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The thesis of Kathleen Marie Jones entitled
Dante: Journey to Freedom, Forgiveness and Identity

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies in the School for Summer and Continuing Education of Georgetown University has been read and approved.

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Dante: Journey to
Freedom, Forgiveness and Identity

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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Abstract

Freedom and identity are two terms that have sparked debate for centuries. How one perceives freedom and self is a product of many things. The political scientist might define freedom essentially as political liberty. The economist might define freedom essentially as financial freedom, or free or unencumbered trade. The philosopher would define freedom in terms of free will. To medieval Dante, freedom was essentially spiritual, then philosophical, then political. Dante had relied on political, economic and intellectual freedom but he awoke "having lost the right path" in the dark wood (Dante Inferno 1.1-4).

Dante’s journey to freedom, and to his true identity, takes him from the dark wood to the depths of Hell where he confronts secrets and dangers of his soul, up through the Mount of Purgatory where he experiences true repentance and conversion. Once he is reunited with his beloved Beatrice, the two continue up the Mount of Purgatory into the Empyrean to the Primum Mobile and community of the White Rose.

Dante fully believes that his freedom rests not in political liberty but in spiritual freedom. He overcomes the notion that his intellect will save him and that through his intellect he will know his true identity. Dante comes to see himself as God sees him and in so doing experiences his true identity in freedom.
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Introduction

Human freedom, my freedom, rests on the premise that freedom is spiritual in the first place, psychic in the second place, and physical in the third place. By "spiritual freedom" I mean precisely the freedom to be whole or complete in relation to the Godhead. The human capacity for identity in relation to God is spiritual freedom. Not discounting freedom of conscience, freedom of thought and freedom to act according to one's desire, spiritual freedom occupies the highest plane in what I call the hierarchy of freedoms.

In the hierarchy of freedoms spiritual freedom occupies both the first, or lowest, and last, or highest, level, creating a circle of sorts. Starting from the lowest, the freedom hierarchy looks like this:

- spiritual freedom, or questioning
- moral freedom, or obligation
- intellectual freedom, or free will
- political freedom, civil or constitutional freedom
- freedom to choose to act according to desire
- spiritual freedom, or identity.

The poem describes in allegorical terms the pilgrim's way to God, "to that union of our wills with the Universal Will in every creature finds its true self and its true being" (Sayers, Inferno 19). The settings Dante selects are Hell, the Earth
and Purgatory, and Heaven. One especially distinctive feature of this poem, comprising of three distinct and self-contained works that together compose *The Divine Comedy*, is that the time frame is the same for each one — Holy Week.

The poem is also autobiographical in nature, but is not an autobiography *per se*. Dante first met Beatrice, the object of his life-long love, at a May-Day party at the home of Folco Potinari, her father. Dante described their first meeting in the following way: "She appeared to me dressed in a most noble manner beyond her very age" (Sayers 26). He was barely nine years old at the time but he never forgot her. Nine years later, through "her ineffable courtesy," Beatrice first acknowledged him publicly by greeting him with "a salutation of such virtue that I seemed to behold the uttermost bounds of bliss" (Sayers 27). In Italian, the words for salutation and salvation are the same: *salute*. So the allegory of Beatrice being a means to his salvation has its genesis at this very point. Seven years later Beatrice died, causing Dante to feel that "the whole city of Florence was widowed by her death" (Sayers 27).

Dante, an emerging poet, put his words together as "strands of experience [with which] he wove his vision of love, singing it out as he went" in the courtly love tradition. When finally he gathered his verses into one book entitled *La Vita Nuova: The New Life*, in which he concluded by writing that he had had a "marvelous vision of the dead and glorified Beatrice." Beatrice became for Dante
the "God-bearing image" or vehicle of Glory and the epitome of all other such communications of grace (Sayers 28). Dante used his verses as the backbone of La Vita Nuova, which was his tribute to Beatrice.

After this sonnet there appeared to me a marvelous vision in which I saw things which made me decide to write no more of this blessed one until I could do so more worthily. And to this end I apply myself as much as I can, as she indeed knows. Thus, if it shall please Him by whom all things live that my life continue for a few years, I hope to compose concerning her what has never been written in rhyme of any woman. And then may it please Him who is Lord of courtesy that my soul may go to see the glory of my lady, that is of the blessed Beatrice, who now in glory beholds the face of Him qui est per omnia secula benedictus (Chiarenza 21).

Using this philosophy of grace and the language of religion in 13th Century Italy, Dante began his poem of the pilgrim's search for his identity that can only be discovered through freedom. For purposes of clarity, the the pilgrim is the character in the poem who makes the journey and Dante is the poet.

Commentaries by Dorothy Sayers, Helen Luke, Marguerite Mills Chiarenza, and Allen Mandelbaum on the Divine Comedy illustrate and give form to ideas that have already been schematically explained. I will draw extensively from them.

In the chapters that follow each freedom will be described and applied to spiritual freedom in the context of the Comedy: the pilgrim's descent into Hell, his
climb up the Mount of Purgatory, his encounter with Beatrice, and finally his
vision of God, which is ultimately relational freedom.

Based on the premise that one’s identity is relational, who and what one is is
defined by how one relates to the world. For example, I am the daughter of two
parents and as such my relationship with my parents defines how I see myself in
relation to them. As a sister to my siblings, my relationship with my siblings is
defined by our history and the fact that we all have exactly the same parents and
that we grew up in the same home, lived in the same towns, and attended the same
schools. We relate to each other in terms of all our history. My relationship to
my husband defines my identity as wife. Likewise, as a mother my relationship
with my children define my identity as mother. And so on in my identity as
friend, colleague, student, teacher, baker, homemaker, and the many other roles that
define my relationships.
Chapter 1

Rational Liberty of Choice and Spiritual Freedom

Freedom can be understood to mean many things. For example, it can be the Aristotelian idea of freedom of will, or free will: human beings have a natural freedom or birthright to choose to act according to desire and not act as slave to our instincts or appetites. Such freedom is defined as rational or deliberate freedom. Aristotle developed the "golden mean" to describe freedom in terms of rationality and deliberation. Intrinsic to free will is the notion of freedom from limitation or from being subject to determination by another. Political freedom is a critical link to the Aristotelian notion of supremacy of law as a condition of political liberty (Aristotle. *Ethics*, V.6.134; *Politics*, III.6.1279). Aristotle formulated his ideas based on this concept of free will; many philosophers have embraced his ideas and, in some cases, expanded them. So Aristotle set the standard for freedom in stating that men are free to practice self government among themselves.

In the 18th century, Locke, Kant and John Stuart Mill all were rationalists from the Aristotelian school of thought. Further, each believed that self government was the essence of good government and therefore was "good government." Human beings were born to be free. Aristotle understood democracy to apply to freeborn men, but Mill believed that democracy applied to all men.
Augustine carried Aristotle's rational view of freedom further and postulated human freedom, or the rule of reason, to mean free will. In other words, freedom from conflict (e.g., imposed beliefs) and freedom or individual liberty are the true meaning of free will. Augustine went further. Ultimate freedom of beatitude, "the last freedom of will," leaves man "not able to sin (Augustine, Confessions, VIII,10-30,55c-61c). Augustine's well known expression, "love, and do what you will," sums up what he meant.

Dante understood Augustine and in fact conveys Augustine's theory poetically in the Inferno, the Purgatorio and the Paradiso. Ultimate liberty consists of freedom from choice or the need to choose, not freedom from love or loving. One cannot be more free than when one succeeds, with God's help, in submitting one's self through love to the rule of God.

When Dante wrote of freedom, he did not mean political freedom, free will, intellect, independence, or liberty. Instead, what Dante meant by freedom was spiritual freedom. That is, freedom to experience God as God truly is.

To the medieval mind, freedom meant the spiritual freedom to be whole or complete in relation to the Godhead. Because of original sin, discussed further in the next chapter, human beings are born into a fallen or sinful state. The only way to escape eternal damnation would be through forgiveness — God's forgiveness. For Dante, it would be inconceivable not to be under the curse of original sin.
Dante’s idea of freedom is based on the theology of creation and grace, embodying the conception of a freedom that is relational and communitarian, not individual. The images Dante employs are the triad or trinity — church, state, and God — and also the trinity of self, other, God. There are other triads or trinities throughout the *Comedy*. Now let’s look at spiritual freedom.

For Dante freedom meant the human capacity for identity. Dante, being a citizen of medieval Florence, could not consider freedom philosophically without considering freedom theologically as well. Dante expressed his logic best in the form of his personal journey toward freedom’s fulfillment as love. His journey embodies his conscious wholeness (i.e., his relationship with Virgil, Beatrice and God), which is composed of relationship.

The metaphor of journey in the *Comedy* is a metaphor of the journey leading to freedom, and the journey from freedom, leading to identity. In the journey, Dante makes the transition from his individual ego-consciousness (i.e., the pilgrim) to his true self (i.e., the poet). A poet writing of his autobiographical journey to find his true identity which turns out to be "poet" is a profound irony. Dante’s freedom is expressed as relational: interpersonal (e.g., the pilgrim and Virgil), communitarian (e.g., the pilgrim and the saints), and trinitarian (e.g., the pilgrim, the other, and God).
Forgiveness, for Dante, is the linchpin of the equation. For, without forgiveness, true freedom cannot be known. Forgiveness, then, is the key example of a relational concept of freedom. Chapter 4 illustrates this concept and illustrates how forgiveness fits into Dante's journey to freedom.
Chapter 2

Image of the Dark Wood and its Meaning (Sin)

The image of the dark wood represents the human condition embroiled in compromise and sin. Dante described himself, halfway through his life, awakening to find himself in a dark wood "where the right road was wholly lost and gone" (Inferno, 1.1-4). Losing the right road is a metaphor for losing freedom. So the stage is set and the goal — finding the right road — is defined as the pilgrim begins his journey to freedom and identity. What separated him from the right road and caused him to lose his freedom? Sin.

The legacy of the first sin (i.e., original sin) puts all humankind at the same starting point. The doctrine of original sin is based first as the sin of pride, "you can be like God" (Gen 3:5, NRSV), and then of the sin of disobedience, "do not eat the fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden [of Eden]" (Gen 3:7). Because of these two sins, all human beings forevermore are born into a fallen world and come with the stain of original sin. Original sin necessitates redemption in order to be free from the bondage of sin and to be free to experience God.

What is sin defined in terms of freedom? In terms of freedom, one’s refusal of love offered as forgiveness is sin. Sin is willful, volitional. In the scene of Paolo and Francesca in the Inferno, Francesca would have us believe that she was in love with love and that she had no choice in the matter at all. The picture she painted,
one of transcendent perfect love, was destroyed by her husband, wrongfully, she felt. The fact that she had betrayed her husband and broken her vow made before God was not at issue for her. In fact, Francesca gives herself away by bitterly cursing her husband for slaying herself and Paolo.

At first reading, I was, like the pilgrim, sympathetic to Francesca and to the lovers. Chiarenza astutely pointed out wherein the real sin lay — beyond the obvious sin of adultery. Out of Francesca’s mouth come the words

As we read on, our eyes met now and then . . . / But just for a one moment overcame us — when / We read of the smile, desired the lips long-thwarted, / since smile, by such a lover kissed away, / He that never from me parted . . . / we read no more that day.

(*Inferno* 5.130-138)

Francesca’s sin was choosing to break her promise to her husband, using as her excuse that they were essentially powerless to break the spell between them. Sayers noted in her commentary that neither Paolo nor Francesca had time to repent of their sin, yet they were nonetheless condemned to eternal Hell (Sayers 103; 5.102). Francesca is unwilling to forgive her husband and has hardened her heart beyond redemption.

If, as Dante believes, God created Hell, and spending eternity in Hell is the result of free will, compared with an eternity in Heaven, then all those who enter
Hell do so of their own free will. Those whom the pilgrim encounters serve only to remind him that "there but for the grace of God go I."

Dante does not excuse the pilgrim who admits that he too is a sinner and shows the pilgrim conversing with those who died in their sin. This serves as a reminder for every reader of what he or she can expect should they too refuse God's forgiveness and fail to repent.

Today psychologists, medical doctors, and some theologians consider lust and the "sins of the flesh" (e.g., gluttony) to be addictions, and not sin. In fact, many social scientists do not accept the existence of sin in any instance. While sin and addiction are opposites conceptually in that sin is volitional and addiction is not, they are certainly causally connected in that forgiveness is a factor in the resolution of both. The medieval mindset, however, considered addiction to be a sin. Dante understood that to overcome the enslavement of sin, a spiritual rebirth of sorts was necessary. In order for the spiritual rebirth to occur, forgiveness and repentance must first take place.

Our fundamental need for forgiveness can be said to explain all depression and guilt. In a perfect world there would be no sin and therefore no need for forgiveness. But we do not live in a perfect world. We live in world based on relationship and relationships are based on love and trust. What relationships are important?
Consider the primary relationship as the relationship with God. If one has broken trust with God, that is, sinned, but has neither confessed nor repented of the sin, accepting God's forgiveness is impossible. Through the act of admission or confession of one's sins, which is always followed by the understanding that such admission or confession is necessary to be forgiven, the true self versus the ego-self breaks through. Yet, once one admits one's sin and confesses that sin, then accepting God's forgiveness is possible. God will always forgive the sinner even if the sinner does not know it to be so.

The need for forgiveness is not strictly limited to the individual: there is a societal need for forgiveness as well as an institutional need. An example of a societal need for forgiveness is the Nazi German society of World War II. I speculate that in the scheme of life this forgiveness is slow in coming but that does not change the fact that forgiveness is necessary. Forgiveness is necessary not only by the world in general but by the Jews in particular. An example of the institutional need for forgiveness would be institutions of higher learning who for centuries excluded both women and non-white men from entering their respective institutions, studying, and earning academic credentials on a par with those earned by white men.

The need for forgiveness is a universal human condition. What keeps most individuals, institutions and societies from recognizing this need however is pride.
Sayers, in her commentary to Canto 10 of the *Purgatorio*, wrote that pride is "the head and root of all sin, both original and actual" (147). Is it any wonder that the penitent proud carried heavy stones on their backs, representing their sin. The striking difference between souls the pilgrim encounters in Purgatory who are guilty of the sin of pride *versus* those in Hell who are guilty of the sin of pride is confession and repentance. Cantos 10 and 11 are rich with detail of repentance. Dante used three forms of the sin of pride: pride of race, represented by Humberto Aldobrandesco; pride of achievement, represented by Oderisi; and pride of domination, represented by Provenzan(o) Salvani.

The aristocrat Aldobrandesco, in life, held his head so high that it was impossible for him to see those he stepped on because of his pride: "these puffed me up — forgetting in my pride / the common mother of humanity" (11.62-3). The mother of humanity to whom Aldobrandesco referred was Eve, one of our first parents whose sin of pride condemned humankind and made salvation necessary. His arrogance "beguiled . . . not only me, but all my kin" (11.67-8). So Aldobrandesco walked bent over with downcast eyes through his entire life in Purgatory — the antithesis of Aldobrandesco the arrogant one.

The artist Oderisi was a celebrated illuminator of manuscripts. Oderisi’s pride of achievement; his skill was so renowned that Pope Boniface VIII invited him to Rome in 1295 to paint books in the Papal library (Sayers, *Purgatory* 155).
The despot Provenzan Salvani was guilty of the sin of pride of domination. Provenzan, whom Sayers describes as a "powerful Sienese nobleman" (157), was one who urged the destruction of Florence.

As Dante reflects on his own sinful pride:

But if . . . the soul who takes no care / For his repentance till his latter end / must wait below, and thence, if no good prayers / Aid him, is not permitted to ascend / Till he have passed is life's length there perfore — / Then by what means was his admittance gained?

(11.127-32)

How then is a soul saved? Through charity. As the pilgrim walks step by step, bent over like those he meets in Purgatory, he encounters the Angel of Humility who erases the first P, representing Pride, from his head and promises him "a journey safe and sure" (11.97-8).

The pilgrim encounters these three prideful sinners in Purgatory, not in Hell, because of each has repented.
Chapter 3

Repentance and Forgiveness (Reconciliation)

Purgatory

If the human condition is that of the sinner, why then are some sinners doomed to spend eternity in Hell and other sinners spending eternity in Heaven by way of Purgatory? The answer is because of repentance.

The doctrine of Purgatory comes from early Church Alexandrian Fathers. Origen, a second century Greek author, teacher, and Church father, interpreted Matt 26 — "Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny" [uttermost farthing] — to be Christ's reference to Purgatory (Sayers, Purgatory 55). He wrote that the souls in Purgatory will have "benefaction in the purification from the evils contracted in that folly [sin]; a purification effected by means of salutary troubles" (Sayers, Purgatory 55). Our earthly existence is filled with pain, which Augustine characterized as purifying trials. Augustine, who lived between 354 and 430 CE, wrote, in the City of God, that "temporal pain, some endure it here [on earth] and some hereafter, and some both here and there; yet all is past before the Last Judgment" (Augustine, City of God XXI.13).

The main distinction between the pain and suffering on earth as opposed to that of Purgatory is the emphasis on "purgative rather than on the penal aspect of punishment" (Ibid). In 1267 (Confession of Faith of Michael Palaeologos) and in 1429
(Decree of the Council of Florence) the Church affirmed that "souls in the Intermediate State [Purgatory] are purged after death by purgatorial or cathartic pains" (Sayers 55).

Thomas Aquinas added meat to the definition and interpretation of Purgatory (ST I.II23, q.87, ad.7). Drawing largely from Aquinas' work Sayers neatly sums up the meaning of Purgatory.

1. Purgatory is not a place of probation . . . all souls admitted . . . are bound for Heaven sooner or later, and are far beyond the reach of sin.

2. Purgatory is not a second chance for the obstinate and unrepentant. The soul's own choice between God and self, made at the moment of death, is final.

3. Repentance in the moments of death is always accepted . . . whether or not it is accompanied by formal confession and absolution; and the soul enters Purgatory.

4. The Divine acceptance of a repentance in articulo mortis (at the moment of death) does not mean that the sinner 'gets away with it' (sin).

5. The souls in Purgatory and the souls on earth are in touch with one another and can aid each other by their prayers. But it is wrong for the living to distract the dead from their task of purgation by egotistical and importunate demands for attention.

6. Souls which have so preserved in virtue till the moment of death as to accomplish their whole purgation in this life, are not detained in Purgatory, but pass immediately into the Presence of God. These are the Saints.

(Sayers, Purgatory 59-60)
Sayers adds to these points "the above is a summary of the Doctrine of Purgatory as generally held by Catholics. Not every item in it is de fide" (Sayers 59-60).

What saved the three prideful sinners was their repentance and what will save the pilgrim is his repentance.

Oderisi's repentance is presented thus:

> For pride like that we here must pay the fine / Not yet should I be here, but that contrition / Turned me to God while power to sin was mine

(11.88-90) [italics mine].

While Oderisi still lived and was therefore still able to sin, he repented of his pride. In Provenzan Salvani's case, his one heroic act of freeing his friend from Charles of Anjou's dungeon (Il.134-38) was enough to show his repentance and enough for his sentence to Hell to be commuted to Purgatory and eventually Heaven. But repentance would not be possible without grace.

Grace is manifest in the reality of repentance by those whom the poets encounter. These encounters release the pilgrim to bear his own conflicts. In his own conversion he finally realized that he was utterly dependent on God — not on his intellect, not on his poetry, not on political maneuvering, and not on his guide Virgil. Dante's own purgatorial process is revealed as his accepting forgiveness.

Purgatorial suffering of others weighed heavy on the pilgrim. But through Virgil's words of consolation, "though there may be suffering here, there is no
death," the pilgrim realized that he was not to get caught up in the particulars of those encountered but to be strong in his resolve to continue his journey (11.20-21).

Little is left for Virgil to saying to the pilgrim accept to empower him as poet.

Await no further sign from me: / your will is free,
erect and whole — to act / against that will would be
to err: therefore / I crown and miter you over
yourself.

(11.139-42)

Virgil's insight into Dante is the insight of a parent. Virgil's role was both as father and mother to Dante. Many parents, and perhaps parents of little or no faith, through some mystical Divine intervention and infusion, often pass seeds of wisdom and pearls of knowledge to their children. What is left now is for Dante to continue his journey, leave his parent figure Virgil, and pass through the Veil of Fire and the Pass of Pardon, and once again readjust his focus. Dante had believed that his intellect would guide and protect him, that his poetry would empower him, and that his political maneuvering would ensure his place in community. Even though Dante's faith in God and understanding of theology was deep, he was discontent: he had yet to accept forgiveness.

Forgiveness, by definition, is to cease to feel resentment against an offender, to pardon one's enemies, to give up resentment of or claim to something, or to excuse a debt. Forgiveness in context of the Purgatorio is more complex and is discussed in the next chapter.
In positive terms, forgiveness releases the forgiven to experience a renewed relationship with the forgiver. The profound experience of renewal can have life-changing effects on both the forgiver and the forgiven.
Chapter 4

The Pilgrim’s Encounter with Beatrice

In order to fully understand the significance of the pilgrim’s encounter with Beatrice, it is helpful to provide some background. The pilgrim’s guide, Virgil, was sent as the result of Beatrice’s intervention because of the "great peril" the pilgrim was experiencing. Actually, the intervention started when the Virgin Mary called on St. Lucy, the "enemy of everything evil," who then called Beatrice to come to the pilgrim’s aid (Inferno, 2.94-120). When the pilgrim accepted his journey, he soon realized that he must confront the "secrets and dangers in his own soul" (Chiarenza 28).

In the pilgrim’s dream, he imagined the siren singing a beautiful song so irresistible that he is drawn to her, "I am . . . the pleasing siren, / who in midsea leads mariners astray" (Purgatorio, 19.19-21). Virgil is immediately rebuked by the "holy lady" (who could be the Lady Philosophy, St. Lucy or Beatrice). Once he rips the clothes off the siren in search of pleasure, the pilgrim exposes her hideousness. Seeing that his imagination drove him into love in undue measure the pilgrim is able to understand how his imagination caused him to stray from his mission.

Cantos 15-18, Purgatorio, explain the medieval mindset concerning the doctrine of love. According to Chiarenza, Dante’s doctrine of love is based partly
on Augustine, partly on Boethius, and partly on Thomas, but is "entirely integrated into his poetic purpose" (Chiarenza 64). For Dante, man’s desire is natural and unlimited. Every action then becomes an attempt by the restless soul (man) to possess some good that will satisfy its desires. Taken further, "all motion, all action is love" (Chiarenza 64). Virgil’s words, "neither Creator nor creature, my son, was ever without love" bear out Dante’s doctrine of love (17.81-92). The text Chiarenza selects to concretize and illuminate the doctrine of love follows immediately.

From His hand who regards it fondly / before it is comes forth, like a / child that sports, tearful and / smiling, the little simple soul that / knows nothing, but, moved by a / joyful Maker, turns eagerly to what / delights it.

(16.85-90)

By reminding the reader of the centrality of Christ to the poem, Chiarenza points out how the poem puts Christ in the context of history, that is, what went before and what will follow. Dante equates the coming of Christ for all men and the coming of life for each man. Finally the angels announce what we think will be Christ’s arrival, "Benedictus qui veni" (30.19). Instead of Christ, it is Beatrice who comes. Clearly, Beatrice is symbolic of Christ.

So on the chariot divine rose rife / By hundreds there, ad vocem tanti senis, / The court and couriers of eternal life. / All these proclaimed: "Benedictus qui venis," /
And tossing flowers about them low and high, / Cried:
"Manibus O date lilia plenis."

(30.16-21)

If we have any doubt here that Beatrice is indeed symbolic of Christ we need only to look at the masculine ending "us" in Benedictus to see Dante's intention. If Beatrice represented herself only then the expression would be Benedicta qui venis.

When Virgil disappears, he leaves Beatrice to continue to guide the pilgrim. Her face is first hidden by a veil, but nonetheless the pilgrim recognizes her:

And instantly, for all the years between / Since her mere presence with a kind of fright / Could awe me and make my spirit faint within, / There came on me, needing no further sight, / Just by that strange, outflowing power of hers, / The old, old love in all its mastering might. / And, smitten through the eyesight unawares, / By that high power which pierced me, heart and reins, / Long since, when I was but a child in years. . . .

(30.34-43)

As the pilgrim turned and looked for Virgil, his lament is touching: "and we stood / Orphaned of him; Virgil, dear father, most / Kind Virgil I gave me to for my soul's good" (30.49-51). As the pilgrim began to weep for Virgil, he is rebuked by Beatrice and is told

Dante, weep not for Virgil's going — keep / As yet from weeping, weep not yet, for soon / Another sword shall give thee cause to weep.

(30.55-57)
When Beatrice names Dante, it is the only time his name occurs in the *Commedia.*

The other sword she refers to the pilgrim knows too well: infidelity. He is guilty for having been unfaithful to Beatrice and equates his unfaithfulness to her to be the same as being unfaithful to God (31.35-36).

His confession is honest and simple:

> Things transitory, with their false delight / . . . enticed my steps aside / Soon as your face was hidden from my sight.

(31.34-36)

Beatrice continues her judgment by rebuking further:

> But when the prisoner's mouth is quick to spill / His own sin forth, then, in our court up there, / Backward against the edge we turn the wheel. / Nevertheless, that thou may'st learn to bear / The shame of guilt, and make a better show / Next time the sirens' song assails thine ear, / Stop sowing tears, and listen; thou must know / How by a way quite other and reversed / My buried flesh ought to have made thee go.

(31.40-48)

The pilgrim's confession and repentance make up his conversion. His feelings for Beatrice are presented "as a gift of God's grace" (Chiarenza 86). And yet the pilgrim is not free. He has still to face that his deeper sin is forsaking his life's quest, that of which he wrote so eloquently in *La Vita Nuova.* Having hardened his heart to his vision, he pursued the ways of the world. His contrition
at Peter's Gate was authentic but incomplete. Helen Luke's commentary describe
the event beautifully and succinctly.

Dante's long journey down and up has brought him at
last to look again clear-eyed on her whom he truly
loved with his whole heart on earth, and she will lead
him to the fullness of love in Heaven, but not before
she has ruthlessly exposed to him his infidelities. She
stresses the extraordinary gifts of nature and grace
which were his and which enabled him when he fell in
love in his youth to catch so clear a glimpse of the end
in the beginning (Luke 106).

Beatrice continues to her accusation:

"And by wild ways he wandered, speaking for / False
phantoms of the good, which promise make / Of joy,
but never fully pay the score. / With inspirations,
prayer-wrung for his sake, / Vainly in dreams and
other ways as well / I called him home; so little did he
reck. / And, in the end, to such a depth he fell / That
every means to save his soul came short / Except to let
him see the lost in hell."

(30.130-138)

In Sayers' Essays Presented to Charles Williams she reminds us that the Dante
who wrote the Convivio has all the elements of the other Dante, "the great intellect
. . . great curiosity . . . great poetry and even great piety," so what is Beatrice
talking about? What Dante lacks is charity (love) and humility. His sin "is not . . .
anybody's system of philosophy; it is simply the thing known as hardness off heart"
(Sayers, Essays 3-4). From across the river Beatrice sums up everything here by the
line Luke claims to be "one of the greatest lines of the poem (Luke 104): "Guarda
ci ben; ben sem, ben sem / Beatrice" ["Look on us well; we are indeed, we are /
Beatrice"] (30.73-74). By these few words Beatrice has told the pilgrim that she has
seen his innermost being. Faced with this truth about himself the pilgrim is
"choked by tears" (Luke 109).

The lady Matilda is the one whom the pilgrim sees when he comes to himself.

When my heart set my outward sense free, / I saw my
first-met, lone-met lady bent / Above me, saying:
"Hold on, hold on to me," / Into the stream she’d
drawn me in my faint, / Throat-high, and now, towing
me after her, / Light as a shuttle o’er the water went ./
... / She stretched both hands, she seized me by the
crown, / Did that fair lady, and she plunged me in, /
So that I needs must drink the water down; / Then
drew me forth and led me washed and clean.

(31.91-96, 100-103)

As the baptizer, Matilda has the same function for Beatrice as did John the Baptist
for Christ. The symbolism Baptist offers (i.e., the complete cleansing of sin and the
washing away of everything evil, vile, and wretched) is indeed powerful here.

Sayers’ notes on Canto 31 comment on the strangeness of putting Dante’s
"overwhelming conviction of sin . . . after his (symbolical) purgation" [italics mine].
He has made his act of contrition at Peter’s Gate (9.94) and has experienced "violent
psychological disturbance." Sayers contends that not until the state of innocence is
regained can one comprehend sin "in its full horror" (319). When Dante speaks:
I dropped my eyes down to the glassy rill, / Saw myself there, and quickly to the brink / Withdrew them, bowed with shame unspeakable.

(30.76-78)

Now, with the pilgrim’s contrition and his awareness of the horror of his sin (i.e., his hardness of heart), his conversion is complete and he has been reunited with his beloved Beatrice: Why doesn’t the poem end? Chiarenza purports that the reason is Dante’s belief in a "dimension beyond time . . . a transcendent resolution," which is Heaven (88-9).

Helen Luke most eloquently describes the pilgrim’s encounter with Beatrice:

experience of human love grows and expands into divinity, deepens and contracts to a single point, so that his whole being is drawn as a magnet to the vision of God (Luke 121).

As the two are pulled up at the speed of light we are reminded that the pull from God is stronger than the pull to degeneration from Satan.

Satan’s moral weight coincides the pull the Earth has on all bodies and, conversely, in Purgatory that pull will lessen gradually and disappear (Chiarenza 89).

The regeneration of Purgatory is markedly different from the degeneration of Hell. Once in Paradise, the lovers continue to move upward.

Here in the Paradiso, the pilgrim’s relationship of the one to the One, his relationship to God/Beatrice, is paramount. Beatrice, his guide, represents his own Christ experience. Beatrice’s eyes are filled with the glory of the sun (a metaphor
for the Glory of God) and by looking into her eyes the pilgrim is lifted from one
sphere to another sphere in Heaven.

Even though those whom the pilgrim encounters in Paradise speak, they
communicate feelings by glowing, twinkling, twirling, singing, and positioning
themselves into shapes symbolic of great mysteries of faith (e.g., a glowing cross).
In the Empyrean, Beatrice leaves the pilgrim's side to take her place among the
souls congregated in adoration of God. Before she leaves her beloved, she smiles
one final time at him. Her meditation message is now complete and she is free to
return her gaze to God in full knowledge that her lover's salvation is secure. She
has "left [her] footprints in Hell" and "drawn [him] from bondage into liberty"
(31.81, 85). The two are forever bound together by love.
Chapter 5

Fulfillment of Freedom as Love

(Paradiso)

In the Paradiso the images of freedom populate every verse. The timeless metaphor of shapeless light is paramount. As in the great New Testament chapter on faith, Heb 11:1, which says that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," the Paradiso provides the reader with the assurance that Dante’s journey to freedom and personal identity takes him to the exact right path. The souls he encounters along the way in Heaven are either surrounded by light or embraced by light in a manner akin to a Thomas Cole pastoral painting. Were it not for Beatrice’s counsel, the pilgrim would think that those personifications of light were not real but mere figments of his imagination or even figments of his joy. Even Beatrice’s smile is expressed by light:

like the sun in / in the most wavering sight, the / remembrance of the sweet smile / deprives my mind of its very self.

(30.25–28)

If, as Chiarenza suggests, Dante offers his poem as "an example, as images of the unspeakable . . . of divine origin," then Dante’s courage to put to verse what we can only imagine must have been seen by some as heresy (Chiarenza 123). Critics
of his day (e.g., Benedetto Croce) ridiculed Dante for not depicting God’s face. But
the freedom of fulfillment as love (i.e., God’s love, Beatrice’s love, and the love of
all the saints he encounters) is difficult to describe. If fulfillment of freedom is love,
what is it that forgiveness makes possible?

O grace abounding . . . so deep the eternal light to
search and sound / That my whole vision was therein
consumed! / In that abyss I saw how love held bound /
Into one volume all the leaves whose flight / Is
scattered through the universe around . . .

(33.78—84)

Grace and intercession make forgiveness possible. Petitions for intercession
are made throughout the Comedy, up until Canto 33 of the Paradiso, when the last
petition is made to the Virgin for grace to be granted to Dante so that he can
experience God (33.1ff). In Inferno the first three petitioners/intercessors were St.
Lucy, Beatrice and the Virgin. Likewise, in the Paradiso Beatrice continues to
petition. In Canto 24 she asks the saints gathered together in community to allow
the pilgrim to share in their joy and therefore experience the Godhead. St. Peter’s
ensuing examination of the pilgrim’s faith (24.52-57) causes Dante to call forth

Hebrews 11:

"Since grace is granted to me, for my creed’s sake / To
speak before the Chief Centurion, / So may my
thoughts their due expression take. / As truly wrote
the pen," so I went on, "Of thy beloved brother, who
with thee / Set Rome upon the way to union, / The
substance of things hoped for faith must be, / And
argument of things invisible, / And this I take to be its quiddity."

(24.58-66)

What is now made possible is for Dante to know himself as God knows him.

How substance, accident, and mode unite / Fused, so to speak, together, in such wise, / That this I tell of is one simple light.

(33.88-90)

He has seen the manifestation of God: three circles of light, each of a different color and hue, as one circle (33.116-120). In the second circle Dante sees a human figure: Christ.

Dante received exactly what he asked: absolute freedom. "But that a flash my understanding clove, / Whence its desire came to it suddenly" (33.140-41). His freedom is absolute because there is nothing real beyond that freedom. He has seen and has experienced the "love that moves the sun and the other stars" (33.145). The medieval mind believed that the earth was the center of the universe and that the stars and heavenly spheres revolved around earth. So to experience the prime mover was to experience God. What else was there for the poet to say?

As a sinner I look for forgiveness images everywhere. In the Paradiso, the white rose, which symbolizes a wrapping up or enfolding or all relationships with the Divine, is the most powerful forgiveness image, second only to the blazing
light. Dante could not have experienced or described the white rose unless he had undergone conversion. But these images gain their meaning only through the role they play in relation to Dante's journey which in turn cannot be separated from his new relationship to Beatrice: properly speaking, she is the prime symbol of forgiveness.

But there is more than one conversion experience in The Divine Comedy. In fact, there is more than one just in the Paradiso. The first occurs in Canto 1 at line 67: "Twas even thus a change came over me" (Sayers) and "In watching her, within me I was changed" (Mandelbaum). For the pilgrim, conversion occurs daily. With conversion comes commitment, and with commitment comes renewal.

Is the white rose image a freedom image today? No, primarily because the image of the white rose comes from antiquity. Images of freedom today would include the cosmos and something along the lines of Teilhard's image of the "Cosmic Christ," or images of spirits floating as in raptured souls being lifted, presumably to heavenly realms. That being said, the image of the white rose still evokes pure love. And if pure love is a metaphor for God, then the white rose could still be considered a metaphor for God and thus of forgiveness. As far as our images of community are concerned, logos and symbols of culture evoke community. For example, the U.S. Marine Corps crest and expression, Semper Fidelis (always faithful) evoke community in the heart of every U.S. Marine who
has ever lived. The image of the cross remains a symbol of Christianity and of Christian community.

Communion with God, the complete blending of identities when God's nature and our nature are truly unified, is a powerful image of forgiveness but it is also a powerful image of freedom: "How much our eagerness be multiplied / To see Him in His essence, in whose being / God's nature and our own were unified!" (2.40-42).

The most dynamic image of forgiveness in the *Paradiso* is the image of seeing with another's eyes. What amazes Dante, the poet and the pilgrim, is what he sees: light. "My seeing nothing else — and love — compelled my eyes to turn again to Beatrice . . . only its Maker can enjoy it fully" (3.14-15, 20-21). Dante understood that he had reached the heaven of pure light.

Chiarenza points out that the souls in Purgatory were visible but unsubstantial; those in Paradise

appear invisible but substantial . . . [accomplished]
through the image off light, its metaphysical associations . . . [they] are in fact being made of light, luminous expressions of themselves (Chiarenza 112).

Not until Beatrice tells Dante that these luminous ones "are real beings that though seest" (3.29) does Dante begin to comprehend his own identity — that of poet.

Those whom Dante encounters, including and especially Beatrice, are able to share their joy with the pilgrim, by music and motion, but also by that which is
communicated through the senses, "spiritual in that it fulfills the desire of his soul" (i.e., to see God). Beatrice and the other souls communicate truth with smiles, not with their eyes, and work "incomprehensibly with the light of their internal vision [of God]" (115). Beatrice's smile is the last image Dante gives us. His description of her smile as she leads him to the Empyrean sums up all his feelings for her (30.16-33).

In Helen Luke's discussion of the Paradiso she points out that the imagination is the critical element when we figuratively enter Heaven. The pilgrim is able to look directly into the noonday sun, "whose light no mortal eye can stand," and in an instant feels "transhumanized," when he sees a second sun and realizes that there is "a day within a day" (Luke 141).

Ultimately the pilgrim is able to see through Beatrice's eyes and, since Beatrice is a metaphor for God, he is able to see through God's eyes. Dante's attempts to describe unspeakable beauty and life, celestial bodies of dancing light and the faithfully departed who through the "power of love appease[s] our will so we long only for what we have," are valiant efforts of putting into language the mystery of God (3.71-72).

As the light progressively intensifies, so does Dante's vision. He is overcome by the beauty of the light. Dante experiences blindness and then sight, blindness and then sight, until at last, when he is able to see with Beatrice's eyes, what he sees
is so magnificent that he can only describe it in terms of light. For Dante, the beauty that God sees is described in terms of blissful love "as sparks or gleams wheeling in the heart of the light which is love" (Luke 141). Love is surrounded by music of such description that Dante’s "ache to hear those songs again will haunt me until I die" (141).

If I could always see with God’s eyes, I would never sin. When one is able to see with another’s eyes, it is possible to surrender one’s self and enter into relationship with one’s entire being, one’s true self, rather than with one’s self image or ego-self.

Would it be possible to see with another’s eyes in real time? I think not, because we are not perfected. Ordinarily, I am limited to seeing through the eyes of another retrospectively, not concurrently. In the rarest of instances, I am able to share an experience of sight, but those instances are rare. Still, it is incredible to contemplate that Dante saw first through his own eyes, then through the eyes of his poet guide Virgil, through Beatrice’s eyes and finally through God’s eyes.

One of the strongest images of freedom is that of repentance and confession and then being able to see how bad the confessed offense actually was. Only after the initial remorse and repentance is one truly able to see the depth of sin.

Life occurs in time and space but eternity does not. The time frame in which Dante places the Comedy is Holy Week. At the beginning of the Inferno,
when the pilgrim finds himself in the dark wood, it is Good Friday; the last
mention of time in the Paradiso is Easter Sunday, which is described as light so
magnificent that it transcends description. Holy Week (Palm Sunday through
Easter Sunday) is the most significant time in the Christian calendar because of the
Resurrection.

All of what the pilgrim experiences is seen in the context of community. In
Hell, community is perverted (Ugolino); in Purgatory community is united in "the
bonds of mutual good will . . . to earth and Heaven" (Sayers, Introduction,
Purgatory, 20); in Heaven, community is totally restored.
Chapter 6
Concluding Reflections
of Forgiveness, Freedom and Identity

Why is forgiveness so important? Forgiveness is the necessary element in the growth of freedom, and freedom is the necessary element as fulfillment of true identity. As the pilgrim discovered, his true identity was relational: himself-other/(Beatrice)-God. Without seeing his relationships for what they really were, seeing his true self was impossible. Only in relationship with others can we know true self, because our identity is constituted by the relations in which we exist and without which we would in no sense be who we are.

Furthermore, loving another is possible only by loving one’s self first and seeing something in the other, something relational, that says that one is lovable. That something which is seen in the other is the relationship to God. For it is precisely the other’s relationship to God that attracts us. Relationship with God is predicated on love first, forgiveness second, submission or conversion third, and freedom in the last place. The fulcrum on which such relation is based is love.

In the West, we embrace the Aristotelian tradition of freedom: freedom of intellect and will. Kantian liberty of the will, or choice, is the purely philosophical tradition, with no acknowledgement or consideration of the Spirit. The religious premise from which Dante wrote is that freedom includes both the possibility and
actuality of sin: an offense not just against human relations, but against God. That is precisely what makes Dante's vision of freedom different than that of modern philosophers. Because human nature is consistently in rebellion against God, John Stuart Mill's utilitarian notion of rational freedom of choice, which disregards the Spirit and any concept of spiritual freedom as well as sin as necessary for happiness, is very attractive.

In the West, we have embraced humanistic utilitarianism as freedom based on rights, without personal accountability or responsibility. Instead, the view of responsibility is predicated on the greatest good for the greatest number, or harm to the least number. Such humanistic utilitarian ideas have fundamentally undermined western thought for the last 200 years.

Dante's idea of freedom is based on a theology of creation and grace, embodying the conception of freedom which is relational and communitarian, and not individual. In Hell, community is perverted (Ugolino); in Purgatory community is united in "the bonds of mutual good will . . . to earth and Heaven" (Sayers, Introduction, Purgatory, 20); in Heaven, community is totally restored.

Spiritual freedom, from Dante's perspective as well as my own, is not just philosophical; it also embodies a theology of creation, grace, and relationship that includes relational church. Taken further, Dante's freedom is contextualized in a broader economy of interacting factors (how things work). He was able to see
himself, his true identity, only after he confronted historical and epic poetic characters in Hell and on the Mount of Purgatory. He first surrendered his great pride and prejudice, but he was fated to encounter himself over and over again.

When I began studying the Commedia I feared that I was not equipped to fathom the poem and to acquire its true meaning through reason. What I’ve discovered, after five years of study, reflection, writing, and discussion, is that I have been profoundly affected by the work. Only during this, my fifth year of studying Dante, have I come to appreciate the poem for what it is: one man’s journey to freedom and his true identity, put in the context of the Comedia. Life is complicated and Dante knew it to be so. But to the medieval mind, the universe could be broken down into complex but discernable and describable elements.

The first few lines of the poem, when the pilgrim found himself in a dark wood and had lost the right road, were familiar to me. My journey to freedom hasn’t been as orderly as the pilgrim’s. But like the pilgrim, at an early age I knew that God loved me and called me to a high purpose. And again, like the pilgrim, I had lost the right road many times.

In reading the poem I felt both validated in my out-of-fashion philosophy and greatly consoled by gaining insight that my true identity is relational and not merely functional. At some level I already knew this, but was not fully equipped
to think the philosophy through. The *Divine Comedy* provided the framework for me to explain identity and freedom in terms of love and relation.

Christian doctrine has many troubling aspects for some. For example, one in particular that evangelical scholars continue to debate is Christ’s descent into Hell, spoken of in the Apostles’ Creed, after His death on the cross. I found Dante’s description of the event, as told through the eyes of the pilgrim’s "unsaved" poet-guide, to be profoundly beautiful:

"When I was newly in this state," said he / "I saw One come in majesty and awe, / And on His head were crowns of victory. / Our great first father’s spirit He did withdraw, / And righteous Abel, Noah who built the ark, / Moses who gave and who obeyed the Law, / King David, Abraham the Patriarch, / Israel with his father and generation, / Rachel, for whom he did such deeds of mark, / With many another of His chosen nation; / These did bless; and know, that ere that day / No human soul had ever seen salvation."

(4.52-63)

I was first struck by the profundity of the poem five years ago in the medieval segment of the undergraduate program when we looked at the *Inferno* briefly. Although we didn’t study the poem much, we did dissect and study a couple of crucial passages. Then in my fourth year of study, I took a class on Dante and Shakespeare, the former representing the late medieval Italian poet and the latter representing the early English Renaissance playwright. During the course of that class I encountered the real Dante.
While reading Mandelbaum’s translation of the Purgatorio, the class was challenged to write our own Comedy, but we were cautioned to start by writing our own Purgatorio. Purgatory, the place one goes to finish working out one’s salvation after death, was something that early in life I had prayed would be short because I wanted to work out my salvation while I am living. I don’t think that I ever understood exactly what the purgation process entailed until I read the Purgatorio. Writing one’s own Purgatorio presupposes faith, contrition, repentance, and forgiveness. The forgiveness element of Purgatory was the lightening bolt that came from my third encounter with the poem, when in the fall of my fifth year in the program I studied Dante again, but this time from a more philosophical perspective.

Seeing the poem as Dante’s journey to freedom and identity put the work in the perspective of a soul in search of its true self, the self that God sees. Is that not what everyone wants? But we all fear that intimate of a relation, mainly because we all know ourselves to have unseen unclean deeds of the heart. So it is that level of fear that keeps us from relationship, but it need not, because of Love given as forgiveness. Because of Love, in his youth Dante was given a vision of the Glory of God. He described this glory in terms of relationship with his beloved Beatrice.

Two interlocutors on this thesis project have completely discounted the entire premise of the poem and that a childhood love could have inspired Dante to
write the *Comedy*. If one discounts the premise of the poem, then the notion that spiritual freedom leads to one's true identity does not equate. I find it interesting that neither of the two is actively pursuing a relationship with God.

One, who considers himself a neo-Platonist, once described to me the year he "got over God." Our many discussions of spiritual matters usually end with him telling me that if it makes me feel good to pray for him then that is good, but that I should not allude myself into thinking that anyone hears my prayers except myself. He spends his time engaged in intellectual pursuits that will somehow lead him to the meaning of life and to his true identity. Like many intellectuals who have forsaken God or who have disallowed even the concept of a Prime Mover or Creator, he searches ancient manuscripts for some mention of an alternative to God. Yet, the only alternative he has found is to make himself his own god, which takes him to the same place as the archetypal Adam and Eve, who are credited with causing original sin.

My other interlocutor angrily denies that God has anything at all to do with his life and that he is free to choose anything his heart desires. Interestingly enough he doesn't deny God's existence, only God's participation in his life or relationships, much like the Deists of the 16th and 17th centuries. He believes that if he does enough good deeds he will know peace and contentment. What he has
discovered, though, is that while doing good works often makes him feel good, he
does not have a true sense of self, and his heart remains hardened.

The *Divine Comedy* provides the literary framework and philosophical
structure to discuss salvation in a new and fresh way, and for that I will be
eternally grateful. For my neo-Platonist interlocutor I can now use a structure
similar to that of Plato but can insert concepts of love, forgiveness and identity
where Plato did not. For my other interlocutor I have a philosophical framework
that is inextricably married to a theology of grace, creation, and relationship, from
which to discuss why repentance and forgiveness leads to freedom and why freedom
leads to identity.

Even though the *Comedy* was written 700 years ago, its crucial elements —
repentance, forgiveness, and freedom — remain as meaningful today as when Dante
put pen to paper. I remain intrigued by Professor Ambrosio’s challenge to write
my own *Divine Comedy*, and some day I might just do so.
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