



2021

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Recommended Citation

Corbett, George (2021) "Interpreting Dante's 'Commedia': Competing Approaches," *Bibliotheca Dantesca: Journal of Dante Studies*: Vol. 4 , Article 1.

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INTERPRETING DANTE'S 'COMMEDIA': COMPETING APPROACHES¹

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This article first addresses the emphasis on the truth of the literal sense of Dante's *Commedia* in twentieth-century scholarship, whether the poem is conceived as a mystical vision (Bruno Nardi, 1884-1968), figural fulfillment (Erich Auerbach, 1892-1957), or allegory of the theologians (Charles S. Singleton, 1909-1985; and Robert Hollander, 1933-2021). Secondly, it analyses the interpretative approach of the French Dominican scholars Pierre Mandonnet (1858-1936) and Joachim Berthier (1848-1924), who draw on symbolic theology (and the four senses of Scripture) but, unlike Singleton and Hollander, insist that the literal sense of the poem is a "beautiful lie." Thirdly, it shows how literalist approaches underpin key twentieth-century discussions of Dante's theology, contribute to broader secularizing trends in Dante Studies, and represent a rupture with the seven-hundred-year-long commentary tradition on the poem as a whole.

Keywords: Dante, *Commedia*, Theology, Hermeneutics, Interpretation, Allegory, Bruno Nardi, Erich Auerbach, Charles S. Singleton, Robert Hollander, Pierre Mandonnet, Joachim Berthier.

The centenary year of 2021 invites a long view and, in this article, I take the opportunity to reappraise the competing approaches to interpreting Dante's *Commedia* over the last hundred or so years. In the first section, I address the dominant emphasis on the truth of the literal sense of Dante's *Commedia* in twentieth-century scholarship, whether the poem is conceived as a mystical vision (Bruno Nardi, 1884-1968), figural fulfillment (Erich Auerbach, 1892-1957), or allegory of the theologians (Charles S. Singleton, 1909-1985; and

¹ I would like to thank especially the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their substantial and very helpful responses; Patricia Kelly for stimulating conversations while working together on the first English edition and translation of Pierre Mandonnet's *Dante le théologien*; Ruedi Imbach for a copy of his unpublished lecture "Dante à Fribourg," as well as of his revised edition of Joachim Berthier's translation of the *Commedia*; Zygmunt G. Barański, Theodore J. Cachey, and David Lumnus for the opportunity to present this research in an earlier form in a centenary conference online; and Simon Gilson and Vittorio Montemaggi for their insightful comments on this material.

Robert Hollander, 1933–2021). This emphasis has profoundly affected how Dante's poem has been understood by subsequent scholars and students. In the second section, I revisit Pierre Mandonnet (1858–1936)'s little known study of the theological form of Dante's *Commedia* in *Dante le théologien* (1935), with reference also to the work of his fellow French Dominican Joachim Berthier (1848–1924). I analyse – for the first time – Mandonnet's rich and historically informed account, which draws on symbolic theology (and the four senses of Scripture) but, unlike Singleton and Hollander, insists that the literal sense of the poem is a “beautiful lie.” In the third and concluding section, I indicate that a literalist approach underpins key twentieth-century discussions of the apparent unorthodoxy of Dante's theology in the *Commedia*, as well as contributing to broader secularizing trends in twentieth-century Dante Studies. Moreover, I argue that whereas the approach of Mandonnet and Berthier is in a spirit and hermeneutic of continuity with the seven-hundred-year-long commentary tradition of the poem as a whole, the literalist approaches which became foundational in twentieth- and twenty-first century scholarship represent a clear rupture with that tradition. Going forward, I suggest that we should continue to reappraise and question the methodological assumptions underpinning our approaches to interpreting the *Commedia*, mindful that progress from one point of view may represent a regression, or even aberration, from another.

I. *The Literal Truth of the Commedia: The Interpretative Approaches of Bruno Nardi, Erich Auerbach, and Charles S. Singleton.*

Charles S. Singleton was clearly the towering figure of North American Dante scholarship in the post war period, his translation of the *Divine Comedy* with commentary (1970–75) only consolidating his influence.² Through his writings and students, his influence on the field extended across North America and internationally; writing a

² Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970–75), 3 vols. in 6. Singleton's principal monographs on Dante are Charles S. Singleton, *An Essay on the "Vita Nuova"* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1949); Singleton, *Dante Studies 1. Elements of Structure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954); and Singleton, *Dante Studies 2: Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1958). For a complete list, see Anthony L. Pellegrini, “The Publications of Charles S. Singleton,” *Dante Studies* 104 (1986): 3–8. For an indication of Singleton's influence on North American Dante scholarship in particular, see, for example, Anthony K. Cassell, “In Memoriam: Charles S. Singleton (1909–1985),” *Italica* 63, no. 3 (1986): VII–IX: “America's most eminent Dantista and Boccaccista, Charles S. Singleton [...] it is for his seminal and influential work on Dante Alighieri that Charles Singleton will be most remembered.”

year after his death, Anthony K. Cassell could remark that the present generation of North American Dantisti “belonged, with very few exceptions, to the Singletonian school.”³ Of the three themes which, according to Kenelm Foster, unified the concerns of Dante scholars in the post war period: “(a) Dante’s philosophy and theology, (b) his use of symbol and allegory, (c) the relation of the *Comedy* to the minor works,” the preoccupation with the second is particularly associated with the Singletonian school.⁴ Moreover, scholars’ understanding of the first (Dante’s philosophy and theology) and third (the relation of the *Commedia* to the minor works) is strongly conditioned by their understanding of the second (Dantean hermeneutics and the question of the “truth claims” of the *Commedia*).

Before considering Singleton’s insistence on the allegory of the theologians as the appropriate interpretative framework for the *Commedia*, I shall outline two other interventions which were also extremely influential: first, Bruno Nardi’s claim that Dante’s poem is a true mystical vision; and second, Erich Auerbach’s method of figural interpretation and “secular” reading of the poem. For now, it is important to highlight that, despite their differing interpretations of Dantean hermeneutics, Nardi, Auerbach, and Singleton share one thing in common: a rejection of the hermeneutic approach of the early commentators (and, specifically, of interpretations according to the allegory of the poets).

Bruno Nardi explicitly sought to dismantle the hermeneutic approach of the early commentators to Dante’s *Commedia*. In his view, these commentators deliberately misinterpreted Dante’s poem according to the allegory of the poets (i.e. the truth under the veil of the “bella menzogna”) in order to protect the poet from charges of heresy.⁵ Instead, Nardi insists that the literal sense of the poem is

³ Cassell, “In Memoriam,” VII.

⁴ Kenelm Foster, “Dante Studies in England, 1921–1964,” *Italian Studies* 20 (1965): 1–16, 7.

⁵ Bruno Nardi, “Dante Profeta,” in Nardi, *Dante e la cultura medievale: Nuovi saggi di filosofia dantesca* (Bari: Laterza, 1942), 258–334: “Chi considera la visione dantesca e il rapimento del poeta al cielo come finzioni letterarie, travisa il senso” (392). Ironically, while Nardi dismisses Dante’s authorship of the first part of the *Epistle to Cangrande* because, in his view, it suggests that the poem is indeed a fiction (*fictio*), to be read according to the allegory of the poets, Singleton argues that the *Epistle* proves his thesis, namely that the poem is to be interpreted according to the allegory of the theologians. See Nardi, “Il punto sull’Epistola a Cangrande” (Florence: F. Le Monnier, 1960), 27: “[T]utti lo mettono al riparo da questa accusa nello stesso modo, cioè distinguendo quello che Dante scrive come poeta (*poetizans*) da quello che Dante pensa come teologo ‘nullius dogmatis expers,’ ossia, in sostanza, fra il senso letterale, intenzionalmente svalutato, e il senso allegorico, il solo vero, cioè quello che si cela sotto il velo delle parole

literally true: that Dante believed that he was shown in vision Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, as they truly are in reality. Nardi claimed, in other words, that Dante spoke as a divinely inspired prophet, and considered his poem not a literary fiction but the report of a true mystical vision.⁶ The ex-priest and anti-clerical Nardi – who had already strongly rejected Thomism – found in Dante his true teacher, and in the *Commedia* his own personal truth, and particular synthesis of Christian wisdom.⁷ By arguing for the literal truth of the poem, moreover, Nardi detached in one important sense his own interpretations of Dante, and of his intellectual sources, from wider interrogation: he no longer ultimately needed to defend what he saw as Dante's theses theologically or philosophically for, in Nardi's view, they were divinely revealed in a vision.

Nardi's insistence on the literal truth of the poem had little precedent in the commentary tradition, with perhaps the arguable partial exception of Guido da Pisa, and it received short shrift, at least initially, in Italy.⁸ Nonetheless, his claim was taken up enthusiastically by much of English-language Dante scholarship in the United Kingdom and particularly so in North America. For example, Teodolinda Barolini (1951-) considers that Nardi “threw down a critical gauntlet and challenged us to look at the *Commedia* not through a glass darkly but face to face,” and her influential monograph *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (1992) takes Nardi's apparent

fittizie, ‘sotto il velame de li versi strano,’ come dice Dante stesso in uno dei luoghi del poema veramente allegorici.”

⁶ See Nardi, *Dante*, 296: “Non artificio letterario, ma vera visione profetica ritenne Dante quella concessa a lui da Dio, per una grazia singolare, allo scopo preciso che egli, conosciuta la verità sulla cagione che il mondo aveva fatto reo, la denunziasse agli uomini, manifestando ad essi tutto quello che aveva veduto e udito.”

⁷ See Paolo Falzone, “Bruno Nardi,” in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 77 (2012). Kenelm Foster notes Nardi's “polemical temper; he was too irascible a man to be always a fair debater; especially when his opponent happened to be a priest” (Kenelm Foster, *The Two Dantes, and Other Studies* [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977], 57-58).

⁸ Revealingly, Teodolinda Barolini ascribes this almost unanimous initial rejection of Nardi's thesis in Italy to two cultural groups: “either, as believers, they are incapable of taking Dante's prophetic pretension at face value (because it involves ‘the unpalatable necessity of accepting with regard to a medieval poet what they find less distasteful with regard to various claimants: namely, authentic divine inspiration’); or, as lapsed believers (and frequently converts to a militant secularism), they do not want to” (Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992], 4).

revelation of the poem's essence as its starting point and foundational premise.⁹

Like Nardi, Erich Auerbach situated his approach to interpreting the poem in antithesis to that of the early commentators; he suggested, moreover, that the “allegory of the poets” is simply incompatible with modern literary sensibilities: “The older commentators had no objection to a purely allegorical interpretation, for they did not, as we do today, feel that allegory was incompatible with authentic poetry. Many modern critics have argued against this idea, stressing the poetic, human, personal quality.”¹⁰ Both scholars similarly inherited the Romantic nineteenth-century emphasis on the literal sense of the poem, and the distaste for a kind of abstract or pure allegorization.¹¹ Thus Auerbach's mentor Karl Vossler (1872–1949) considered allegory “a soulless repetition or dull imitation of antiquity [...] in short, philological art.”¹²

And yet, as James I. Porter has convincingly shown, Auerbach's seminal approach to Dante is also a polemical reaction against his teacher Vossler's theological reading of Dante.¹³ Where Vossler presents Dante's poem as entirely cut off from all “earthly existence,” according to Auerbach, “[Dante] projected his earthly surroundings into the realm of eternity and created the Dantean world *sub specie aeternitatis*.”¹⁴ Where, for Vossler, Dante's poem is but an instance of one man's religious belief, for Auerbach, the poem describes “the

⁹ Like Nardi, Barolini maintains that “we accept Dante's insistence that he is telling the truth and move on to the consequences, which we can only do by accepting that he intends to represent his fiction as credible, believable, true” (Barolini, *Detheologizing Dante*, 13). In the English context, see, for example, Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 127: “the great prophet-visionaries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – Hildegard and Joachim, Mechtild and Marguerite – made unflinching claims to truth. I believe it is their kind of claim that Dante makes.”

¹⁰ Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European History* (New York: Meridian, 1959), 68. In his review of Singleton's *Essay on the “Vita Nuova,”* which “may serve as a model of mediaeval studies,” Auerbach refers to the “absurd struggle between realists and allegorists,” commending Singleton's emphasis on Beatrice as “a living creature who was a miracle” (Erich Auerbach, Review of *Essay on the “Vita Nuova,”* by Charles S. Singleton, *Comparative Literature* 2, no. 4 [1950]: 373–75).

¹¹ See Erich Auerbach, “Figura (1938),” in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. James I. Porter, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 65–113, 107.

¹² Karl Vossler, *Medieval Culture: An Introduction to Dante and His Times*, trans. William Cranston Lawton, 2 vols., 2 (New York: Ungar, 1966), 131.

¹³ Porter, “Introduction,” in *Time, History, and Literature*, ix–xlvi.

¹⁴ Erich Auerbach, “Anniversary Celebration of Dante (1921),” in *Time, History, and Literature*, 121–23, 122.

narrow cleft of earthly human history, the span of man's life on earth."¹⁵ Where Vossler presents Dante as "an unwavering dogmatic," Auerbach argues that, in Dante, "the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man turns *against* [the divine] order ... and obscures it. The image of man eclipses the image of God."¹⁶ In other words, Auerbach makes Dante a "poet of the earthly world," his own English rendering of his original title *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (1929), and, in so doing, he turns Dante into a "poet of the secular world," the title as translated by Ralph Manheim in the English edition of 1961.¹⁷

Auerbach's polemical interpretation of Dante thus forms part of his overarching philosophy of history, according to which Christianity was but one stage in the progressive march towards secularization: "from an era in which human meaning is sought out in some transcendental sphere above to an era in which it is discovered and consciously made here on earth."¹⁸ With his theory of *figura*, Auerbach seeks to reduce Dante's eschatology to little more than a literary form which contains, like a frame, a content about man's earthly life:

In my essay "Figura," I have shown – convincingly, I hope – that the *Comedy* is based on a figural view of things. In the case of three of its most important characters – Cato of Utica, Virgil, and Beatrice – I have attempted to demonstrate that their appearance in the other world is a fulfilment of their appearance on earth, their earthly appearance a figure of their appearance in the other world.¹⁹

Drawing on the figural interpretation of events in the Old and New Testaments in terms of promise (figure) and fulfillment, Auerbach considers Dante's eschatology as the figural fulfillment of the souls' promise on earth. Citing Hegel, Auerbach claims that: "Dante's

¹⁵ Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 132 (cited in Porter, "Introduction," XIV).

¹⁶ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 202 (cited, with adaptation, in Porter, "Introduction," XXV).

¹⁷ Porter cites Martin Valion's "extraordinary find" that, in his *curriculum vitae* submitted in 1941, Auerbach renders the title of *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (1929) as *Dante as Poet of the Earthly World* (Porter, "Introduction," XXI).

¹⁸ Porter, "Introduction," xiii. Neglecting Christ's ascension, his church, and the eschatological dimension, Auerbach places "the true heart of Christian doctrine" in the mystery of the Incarnation and of Christ's passion (Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 72; cited in Porter, "Introduction," xxiii). Dante's "gift to posterity," for Auerbach, is the way in which he articulates the paradox and tension in the Christian religion in which a man, Christ, embodies godhood (Auerbach, *Dante*, 11; cited in Porter, "Introduction," xxi-xxii).

¹⁹ Auerbach, "Farinata and Cavalcante," in *Mimesis*, 195.

inhabitants of the three realms lead a ‘changeless existence’ [...] yet into this changeless existence Dante ‘plunges the living world of human action and endurance and more especially of individual deeds and destinies.’”²⁰ The world beyond is “God’s design in active fulfillment. In relation to it, earthly phenomena are on the whole merely figural, potential, and requiring fulfilment.”²¹

However fertile his reading of the “earthly qualities” of Farinata and Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, Auerbach’s “figural” interpretation – even when just applied to the static souls in Hell – is severely deficient; when applied to the souls in Purgatory and Paradise, it arguably falls apart all together.²² Nonetheless, Auerbach’s figural interpretation, like Nardi’s account of a true mystical vision, would be extremely influential on Dante criticism.²³

Singleton’s approach to the hermeneutics of the *Commedia*, like the approaches of Nardi and Auerbach, is a departure from that of the early commentators, and of the majority of the commentary tradition up until the twentieth century. In his “The Vistas in Retrospect” (1965), Singleton delineates his own contribution to twentieth-century progress in Dante Studies: it is the “polysemous” reading of the poem, and the interpretative principle that every *thing* is also a *sign*.²⁴ Singleton founded, indeed, a kind of theological reading

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 191. Auerbach notes that “Hegel uses the expression (‘changeless existence’) in his lectures on aesthetics in one of the most beautiful passages ever written on Dante.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

²² See, for example, David Thompson’s convincing refutation in “Figure and Allegory in the *Commedia*,” *Dante Studies* 15 (1972): 1–10 (5): “is it necessary to talk of figure and fulfilment to explain Dante’s realism? By the logic of Auerbach’s formulation, Dante could achieve his realistic representation, comparable to what we find in ancient and modern literature, *only* in describing the afterlife: untransfigured reality, our terrestrial world of figures, would not lend itself to such vivid depiction. But given the infernal situation, and the ground to be covered, are Farinata and Cavalcante different in the poem from what we should expect if Dante were writing a novel about people he had met recently on a journey through Italy? Dante’s Farinata may strike us as the quintessential Farinata (just as a novelist’s brief picture may seem to capture a character’s essential features); but if so, this is a literary, not an ontological matter.”

²³ I became more aware of the persistence of Auerbach’s influence on English-language Dante criticism at a conference in Oxford, *Looking Back with Auerbach: A Convivial Celebration of Dante’s Birthday* (June 2015), organized by David Bove, Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, Martin McLaughlin, and Jennifer Rushworth, a conference at which I shared, at more length, what I consider the important implications for Dante Studies of Porter’s reappraisal of Auerbach.

²⁴ Charles S. Singleton, “The Vistas in Retrospect,” *Modern Language Notes* 81, no. 1 (1966): 55–80, 57: “I do believe that we can honestly lay claim to have made some progress along that line in our time – by which I mean the twentieth century – particularly in the way we are learning always better, it seems to me, to read the Poem in depth, or as the Poet in his Letter to Cangrande would have said *polysemously*.”

of the *Commedia* based on his imposition of a medieval hermeneutic of Scriptural allegory onto the hermeneutics of the poem.²⁵ Where Dante interprets his canzoni in the *Convivio* according to the allegory of the poets, explaining “the truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie,” this is not the correct hermeneutical frame, Singleton claims, for Dante’s *Commedia*.²⁶ Instead, the *Commedia* imitates Biblical polysemy and should be read through the allegory of the theologians. As medieval theologians understand the literal or historical sense of Scripture to be true, the precondition for Dante’s reader is, on Singleton’s view, an imaginative assent to the truth of the literal sense, the journey through the afterlife. The literal story of Dante’s poem should be read as if it were true or, in Singleton’s famous and confusing phrase, “the fiction of the *Comedy* is that it is not a fiction.”²⁷

Singleton’s approach validates the primacy of the literal sense (and the Crocean imperative to read Dante *as poetry*) while also recovering the hermeneutic richness of polysemous interpretation. Despite this, Singleton and his followers were accused by Italian scholars in particular of searching for theological meanings at the expense of the poem’s form, its literal meaning.²⁸ Singleton was nonetheless fully aware that his interpretative approach represents a clear break with the dominant understanding of Dante as *poeta theologus* in the commentary tradition as a whole, and that it sets up Dante’s method as unique in literary history.²⁹ But he insists that “strikingly soon after Dante,” and especially with Boccaccio, Dante’s own understanding

²⁵ On Singleton and his influence, as well as the much greater complexities of North American Dante scholarship as a whole, see, for example, Zygmunt G. Barański, “Dante, America, and the Limits of ‘Allegory,’” *Italian Studies* 50, no. 1 (1995): 139–53, 142, n. 8 for further bibliography on Singleton’s influence); and Barański, “Reflecting on Dante in America: 1949–1990,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 8 (1990): 58–86.

²⁶ According to Singleton, Dante’s *Vita nuova* is not an allegory at all, but a literal account of his love for Beatrice Portinari.

²⁷ Charles S. Singleton, “The Irreducible Dove,” *Comparative Literature* 9 (1957): 124–3, 129.

²⁸ See Gianfranco Contini, “Philology and Exegesis,” *Dante Studies* 87 (1969): 1–32. See also Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Reflections on Dante Studies in America,” *Dante Studies* 118 (2000): 323–30. With reference to Contini’s essay, and its “juxtaposition between two national strains of scholarship [...] as if ‘philology’ and ‘exegesis’ stood for two distinct countries,” Mazzotta defends American Dante Studies as being fully conversant with and mediated through the critical-philological tradition (327).

²⁹ Singleton, *Elements of Structure*, 95: “To see the poet as a ‘theologian’ is to see him essentially as one who constructs an ‘allegory of poets’, hiding under a veil the truths of theology – a view which has a long history in Dante interpretation”; *Ibid.*, 13: “there is no literary allegory to compare with [Dante’s poem].”

of the poem's hermeneutics, as allegory of the theologians, became lost.³⁰

The persistent influence of Singleton on subsequent Dante Studies to the present day is pervasive, but let me give just one example in the scholarship of Robert Hollander.³¹ Hollander sought to develop Singleton's application of allegory (beyond the moral-theological sense) and, by drawing also on Auerbach's work on figuralism, to open a wider discussion about the exegetical strategies invited by Dante's text.³² Hollander's *Allegory in Dante's Commedia* (1969) is his most extensive treatment of the theoretical issue, but it recurs throughout his writings, including in a short summary note he wrote on "allegory" for the Princeton Dante Project in 1998.³³ Like Singleton, Hollander considers the *Commedia* as an allegory of the theologians, according to which the literal level is to be understood as if it were true, commending Singleton's pithy statement that "the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not a fiction".³⁴ Hollander also considers Auerbach's figural interpretation (of the "sinner or saved

³⁰ Singleton, "Vistas," 57-59. See also, on Boccaccio's commentary and its reception, Simon Gilson, "Modes of Reading in Boccaccio's *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia*," in *Interpreting Dante: Essays on the Traditions of Dante Commentary*, ed. Paola Nasti and Claudia Rossignoli (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 250-82.

³¹ Robert Hollander has had a particularly powerful influence, of course, on Dante scholarship not only through his own individual contributions, but through the invaluable scholarly resources he had made freely available online: the *Dartmouth Dante Project*, the *Dartmouth Dante Lab*, and the *Princeton Dante Project*. When I was bringing this paper to completion, I was deeply saddened to hear of the death of Bob Hollander. He is a great loss to all who love and study Dante's work, and he will be sorely missed by scholars in the field.

³² See Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). Barański sees John Freccero (1931-) as more clearly "neo-Singletonian," but he affirms that "Hollander has been able to tap into what is best in Singleton [...] while developing his own critical identity" (Barański, "Dante, America," 142-43).

³³ Robert Hollander, "Allegory" (February, 1998), <https://dante.princeton.edu/pdp/allegory.html>. See also Hollander, "Dante 'Theologus-Poeta,'" *Dante Studies* 118 (2000): 261-302.

³⁴ Hollander, "Allegory": "Rather than employ the allegory of the poets, which admitted, even insisted, that the literal sense of a work was untrue, he chose to employ the allegory of the theologians, with the consequence that everything recounted in the poem as having actually occurred is to be treated as 'historical', since the poet insistently claims that what he relates is nothing less than literally true." See also Hollander, "Theologus-Poeta," 273: "without entering into a discussion of whether or not Dante actually visited the afterworld (which few will maintain) or in the *Commedia* sets down on paper a vision which he had in a momentary flash, we can, I think, almost all agree that Dante's poem is a *factio*. But whereas some, coming to this affirmation, see it as a means of undermining the Singletonian position, it is an affirmation which Singleton (or Hollander, for that matter) not only accedes to but insists on [...] the central assertion of this position [...] is that Dante *feigns* that his fiction is literally true."

soul [being] the fulfilment of [their] earthly life”) as true but limited, highlighting that there are many more interesting figural relationships, including between different personages in the *Commedia*, relationships he draws out compellingly in his commentaries and articles on the poem.³⁵

Let us briefly consider, though, four of Hollander’s assumptions underlying his interpretative position: (1) he associates the literal sense of Scripture exclusively with “the historical passages in the Bible,” and claims that the “literal sense of theological allegory is historically true, found only in events narrated in the Bible”;³⁶ (2) he asserts, as Dante’s claim in the *Convivio*, that “he *could have* employed theological allegory in his analysis of his poems” and, furthermore, that Dante goes on to do so in writing the *Commedia*; Hollander dubiously bases this “astounding fact” merely on Dante’s affirmation that “since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets” (*Convivio* 2.1.3-4);³⁷ (3) he claims that because, in the *Epistle to Cangrande*, Dante makes the “most astounding and controversial assertion [that] the fourfold interpretation of texts used to elucidate the historical meanings of the Bible was the very method to be used in order to understand the *Comedy*,” this position “at the very least and unmistakably implies that the literal sense of the poem be treated as historical tract, i.e. that Dante’s seven-day visit to the afterworld is to be treated as historical fact”; (4) he asserts that theologians were opposed “to the idea that secular literature had any meaningful claim to purvey truth,” and that Dante’s procedure is “surely the stuff of heresy.”³⁸

Finally, Hollander highlights that Singleton’s pithy way of “framing the question” had the “crucial and noteworthy result” of freeing readers from the “interpretative shackles imposed by forcing the ‘allegory of the poets’ onto the poem,” an approach which, he also underlines, has been “its fate from the time of the earliest commentators.” Forty years into his own teaching career, Hollander concludes: “It is a useful and pleasing freedom that you [students of the

³⁵ Hollander, “Allegory.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*: “let us consider what Dante believes to be the distinguishing mark of theological allegory, the way in which ‘the theologians take this sense otherwise than do the poets.’ It is clear that he is now speaking of a privileged and limited class of texts, the historical passages in the Bible that medieval exegetes believed to possess the four senses.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*: “the claim he had staked when he wrote *Convivio* (ca. 1304-6) lay ready to be put to use when he moved on to the *Comedy* (ca. 1307).”

³⁸ *Ibid.*

poem] enjoy: ‘The allegory of the *Comedy* is not the allegory as the commentators urge me to apply it. I may read this poem as history, and understand it better’. When I first taught this poem, in 1958, I wish someone had given me that gift.”³⁹

To summarise this first section, Nardi, Auerbach, and Singleton all placed emphasis on the truth of the literal sense of the poem, albeit in different respects. For Nardi, Dante speaks as a divinely inspired prophet and the literal sense of the poem records Dante’s mystical vision. For Auerbach, Dante transposes the “earthly world” onto his eschatology, and the literal sense of the poem is but the fulfillment of an earthly life which, in relation to this fulfillment, is merely the figure. For Singleton, Dante adopts God’s mode of writing in Scripture: the reader is asked to assent, therefore, to the literal sense of Dante’s poem as if it were true.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, as Scripture is polysemous, so Dante’s poem should be read according to the allegorical senses as well, and this typically for a moral or theological meaning. Crucially, though, Singleton’s emphasis on the truth of the literal sense (and the allegory of the theologians) rules out an interpretative strategy of the allegory of the poets common since the early commentators: namely, to read certain passages solely according to an allegorical sense. Instead, for literalist readers, Virgil is *always* Virgil the man; Beatrice is *always* Bice Portinari, the young woman; Dante’s journey through the regions of the afterlife is always *literally* true or intended to be accepted as such, whatever the additional allegorical meanings there may or may not be.

II. *The Theological Truth of the ‘Commedia:’ The Interpretative Approach of Pierre Mandonnet and Joachim Berthier.*

Pierre Mandonnet, O.P. came to Dante, a literary passion throughout his life, as an outstanding medieval historian (author, for example, of important volumes on Siger of Brabant and the life of St Dominic) and a Thomist (collaborating on the new critical edition of Aquinas’s

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Unlike Hollander, Barolini sees these three approaches as essentially complementary: “[I]t is my belief that Nardi’s contributions regarding ‘Dante profeta’ and Singleton’s regarding the *Commedia*’s use of the allegory of the theologians are essentially complementary. Since Singleton, in the wake of Erich Auerbach, emphasizes the validity of the literal sense as historically true, and the issue of Dante as *profeta* ultimately goes beyond the specific prophecies within the text to encompass the much larger problem of the poet’s view of himself as a teller of truth, these two traditions are in effect parallel ways of discussing the one central issue of the poet’s truth claims” (Barolini, *Detheologizing Dante*, 5).

works commissioned by Pope Leo XIII as editor, for example, of Aquinas's huge commentary on the *Sentences*).⁴¹ Entering the Dominican order in 1882, he was professor of history at the University of Fribourg from 1891–1918; on retirement, he continued to research and teach at the Dominican house of Le Saulchoir in Belgium.⁴² Having published short articles on Dante during his academic life, he published *Dante le Théologien* in 1935, shortly before his death on 4 January 1936.⁴³ Mandonnet's academic career thus parallels that of

⁴¹ See R.F. Bennett, "Pierre Mandonnet, O.P., and Dominican Studies," *History* 24, no. 95 (1939): 193–205. By the 1930s, Mandonnet was "one of the giants of medieval studies," and, as founder and honorary president of the French Société Thomiste, his name was "synonymous with fundamental research into the thought and writings of Thomas Aquinas" (Ralph McInerney, *Praeambula fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* [Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006], 108; 91). On Siger, see Pierre Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant et l'averroïsme latin au XIII^e siècle. Étude critique et documents inédits* (Fribourg: Librairie de l'Université, 1899). Revised and edited after his death, Mandonnet's study of St Dominic was translated into English as Pierre Mandonnet, O.P. *St Dominic and His Work*, 2 vols, trans. Sr Mary Benedicta Larkin, O.P. (St Louis/London: Herder Book Co., 1944).

⁴² Bennett, 193–94. Le Saulchoir was the Dominican house of studies for the French province, in exile in Belgium between 1904 and 1939 due to the laws separating church and state. Raised to the status of an institute of higher education, the Dominicans established the "Institut historique d'études Thomistes" there in 1921. Mandonnet was instrumental to the implementation of this new institute, and he was central to the establishment of its programme of study. As Antoine Leomonnyer (1872–1932), the regent of studies since September 1911, wrote in a memorandum: "Il aurait l'avantage de bénéficier, pour l'organisation et la mise en train de ces cours, de l'expérience et de la compétence exceptionnelle du T.R.P. Mandonnet, dont, en retour, les travaux et les projets trouveraient dans notre jeunesse d'utiles collaborateurs" (Archives O.P., Paris. III-L-545, cited in André Duval, "Au origines de l'Institut historique d'études Thomistes" du Saulchoir [1920 et ss]: Notes et Documents," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 75, no. 3 [1991], 423–48, 433).

⁴³ Pierre Mandonnet, *Dante le théologien: Introduction à l'intelligence de la vie, des oeuvres et de l'art de Dante Alighieri* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1935). Etienne Gilson's *Dante et la Philosophie* (1939), which Kenelm Foster described as Gilson's "brilliant raid into Dante territory" (Foster, "Dante Studies," 3), was nothing other than a book-length refutation of Mandonnet's *Dante le théologien*. But whereas Gilson's *Dante the Philosopher* (as the title was rendered in the English translation of 1946) was widely read, and deeply influential, on twentieth-century Dante scholarship, Mandonnet's *Dante le théologien* was never translated into English, and is typically referred to (if at all) through Gilson's reductive caricature. Early reviewers of Mandonnet engaged (and very negatively) only with his purely symbolic interpretation of Beatrice and hypothesis of Dante's clerical vocation (in part I of the book), and the other three parts of Mandonnet's book, including Part III on the theological form of the poem, have been neglected (although it did influence Auerbach). With Patricia Kelly, I am seeking to remedy this neglect by producing the first English edition and translation of Mandonnet's *Dante le théologien*. In citing Mandonnet's text here, page numbers refer to the original 1935 edition, while English translations are, with grateful permission of Patricia Kelly, from our new edition and translation of the work.

a Dominican colleague at Fribourg ten years his senior, Joachim Joseph Berthier, O.P.⁴⁴ An accomplished medieval historian (who published important works on the early masters of the Dominican order Humbert of Romans and Jordan of Saxony) and Thomist (who also collaborated on the Leonine edition of Aquinas's works and published a series of Thomist scholastic manuals), Berthier translated Dante's *Commedia* into French, and published a two volume edition of the *Infèrno* in Italian "with scholastic commentary" in 1892, as well as a series of articles on the poet.⁴⁵ As Ruedi Imbach notes, Berthier and Mandonnet's labours testify to a "new catholic impulsion to Dante Studies," symbolically given Papal approval by the removal of Dante's *Monarchia* from the Index in 1881 (where it had remained since 1554), and which paralleled the Renaissance in Thomistic Studies instigated by Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni patris* in 1879.⁴⁶

Mandonnet's approach to the theological form of the *Commedia* builds on that of his Dominican colleague Berthier, whose "originality" consists in a return to the original contexts of Dante's work, and of the early allegorical commentary tradition, in a spirit of interpretative continuity.⁴⁷ At the level of theological content, Berthier characterises Dante as less of an inventor than a brilliant scholar

⁴⁴ Berthier entered the Dominican order in 1871. From 1890-1905, he was the principal collaborator of Georges Python (1856-1927), founder of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), in creating a faculty of theology. From 1907-1920, he lived in Rome, notably as consultant of the Sacred Congregation of Studies.

⁴⁵ See *Dante Alighieri: La Divine Comédie: Traduction littérale avec notes par Joachim-Joseph Berthier, O.P., Réédition de la version de 1924 sous la direction de Ruedi Imbach* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2018); see also *La Divina Comedia di Dante con commenti secondo la scholastica del P. Gioachino Berthier, Infèrno*, vols. 1-2 (Fribourg: Libreria dell'Università, 1892). For a list of Berthier's main Thomist works, including *De locis theologicis* and *Tabulae Synopticae et systematicae totius Summae Theologiae* (in Latin) and *L'Etude de la Somme Théologique de Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (in French), see "In Memoriam R.P. Mag. Fr. Joachim Jos. Berthier, OP," *Angelicum* 2, no. 3 (1925): 343-45.

⁴⁶ For example, Berthier dedicates his commentary on the *Infèrno* to Pope Leo XIII "mecenate insigne degli studi Tomistici e Danteschi."

⁴⁷ Thus, for example, in arguing that the formal object of the poem is ethics, Berthier cites the testimony first of Dante himself, and then of all the ancient commentators (Berthier, xxii: "Che l'oggetto del poema sia la Morale, lo scrisse Dante, e tutti gli antichi lo credettero e lo affermarono"). As Nasti and Rossignoli note, Berthier critiques nineteenth-century Dante commentators and scholars who "had become insensitive to the theological dimension of the *Comedy* (its 'bone marrow')," while his scholarly approach may also challenge a tendency in modern literary scholarship to "pursue critical controversy" and mark "its originality, its new conquests" (Nasti and Rossignoli, *Interpreting Dante*, 8-9).

and synthesiser.⁴⁸ Dante's true innovation was to unify the new doctrine of the schools with poetry; that is, the doctrinal transformation witnessed most powerfully in the life and work of Aquinas led, in Dante, to a special transformation of poetry. Whereas poetic literature in the vernacular had heretofore concerned itself almost exclusively with feats of arms, the acts of love, and the corruptions of the court, now it became allegorical: it sung of knowledge, of wisdom, of the intellect and virtue. In Provençale, the Franciscan Maffre Ermengaud (d. 1322) wrote the *Breviari d'amor* (c. 1288) celebrating the Christian virtues⁴⁹ while, in the Italian vernaculars, Guido Guinizelli sang of knowledge, Guido Cavalcanti of philosophy, Cino da Pistoia of justice, and Dino Compagni of the intellect.⁵⁰ Berthier does not negate that these writers may have written of women in the flesh, but he underlines that they wrote of them allegorizing and idealizing, such that their loves for "Giovanna" and "Mandetta" (Cavalcanti) or "Beatrice" (Dante), for "una pastorella" or "una forsetta," also symbolise the love of science and virtue, the poets transferring the idealized beauties onto the true intellectual objects of their poems.⁵¹ This is, Berthier claims, the ambient of Dante, and the distinctive trait of the *dolce stil novo* school of poetry, of which Dante calls Guido Guinizelli the founder (*Purgatorio* 26.92-108).⁵² Even within the

⁴⁸ Berthier, *Dante La Divine Comédie*, 48. Mandonnet makes the same point, asserting that "the profound, rich doctrines which [Dante] uncovers for us were to a certain extent part of the shared patrimony of all the great minds of that astonishing Christian Europe of the thirteenth century" (Mandonnet, 241). In other words, "Dante's original greatness does not reside in the content of his work, but in his extraordinary poetic technique, which synthesises this material in an immense, finely detailed, and harmonious poem of beautiful unity and perfect proportion, with connections between all its major themes, and grace and truth in its smallest details."

⁴⁹ M. Mary-Lafon, for example, highlights the potential influence of Ermengaud's work on Dante, as well as the many parallels between them. See M. Mary-Lafon, *Histoire du midi de la France* (Paris: P. Melier, 1845), 326. Specifically, she argues that Dante's nine circles of Hell, with the ten *bolge*, derive from Ermengaud's ten punishments: whereas Dante places the gluttons in the third circle, Ermengaud places them in the tenth; Ermengaud reserves the first, the fourth, and the fifth for the avaricious, the prodigals and the wrathful, whereas Dante places these in the fourth and fifth circles; Ermengaud places the unbelievers in the sixth punishment, Dante in the sixth circle (of the heretics); Ermengaud places the violent in the eighth punishment, whereas Dante does so in the seventh circle; Ermengaud places the lustful in the ninth punishment, Dante in the second (Mary-Lafon writes the eighth circle, so may be referring to the panders and seducers). The idea of Dante's ninth circle, encased in ice (*Inf.* 32.35-36), is taken, she claims, word for word from the second punishment in Ermengaud.

⁵⁰ Berthier, "Introduzione," par. 18, in *Inferno*, vol. 2, XL-XLI.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, XLI; 18.

⁵² It is in reference to this, Berthier adds, that Guittone d'Arezzo, Bonagiunta da Lucca, and Giacomo da Lentini are found wanting, "poeti duri e inanimi" (*Ibid.*).

school of the *dolce stil novo*, however, Dante flies higher than the others precisely because the other poets celebrated the sciences which are servants or handmaids (“ancelle”) of theology, while he sung of theology herself in the figure of Beatrice.⁵³

Thus, according to Berthier, Dante creates an immense allegory, where one finds the immediate object and what is mediated, the sign and the signified, the allegory itself, and the sense of the allegory. There are two key implications of Berthier’s approach. First, the allegory itself – by which Berthier means Dante’s depiction of the Hell, Purgatory and Paradise of the otherworld, with their circles and inhabitants – is not dogmatic or strictly theological at all; rather it represents a fiction, according to which particular places, personages, or mythical figures – depicted with marvellous verisimilitude – signify dogmatic and theological truths (and particularly the moral Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of this life).⁵⁴ Berthier claims that the admission of this simple rule (that Dante always speaks as a poet, in creating fictions, and as a theologian, in communicating doctrines) removes all shadows of difficulty from the point of view of theology.⁵⁵ Second, it is an interpretative error to seek for meaning only in the allegory itself, since the literal sense does not exist for itself (*per se*), but for its signification.⁵⁶

Interestingly, Berthier connects this erroneous interpretative approach in the literary study of Dante to late nineteenth-century Biblical Studies (“one finds the same issue in Biblical Studies”) which

⁵³ *Ibid.*: “Anzi l’Allighieri sopra gli altri volò, in guisa che questi furono inferiori, come tutte le Scienze da loro celebrate sono ancelle alla Teologia cantata dal Sommo Poeta. E tutto nella sua poesia appare nascosto insieme e significato in allegorie stupende di bellezza.”

⁵⁴ For Berthier, Dante’s poem is above all a work of ethics (Berthier, “Introduzione,” XXI–XXIII, in *Inferno*, vol II, xlv–lv). Berthier cites *Purgatorio* 8.59–60 to the effect that Dante describes himself as *in via* (“sì andando”), and on this journey there are three stages: the *terminus a quo* is Hell, the manifestation of sin and the punishments for evil (morally, the life of the vicious); the *terminus per quem* is Purgatory, the escape from sin (morally, the life of the penitent); the *terminus ad quem* is Paradise, the arrival point (morally, the life of the virtuous) (*Ibid.*, XXIII).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, XLIV–XLV.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, XLV–XLVII. Berthier argues that Dante himself had sought to correct such a false interpretative approach to his poems in writing the *Convivio*, as his *canzoni* had already been misinterpreted in his lifetime. His poems were “sì di amore come di virtù materiate”; however, many readers were able to understand “lor bellezza (estrinseca) più che la lor bontà (intrinseca).” Thus Dante concludes: “E conciossiacosachè la vera intenzione mia fosse altra che quella che di fuori mostrano le Canzoni predette, per allegorica sposizione, quelle intendo mostrare, appresso la litterale storia ragionata” (*Conv.* 1.1; cited in *Ibid.*, XLVI). This same hermeneutic principle, Berthier underlines, applies also to the *Commedia*.

similarly developed an almost exclusive focus on the literal sense of Scripture, with a dismissal of the mystical senses.⁵⁷ Late nineteenth-century Dante scholars are like the *laici* of Dante's own time who, in ignorance of theology, simply interpret his poems as about sensual love, or his *Commedia* as about the regions of the afterlife ("they even suppose he went there!"), whereas, for the learned, this is obviously only the allegory (the fiction), and not the meaning of the allegory (which lies hidden beneath its veil).⁵⁸ In this respect, Berthier highlights Giovanni Villani's reference to Dante as a great scholar in all the branches of learning, despite being a lay person ("tutto fosse laico"), and as one "who didn't know well how to converse with laypeople" ("non bene sapea conversare co' laici"), emphasising the implicit (and common) medieval distinction between a cleric ("chierico"), learned in the sciences, and a layman ("laico"), ignorant of them. With regard to allegorical poetry, the typical lay reader can only appreciate the surface meaning ("la sola laicale sposizione"); "mute" and "silent," he cannot penetrate the doctrine hidden beneath it.⁵⁹

Like Berthier, Mandonnet issues the standard complaint against secular critics such as Benedetto Croce, who sought to separate poetry from theology, and only consider the literary aspect of the *Commedia*: this is to impose the flaying of Marsyas on Dante, leaving one

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xlvi: "Oggi, secondo noi, si suole fermarsi un po' troppo esclusivamente alla sola esposizione 'laicale', e non si va, quanto sarebbe necessario, all'esposizione più 'midollata e intrinseca'. Il medesimo fatto s'incontra negli studi biblici."

⁵⁸ Berthier gives three reasons why Dante's poem is interpreted only at a superficial level and in a "lay manner." The first is a certain frivolity or thoughtlessness (*la leggerezza*): it is much easier to remain at the exterior of the poem (*la cortecchia*) which affects the imagination and the sensibility, and it thus happens that a few remarkable episodes, as of Francesca da Rimini and Ugolino, constitute the entire subject of certain scholars. The second is ignorance: many Dante scholars attempt to interpret the poem, but know nothing of scholastic theology, and yet argue with those who in fact study it; such readers, in ignorance, do not see in the poem what they do not even suspect to be there. The third is bad faith: for many secular readers, it is a great trial that Dante was a Christian believer and, to dismiss him and show off their own lack of remorse, they reinvent him as simply a politician or a fantasist (*Ibid.*, XLVI-XLVII).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: "A capire meglio il senso del riferito testo si noti che siccome *chierico* era nel medio evo sinonimo di dotto, così *laico* era sinonimo d'ignorante, almeno nelle scienze sacre. Giov. Villani dice di Dante: 'Questi fu grande letterato quasi in ogni scienza, tutto fosse laico'. *Cron.*, lib. IX, c. CXXXV [...] Un goliardo scriveva: 'Aestimetur autem laicus ut brutus: / Nam ad artem surdus est et mutus'. E un altro: 'Literatos convocat decus virginalis: / Laicorum exsecrat pectus bestiale'. [...] Guillelmo Neuber: 'Laici estis ci percipere non potuistis vim verbi.', *Rer. Anglic.*, lib. IV, cap. III." In Villani's chronicle, Dante is "schifo e sdegnoso, e quasi a guisa di filosofo mal grazioso," as one who "non bene sapea conversare co' laici".

in effect with an ornamental bedside rug (a lion skin) rather than a great living organism (the lion itself).⁶⁰ But Mandonnet goes further. He argues that even the poetical style of Dante's *Commedia* is theological. Dante is not merely a poet who treats theology; instead, Dante is a poet who treats theology through theology, through a properly theological technique.⁶¹

According to Mandonnet, Dante derives four methodological elements from theology: 1) the literary modes; 2) the rule of symbolism; 3) the use of the four senses; and 4) the formal concept of one-in-threeness (*unitrinisme*). The latter is Mandonnet's invented neologism to describe the way in which Dante imprints the central mystery of the Christian faith – that God is one in three persons – into the fabric of the *Commedia* at every level.⁶² Mandonnet thereby provides a highly rich and variegated account of the theological form of Dante's *Commedia*. Like Singleton after him, Mandonnet sees Dante as drawing on fourfold Scriptural exegesis; for Mandonnet, however, this does not imply in any way, as it subsequently did for Singleton, that Dante considered the literal sense of his poem to be true.

The first key element of Dante's theological methodology according to Mandonnet, then, is the hermeneutic tradition of the multiple modes of treating theology.⁶³ To serve the purposes of his poem, Mandonnet sees Dante as deploying twelve different literary modes in the *Commedia*. The poem's general purpose is the glory of God, and Dante's poem, comprising “cantica” and “canti,” is a lauda or canticle throughout, using the (1) laudative mode (*modus laudativus*).⁶⁴ The three particular purposes regard the aesthetic, moral, and intellectual orders. As poet, Dante employed the (2) narrative

⁶⁰ Mandonnet, 150–51.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 152: The qualifier “the Theologian” for Dante in Mandonnet's title relates not only to the subject matter of his poem, but also to its very form, that is, the basic conditions which Dante imposed on his poetry.

⁶² Thus, for example, Dante presents one vision of the afterlife in three realms (Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise), and each of the three main characters – Virgil, Dante, and Beatrice – have, according to Mandonnet, three offices. At a textual level, one-in-threeness informs Dante's arrangement of *terzine*, *strophe*, cantos, and canticles, as well as his use of numerical symbolism.

⁶³ Although Aquinas relinquishes this tradition in the *Summa theologiae* (the work of “new” scientific theology *par excellence*), Mandonnet nonetheless locates its presence in his early systematic work, the commentary on the *Sentences*, as well as in his commentary on the *Psalms* (one of his final works, which, as a Scriptural commentary, discusses different literary modes of expression in sacred scripture).

⁶⁴ Mandonnet suggests that Dante might have been inspired by St Thomas's commentary on the psalms, with its definition of a hymn as “*laus Dei cum cantico*. Canticum autem exultatio mentis de aeternis habita, prorumpens in vocem” (see Mandonnet, 160, n.).

(*narrativus*), (3) the praying or deprecativ (orativus sive deprecativus), and the (4) symbolic (*symbolicus*) modes, as well as (5) the mode of soliloquy (*modus soliloquii*). As preacher, he used the (6) preceptive (*praeceptivus*), (7) exhorting (*exortatorius*), (8) admonishing (*comminatorius sive admonitorius*), (9) promissory (*promissivus*) modes, as well as the (10) narrative of exemplars (*narrativus exemplorum*). Finally, as teacher, he drew upon the (11) revelatory (*revelativus*) and (12) argumentative (*argumentativus sive disputativus*) modes. The last, the argumentative, pertains equally to theology and philosophy, as both employ disputation according to three categories of proofs: the authority of great teachers (*per auctoritates*); demonstration (*per rationes*); and similitudes (*per similitudines*). Although Dante does not treat these modes explicitly in his theoretical works, he does touch upon the variety of literary modes employed superficially in his *Epistle to Cangrande*, where we find the following list in two parts: the (i) poetic (*poeticus*), (ii) fictive (*fictivus*), (iii) descriptive (*descriptivus*), (iv) digressive (*digressivus*), and (v) transumptive (*transumptivus*) modes, as well as the (vi) defining (*definitivus*), (vii) dividing (*divisivus*), (viii) proving (*probativus*), (ix) disproving (*improbativus*) modes, and (x) the positing of examples (*exemplorum positivus*). The second group are, of course, identical to the list of the five *forma tractandi* given, for example, in Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*.⁶⁵

Far from equating Dante's hermeneutics with the procedure of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*, Mandonnet sees Aquinas's *Summa* as the paradigmatic example of a "new direction of theology," while he understands the hermeneutics of Dante's *Commedia* principally within the cultural context of the symbolic theology which it displaced.⁶⁶ Two features characterized the "new direction of

⁶⁵ See Aquinas, *Commentary on the Perihermeneias*, trans. Jean T. Oesterie (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1962). See also Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poet of the Latter Middle Ages: A decorum of convenient distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); and Heine Hansen, *John Pagus on Aristotle's "Categories": A Study and Edition of the Rationes super Praedicamenta Aristotelis* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), 146, n. 2: "[Aquinas] counts five types of *forma tractandi* (definitivus, divisivus, probativus, improbativus, exemplorum positivus)."

⁶⁶ Dante's synthesis of pagan literature, moreover, is part of a sophisticated theological exegetical tradition (which, Mandonnet highlights [152], again does *not* derive from Aquinas), according to which "everything must be laid at the service of Christianity, just as Virgil follows Beatrice's orders for higher ends" (173); "Allegory in the *Commedia*, then, whether directly or indirectly, proceeds from scriptural theology. Dante's use of figures from classical antiquity is a process which had already been introduced into the interpretation of Scripture and the writing of religious propaganda by various theologians" (175). Mandonnet adds: "However, one main thing remains, which is that

theology”: first, the introduction of Aristotle’s logical works and then his entire corpus into the schools provided a new philosophical methodology, which was placed at the service of sacred doctrine (*sacra doctrina*) enabling, thereby, a true science of theology; second, the critique of unrestrained allegorization, and the emphasis on the primacy of the literal sense of Scripture for deriving theological doctrine.⁶⁷ By contrast, symbolic theology (dominant “from the Church Fathers until the start of the thirteenth century”) was characterised by the unrestrained use of the allegorical method of Scriptural interpretation, according to which “one can allegorise about everything,” be that a person, a thing, a number, a place, a time, or a fact.⁶⁸

Crucially, while Mandonnet avers that the new direction in theology gradually displaced symbolic theology in the schools or universities (in other words, in academic theology), he equally highlights that symbolic theology “continued to occupy the streets, the porch, and the narthex,” holding a privileged place in figurative and architectural art, vernacular literature, and as a teaching and catechetical tool.⁶⁹ Specifically, Mandonnet associates the symbolic method with the literature of the goliards and the troubadours, most of whom, he avers, were clerics or clerics who had returned to lay life.⁷⁰ Mandonnet underlines one further (and apparently contradictory) feature of literary symbolism which pertains to Dante’s authorial procedure: as

Dante, like Richard of St Victor, considers the use of allegory to be a proper means to convey doctrine, so much so that under every allegory there is a doctrine which must be drawn out” (175, n.).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 168–69.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 167. In the absence of a culture of reason, “it opened the way to an arbitrary, unlimited form of interpretation”; as examples, Mandonnet cites the glosses attributed to Walafrid Strabo and Anselm of Laon.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 170: “Symbolism also found a privileged place in figurative and architectural art. Medieval art was essentially at the service of religion. It was a teaching tool, the catechism of the people who, universally, could not read. But the religious idea, and the religious fact, could not be directly translated: they needed forms and symbols. Symbolism governed the construction and layout of places of worship, the statues and carvings which covered their walls, and neither did frescoed wall-paintings and manuscript pages escape their rule”. This because “people understand an image, symbol, or allegory better than direct and abstract doctrine.”

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 171. Dante inherited in this way the figure of the Lady of his thoughts, (of which, he notes, “courtly poetry had made an abusive, even sterile use”) but he applied it to the moral and religious order in ways which “went far beyond the concerns of the troubadours.” More generally, Mandonnet considers symbolism a feature of all pre-Christian literature, given that symbolism “by its nature [is] part of the human order”; thus, for example, “Plato’s celebrated myths are nothing other than marvellous allegories” (165). Dante, of course, alludes to this allegorical interpretation of Plato’s myths in *Paradiso* 4.22–63.

well as allegory being used to communicate and make known doctrine, it could also be used to hide doctrine. In this way, and following the example of Christ in the parables, allegory “enabled sacred truths to be hidden from profane and superficial readers,” as well as sharpening the curiosity of deeper ones.⁷¹

Symbolism is, Mandonnet affirms, the “crust of the *Commedia*,” which appears first and which also “creates the greatest difficulties for the reader in trying to understand the work.”⁷² He divides Dantean symbolism into three main forms: metaphor, typology, and allegory. Typology and allegory, which are inter-related, are most important for interpreting the *Commedia*. Typology is static, and normally refers to a person. Allegory is dynamic, and is a symbol “which is ongoing for more or less time, and which is developed successively [...] when the type appears on stage, its action is allegorical.”⁷³ Thus, according to Mandonnet, Dante is a type for the Christian (and is poet, sinner, and student); Virgil is a type for the natural order, and is Dante’s guide in poetry (*duca*), leader in virtue (*segno*), and teacher of truth (*maestro*); Beatrice is a type for the Christian supernatural order, and is the beauty of Christian revelation (in the realm of making), grace and the light of glory (in the practical field of morals), and faith and the light of glory (in the speculative field of knowledge).⁷⁴ Secondary protagonists, such as Statius, Matilda, and Bernard, have similar typological meanings.⁷⁵ Dante-character’s journey through the three realms of the afterlife, then, is the poetic and fictive element of the poem which establishes the unity of dramatic action, including the action of these typological *personae*, and their relation with each other, as they unfold dynamically in the course of the poem.⁷⁶ Alongside typology and allegory, Dante also uses symbolism in the form of metaphor, principally to translate theological or other ideas through material forms. Thus, the butterfly emerging from the chrysalis is Dante’s metaphor for the human soul shedding its body and undergoing an apparently miraculous transformation upon death; the butterfly is “angelic” (“l’angelica farfalla”;

⁷¹ Mandonnet, 175-76, n.: “Gloria Dei est celare verbum et gloria regum investigare sermonem. Prov. 25.2. Semper sapientes contra vulgus divisi sunt et arcana sapientiae non toto mundo sed plebi philosophantium revelaverunt.”

⁷² *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

Purgatorio 10.125) because human souls, temporarily separated from their bodies, have a spiritual nature like that of angels.⁷⁷

Mandonnet also situates Dante's use of symbolism within the historical development by theologians of the theory of the four traditional senses of Scripture.⁷⁸ Mandonnet deploys Aquinas's relatively precise taxonomy of the four senses (in his later works) as a framework to analyse Dante's practice in the *Commedia*, cross-referencing, in the process, Dante's passing and superficial references to the four senses in the *Convivio* and the *Epistle to Can Grande*. Both Aquinas and Dante divide the four senses into two: the literal sense and the threefold spiritual sense (moral, anagogical, and allegorical). For medieval interpreters, the literal sense is "that which is signified by the letter" (*sicut littera sonat*). This literal signification can be direct, but it can also be indirect (whereby parabolic or figurative expressions come under the literal sense).⁷⁹ With indirect signification, the "literal sense is not the figure of speech itself but the thing figured. Thus when Scripture speaks of the arm of God it does not literally mean that God has bodily members of this kind, but it means that which is signified by such members, *viz.* operative power."⁸⁰ With indirect signification, then, there is the "letter of the symbol" (the arm of God) and the "sense of the symbol" (the operative power of God). In ordinary parlance and in allegorical poetry, we would call the former the literal sense of the symbol, and the latter the spiritual or symbolic sense; however, in Scriptural interpretation, the latter is, in fact, the literal sense, as it is the sense intended by the author.

Where Singleton, Hollander et al. associate the literal sense of Scripture exclusively with "the historical passages in the Bible," and conclude that, as a result, "Dante's seven-day visit to the afterworld is to be treated as historical fact," Mandonnet applies the Scriptural procedure of *indirect* literal signification – and the distinction between the letter and the sense of the symbol – to the distinction between the literal and symbolic senses of Dante's *Commedia*. Like the letter of the symbol in Scriptural interpretation, the literal sense of

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷⁸ Mandonnet emphasises that the theoretical treatment could be varied, and not always consistent, and that this was a practice of hermeneutics which "had arranged practically, not logically" (*Ibid.*, 178).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁸⁰ Aquinas, *STh.*, Ia, q.1, a.10. Mandonnet refers to this article in the notes (179, nn.1–3; 180, n.1; 182, n. 2; and 183, n. 1) and is clearly paraphrasing Aquinas's exposition: "Non est litteralis sensus ipsa figura, sed id quod est figuratum" (183, n.1). See also Hugh Pope, *St Thomas Aquinas as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1924).

Dante's *Commedia* is a figure and is, in a strict sense, instrumental, whereas the symbolic or allegorical sense of Dante's *Commedia*, like the sense of the symbol in Scriptural interpretation, is the intended meaning. Thus, at the beginning of the poem, Dante describes carnal passion (the sense of the symbol or, in allegorical poetry, the symbolic sense) through the leopard (the letter of the symbol or, in allegorical poetry, the literal sense). From the perspective of ethics, the symbol (the leopard) has no reason to exist of itself, as it is ancillary, instrumental, and pertains to a shared language or stock of images. By contrast, the thing signified (carnal passion) exists for itself, and is the purpose of this kind of symbolic expression. At a macro level, Dante's fictional depiction of the realms of the afterlife and invented encounters with over three hundred souls is a figure for, and is instrumental to, the moral and doctrinal senses and purposes of his poem.

This notwithstanding, from the perspective of poetry, the proper aim of which is to create fictions ("belle menzogne" [beautiful lies]), the principal object is the very beauty and appropriateness of the symbols themselves.⁸¹ Here, then, is the formal distinction between theological and poetical symbolism (which both Aquinas and Dante touch upon in their theoretical works): sacred scripture uses symbolic and literary figures due to necessity and utility; by contrast, the very purpose of poetry, on this view, is to create symbolic figures, delightful representations, which cloak doctrine (whether sacred or profane).⁸²

⁸¹ While Dante frequently employs ambiguity (where a single word can have multiple or equivocal meanings), with regard to symbolism, the word or statement refers univocally to one object symbolized. The symbol itself, though, can signify many different ideas and, according to Mandonnet, typically has up to three meanings in Dante's *Commedia*. Dante deploys ambiguity in the *Commedia* not just with regard to a particular word (as Belacqua's "porta"; *Purg.* 14.127;129) but, also, with regard to an entire phrase or dialogue, as is the case with Dante's dialogue with Cavalcante in *Inferno* 10, which is equivocal, and which Dante-character first interprets according to a spiritual sense, and Cavalcante interprets in a literal sense (see George Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus: A Dualistic Vision of Secular and Spiritual Fulfilment* [Oxford: Legenda, 2013], 89-120).

⁸² Aquinas, *STh.*, Ia, q.1, a.9, ad 1; *Conv.* 2.1.6 (cited in Mandonnet, 182, nn. 1-2). Furthermore, and again unlike Singleton, Mandonnet does not simply map the four traditional senses onto Dante's poem. Instead, he highlights (184-85) that a recognized problem of the threefold distinction of the symbolic or spiritual sense (allegorical, moral, and analogical) was that it did not seem to incorporate the dogmatic subject matter of theology. Mandonnet notes that Aquinas in a *quodlibet* article (but not in the *Summa theologiae* itself) ingeniously makes room for the dogmatic matter of theology by dividing the three spiritual senses into two: first, with regard to right action (the moral or tropological sense); second, with regard to right belief and, thus, with regard to theology (the allegorical and analogical senses). Mandonnet avers that the moral sense of the symbol prevails in Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* (as their subject matter is principally

Let us make some summarizing comments, then, about Dante's use of symbolism on Mandonnet's view: (1) he associates it with a plurality of traditions (including those relatively unconnected with Aquinas's normative procedure), such as classical literature and philosophy, symbolic theology, and medieval art, architecture, catechesis, and vernacular literature; (2) he distinguishes between typology and allegory, on the one hand, and metaphor, on the other; (3) he argues that Dante draws on the theological tradition of the four senses of Scripture in a critical and selective way; (4) he underlines the distinction between direct and indirect signification in the literal sense of Scripture, and compares the distinction between the letter and the sense of the symbol (in indirect signification) to the distinction between the literal sense and the symbolic senses in Dante's poetry; (5) he particularly highlights the moral (*Inferno* and *Purgatorio*) and anagogical (*Paradiso*) senses of Dante's symbolism; (6) he underlines that, from the perspective of ethics and theology, what matters is the symbolic sense (and the literal sense is instrumental) but, from the perspective of poetry (the purpose of which is to create "beautiful fictions"), the literal sense itself is the principal object (and we admire the poet, as poet, for his ability to create particularly appropriate and delightful representations). Finally, Mandonnet frames his whole discussion of Dantean symbolism with a consideration of the variety of literary modes used by Dante. Thus, although symbolism is the most notable feature of Dante's poem as whole, there are parts of the poem (such as the so-called doctrinal passages) where its presence is less keenly felt, and where other modes of writing come to the fore.

III. *Continuity or Rupture: A Revisionary Proposal.*

From the interpretative perspective of Berthier and Mandonnet, Bruno Nardi's contention that Dante "spoke as a divinely inspired prophet," who believed he actually received a mystical vision of the afterlife, might seem a retrograde step, encouraging the naive literalism of unlearned readers, the *laici*. While Barolini maintained that Nardi revealed the essence of the poem, leading twentieth-century scholars and students to see the "*Commedia* not through a glass darkly but face to face," Robert M. Durling (1929–2015) and Ronald Martinez (1948–) concluded a decade ago that he was "wildly mistaken," and ushered in "hagiographic fumes" that actually obscured a correct understanding of Dante's greatness as a poet and as a human

ethical), while the anagogical sense of the symbol prevails in *Paradiso* (as the subject matter is principally theological).

being for generations of scholars and students.⁸³ Similarly, Auerbach's reading of Dante as a "poet of the earthly world," and his limited application of allegory to the figure and fulfillment of earthly lives, might seem a continuation of late nineteenth-century Romantic readings and as an accommodation to twentieth-century secular re-appropriations of Dante, rather than as a progressive development in our understanding of the *Commedia*.

It is apparent that while the allegory of the poets might be opposed to what Auerbach understood as "modern literary sensibilities," it does not follow that, in considering the literal sense as a "beautiful fiction," we necessarily have less appreciation of its realism, verisimilitude, or "human, personal" qualities. Moreover, Mandonnet's sophisticated understanding of Dante's adoption of the symbolic method and polysemous signification in the *Commedia* enables us to situate Singleton's contribution more accurately: this was Singleton's novel insistence that Dante thereby implies that the literal sense of his poem must be read as if it were true.⁸⁴ The assumptions underpinning this conviction – as we outlined in relation to Hollander – are just that, however, and betray a typically Protestant understanding of the literal sense of Scripture, and an apparent unawareness of the crucial distinction in medieval Biblical hermeneutics between direct and indirect signification. That Dante draws on theological modes of

⁸³ See *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 3: Paradiso*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling, with Introduction by Robert M. Durling and Notes by Ronald L. Martinez and Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–20. The idea that the poem is "literally true is not only wildly mistaken, it distracts attention from the depth and complexity of Dante's achievement" (10); "the entire journey through the heavens in Dante's conception takes place in the pilgrim's head, that is, in his imagination" (14). See also Alex C. Telander, "Dante's Champion: An Interview with Robert M. Durling" (19 April, 2011), <https://bookbanter.wordpress.com/tag/robert-m-durling/>: "We hope to clear the air of the hagiographical fumes that imagine he actually did voyage to the other world, as opposed to making it all up on the basis of his extensive reading and thinking."

⁸⁴ As far as I am aware, Singleton never cites or references Mandonnet's *Dante le théologien* and one might thereby assume that he had never read it. On the other hand, even leaving aside Singleton's celebrated treatment of fourfold exegesis as it pertains to the *Commedia*, there are a series of other strong parallels with Mandonnet's earlier work: (1) Singleton's essay "The Vistas in Retrospect" (1965) provides a sustained meditation on the threefold "ruina," the subject (albeit a Dantean crux) also of the long appendix in Mandonnet, 281–326; (2) Singleton, like Mandonnet before him, also takes a fourfold approach to the poem, delineating "four elements," "four dimensions of meaning," comprising "the substance and special texture of the poetry of the *Divine Comedy*" (Singleton, *Elements of Structure*, VII); (3) Singleton's methodological approach to numerology in his celebrated essay (Charles S. Singleton, "The Poet's Number at the Centre," *Modern Language Notes* 80 [1965]: 1–10) also bears striking similarity to Mandonnet's numerological procedure.

Scriptural interpretation does not imply that the literal sense of Dante's poem is not fictitious.

Nonetheless, some of the most vexed twentieth-century discussions of the theological content of Dante's *Commedia* are underpinned by such an insistence on the literal truth claim of the poem. For example, Kenelm Foster, an authority on Dante's theology,⁸⁵ memorably posited a deeply problematic tension in the *Commedia* between the "Two Dantes," "attached, simultaneously, to Christianity and to paganism," a tension he located especially in Dante's treatment of Virgil.⁸⁶ By contrast, Mandonnet understands Dante's Virgil and Beatrice as his poetic solution to the challenge of representing, in the speculative order of knowledge, the autonomy of truths from reason and from revelation, truths which find – in Christian theology (as in Dante's *Commedia*) – their integration, without thereby losing their distinction.

The same applies, within the practical order of morals, to the distinction between nature and grace. For Foster, nature must – in some sense – surrender its autonomy in a Christian synthesis; by contrast, Virgil (and the limbo of the virtuous pagans as a whole) seems to embody a kind of human perfectability without healing grace (*gratia sanans*), which he finds theologically unacceptable.⁸⁷ From the

⁸⁵ Held in great esteem in Italy, Foster was entrusted with the most important theological entries in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*: "Cristo," *ED*, II, 262–69; "Dio," *ED*, II, 452–57; "Summa contra Gentiles," *ED*, V, 479–80; "Teologia," *ED*, V, 564–68; "Tommaso d'Aquino," *ED*, V, 626–49; and "Vangelo," *ED*, V, 874–77. Even at the close of the twentieth century, Stephen Botterill (1958–2018) continued to appeal to Kenelm Foster's kind of "theological reading" – Foster knew "Scholastic theology" but read "the *Commedia's* poetry as poetry" – to remedy what he saw as the tendency of North American Dante Studies either to concentrate solely on theology without attention to Dante as poet, or to ignore theology altogether (Stephen Botterill, "Dante in North America: 1991–93," *Lectura Dantis* 14–15 [1994]: 116–28).

⁸⁶ Foster, *The Two Dantes*, 156. In postulating the "Two Dantes," Foster may also be accused of falling into T.S. Eliot's Hamlet fallacy (i.e. of interpreting Dante in his own image): in his career, indeed, there were arguably two Kenelm Fosters: the Italianist, on the one hand, and the Thomist Dominican on the other. Bede Bailey, a fellow Dominican who knew him well, highlights that, as a young man beginning philosophical study at the Dominican priory of Hawkeshead, Foster "was already learned and cultured, an artist and poet, and more educated than some of his teachers," and that he subsequently identified with the catholic poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins, "perhaps sharing the poet's tension between his religion and artistry" (Bede Bailey, O.P., "In Memoriam Kenelm Foster OP: 1910–1986," *New Blackfriars* 67, no. 789 [1986]: 138–40, 139). See also T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood, Essay on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber, 1997; first published 1920), 81–87.

⁸⁷ Foster, *The Two Dantes*, 248–49: "a 'nature' whose contact with God (through grace) is minimal, but whose intrinsic excellence, on its own level and for the duration of life

hermeneutic perspective sustained by Berthier and Mandonnet, however, Dante's limbo of the virtuous pagans, which so troubled Foster (given his equation of the poem's theological truth with its literal sense), is not intended as dogmatic eschatology at all (i.e. to imply that such a state actually exists for adult pagans in the afterlife). Rather, what is primary is the truth signified, not the fictional sign: namely the kind of (albeit limited) earthly happiness attainable by the teaching of the philosophers. Man's natural end (natural beatitude) – praising and contemplating God without suffering but without seeing Him face to face – would be, according to Aquinas's theological hypothesis, the eternal destiny of unbaptized infants in limbo. However, in Dante's fiction, man's limited earthly happiness is seen (and represented in the limbo of the virtuous pagans) from the perspective of man's supernatural end, and hence the virtuous pagans “live in desire without hope”.⁸⁸

The limbo of the virtuous pagans may thereby exemplify Mandonnet's distinction between Dante's (potentially competing) theological and poetical principles in composing the *Commedia*, the tension between the demands of the teacher and the poet.⁸⁹ While

on earth can, in principle, be complete. And this completeness in human excellence, if achieved, would be *self*-achieved. Grace as *sanans*, as healing the wound of sin, would not, in principle, be needed.”

⁸⁸ In his commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*, Aquinas clarifies that the temporal beatitude of philosophical contemplation spoken of by Aristotle is qualified: “such men are happy *as men*, for in this life subject to mutability, perfect happiness cannot be attained” (see Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010), 361-62, n. 175); the natural final beatitude must be satisfied after this life but, from a theological perspective, this need not have involved the beatific vision (seeing God face-to-face), as the theological hypothesis of the beatitude of the unbaptized infants underlines. However, from the perspective of the afterlife, the qualified temporal beatitude of the pagans (intended as a limited happiness in this life) is, of course, deficient.

⁸⁹ Mandonnet, 243-52: “the different demands of the *Commedia*'s poetic and doctrinal elements: the poet is hampered by the teacher, the teacher by the poet. Ordinarily Dante triumphs over these difficulties with great success, almost as though it were a game. As poet, he always remains within the realm of verisimilitude, even when creating such an improbable type as Beatrice. As theologian and philosopher, he sacrifices nothing essential in the precision of doctrine. Yet by force of circumstance, some conflicts are inevitable, and the problem, which is incidentally most interesting, is to know which one, poet or teacher, will impose the strongest demand and make its competitor cede. In such a case, as in everything to do with the practical order, the tension is resolved through mutual concessions, and one can only admire the extent to which Dante is an excellent judge of harmony. Nevertheless, and despite the concordat, the differences remain, and the critic must be aware of this and recognise that the solution Dante accepts is but a compromise between two contradictory intentions. Without paying attention to this, one cannot understand certain passages of the *Commedia* precisely, and scholars

Kenelm Foster and many other twentieth-century scholars were deeply preoccupied by Dante's apparent damnation of Virgil (and this undeniably provides, at the level of the fictional journey, one of the key narrative dramas of the poem), what is primary is not the actual eternal destiny of particular pagans (which, in the heavens of Jupiter and Saturn, Dante finally makes clear is known to God alone), but rather important theological and moral doctrines (which, at the level of the fiction, necessitate Virgil's apparent damnation).⁹⁰ Doctrinally, Dante's Virgil typologically represents the natural order (including philosophical truth, the moral law, and the human art of poetry); the necessary corollary being that, at the level of poetic representation, the historical Virgil is located in limbo and apparently (1) morally impeccable (which is, theologically, an impossibility) and (2) spiritually damned (which is theologically plausible, but not theologically necessary).⁹¹

Dante could have avoided these two consequences, at the level of the fiction (the poem's literal sense), had he chosen as his signifier for the natural order in the *Commedia* an abstract (and historically non-existent) lady such as Boethius's Lady Philosophy, or the 'donna gentile' of the *Convivio*.⁹² But, clearly, Dante had many other

have thereby sometimes raised unjustified accusations at Dante's door. There are problems of the poetic order whose solution appeals to the doctrinal order, and vice versa, and it seems to me that critics are not always sufficiently aware of this" (243-44).

⁹⁰ The moral message underpinning the tragic fate of the pagan is particularly aimed, indeed, at unbelievers. As Francesco da Buti puts it: "Every unbeliever in this life is without hope. Since faith generates hope, he who does not have the true faith does not have true hope. And the unbelievers of the world still give testimony to this – who live in continual desire for beatitude and yet cannot have true hope for it because they do not have true faith" (Francesco da Buti, gloss to *Inf.* 4.43-45).

⁹¹ Given what he must have known about their lives, it is rather implausible that Dante did, in fact, believe that the historical Virgil and the other adult inhabitants of limbo were morally impeccable (i.e. that they did not sin in their earthly lives). This heterodox opinion goes against common sense, and it is explicitly ruled out as shameless presumption and mistaken blundering by Augustine, and as unsuitable, and simply an impossibility, by Aquinas (see Augustine, *Contra Iulianum haeresis Pelegiannae defensorem*, IV.3.26 and Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.24, a.12, ad.2). On the question of pagan salvation, and for a further analysis of the above sources, see Corbett, "The *Limbus Gentilium Virtuosum*," in Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus*, 123-29.

⁹² Mandonnet believed that Beatrice, Dante's signifier of the Christian supernatural order, is, indeed, an abstract (and historically non-existent) figure (Mandonnet, 29-135); Berthier, by contrast, argues for the literal identification with Beatrice Portinari in the *Vita Nuova*, but maintains that, in the *Commedia*, Dante typically speaks of Beatrice solely according to what she signifies (Berthier, "Introduzione," par. II-III, in *Inferno*, vol. I, x-xvi; see also par. XXIV, vol. II, liv: "Perché Dante fece di Beatrice il simbolo della conoscenza soprannaturale di Dio? Ecco il motivo: Dante avrebbe trovato in Beatrice la sua felicità di questo mondo: ma poiché non gli fu dato di possedere Beatrice in

reasons for making the historical Virgil the first guide in his poem, including Virgil's authority as an ethical poet who wrote, also, of the pagan underworld; Virgil's political function as poet of empire (“*imperium sine fine*”)⁹³; as well as, autobiographically, the ethical power of Virgil's poetry on Dante's own moral and spiritual life; Dante's indebtedness to Virgil for his development as a poet; and Dante's profound empathy for Virgil the man. Choosing a historical person, Virgil, while giving him a three-fold (in Mandonnet's view) allegorical function, implies a balancing act between sustaining the verisimilitude of the fiction, on the one hand, and sustaining the typology and allegory, on the other. Likewise, in interpreting Dante's *Commedia*, we, as readers, need to be mindful of these principles, aware that – at particular pressure points in the poem – one may have to give way to the other.

The hermeneutic strategy to interpret certain features of the *Commedia* solely according to the allegorical sense is in continuity with the approach of Dante's first commentators, but it is ruled out if one equates the theological truth of the poem primarily with its literal sense.⁹⁴ Moreover, with the example of the limbo of the virtuous pagans (another example would be the region of the neutrals), we see how a commitment to the truth of the literal sense of the poem implies a heterodox interpretation of Dante's theology (that Dante believed that pagans could have been sinless in their earthly lives) whereas, interpreted according to the poetic allegory, the theological or moral doctrine hidden under the fiction of Dante's invented region may not be necessarily problematic at all.⁹⁵

questo mondo, ei ne fece allegoricamente la personificazione della sua felicità nella vita migliore. Ma la felicità della vita consiste prima di tutto nella conoscenza soprannaturale di Dio [...] quindi Beatrice è la personificazione di quella cognizione di Dio che si ha specialmente per mezzo della Fede e della Teologia”).

⁹³ In the *Convivio*, Dante defends his argument that the Roman Empire was established by Divine providence with reference to the authority of Virgil's *Aeneid*: ‘A costoro – cioè alli Romani – né termine di cose né di tempo pongo; a loro ho dato imperio senza fine’ (*Conv.* 4.4.11).

⁹⁴ Guido da Pisa, gloss to *Inf.* 4.82–84: ‘Sed nostra fides non tenet quod ibi sint nisi parvuli innocentes [...] iste autem poeta in hac parte [...] loquitur non theologice sed poetice’ (But our faith does not hold that in Limbo there are any souls except innocent children [...] the poet, however, in this part [...] is not speaking theologically but rather poetically).

⁹⁵ See, for example, Berthier, “Introduzione,” par. XX, in *Infèrno*, vol. 2, XLV: “Così Dante nella sua ‘bella menzogna’, finge un altro mondo più o meno vero o verosimile, per dirci una cosa verissima che esiste nel mondo presente, cioè l’inferno, il purgatorio e il paradiso morale. Chi ammette questa semplice regola non troverà in tutto il poema una sola espressione che presenti ombra di difficoltà dal punto di vista della Teologia; nè

This leads us to consider a further, more general import of the three literalist approaches we have examined, one particularly pertinent perhaps given the increasing theological turn (or return) in Dante Studies in the twenty-first century.⁹⁶ Arguably, all three literalist approaches contributed to a wider, secularizing approach to Dante in the twentieth century. Auerbach's approach does this most openly and straightforwardly by re-presenting Dante as a poet of the earthly or secular world. By contrast, both Nardi's theory of mystical vision and Singleton's imposition of the "allegory of the theologians," by locating the poem's theological truth primarily in its literal-historical sense, create an implicit separation and alienation between Dante (and what he is presumed to have believed or to have asked us to believe) and his readers (and what they are presumed to deem credible). As the evidence of Dante's first commentators indicates, this separation and alienation would have been equally true in Dante's day as in our own. No right-minded person, whether Christian or not, and whether medieval or modern, would accept that the *Commedia's* depiction of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise were shown to Dante in a mystical vision as they truly are in reality (let alone a newly invented region like Ante-Purgatory); and yet, Nardi claims that Dante did indeed believe this. No right-minded person would believe that the literal sense of Dante's poem is true; and yet, on Singleton's view, Dante is asking us to assent to the poem's literal sense (which is clearly not literally true), *as if it were literally true* (which is, at the least, rather unreasonable).

However, if Dante did *not* intend for us to read his poem literally, this separation and alienation between Dante and his readers,

gli accadrà mai di far rilevare con molti, anche cristiani, che nel tal passo Dante parla da poeta, e non da teologo, mentre il vero sta che parla sempre da poeta e sempre da teologo. Poeta, adopera finzione più or meno arbitraria, la quale, non essendo altro che una figura, si deve considerare per tale, e non come cosa figurata; teologo, esprime verità rigorosamente teologiche e dottrinali, nascoste in quelle figure."

⁹⁶ See, for example, edited volumes such as *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, ed. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, ed. Claire E. Honess and Matthew Treherne, 2 vols. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013); *Le teologie di Dante*, ed. Giuseppe Ledda (Ravenna: Angelo Longo, 2015); *Vertical Readings in Dante's "Comedy"*, ed. George Corbett and Heather Webb, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017); and single-author studies such as Peter Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); John Took, *Conversations with Kenelm: Essays on the Theology of the "Commedia"* (London: Ubiquity Press, 2013); Vittorio Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's "Commedia" as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Corbett, *Dante's Christian Ethics* (2020).

at least in this key respect, disappears: the poem's truth claim is with regard not to the signifier (the literal sense) but to the signified (the allegorical meanings). Dante is indeed claiming to reveal the truth, but he does so through literary forms and poetic conventions, which carry his teaching, his preaching, and his apparently prophetic polemic. Authorial claims to report what he has seen (for example, "O mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi"; *Inferno* 2.8), on this view, are constitutive of the literary form and rhetoric of the poem as a whole, as is the author's famous swearing on the veracity of his poem (a truth which has the face of a lie; *Inferno* 16.124) in relation to "seeing" the image of fraud, Geryon (a lie which has the face of truth; *Inferno* 17.10-12).⁹⁷

For Berthier and Mandonnet, what is signified through the "beautiful lie" of Dante's fiction – predominantly ethics and theology – is, in large part, "simply catholic doctrine".⁹⁸ This does not mean that they were unaware that some key aspects of Dante's thought were (or would subsequently be viewed as) heterodox. Thus, Berthier and Mandonnet considered Dante's political theology contrary to catholic teaching and downright dangerous for humanity. Their fellow Dominican Guido Vernani was quite right, in their view, to condemn the imperialist utopianism of *Monarchia* and to unpick some of its absurd arguments shortly after Dante's death.⁹⁹ The treatise's removal from the Index in 1881 was in no way a belated

⁹⁷ Berthier, for example, cites approvingly Jacopo della Lana's commentary (1324-28), noting only that Dante clearly indicates thereby that all of this is an allegory (of the poets): "Quindi ci ammonisce Dante che tutto questo è allegoria." (Berthier, *Inferno*, vol I, 294). See also Jacopo della Lana, gloss to *Inf.* 2.124-26: "alcune veritadi [...] non hanno apparenza di vero, come l'allegoria che pone l'autore, le quali non sono cognosciute anzi lo loro essere in atto, se non per li savii: altre cose sono ch'hanno apparenza d'essere e non sono quel che paiono, sicome la fraudolenza, che ha in pria apparenza di bene, ed è tutto l'opposito." By contrast, according to Hollander, Dante always intends us to take his "seeing" literally; thus, "Dante will claim for [Geryon] a literal veracity, will indeed put his entire *Comedy* behind the claim that he actually saw the actual Geryon" (Hollander, "Theologus-Poeta," 112).

⁹⁸ See Berthier, *Dante La Divine Comédie*, 48: "Cette doctrine est la doctrine catholique simplement, que Dante trouve enseignée autour de lui par les philosophes et théologiens, par Thomas d'Aquin surtout, et qu'il exprime non plus seulement comme vraie et séduisante dans son austère nudité, mais qu'il nous présente, dit-il, sous les atours d'un 'beau mensongne'."

⁹⁹ Anthony K. Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy: An Historical Study with Accompanying Translations of Dante Alighieri's "Monarchia", Guido Vernani's "Refutation of the 'Monarchia' Composed by Dante", and Pope John XXII's Bull "Si fratrum"* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004). On Vernani's critique, see also Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus*, 51-56.

recognition that Dante's political vision had, in fact, been correct. However, times had moved on, and the Church arguably did not want to dampen, by this censure, the enthusiasm for Dante as the Christian poet of the *Commedia*.¹⁰⁰ Notwithstanding Dante's heterodox political vision, then, it is the theological and philosophical doctrines of the *Commedia* overall that Mandonnet and Berthier consider sound.

Whether or not modern readers assent to these doctrines will depend on the nature of their own philosophical convictions, and the nature of their Christian faith or lack of it, but neither Christian believer nor unbeliever needs to ascribe to Dante the implausible belief that his poem records a true mystical vision (Nardi), that it is a private or even "authentic divine revelation" (Barolini), or that Dante wanted us to read the *Commedia*, like Scripture, as if it were literally true (Singleton). Where Hollander encouraged students that "the allegory of the *Comedy* is not the allegory as the commentators urge me to apply it. I may read this poem as history, and understand it better," Mandonnet and Berthier (who were alike historians and theologians) might encourage a future generation of students that "the allegory of the *Comedy* is the allegory as the commentators urge me to apply it. I may read this poem as ethics and theology, (while appreciating ever more fully Dante's poetic art, his profound empathy with the lives of specific historical individuals, and his mastery of verisimilitude), and understand it better."

As we look ahead to the next hundred years of Dante Studies, my revisionary proposal, therefore, is that we revisit the interpretative perspectives of Mandonnet and Berthier, and other outstanding scholars of their generation. Mandonnet presents compelling reasons, I think, for Dante scholars to set aside the dominant twentieth-century insistence on the literal truth claim of the poem, and the interpretation of the *Commedia* as "mystical vision" (Nardi), figural fulfilment (Auerbach) or according to the allegory of the theologians (Singleton and Hollander). In its stead, Mandonnet offers a highly rich account of the theological form of Dante's *Commedia*, an account which pays attention both to the marvellous verisimilitude, realism, and human particularities of the literal sense (understood, nonetheless, as a "beautiful lie"), and to the doctrine (especially moral

¹⁰⁰ See Berthier, "Introduzione," par. VII, in *Inferno*, vol 2, XXIV: "La dottrina politica di Dante sempre utopistica, fu pericolosa in certi tempi, preparando la servitù e la corruzione universale, se non *per se*, almeno per le passioni umane. Quindi fu confutata e condannata. Ma non ne segue che Dante non sia stato riconosciuto come l'una delle più grandi glorie del Cristianesimo"; and see also Mandonnet, 134.

and theological) which it covers or hides. As we have seen with the concluding example of the limbo of the virtuous pagans and the damnation of Virgil, how we understand the theological form of Dante's poetics may also be decisive for how we understand the nature of its theological content. In this respect as well, Mandonnet's competing interpretative approach may provide alternative resolutions to some of what twentieth- and twenty-first century Dante scholars have underlined as heterodox elements in Dante's poem and his theology. Whatever our own approach to interpreting Dante's *Commedia* in the future, moreover, we should be aware that Mandonnet's hermeneutic approach is much more in continuity with the seven-hundred-year long commentary tradition on the poem as a whole than the literalist approaches favoured by many scholars over the past hundred years.