodolinda Barolini, 'Dante and Reality / Dante and Realism', *Spazio Filosofico*, 8 (2013), pp. 199–208.

26 See Kellie Robertson, 'Scaling Nature: Microcosm and Macrocosm in Later Medieval Thought', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 49.3 (2019), pp. 609–31 (p. 624) <https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-7724697>.

nity of persons.[27] Certainly, as Barolini has noticed, the end of the third cantica still alternates the lyrical mode and the narrative one, the need to convey the difference for explicative purposes and the attempt to express the fundamental unity of the divine mind. However, at this point the paradox is that there is no paradox anymore; or rather, from the point of view of an external observer (as we also are) the paradox is real, but this is not the case for the subject operating within the 'system'. Things just *are*. Beatitude is equally perfect for everybody although it is quantitatively different, because measurement as a category of thought has lost any sense. As Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote at the end of his *Tractatus*, 'Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is' (6.44).[28] After a profusion of propositions, enunciations, laborious and complex constructions of meaning, now the pilgrim — and the poem — must 'so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it. He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright' (6.54).

To reach the Empyrean, throughout the *Commedia*, Dante ascended also another kind of ladder — the one Richard of Saint Victor called the '*Scala similitudinum*',[29] the ladder required by those who do not yet possess the 'wings of contemplation'. Similes have already transformed into metaphors, and now, at the threshold of language, metaphor itself shifts into metonymy, since everything may be perceived in a metonymic relation with everything else, as parts or modes

27 'And so, if one likens it to a living richly varied sphere, or imagines it as a being-all-faces, shining with living faces, or as all the pure souls running together into the same place, with no deficiencies but having all that is their own, and universal Intellect seated on their summits so that the region is illuminated by intellectual light — if one imagined it like this one would be seeing it somehow as one sees another from outside; but one must become that, and make oneself the contemplation' (*Enneads* VI.7.15.25–33; Plotinus, *Enneads*, with an English translation by A. H. Armstrong, 7 vols (Harvard University Press, 1966–88); translation modified by Mateusz Strózyński). See also Mateusz Strózyński, *Plotinus on the Contemplation of the Intelligible World: Faces of Being and Mirrors of Intellect* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), p. 349 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009494854>.

28 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1922], ed. Kevin C. Klement, trans. by C. K. Ogden and Frank P. Ramsey (UMass Amherst, 2018) <http://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/> [accessed 20 December 2025].

29 *De trinitate* VI, 23: 'similitudinum scala libenter utimur ut habeant qua ascendere possint qui contemplationis pennas non dum acceperint'.

of existence of the whole.[30] In the end, what we witness is the collapse of the onto-taxonomy and the mutual penetration of a top-down and a bottom-up perspective.

CONFLICTING SCALES?

At this point, I would like to make a terminological distinction to clarify how I differentiate between two levels of understanding of the poem and the reality it represents. What I have called the 'scale of abstraction' can be understood in a certain sense as the scale of scientific discourse. Working through reduction and categories, such as those of genre, species, or individual (or atoms, molecules, cells, celestial bodies), it has the explanatory purpose of making understandable features of reality that are physically or conceptually perceived as distant from one another. Scalar representations thus serve to grasp the world, as Beatrice states (*Par.* 4.28–42), explaining that everything the poet will see in Paradise, until Empyrean is staged for his coming, is pure didactic representation. The ladder was needed to ascend to the Empyrean; so was the *scala naturae*. When the poet arrives in the true place of the creation, the *locus naturalis* of the universe, these distinctions not only are not necessary, but they also truly make no sense anymore. Even the concentric angelic choirs are an illusion in their disposition, because no difference in size, length, or measure can subsist here. At the scale of abstraction, unfolded in linguistic categories linked with our perceptual sensitivity, levels exist, and the nine angelic choirs differ in magnitude and circumference, but at the scale of existence everything just *is* in the Empyrean. Everything, even all that can be said or thought, exists as a living image in the mind of God, perpetuating

30 If *metapherein* means to transfer a meaning, a signification, from one word to another, *metonomasia* means changing the name (*onoma*), implying the fact that the things that we are putting in relation are in a certain sense already factually the same. As Harry Berger Jr. writes: 'metaphors involve modifications of meaning produced by the rhetorical context, whereas metonymies involve analytic or descriptive changes of name that may illuminate but don't change the prior meanings of the things signified. Metaphors rhetorically challenge the similarity they grammatically claim to establish, in order to feature their departures from preexisting states of affairs. Metonymies present themselves as analogies that articulate or reaffirm preexisting states of affairs.' Harry Berger Jr., *Figures of a Changing World: Metaphor and the Emergence of Modern Culture* (Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 12.

its own individual perfect fullness. Lyrical language attempts to evoke this dimension through the accumulation and combination of signs conveying images linked to a loving body.[31]

What I call the 'scale of existence' is the scale of love (they are fully identified with one another, through the nexus of the *pondus amoris* that merges gravity as a physical principle and love as metaphysical ground of being). The philosopher Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) explained the difference between two registers of understanding of the same phenomenon: a drunk man cannot describe his own condition scientifically; a sober doctor could do it, but in turn he cannot access what it means, 'existentially', for the drunk man to be in this state.[32] This does not mean that everything the pilgrim has passed through was just illusion, dream, veiled reality, and that only now in the Empyrean the unveiling of the world takes place. It means, in my view, that the subject-object distinction was a scalar distinction, which can be passed over or dismissed once one has arrived in the place outside time and space.

Nevertheless, this does not imply the loss of individual passions. Distinctions still exist, but they are not differentiating ones. Even if we see the subject as a particular configuration or mode of existence of the cosmos in a specific dimension, that does not mean that individual love can be scaled up and considered 'only' as the instrument needed to ascend to a higher scale of love. The access to the universal is made through images that share a common ontological ground but are individualized by an irreproducible signature: subjective love. At the end of his journey, Dante does not finally see his love for Beatrice as the incomplete, figural, terrestrial version, at a human and smaller scale, of a cosmic divine love that would re-absorb and obliterate the

31 On the lyric not just as style and tradition but as a 'mode' or 'modality' of thought and representation, see Francesca Southerden, 'The Lyric Mode', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 546–62.

32 Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, ed. by G. Salibā and K. Iyād (Maktab al-Arabi, 1939), p. 132; English translation in *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali*, trans. by W. M. Watt (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 57. See Taneli Kukkonen, 'Plenitude, Possibility, and the Limits of Reason: A Medieval Arabic Debate on the Metaphysics of Nature', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61.4 (2000), pp. 539–60 <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2000.0042>.

individual images of this sentiment, rooted in embodied experience. She appears magnificent at the beginning of the canto ('The beauty that I saw transcends | all thought of beauty', *Par*. 30.19–20) because all mediation ceases and the pilgrim's intellect and bodily faculties are overcome by the *lumen gloriae*.[33] Thus she is contemplated *sub specie aeternitatis*,[34] in the sense that Dante sees the present Beatrice, the Beatrice of the future, who will have regained her glorious resurrected body, but also, and maybe above all, the Beatrice of the past. Critics have often highlighted that Beatrice's withdrawal is necessary at the end of the poem, to permit the ultimate union with God, with Bernard of Clairvaux as a guide.[35] But again, how can Beatrice really withdraw in a place where space and distance do not exist, and in which, as Dante clearly states, one can see everything, quantity and quality ('il quanto e 'l quale'), simultaneously and without impediment ('my sight was not confused but shared | the full extent and quality of that rejoicing. | There, near and far do neither add nor take away', 30.118–120)? If one takes seriously the nature of Empyrean and its implications, Beatrice can never disappear from view.

There is another passage from William of Saint-Thierry's treatise *De natura et dignitate amoris* in which I believe we can grasp an alternative example of a distinction not far from that which I intend

33 Albert the Great describes this process, by which the divine essence can be contemplated without mediation: 'superadditur aliud lumen, scilicet gloriae, confortans intellectum, ut divinam ipsam essentiam videre possit sine aliqua specie mediante'. Albert the Great, *Quaestio De visione Dei in patria*, ed. by Albert Fries, Wilhelm Kübel, and Henryk Anzulewicz (Aschendorff, 1993), p. 99a, 27–99b, 29; cf. Aristotle, *De anima*, III, 5, 430 a 15.

34 Eternity is 'ipsa aeternitas successione caret, tota simul existens' (Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1, 10, 1), but also his adversary Siger of Brabant (*Comm. super liber de causis*, q. 8): 'in aeternitate non est aliqua successio, sed tota simul existit'. The common traditional reference for the definition of eternity was Boethius: by Eternity, the mystic does not mean endless time, nor, primarily, everlasting life, but the 'complete and perfect possession of unlimited life at a single moment' ('A eternitas igiiur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio', *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, V, pros. 6). On medieval accounts of time and eternity, see Pasquale Porro, *The Medieval Concept of Time: Studies on the Scholastic Debate and Its Reception in Early Modern Philosophy* (Brill, 2001).

35 In the traditional allegoric interpretation of the *Commedia*, Virgil would represent human rationality, Beatrice theology, and Bernard mysticism. See, for instance, Lino Pertile, *La punta del disio. semantica del desiderio nella 'Commedia'* (Cadmo, 2005), pp. 235–46; and Steven Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the 'Commedia'* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 64–86.

between the scale of abstraction (or science) and the scale of existence (or love):

> The sight for seeing God, the natural light of the soul therefore, created by the Author of nature, is charity. There are, however, two eyes in this sight, always throbbing by a sort of natural intensity to look toward the light that is God: love and reason. When one attempts to look without the others, it does not get far. When together they help one another, they can do much [...]. In this they labor much, each in its own way, because one of them — reason — cannot see God except in what he is not, but love cannot bring itself to rest except in what he is.[36]

The two ways of questioning reality and understanding the world are not opposed, but ineluctably complementary. *Charitas*, William said, has two eyes, always tending towards the gaze of the divine light; but Reason (*ratio*) can only search for God in a negative way, in all the things in which God is not ('*in eo quod non est*'). This is what I have called the 'scale of abstraction' or science, and it is certainly the one that has been most successful in modernity. If God is in the plant, in the bird, or in the love between individuals, reason can only try to 'find him' in botany, zoology, psychology — that is, where he is not, in discourses abstracted from singular substances and phenomena. Love works in the opposite way: it can only find rest where God is found, in the here and now (and eternally) of the individualized particular entity, be it a mineral, a forest, or a smile.[37] Together, these two eyes allow us to focus on the *imago dei*, which is also *imago mundi*, and thereby to hold together two resolutions that are incompatible with each other, the zoom and the panoptic vision (*Par*. 30.118–123), the molecular structure of the vocal cord and the pleasure of the song. This is why analogy, understood not as similarity but as identity of relation, is a privileged tool, both poetic and scientific, for analysing a complex

36 'Visus ergo ad videndum Deum naturale lumen animae, ab auctore naturae creatus, charitas est. Sunt autem duo oculi in hoc visu, ad lumen quod Deus est videndum naturali quadam intentione semper palpitantes, amor et ratio. Cum alter conatur sine altero, non tantum proficit; cum invicem se adjuvant, multum possunt [...] in hoc autem plurimum laborant suo unusquisque modo, quod alter eorum, id est ratio, Deum videre non potest nisi in eo quod non est, amor autem non acquiescit requiescere nisi in eo quod est.' William of Saint-Thierry, *De natura et dignitate amoris*, VII, 21, p. 393; *On the Nature and Dignity of Love*, p. 77.

37 See *Par*. 27.4–5, 'riso dell'universo' (smile of the universe).

system, for accessing truth, as Simone Weil wrote in a letter to her former teacher, the philosopher Alain:

> There is only one way to conceive of a series without detaching it from terms, and that is through analogy. [...] Only analogy provides the possibility of thinking in a way that is both absolutely pure and absolutely concrete. We only think about particular things; we only reason about the universal; modern science has lost its soul by trying to resolve this contradiction through the artifice of reasoning only about conventional signs, which are particular objects insofar as they are black marks on white paper, and are universal by definition. The other solution would be analogy.[38]

Here Simone Weil seems to outline the contours of a distinction between thought and reasoning that only analogy can bridge. On the one hand, reasoning, the scale of science and abstraction, which uses categories and quantities; on the other, thought, the scale of existence and love, which knows only the particular and its qualities.[39] Similarly, the vertical and teleological hierarchy of the *Commedia* conveyed by the narration of the pilgrim's journey and the horizontal plane of simultaneity and coexistence are just two sides of the same coin. At the end of the vision, when the divine mind, *intellectus agens*, becomes the form of the individual intellect, and the mystical union with the principle of being is accomplished, a metaphor accurately describes this duality:

38 'Il n'y a qu'une manière de concevoir une série sans la détacher des termes, c'est l'analogie. [...] Seule l'analogie fournit la possibilité de penser d'une manière à la fois absolument pure et absolument concrète. On ne pense que des choses particulières; on ne raisonne que sur l'universel; la science moderne a perdu son âme en voulant résoudre cette contradiction par l'artifice qui consiste à ne plus raisonner que sur des signes conventionnels, qui sont des objets particuliers en tant que marques noires sur du papier blanc, et sont universels par leur définition. L'autre solution serait l'analogie' (Simone Weil, *Sur la science* (Gallimard, 1966), p. 112; my translation). On Simone Weil's sharp critique of modern science, see Vance Morgan, *Weaving the World: Simone Weil on Science, Necessity, and Love* (Notre Dame University Press, 2005); and Joseph K. Cosgrove, 'Simone Weil's Spiritual Critique of Modern Science: An Historical-Critical Assessment', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 43.2 (2008), pp. 253–370 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2008.00921.x>.

39 In a certain sense, the distinction between two models of human knowledge, which take the form of two opposing and complementary images of the world, is reminiscent of that between the manifest and the scientific images of man-in-the-world outlined by Wilfrid Sellars. See Wilfrid Sellars, 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man', in Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 1–40.

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna
legato con amore in un volume,
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:
sustanze e accidenti e lor costume,
quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo
che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume.

(In its depth I saw contained,
by love into a single volume bound,
the pages scattered through the universe:
substances, accidents, and the interplay between them,
as though they were conflated in such ways
that what I tell is but a simple light.)

(*Par*. 33.85–90)

Here, the metaphor of the book goes beyond the traditional metaphor of the 'book of nature', as already present in writers such as Alanus of Lille, Bernard Silvestris, or Bonaventure;[40] the book is the totality of the creation as it is seen in the *Nous,* the mind of God. It is not, however, the end of the subject, nor of his individual love. The object of erotic and memorial individual love survived and persisted through the ascension of the heavens, as clearly stated in canto 26.13–15 ('Io dissi: "Al suo piacere e tosto e tardo | vegna remedio a li occhi, che fuor porte | quand' ella entrò col foco ond' io sempr' ardo"'; 'And I said: 'As soon or as late as she wishes, | may the cure come to eyes that were the portals | she entered with the fire in which I always burn').[41] Beatrice is not the ladder that can be thrown away when you get to the top; she never was just an object of *uti* but always an object of *frui*,[42] and all the spiritual, theological, soteriological characterizations

40 On the metaphor of the book, see chapter sixteen of Ernest Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 1990). Particularly interesting for us is the quotation from Bernard Silvestris's *Cosmographia* (1, 2), because he clearly posits the 'text of time' in the *Noys*: 'illic exarata supremi digito dispunctoris textus temporis, fatalis series, dispositio seculorum'; 'There, inscribed by the finger of the supreme arbiter, were the fabric of time, the chain of destiny, the disposition of the ages' (Bernard Silvestris, *The Cosmographia of Bernard Silvestris*, trans. by Winthrop Wetherbee (Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 74.

41 See also Regina Psaki, 'Love for Beatrice: Transcending Contradiction in the *Paradiso*', in *Dante for the New Millenium*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini and Wayne Storey (Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 115–30.

42 Recovering the Augustinian distinction between objects of the worlds as means (*uti*) to get to the only true enjoyment (*frui*) of God.

accumulating upon her never replaced nor modified her polysemic and corporeal nature.

The process of intellection is constituted by a progressive abstraction of the universal from the singular, towards the naked intelligible, freed of all sensitive images that accompanied it at its first imaginative perception. When the object of this intellection is the totality of the intelligible, the *Noys*, no further abstraction is possible, no division; furthermore, I am not thinking all the things, the totality is thinking itself through me. This is the end of narration, movement, science as abstraction, of the world as *uti*. As Georges Bataille puts it, writing upon the object of desire in his *History of Eroticism*:

> Nowhere do we find a totality that is an end in itself, that is meaningful as such, that doesn't need to justify itself by pleading its usefulness for some other thing. We escape this empty and sterile movement, this sum of objects and abstract functions that is the world of the intellect, only by entering a very different world where objects are on the same plane as the subject, where they form, together with the subject, a sovereign totality which is not divided by any abstraction and is commensurate with the entire universe (*et qui double l'univers entier*).[43]

In the final line, I think that the English translation edulcorates the sense of the original text. '*Doubler l'univers entier*' means to pass over but also literally to create another universe, a double universe.[44] This other universe can be seen as a 'place' or a state of consciousness that can be reached through mystical practices, in a state of *excessus mentis*, or as another way of looking at the most common things, as 'reality' but seen at a different scale of observation. The difference between Dante's lyrical mysticism and mysticism as it was commonly intended and practised in his time is that even if the drop disappears in the

43 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, 3 vols, trans. by Robert Hurley (Zone Books, 1988–92), II: *The History of Eroticism* (1992), p. 112.

44 Empyrean is presented as another universe, parallel to ours, and has been seen by some critics as a hypersphere structure, though I prefer to visualize it more as a holographic representation of reality, in which each point contains information about the entire system. See Susanna Barsella and Vincenzo Vespri, 'Dante's Cosmos and the Geometry of Paradise', *Italianistica. Rivista di letteratura italiana*, 50.1 (2021), pp. 239–52 (p. 246). The two authors propose to consider Dante's universe as a stereographic projection; the article is very interesting and quite technical.

sea and the spark in the fire (widespread mystical images), through the lyrical element we never cease to perceive the traces of the single drop and the single spark. Like the Eagle of Justice who talked with one voice but was constituted by many faces (*Par*. 19.10–12), a sort of lyrical 'perspectivism' coexists with the unity of the All.

LOVE, ETHICS, LANGUAGE

I would like to conclude by mentioning the 'practical' aspect of these reflections. Already in the *Timaeus*, cosmology was strictly bound to an ethical and political purpose. It is the same for Dante's cosmology; as written in the famous letter to Cangrande della Scala, the whole *Divine Comedy* was not written for the sake of pure speculation, but for practical purposes: ('*non ad speculandum, sed ad opus incoeptum est totum*'; 'not for speculation, but for practical effect was the whole work undertaken', *Epistola* XIII, 40). Every ontology implies and presupposes a political project and a vision of the world and of society.[45] The anthropomorphic nature of the cosmos (intended in the original etymological sense of the ordered universe, or the order of things) is the mirror effect of the cosmomorphic nature of human beings, as Max Scheler once wrote in his famous essay *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (1923):

> The cultivation of human nature (which includes the emotional side) must set itself against this 'scientific experts' view of Nature as an enemy to be overcome. Hence the first task of our educational practice must be to revive the capacity for identification with the life of the universe, and awaken it anew from its condition of dormancy in the capitalistic social outlook of Western man (with its characteristic picture of the world as an aggregation of movable quantities). We must dissociate ourselves, firmly and unreservedly, from the gross error of regarding the sense of unity with the universe as merely an 'empathic' projection of specifically human emotions into animals, plants, or inanimate objects — as sheer anthropomorphism, therefore, and a fundamental misapprehension of the real. On the contrary, it is man the microcosm, an actual

45 The bibliography on this point would be too extensive; I will only mention the recent essay by Giorgio Agamben, *The Unrealizable: Towards a Politics of Ontology*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Chicago University Press, 2024).

> embodiment of the reality of existence in all its forms, who is himself cosmomorphic, and as such the possessor of sources of insight into all that is comprised in the nature of the cosmos.[46]

As Scheler points out, by recovering the medieval account of man as microcosm, the unity of the cosmos and the human is not a weak anthropomorphic projection but the truth of a common grounding. Simone Weil helps us again to conceive a way of merging knowledge and desire (or abstraction and existence, to retrieve the definitions provided previously) and thus escaping the reductionist circle of human beings as monads clinging to a picture of the world as an 'aggregation of movable quantities'. Attention is the bridge between the scientific apprehension of reality, which abstracts, isolates, and measures, and the contingent immanence of existence, which is grasped in its wholeness through love. Without attention, the 'purest form of love', no empathy is possible, no analogy, no knowledge, no possible escape from utilitarianism:

> The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. [...] The authentic and pure values — truth, beauty and goodness — in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object.[47]

What is the connection between vision, intellection (intellectual knowledge), and love? All these acts are conceived and described by Stoic philosophy, Augustine, and late medieval scholasticism as forms of physical and spiritual tension, crystallized in the polysemic term *intentio*.[48] Knowledge is an act but also a union between the knower and

46 Max Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, in Scheler, *Gesammelte Werke*, 15 vols (Francke and Bouvier, 1954–97), VII (Francke, 1973), p. 113. Translation from Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. by Peter Heath (Archon Books, 1970), p. 105. Recently, Graham Harman has appealed to Scheler's philosophy to propose an interesting reading of Dante's ethics and metaphysics; see Graham Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer* (Repeater, 2016).

47 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (Routledge, 2002), pp. 119–20; original text in Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Plon, 1947), p. 138.

48 For a detailed historical analysis of the common Latin root of *intentio* as desire and as intellectual attention, see Jean-Luc Solère, 'Tension et intention: Esquisse de l'histoire d'une notion', in *Questions sur l'intentionnalité*, ed. by Lambros Couloubaritsis and Antonino Mazzù (Ousia, 2008), pp. 59–124.

the known object; the subject receives the form of the observed object, not the natural form but the intentional form (*species intentionalis*, the immaterial representation, the likeness of the thing, that informs the subject). The broad semantic field covered by this word and its derivatives refers to the idea of an effort to 'direct towards', a significant tension between two poles.[49] Attention is this fusion of intellect and desire, of love and 'science'; the tension towards the object of love is a bodily tension of the soul, which expands and grows, in an almost visible way, as Beatrice declares to Dante during the vision: 'The deep desire that now inflames and prods you (*turge*) | to understand at last all that you see | pleases me the more the more it surges (*urge*)' (*Par.* 30.70–72). The cognitive process, like the act of love, is understood by medieval thinkers in terms of an effort towards likeness, in the sense of a constant striving towards the assimilation of the knower to the known, and of the lover to the beloved. In the affective and intellectual value of *intentio*, in attention as a cognitive effort and amorous impulse, I believe we find a convergence between Weil's pedagogy and Dante's lyrical mysticism.[50]

It is through attention that the various moments of discontinuity between the heavens in the *Paradiso* are each time overcome by the poet; from the first canto (64–72), from the moment of *trasumanare* onwards, fixed attention is essential to bring about the successive psychic and somatic transmutations that will allow access to divine vision. At other times, still using the metaphor of the adaptation of sight, the progressive growth of the pilgrim's physical and mental faculties to adapt to the changing environment of Paradise is always inaugurated by an act of attention focused on the object of desire, Beatrice. The

49 Duns Scotus enumerates four different acceptations of the word, as act of the will, as formal reason, as concept, and as tension of assimilation between two poles: 'Uno modo dicitur actus voluntatis intendo. Alio modo: ratio formalis in re, sicut intentio rei a qua accipitur genus differt ab intentione a qua accipitur differentia. Tertio modo dicitur conceptus. Quarto modo, dicitur ratio tendendi in obiectum, sicut similitudo dicitur ratio tendendi in illud cuius est' (*Ordinatio*, l. II. d. 13 q.). See also Katherine Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham* (Brill, 1988).

50 Weil's account of attention as a 'negative effort', a paradoxical passive action that prepares the subject for the reception of grace, corresponds also to the consensual and free subjection to divine and natural necessity expressed in *Purg.* XVI, 81, *'liberi soggiacete'*. On attention as a spiritual exercise in Weil, see Simone Kotva, *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

adaptation to an ever-changing *umwelt* is made possible by a systematic, attentive return to the object of love, which is the starting and finishing point of all cognitive operation.[51] This narrative device takes the form of a sort of objective correlate of the poet's creative-contemplative act. Of the various examples that could be given, perhaps this *terzina* from the last canto of *Paradiso* suffices:

> Così la mente mia, tutta sospesa,
> mirava fissa, immobile e attenta,
> e sempre di mirar faceasi accesa.
>
> (Thus all my mind, absorbed,
> was gazing, fixed, unmoving and intent,
> becoming more enraptured in its gazing.)
>
> (Par. 33.97–99)

Attention is love because it is rooted in desire, a self-perpetuating desire ('*e sempre di mirar faceasi accesa*') that cannot cease in rest but fuels an ever-renewed pleasure in the never-ending assimilation of the object of knowledge. Attention is perhaps the act in which love and reason, William of Saint-Thierry's 'two eyes', reunify: not love under the guardianship and control of reason (as since the *Vita nova* Dante tried to conceive their relationship),[52] but reason guided and assisted by love, 'affective cognition'.[53] Language generates structures, categories, and hierarchies, but it also provides the means to overcome all this and to give birth to new *Lebensformen*. Hierarchy (angelic, creatural) is, in a Dionysian sense, mediation. Language is the form of this omnipresent mediation, simultaneously proceeding, returning, and re-

51 Since their Sicilian origins, the discourses on amorous desire and on the act of cognition have been closely linked. The knowability of the object of love, of love itself, and of the world through it permeates the lyrical landscape in which Dante evolves from the outset, particularly in the poetic practice of his 'first friend', Guido Cavalcanti.

52 'And though her image, which remained constantly with me, was Love's assurance of holding me, it was of such a pure quality that it never allowed me to be ruled by Love *without the faithful counsel of reason*' (*Vita nova*, II, 9; Dante Alighieri, *Vita nova*, trans. by Mark L. Musa (Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 4; my emphasis).

53 I borrow here the notion of '*cognitio affectiva*' employed by Thomas Gallus (1200–1246), the last great member of the School of Saint Victor. See Boyd Taylor Coolman, *Knowledge, Love and Ecstasy in the Theology of Thomas Gallus* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

maining.[54] Lyrical language provides the sharpness and openness that translate this inescapable mediation into the intuitive grasping of the existential modes of being within the 'sea of being'. Such a form of attention is a goal and a reward in itself; in the end, what is the Empyrean if not a community? A community where the countless faces of beings drink the same light looking at each other, where above and below are confused to the point of losing meaning, where authority is expiated through the sovereignty of love in which every person withdraws from themselves by affirming their irreducible existence in the other's loving gaze,[55] the sea of being where the exact measure is the right word and every word is right. Lyrical Empyrean is therefore also the place of difference, or, better, of the totality of all the individual and qualitative differences that constitute the unity of reality, for in God 'everything is a subject, everything is a person.'[56]

54 As summarized by Bonaventure, probably influenced by the Victorines: 'this is the sum total of our metaphysics concerned with emanation, exemplarity, and consummation' (*Collations on the Six Days*, 1, 13, 17, v, 331–32). I think that the mystical theology of Thomas Gallus deserves to be investigated more deeply as a possible source for the Dantean account of Empyrean's metaphysics.

55 Inspired by Bataille, I mean that authority derived from hierarchy is expiated and somehow purified by love as flattened coexistence of the difference in unity; cf. Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt (State University of New York Press, 1988): 'affirm of inner experience that it is authority (but all authority expiates itself)' (p. 102).

56 Simone Weil, 'Concerning the Pythagorean Doctrine', in Weil, *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by D. K. Levy and Marina Barabas (Routledge, 2024), pp. 239–88 (p. 279).

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