

“CENTRO DEL CAMMIN”
CENTERS AND CENTRALITY IN THE ‘COMMEDIA’

J.C. WILES, University of Cambridge¹

The thematization of centrality in Dante’s *Commedia* is evident even in its opening lines. Despite the evident richness of the theme throughout the poem, however, criticism has overwhelmingly preferred to discuss centrality in the *Commedia* in terms of numbers. This has led to a general critical concern less with centrality than with what one might call “middleness,” which has precluded any serious discussion of the two distinct concepts. In the *Commedia*, the state of middleness carries with it the double meaning of *mezzo* as both a middle and a tangible medium through which action takes place, while *centro* carries its own distinct set of nuances. By consolidating existing critical receptions of centrality, and offering new approaches to the poem’s rich polycentrism, this essay elucidates the ways in which each potential center—geographical, numerological, “human” – offered by the poem functions as a perspectival lens through which to read it.

Keywords: Center, Centrality, *Centro*, *Mezzo*, Polycentric, Dante

INTRODUCTION: PERIPHERY, POLYSEMY, POLYCENTRISM

First-time readers of the *Commedia* and Dante scholars alike cannot fail but be struck by the poem’s immediate, intense focus on centrality, even in its opening lines. In its narrative fabric, Lino Pertile remarks “two interdependent movements [...]: the journey of the poet-character from the dark wood to the Empyrean; and the journey of the poet-narrator from *Inferno* 1 to *Paradiso* 33.”² This observation points to a corresponding typological distinction in terms of centralities: those of cosmic geography, and those of poetic structure. Like the parallel journeys Pertile distinguishes, these two broad categories are multivalent and densely intercon-

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² Lino Pertile, “Narrative Structure,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante’s ‘Commedia’*, eds. Zygmunt G. Barański and Simon Gilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4-27, 8.

nected. The poem dramatizes the complex interplay between centers and peripheries within these two overarching typologies: geographical, cosmological, and, most importantly, what the present study will call "human". Many crucial moments in the *Commedia* pivot around this ineluctable deixis of centrality and periphery, and all in turn contribute to the poem's overarching movement towards the reorientation of divine and spiritual love at the center of Dante's poetic universe. This reorientation, which cannot be fully achieved until the vision of the Godhead at the close of *Paradiso*, depends upon the coalescence of the poem's various polyvalent central moments. By stressing the tension between centrality and periphery throughout the text, moreover, Dante continually gestures towards the collapsing together of the two concepts at the moment of the final vision.

Despite the extensive interactions of these phenomena in the text, criticism has overwhelmingly preferred to discuss centrality in the *Commedia* in terms of numbers. This is unsurprising, particularly given Dante's ardent attention to numerology in *Vita nuova*, and the doubtless significance of certain numbers in the poem, not least its overarching "principle of threeness".³ Nevertheless, these types of analyzes inevitably yield results which are unsatisfying and belie the rich thematization of centrality so clearly at work in the poem. The consensus has been to place the *Commedia's* "center" somewhere between *Purgatorio* 16 and 18. While there is a compelling case for these cantos to be read as a textual center, critics have largely ignored the poem's own indications of their more meaningful centrality in favor of radically varying approaches to pinning down a "central number". As well as causing them to overlook the text's own endorsements of its structural center, numbers almost invariably lead commentators into a critical cul-de-sac. To begin with, they cannot agree exactly which numbers to use. They may choose the space between *Purgatorio* 16 and 17 (the poem's 50th and 51st cantos); they may opt for the central line of *Purgatorio* 17; others stress the importance of Canto 17 itself as a mathematical center.⁴ Some have even found ingenious resonances

³ Prue Shaw, *Reading Dante, From Here to Eternity* (London: Liveright, 2014), 176.

⁴ See Mira Mocan, "Amore, libero arbitrio e fantasia- *Purgatorio* XVI- XVII- XVIII," in *Esperimenti danteschi, Purgatorio 2009*, ed. Benedetta Quadrio (Genoa and Milan: Marietti, 2010), 147-174; cf. Christian Moevs, "L'amore triforme: i sette peccati capitali e la struttura della *Commedia*," in *Le teologie di Dante*, ed. Giuseppe Ledda (Ravenna: Centro dantesco dei frati minori conventuali, 2015), 143-80; cf. George Corbett, "Moral Structure" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'*, 61-78.

coded into the number 7,117 at the exact numerological center of the 14,233-line poem, and still this list is not exhaustive.⁵

The scholarly consensus shows a concern less with centrality than with what one might call “middleness,” which has precluded any serious discussion of the two distinct concepts. In the *Commedia*, the state of middleness carries with it the double meaning of *mezzo* as both a midpoint, and a tangible medium through which action takes place. A very different set of nuances applies to the word *centro*, which is interrogated throughout the poem in both spatial and abstract terms. Indeed, there are ways in which Dante’s conceptions of centrality anticipate more modern spatial theorizations, as well as problematizing applications of the word *centro* in cosmological treatises prevalent in the thirteenth century. As will be seen, spatial centrality is just one inflection of the poem-wide thematization of the word *centro*, and each *cantica* brings its own set of factors to bear on the difference between *centro* and *mezzo*. Historically, critics including Victor Castellani have been careful to tease apart the meanings of these concepts, particularly in relation to the third *cantica*, and this is a tension with which the poem itself grapples, as it periphrastically articulates the difference between them.⁶ As will be seen, the defining difference can only be fully divulged in the final cantos of *Paradiso*, after the text has laid out a number of episodes which foreground the issue. In his initial conjectures on the concept of centrality, J.H. Bird suggests that “Centers in the real world reflect a need for centers in the inner world”.⁷ For the purposes of this Dante-centric study one might reformulate this and suggest that real-world centers, in conjunction with “otherworldly” centers, map directly onto the *Commedia*’s search for inner-worldly centrality. So much, at least, accounts for the various and distinct potential centers offered by the text as perspectival lenses through which to read it.

And it is precisely *centers* and not one single center that are at stake here: the *Commedia* constitutes a ceaseless enmeshing of centers and peripheries, and this coaction is borne out on every level of the poem’s micro- and macrostructures. It is a densely polycentric text which at every turn interrogates what it means to be at a given center, to be in the proximity of that center, or at its circumference or periphery. These explorations of physical centrality feed directly into the poem’s search for a stable center in more

⁵ See Manfred Hardt, “I numeri nella poetica di Dante,” *Studi danteschi* 61 (1989), 1-27.

⁶ See Victor Castellani, “Heliocentricity in the Structure of Dante’s ‘Paradiso’,” *Studies in Philology* 78, no.3 (1981): 211-23.

⁷ J.H. Bird, *Centrality and Cities* (London: Routledge 2007 [1977]), 2.

abstract, human terms. It is, after all, as Gaston Bachelard has observed, a human instinct to project centrality onto any given space.⁸ This conception of centrality is articulated by Bachelard in both a physical and an abstract sense, and it will be seen that Dante's intuition of this instinctive desire for physical and philosophical orientation is borne out across the *Commedia*. As a result, any understanding of the poem will be radically inflected depending on how or where one chooses to project or "read" the center. Dante himself underscores the polysemy of his text in his Letter to Can Grande (*Epist.* 13.20), and it stands to reason that each central moment should carry with it a density of meaning which shapes one's reading of the poem. It might be supposed that such polycentrism in the *Commedia* would serve to destabilize it. The present study demonstrates that, on the contrary, the text's various potential centers are integral to the poem's fulfilment of the search for human centrality at its thematic core, and its ultimate arrival at stability. Before the divine central *punto* of the universe can be witnessed and comprehended as such, the text insists that there are other kinds of centrality which must be understood. The present analysis seeks to consolidate these centralities, as well as key critical receptions to the issue of centrality in the poem. By beginning with the text's problematization of periphery in the *selva oscura*, the central moments at play in all three *cantiche* can be more readily interrogated. Additionally, the poem's structurally central cantos offer a method of reading the poem which binds together the variously inflected centralities operating across the text, as well as shedding important light on the coaction of the concepts of *centro* and *mezzo*. A close analysis of the cantos at this central axis reveals them to be an interpretative key to an understanding of the *Commedia*'s rich polycentrism, particularly as its various centers coalesce at the moment of the final vision. They also cast a significant light on a hitherto unexplored facet of Virgil's role in the poem at large, and particularly his allusive presence in the poem's closing moments. Virgil, as will be seen, is frequently the common element in the *Commedia*'s moments of human centrality, even after his departure from the text. With that promised end in mind, the present study begins, as the poem would have it begin, in the middle of things.

⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: Penguin, 2014 [1957]), 38-9.

IN MEDIAS RES: BETWEEN EDEN AND THE *SELVA OSCURA*

Dante's beginning "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" (*Inf.* 1.1) introduces a network of resonances key to an understanding of centrality in the *Commedia*. Dante chooses to begin not with the beginning of life, but halfway through his protagonist's biblically allotted threescore years and ten (*Ps.* 90). The poem's earliest moments, then, exhibit the hallmarks both of a center and a periphery: an opening characterized by the language of middleness. It is, moreover, a critical truism that the *Commedia* begins with a definition of what it is not, rather than what it is. For by opening "nel mezzo del cammin" it is set in marked contrast to the Bible, which emphatically begins "In the beginning" (*Genesis* 1:1). The opening of *Vita nuova* achieves a similar effect: "In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria dinanzi a la quale poco si potrebbe leggere, si trova una rubrica la quale dice: *Incipit vita nova*" (*VN* 1.1). Both *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia* place immediate structural emphasis on re-beginning: a moment of conversion which initiates the trajectory of their narratives. The *Commedia's* own bold self-definition is underscored further by its lack of any expected invocation of the Muses, or of any exordium of any kind. That such an invocation is deferred but not entirely absent lays further emphasis on the fulcrum with which the poem opens (*Inf.* 2.7-9). Thus it begins completely *ex abrupto*, placing its protagonist at an emphatic, fixed point in time: "mi ritrovai per una selva oscura" (*Inf.* 1.2).⁹ In this way, Dante grounds the poem firmly in the Aristotelian conception of time as a tripartite system of moments: the before, the present, and the after, establishing a further, temporal tension between a "central" moment in the historic present, and peripheral moments which precede and succeed it.¹⁰ From its very opening, then, the *Commedia* initiates a dense enmeshing and disentangling of centers and peripheries. This is borne out even on the minute structural level of the *terza rima*: for each new rhyme becomes the center of its first *terzina*, before becoming a periphery to the next. The iterative self-circumscription of Dante's *terzine* allows not only for the constant interweaving of past, present and future in the text, but also for the unfolding of the poem-wide interrogation of centrality in a verse form predicated on the same deictic relationship between center and periphery.¹¹

⁹ See Andrea Mazzucchi, "Percorsi dell'interpretazione," in *Esperimenti danteschi, Inferno 2008*, ed. Simone Invernizzi (Genoa and Milan: Marietti, 2011), 3-22, 7.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Physics*, 217b 30-218b 18.

¹¹ See John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 262.

All of these strategies of placement and self-definition, however, occur against the backdrop of the *selva oscura* itself: a wilderness which externalizes the "state of chaotic indirection" which characterizes the poem's earliest moments.¹² Robert Harrison builds on this idea of indirection, positing that "A wilderness is itself placeless, for it has no human center or point of convergence around which nature can gather and become bounded".¹³ Harrison does not articulate precisely what is meant by human centrality here, but he develops the notion of a phenomenon which has less to do with spatiotemporal placement than it does with the stability and confident orientation of individual human consciousness. This is the definition which this study adopts, for such is clearly what is at stake in the *Commedia's* opening scene. In it, Dante strongly underscores his protagonist's state of placelessness, and the reason for this is clear: for if one finds oneself in an environment in which "io non so ben ridir com' i v'intrai" (*Inf.* 1.10), one loses all frame of reference to the center or the periphery of that environment. One is utterly displaced, disoriented, and decentralized, and this is precisely the state in which the wayfarer first appears in the poem. By framing the scene in the middle of *nostra vita*, moreover, the reader is directly involved in the displacement it describes. Indeed, with a complete lack of spatiotemporal coordinates, and no traditional exordium with which they might shape their expectations in terms of genre or narrative trajectory, the reader of the poem is placed in as decentralized a situation as the protagonist. However one chooses to read the *selva oscura*, whether through a Cartesian lens of lost resolution, as an allegory for depression and midlife crisis, or as a dramatization of exegetical confusion, the opening setting of the *Commedia* hinges on the destabilization of its central consciousness, while laying bare this initial problem as part of its own solution.¹⁴ The *Commedia* is, among all else, a quest for placeness and human centrality, and the disorienting, destabilizing narrative of the opening cantos are an invaluable touchstone as this journey towards the re-centering of the self unfolds. There is a palpable buildup of potential energy in the opening cantos that will launch Dante from the peripheral dark wood towards the center (or centers) of the universe.

¹² Francis X. Newman, "St. Augustine's Three Visions and the Structure of the *Commedia*", *MLN* 82, no. 1 (1967): 56-78, 65.

¹³ Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 18.

¹⁴ See David Dean Brockman, *A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Dante's The Divine Comedy* (London: Routledge, 2017); Lawrence Warner, "The Dark Wood and the Dark Word in Dante's 'Commedia'," *Comparative Literature Studies* 31, no. 4 (1995): 449-78

It is not incidental that one of these centers should be another forest: namely, the *selva antica* which Dante reaches at the summit of Purgatory. The final cantos of *Purgatorio* dramatize multiple convergent elements of centrality which are at issue in the poem, and this is achieved in no small measure through the invocation of the pathless periphery from which it began. If, as Dante expresses in the *Convivio*, “lo sommo desiderio di ciascuna cosa [...] è lo ritornare a lo suo principio” (*Conv.* 2.7.14), and if this desired return to one’s origins is borne out most explicitly *Purgatorio* with the arrival in Eden, such a return is nevertheless conducted through overt reference to the *Commedia*’s own point of origin in the *selva oscura*.¹⁵ Far from the utter placelessness of Milton’s Eden, “Wherever thus created, for no place / is yet distinct by name,” Dante is careful to give his Earthly Paradise an easily discernible, and not uncontroversial, geographical location.¹⁶ In purely geophysical terms, Dante’s Eden is located at the furthest point on Earth from its center, “Nel monte che si leva più da l’onda” (*Par.* 26.139): high above sea level on the opposite side of the globe to Jerusalem. Given its precise placement at Earth’s highest geographical point away from its core, the fact that some critics have sought to name Eden as the center of Purgatory might strike one as needlessly partisan, particularly given the topological and topographical evidence to the contrary.¹⁷ There is a strong case to be made, however, for the notion that the “divina foresta” at the top of Purgatory (28.2), with Eden at its heart, is the center to which the *selva oscura* is peripheral. The evidence for this begins with the similarities between the moments of arrival (or, better, re-finding) in the two forests. On arrival in the purgatorial *selva*:

Già m’avean trasportato i lenti passi
dentro a la selva antica tanto ch’io
non potea rivedere ond’io mi’ntrassi,
ed ecco più andar mi tolse un rio
che’nver’ sinistra con sue picciole onde
piegava l’erba che’n sua ripa uscìo. (*Purg.* 28.22-27)

¹⁵ See Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 101.

¹⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, VII.535-536; see Manuele Gragnotati, *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005), 112.

¹⁷ See Charles S. Singleton, *Dante’s Commedia. Elements of Structure* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1977); Newman “St. Augustine’s Three Visions and the Structure of the *Commedia*.”

Giuseppe Mazzotta notes a revisitation here of the vocabulary and setting of the *selva oscura* from a new, Edenic perspective.¹⁸ To unpack this observation, the *lenti passi* directly recall Dante-*personaggio's* state "pieri di sonno" in the forest of *Inferno* 1 (11), and the *picciole onde* of the river inevitably recall the "acqua perigliosa e guata" (24) of the *Commedia's* first simile. Most significantly, the third line of this passage reads as a direct transposition of the poem's initial disclosure of de-centralization: *io non so ben ridir com'i v'intra*. There is, as in the *selva oscura*, a complete unconscious loss of spatial coordinates. Unlike its infernal counterpart, however, this disclosure is plainly untrue. Dante knows precisely how he has come to be in this forest: the text itself is testament to the process of his arrival. This postured ignorance leads one to reexamine the nature of the journey that has culminated in this Edenic *nostos*, just as Matelda's cosmological, even cartographical account of the cosmos will shortly cause the reader to look ahead of and behind themselves from this central point of the journey.¹⁹ The theological meaning of Eden's centrality, that is to say, can only be fully understood through reference to the shadowy double at its earthly periphery.

Dante's arrival in the *selva antica*, then, is fundamental to the reorientation necessitated by the initial displacement of the *selva oscura*. The connections between the two forests do not end here, however. Up until the encounter with Beatrice at the top of Purgatory, Dante has been shadowed by a twofold threat initiated in the *Commedia's* opening moments: that of linguistic and spiritual paralysis. The anxieties inherent in these threats are borne out through the language and drama of *Inferno*, from his struggle to describe the savagery of the *selva oscura* (*Inf.* 1.4-6), through his near-encounter with Medusa in Canto 9, to the crippling stasis threatened by Lucifer: "Io non morì e non rimasi vivo" (*Inf.* 34.25). Significantly, the language of these threats is gradually recapitulated *in bono* as he moves through the *selva antica* and arrives in Eden. Just as the ice of Cocytus has threatened Dante's "lago del cor" from the poem's opening scene (*Inf.* 1.20) only to be thawed in *Purgatorio* 30 (97-99), so, too, does his state of being "maligno" and "silvestro" (*Purg.* 30.118) which he has carried with him since

¹⁸ Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Reading Dante* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 172.

¹⁹ See Theodore J. Cachey Jr., "Cosmographic Cartography of the 'Perfect' Twenty-Eights," in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, vol. 3, eds. George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 111-38.

the *selva oscura*, fall away as he completes his purgation in Eden.²⁰ From this Edenic vantage point, the *in malo* language and setting of *Inferno*'s opening are revealed to be the necessary forerunners of Dante's final purification before his ascent to Paradise. It is only at this central moment that the dangerous periphery from which Dante began can be fully understood. Here, at the heart of the ancient forest, he is given his name for the first and only time: at the center of this wood, Dante regains the human centrality which was lost in the wilderness in which the poem began. In a very real sense, the disoriented *ritrovarsi* of *Inferno* 1 is here recontextualized as a re-centering of, and a returning to, the self. If, as Francis Fergusson suggests, "the *Paradiso Terrestre* is the earth redeemed," it is redeemed at least in part through the casting off of the earthly *selva oscura*, and the return to centrality which such a process entails.²¹ It is precisely the "coalescence of beginnings and ends" at the close of *Purgatorio* that allows for the concentrated interplay of centralities at this juncture in the poem.²²

With these considerations in mind, to borrow a phrase from Arundhati Roy, it is the "irreconcilable far-apartness" of the dark and ancient forests that confers centrality on the latter.²³ Read in this way, the *selva antica*, with Eden at its core, is one of the poem's most important centers: as well as being the nexus between the *Commedia*'s earthly and celestial realms, it is also the stage for the final re-stabilizing and reorientation of its central consciousness. One need not, however, be satisfied with spiritual or allegorical centrality alone: Dante offers very concrete implications of its geophysical and cosmological centrality.²⁴ Eden, formed of earth, but out of reach from earthly forces (*Purg.* 28.97-102), is high enough to directly experience the divine movement of air generated by the *primum mobile* which, as will be seen, also contains the paradoxical central point of *Paradiso*. This network of centralities is made still more totalizing if one considers that the very ground upon which

²⁰ See Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 131-32; Cormac Ó Cuilleánáin, "Patterns of Enclosure in the 'Commedia,'" in *Patterns in Dante, Nine Literary Essays*, eds. Cormac Ó Cuilleánáin and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 119-45, 122-23.

²¹ Francis Fergusson, *Dante's Drama of the Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 205.

²² See Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "'Sì pia l'ombra d'Anchise si porse': *Paradiso* 15.25" in *The Poetry of Allusion: Virgil and Ovid in Dante's 'Commedia'*, eds. Rachel Jacoff and Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 145-56, 145.

²³ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: 4th Estate, 2017 [1997]), 93.

²⁴ See Cachey, "Cosmographic Cartography of the 'Perfect' Twenty-Eights," 126; For a discussion of these facets of Eden, see Rachel Jacoff, "Intertextualities in Arcadia: *Purgatorio* 30.49-51," in *The Poetry of Allusion*, 131-44.

Eden is founded is, in fact, as cosmically central as can be. Or, rather, it was: for the earth which moved from beneath Lucifer on his fall to planet's core "per fuggir lui lasciò qui loco vòto / quella ch'appar di qua, e sù ricorse" (*Inf.* 34.125-126). The geophysical implication here is that the displacement by Lucifer at the fall resulted in Eden's cultivation on ground which has passed through the center of the Earth, and of Dante's cosmos: the geography and facticity of these two realms are closely interrelated, as are both *cantiche's* multivalent relationships with centrality. Such a reading further underscores *Purgatorio's* thematization of centrality in its final cantos. That Eden should be given such geophysical, topographical, and thematic centrality comes as no surprise, for it also marks the resolution of the crisis which, ultimately, gave rise to the *Commedia*. In Eden the central tragedy of *Vita nuova* is undone, and Beatrice is regained. At the end of Dante's earthly exploring, he returns to a re-stabilized, re-centered, version of where he began: real world, otherworld, and inner-world centrality are at last brought together, and he is prepared to move towards the paradoxical universal centrality of Paradise. This process of reorientation and re-centralization is an essential prelude to the process of figuring the paradoxes of the third *cantica*, and of confronting the final obliteration of center and periphery in the Empyrean.

CELESTIAL CENTRALITIES

As has been intimated, critical approaches to Dante's geographies tend to raise more questions than they answer, particularly, and unsurprisingly, when it comes to mapping the multiform landscape of *Paradiso*. Identifying commonalities between the centers of the individual *cantiche* is equally challenging in this regard, particularly given the fact that each realm is characterized by its own self-contained geography.²⁵ Nevertheless, Dante arranges the three parts of the poem in such a way that each *cantica's* "final vision" contributes to the *Commedia's* overarching interrogation of centrality. Rachel Jacoff has described *Purgatorio* 30 as "a turning point that is at once a vortex and a peripeteia," and all three of these terms are applicable to the moments of conversion which characterize the corresponding centers of *Inferno* and *Paradiso*.²⁶ In addition to the interacting peripheries and centralities remarked above, it will be seen that the distinct metaphysics of each *cantica* inform the poetics of centrality borne out in the *Commedia* as a whole. The points at the centers of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* may be read as such in their

²⁵ See David Heinsen, "Ironizing Ugolino," *Bibliotheca Dantesca* 1 (2018): 70-95, 70.

²⁶ Jacoff, "Intertextualities in Arcadia," 131.

own right, but neither *punto* can be fully appreciated or understood without the other.

COMMOTION, CO-MOTION

The concurrent parallelisms and polarities of the final visions of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* have, on the whole, been well documented.²⁷ Critics have thus far offered little, however, on the fact that such thematic and structural overlaps belie a crucial divergent aspect of the culminating encounters in terms of centrality. Just as Paradise is figured as a “deiforme regno” (*Par.* 2.20) so, too, does the “doloroso regno” of Hell take the cue of its form from its “emperor” (*Inf.* 34.28). Lucifer is the embodiment of all that the ruler of Paradise is not: “S’el fu sì bel com’elli è ora brutto, / e contra ’l suo fattore alzò le ciglia, / ben dee da lui procedere ogni lutto” (*Inf.* 34.34-36). Absolutely isolated, absolutely earthly, absolutely damned, he confers not beatitude, but *lutto* upon his infernal cohabitants. To the implications of Lucifer’s fall on the geography of Dante’s cosmos remarked above, here it might be added that Dante’s placement of Lucifer at the Earth’s core, “al quale ogni gravezza si rauna” (*Inf.* 34.74) is a theological and geological choice corroborated by the scientific enquiry of the *Questio de aqua et terra*. In that text, Dante refers to the “extreme circumference of the universe” in relation to the center of the Earth (*Questio*, 76), beyond which, the *Questio* implies and *Paradiso* confirms, is the Empyrean.²⁸ It follows that Lucifer is placed in polarity with this extreme circumference, at what might be called the “extreme center” of the cosmos. That geocentric models of the universe were prevalent during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, following long-established Aristotelian and Ptolemaic thought, hardly needs restating here. It is interesting to note, however, that the emphasis on Lucifer’s position of extreme centrality maps closely onto interrogations of geocosmic centrality conducted in Dante’s own time. In Restoro D’Arezzo’s vernacular treatise of c.1282, *La composizione del mondo*, one sees a similar insistence on the center of the earth as a cosmic *centro*, defined as such in terms of its extreme distance from Heaven: “E troviamo il centro della terra essere centro della spera delle stesse fisse, e possiamlo chiamare centro del mondo”; “e questo punto pare che sia centro della terra, o centro

²⁷ See, for instance, Piero Boitani, “The Sibyl’s Leaves: A Study of *Paradiso* XXXIII,” *Dante Studies* 96 (1978): 83-126; Rowan Williams, “Ice, Fire, and Holy Water,” in *Vertical Readings in Dante’s Comedy*, vol. 3, 217-28.

²⁸ “Ultime circumferentie universi.” P.H. Wicksteed’s translation from *The Latin Works of Dante Alighieri* (London: Dent, 1904).

di tutto il corpo del mondo".²⁹ This latter emphasis on the materiality of the Earth and its *centro* is of especial significance here: irrespective of whether Dante was familiar with this text or not, it elucidates the state of scientific thought about earthly cosmic centrality towards the end of the thirteenth century. This scientific context in turn casts light on Dante's underscoring of Lucifer's position at the extreme material center of the cosmos. This materiality which, as has been remarked, is the hallmark of a *mezzo* as well as certain types of *centro*, will be discussed in due course, as Lucifer's material centrality is set against the *mezzo*-less environment of the Empyrean.

Here, however, there is a problem. Charles Singleton conceives of Lucifer as "a terminus, a fixed point at the center which is also the end: a kind of absolute pole of Evil counter-balancing that of the Supreme Good at the center and end of *Paradiso*".³⁰ Certainly, in this regard there is a tempting parallelism in the arrangement of *Inferno* and *Paradiso*: each would seem to conclude at what T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets* calls "the still point of the turning world," or, better, at what Melville's Ishmael describes as "that enchanted calm which [...] lurks at the heart of every commotion".³¹ Both *cantiche* are characterized by such Melvillean commotion, but to very different ends. For while *Inferno* imparts a sense of commotion as it is commonly understood, in *Paradiso* it bears its etymological sense of *con moveō*: a harmonious co-movement with the divine. The divergence runs deeper than this, however, and it is vital to an understanding of the paradox of infernal centrality. When coming to discuss *Paradiso*, it will be seen that Singleton's assertion does not sufficiently account for that *cantica*'s complex relationship with physical and spiritual centrality, but a similar spatial problem is also at work in *Inferno*. Lucifer's special cosmic centrality ironically concretizes his utter exclusion from the celestial community, a fact underscored by his placement in *Inferno*'s outlying Canto 34, which offsets the otherwise harmonious structural balance of the three *cantiche*. Lucifer's "centrality," then, is an ironic physical testament to his relegation to the furthest periphery of a universe moved by love, with God at its center. Whenever one speaks of Lucifer as a center, then, one is also necessarily speaking of him as a periphery, and an infernal proximity to him

²⁹ Restoro D'Arezzo, *La Composizione del mondo*, ed. Enrico Narducci (Rome: Tipografia delle scienze matematiche e fisiche, 1859), XII; XIX.

³⁰ Singleton, *Dante's Commedia. Elements of Structure*, 42.

³¹ T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001 [1944]), 5. See also Dominic Manganiello, *T.S. Eliot and Dante* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1851]), 422.

signifies a placement at the furthest point in the universe away from God. His cosmic *centralità* is part and parcel of his damnation: indicative of his extreme isolation from the heavenly community. That this infernal centrality is integral to Dante's ultimate experience of the Godhead, however, is demonstrated by the fact that Lucifer's body becomes the vehicle for the literal experience of conversion he undergoes at the bottom of Hell.³² The materiality, the haptics of this transition, and the resultant reversal of perspective are in marked contrast to the corresponding metaphysical inversion in the late cantos of *Paradiso*, of which more will be said below.

Lucifer, then, embodies what Toni Morrison has termed "the desolated center, where the self that is no self ma[kes] its home".³³ Selfhood and centrality are always at odds in *Inferno*. From the suppressed identities of the *ignavi* to the crystallized infernal personhood of Ugolino as damned father and statesman (*Inf.* 3. 34), each damned soul is condemned to become the center of their own universe of impotent self-involvement, even monomania.³⁴ One of *Inferno*'s greatest ironies is precisely the arrangement of each of these monomaniacal souls around the epicenter of Lucifer's "perfectly diabolical insularity".³⁵ Not for nothing is Hell described early in the poem as a *centro* in and of itself, with Virgil drawing a sharp distinction between "questo centro" and "l'ampio loco" of Paradise (*Inf.* 2.83-84). Here, the concentrated center of damnation at the Earth's core becomes a metonym for Hell as a whole, laying emphasis on the poetics of desolation and isolation at work in *Inferno* from its periphery to its center. This infernal spatial dynamic is indirectly articulated by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*: "To the extent that center and periphery are distinguished," he writes, "the center has its own tragic reality [...] So too has the periphery- after its fashion".³⁶ Though Dante is not the focus of Lefebvre's analysis here, he nevertheless succinctly encapsulates the infernal condition: for in Hell both center and periphery variously inflect the reality of damnation. By complete contrast, the blessed in *Paradiso* are perfected both in their selfhood and their

³² See John Freccero, *The Poetics of Conversion*, 180-85.

³³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 2016 [1987]), 165.

³⁴ Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 40.

³⁵ Heather Webb, "Power Differentials, Unreliable Models, and Homoerotic Desire in the *Comedy*," *Italian Studies* 68, no. 1 (2013): 17-35, 35.

³⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991 [1974]), 20.

centrality, dwelling as they do simultaneously as individual, completely fulfilled paradisiacal selves, and as one with the central *punto* of Paradise.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

This simultaneity, however, is an aspect of *Paradiso* that complicates any discussion of centrality within it. Indeed, for all of its investment in ontological and theological certainties, the third *cantica* is run through by a series of dualities that complicate analysis of its structure. The first of these is overtly articulated by Beatrice in *Paradiso* 4 (28-36): "D'i Serafin colui che più s'india, / Moïsè, Samuel e quel Giovanni / che prender vuoi, io dico, non Maria, / non hanno in altro cielo i loro scanni / che questi spirti che mo t'appariro, / né hanno a l'esser lor più o meno anni, / ma tutti fanno bello il primo giro, / e differentemente han dolce vita / per sentir più e men l'eterno Spiro". The souls, that is to say, reside simultaneously in the spheres in which Dante encounters them, and *indiati* in the Empyrean which, Dante repeatedly stresses, is located beyond the extreme circumference of the universe (*Questio*, 76; *Conv.* 2.3.8). Paradoxically, however, as Dante enters the *primum mobile*, Beatrice reveals that the Empyrean is located both at the extreme periphery and the absolute center of the universe, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. Up to this juncture, after all, the reader has been given to understand that the Earth is at the center of the cosmos. This new model posits that God, and not Earth, is the universe's central point. This paradisiacal double-think would appear to contravene the *Convivio's* insistence that "La Geometria si muove intra due repugnanti a essa, sì come tra 'l punto e lo cerchio" (2.8.26), as it would appear that the Empyrean is both *punto* and *cerchio*. Such geometrical impossibilities are also interrogated in *Monarchia* (3.3.2), in which the squaring of the circle is used to indicate humankind's imperfect comprehension of the divine, and the same earthly limitations to understanding are at issue here in *Paradiso*.³⁷ As a foretaste of how this doubleness can be the case, Beatrice gives this gloss: "La natura del mondo, che quieta / il mezzo e tutto l'altro intorno move, / quindi comincia come da sua meta, / e questo cielo non ha altro *dove* / che la mente divina, in che s'accende / l'amor che'l volge e la virtù ch' ei piove" (*Par.* 27.106-111). Then follows the *tour de force* of perspectival reorientation which will explain these theological dualities.

Indeed, it is telling that, before his entry into the *primum mobile*, Dante's gaze should briefly be directed back towards Earth: the center of the cosmos as he has hitherto understood it (*Par.*

³⁷ Boitani, "The Sibyl's Leaves," 110.

27.77-87). As well as being a moment of great pathos, this backward glance gives the reader a (literal) point of reference before participating in the poem's most extraordinary perspectival shift. With the "varco / folle d'Ulisse" (82-83) as his touchstone, Dante prepares to perform his own Ulyssean trespass as he penetrates the celestial *punto* at the center of the universe, upon which "depende il Cielo e tutta la Natura" (*Par.* 28.42). At first, on seeing the divine point of light at the center of the angelic hierarchies, the wayfarer is confused: "ma nel mondo sensibile si puote / veder le volte tanto più divine / quant' elle son dal centro più remote" (*Par.* 28.49-51). With his earthly eyes—those of *Monarchia* and the *Convivio*—he cannot comprehend how this point can be both the center and the circumference of the universe. Here, the whole of *Paradiso* appears to be a paradigmatic "contradictory space" as described by Lefebvre.³⁸ Indeed, any pursuit of a Lefebvrian "logic of space" in the third *cantica* is swiftly exposed as a futile endeavor: the process of arrival at the *Commedia*'s theological, human center involves the surrendering of any such attempts at rationalization in favor of divine logic, under which center and circumference can become one.³⁹ Singleton's analysis does not address this fundamental paradisiacal dialectic. The poem's explanation must come from "quella che'mparadisa la mia mente" (*Par.* 28.3), and at this juncture that is precisely what she does. She prises apart the physical and spiritual structures of the universe: the former is characterized by the celestial spheres hitherto experienced, the latter by the orders of the angels, with the *primum mobile* as the interface between the two.⁴⁰ It is only as Dante bestrides these two coexisting models of the universe that God can be understood as all-encompassed (center) and all-encompassing (periphery). No physical *mezzo* could occupy such a paradoxical position; no haptic interlude can aid in this moment of conversion. Dante must relinquish such earthbound notions at this point: his cosmological perspective is completely inverted as this piece of divine understanding falls into place.

Not that such interplay of point and circumference is unprecedented in the poem, or in Dante's *oeuvre* at large. He is careful to stage scenes in *Infèrno* and *Paradiso* which dramatize their divergent relationships with centrality, as well as their extended meditations on the image of the circle. In the former, the avaricious and prodigal clash in the middle of a "cerchio tetro" (*Inf.* 7.31) before returning to its edge: an inane, repetitive action characterized by maddening disunity. In the Heaven of the Sun, by contrast,

³⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 292ff.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴⁰ See Mazzotta, *Reading Dante*, 248.

the "doppia danza" (*Par.* 8.20) of the blessed stages not only the absolute harmony of the souls, but also a literalistic display of the universal human centrality which will be achieved at the final vision: "Io vidi più folgór vivi e vincenti / far di noi centro e di sé far corona, / più dolce in voce che in vista lucenti" (*Par.* 10.64–66). Dante's living form, a source of repeated shock to the souls of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, here becomes an axis for the pageantry of the blessed, while also anticipating his spiritual synthesis in the centrality of the final vision. Indeed, nascent prefigurations of this kind are also at work in *Vita nuova*, in which Dante depicts the Lord of Love at the center of a circle: "I am as the center of a circle, equally distant from each point of the circumference. You are not" (*VN.* 12.4).⁴¹ Tellingly, when Dante asks the significance of Love's position at this central point, Love responds "Non dimandare più che utile ti sia" (*VN.* 12.6). The *Commedia's* extended occupation with centrality, then, is strongly informed by the interrogation of, and final answer to, this question left open by the earlier text. As Arielle Saiber and Aba Mbirika observe, "in order to 'see' [...] the mystery of the Trinity, Dante had to enter into the paradoxes of the circle."⁴² He confronts these paradoxes head on in the *Commedia*, while *Vita nuova* goes only as far as gesturing "Oltre la spera che più larga gira" (41.10), stopping short of the problems inherent in figuring what lies beyond.

Indeed, such questions of figuration and perspective are as evident in Lower Hell as they are in Upper Paradise. As Dante, clinging to Virgil, passes through the "punto / al qual si traggon d'ogne parte i pesi" (*Inf.* 34.110–111), down becomes up, and the pit of Hell seen from above describes the shape of the mountain the wayfarer will shortly climb. It is only as Dante-*personaggio* passes through the center of the Earth that Dante-*poeta* reveals that what has appeared to be a descent has in fact been a continuous ascent towards and beyond Mount Purgatory.⁴³ As such, the conversion at the center of the Earth simultaneously enacts the theological maxim that the way up is down, while demonstrating that an infernal descent is only such from an infernal perspective.⁴⁴ The difference in *Paradiso* is that no matter the perspective from which one views its various spheres, "ogni dove / in cielo è paradiso"

⁴¹" Ego tanquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentie partes; tu autem non sic." Translation mine.

⁴² Arielle Saiber and Aba Mbirika, "The three *giri* of *Paradiso* XXXIII," *Dante Studies* 131 (2013), 237–72, 245.

⁴³ See Freccero, "Infernal Inversion and Christian Conversion," 182.

⁴⁴ See Robert Pogue Harrison, "The Love that Moves," in *Critical Insights: The Inferno*, ed. Patrick Hunt (Pasadena and Hackensack: Salem Press, 2012), 35–48, 46.

(*Par.* 3.88-89). In the rigid hierarchy of Hell there is no such universal truth: the damned are utterly, infernally, where they are, with all that their particular placement entails. Just as Heidegger remarked of *Being and Time* that “the and [...] conceals within itself the central problem” so, too, is *Paradiso* characterized by a series of problematizing *and*s which inform its plural geographies.⁴⁵ This issue will reach its climax as Dante attempts to figure the Godhead, which is characterized precisely in these Heideggerian terms: “tre persone eterne [...] una essenza sì una e sì trina, / che sofferà congiunto “sono” ed “este”” (*Par.* 24.139-141). In Paradise, the individual signifiers of periphery and center collapse together: both come to denote the single paradisiacal signified that is union with the divine. This is the paradoxical centrality for which the text has been preparing the reader from its opening moments: the witnessing of the divine location where “s’appunta ogne *ubi* e ogne *quando*” (*Par.* 29.12) draws together every center experienced thus far by ascribing to them a common, universally central point of origin. Once again, however, this line’s allusion to Genesis cannot fail, as Dante approaches the divine central *punto*, to recall the poem’s point of departure which, as has been seen, takes the same biblical source as its anchor.⁴⁶ Indeed, Robin Kirkpatrick has noted that the word *punto*, obsessively repeated in *Paradiso* 28, inescapably recalls the fatalistic *punto* which overcame Paolo and Francesca (*Inf.* 5.132).⁴⁷ To this one might add the redolence of the wayfarer’s state at the very beginning of his journey: “tant’era pien di sonno a quel punto” (*Inf.* 1.11). These infernal redolences underscore the fact that one must understand center *and* periphery if one is to fully comprehend and experience the magnitude of the poem’s final vision. This multiple perspective is also required in the triad of cantos which the poem itself endorses as its structural center. These cantos are the focus of the next section.

CENTRO DEL CAMMIN: PURGATORIO 16, 17, AND 18

Critics commonly discuss these three cantos as a tightly bound “central” unit, though few have given attention to precisely what it is that binds them together, or how this unit might be thought

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997 [1929]), 170.

⁴⁶ See Mazzotta, *Reading Dante*, 252.

⁴⁷ Robin Kirkpatrick, notes to Dante, *Paradiso*, ed. and trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin 2007), 449.

of as a center of the poem as a whole in more than a mere numerical sense.⁴⁸ Teodolinda Barolini has suggested that, in the numerologically central cantos of *Inferno*, Dante presents a composite allegorical image of the whole poem in the figure of Geryon.⁴⁹ Despite very strong evidence for the case, however, no critic has yet posited a similar argument for the equivalent cantos of *Purgatorio*. Setting their privileged structural placement aside, there is much in these cantos that invites a reading of them as a microcosm of the *Commedia* as a whole. While Mira Mocan has argued that *Purgatorio* 16 and 17, as well as recalling the beginning of the poem, "cont[engono] anche la sua fine, condensando davvero, a livello lessicale e figurale, la totalità dell'opera-universo," a fuller, and perhaps more successful rendering of the *opera-universo* is one which includes *Purgatorio* 18, replete as it is with far more paradisiacal resonances than Canto 17.⁵⁰ Such a reading is offered in the present section. Kirkpatrick identifies a marked return to the anxieties articulated by *Inferno* 1 in these cantos, and it will be seen that, as a unit, they draw the reader back to the dense network of displaced centralities that characterizes the poem's opening moments.⁵¹ Indeed, the respective themes, lexicons and landscapes of each canto directly recall those of the poem's three *cantiche*. It is not merely the case that *Purgatorio* 16 is infernal, 17 purgatorial, and 18 paradisiacal, however: these cantos recapitulate *in nuce* the poetics of the respective *cantica* they invoke, beginning with their incipits and continuing throughout the cantos, intertwined with the narrative action they describe. As will be seen, the persistent critical focus on numerical middleness has belied the rich development of the theme of centrality in these deeply reflexive cantos, and Dante's careful construction of a metapoetic and metatextual axis around which the poem revolves.

Purgatorio 16

The overt recollection of *Inferno* in *Purgatorio* 16 begins with the canto's opening lines:

Buio d'inferno e di notte privata
d'ogne pianeta, sotto pover cielo,
quant'esser può di nuvol tenebrata,

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Manuele Gragnolati "Politics of Desire" in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, vol. 2, eds. George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016); Mocan, "Amore, libero arbitrio e fantasia."

⁴⁹ Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 66.

⁵⁰ Mocan, "Amore, libero arbitrio e fantasia," 163.

⁵¹ Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante's 'Inferno': Difficulty and Dead Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 38.

non fece al viso mio sì grosso velo
come quel fummo ch'ivi ci coperse,
né a sentir di così aspro pelo,
che l'occhio stare aperto non sofferse (*Purg.* 16.1-7)

This infernally dark setting contrasts sharply with the blinding light of the previous canto. There, Dante is so overwhelmed by the light of the Angel on the terrace of envy that “a fuggir la mia vista fu ratta” (*Purg.* 15.24). Here, his vision is impaired by the smoke which darkens the terrace of anger. As well as the infernal redolence of its opening line, the fact that the *grosso velo* enforces the closing of the eyes recalls the ways in which the souls in Hell have—willingly or not—been blind to divine love. Indeed, the very “materiality” of the terrace’s darkness strengthens its resonance with *Inferno*, particularly if one accepts Nina Edwards’ suggestion that darkness constitutes the very “substance of hell” in the first *cantica*.⁵² Further, emphasis on materiality subtly but definitely recalls Lucifer’s function as a material *mezzo* at the geocosmic center discussed above. This substantiality is affirmed by the text itself, as Dante emerges from “l’aura morta / che m’avea contristati li occhi e ’l petto” (*Purg.* 1.17-18), and into the light of Purgatory. *Inferno* is characterized throughout by the language of darkness and blindness: “l’aere senza stelle”; “questo mondo cieco”; “cieco / carcere” (*Inf.* 3.23; 27.25; 10.58-59), the last of which also recalls the “carcere caeco” described in the *Aeneid* (VI.734). Indeed, Guido da Montefeltro’s reference to the blind world of Hell, offers a clear prefiguration of Marco Lombardo’s maxim that “lo mondo è cieco, e tu vien bien da lui” (*Purg.* 16.66), and this worldly blindness is further corroborated by his framing of the tension between Church and Empire in terms of diminished light: “Soleva Roma [...] due soli aver [...] L’un l’altro ha spento” (106-109). Throughout the canto, moreover, one finds the distinctly infernal rhyme *morte/scorte* (43, 45) as well as vocabulary which recalls the beginning of the journey of *Inferno*: *aspro*, *amaro*, and *selvaggio* (6, 13, 135). Most strikingly of all, Dante stresses the risk of *smarrirsi* in the terrace’s hellish darkness (11). The canto’s vocabulary, then, strengthens the recollections of *Inferno* constituted in the terrace’s landscape and environment.

Indeed, Marco’s discourse throughout the canto is permeated by infernal resonances, beginning even with his introduction: “Lombardo fui, e fu’ chiamato Marco” (46) recalls similar constructions used by damned souls in Hell, most notably Guido’s “Io fui uom d’arme e poi fui cordigliero” (*Inf.* 27.67), and, in an extreme

⁵² Nina Edwards, *Darkness. A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 69.

case, Capaneus' "Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto" (*Inf.* 14.51). Such infernally delusive attachment to earthly identity will be corrected in *Paradiso* by the likes of Justinian ("Cesare fui e sono Iustiniano" (*Par.* 6.10)), and St. Bonaventure ("Io son la vita di Bonaventura" (*Par.* 12.127)). More significantly, Marco's advice on how to proceed to the next terrace carries striking infernal undertones: "Per montar sù dirittamente vai" (*Purg.* 16.49). By this stage of his journey, Dante has learned that the *diritta via* is all too easily lost, and is in any case not always the best way to proceed. It is, as Harrison has suggested, precisely because he sought to follow the *diritta via* that Dante was lost in the *selva oscura* to begin with.⁵³ The reorientation towards God which an ascent of Purgatory entails is not achieved by following a physical *diritta via*, but through a re-centering of Scripture, liturgy, and prayer within the consciousness.⁵⁴ All this aside, Marco's directions could never suffice as *scorte*, given as they are in the double darkness of smoke and closed eyes. They arrive, moreover, among a network of linguistic parallels and resonances which hardly seem incidental. Marco even goes on unwittingly to recall the language of the gate of Hell in his exposition on free will: his description of the human spirit "mossa da lieto fattore" (*Purg.* 16.89) recalls the gate's affirmation that "Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore" (*Inf.* 3.4), while his expression of the need for a ruler "che discernesse / de la vera cittate almen la torre" (*Purg.* 16.95-96) inevitably recalls the distorted geography of the "città dolente" (*Inf.* 3.1). While this latter is not enormously suggestive in isolation, it becomes much more so in the broader context of Marco's discourse, and against the infernal backdrop of the canto. By reorienting Dante's focus towards earthly civic issues, his language, which is permeated by a lexicon of the city, cannot but recall the landscape of the anti-city of Hell, as well as the civic concerns of damned souls like Ciaccio and Farinata (*Inf.* 6; 10).⁵⁵ This canto is full of the kind of linguistic and procedural traps which characterized the first part of Dante's journey, stretching back even as far as his initial *smarrimento* in the *selva oscura*. By this point, it has been made all too clear that following the *diritta via* leads one on a straight path not towards salvation, but towards the *città dolente*.

Nor is it merely the language and setting of the third terrace that recall *Inferno*. John Took suggests that anger is by far the most

⁵³ See Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 82.

⁵⁴ See Corbett, "Moral Structure," 72.

⁵⁵ See Claire E. Honess, "Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'*, 192-207.

characteristic trait of the damned, and one need only consider Francesca's vengeful condemnation of Gianciotto to Caina, or the furious gestures of Vanni Fucci to see the truth of this (*Inf.* 5.107; 25.1-3).⁵⁶ Additionally, the nature of the penitence for anger also places the purging souls in a state which problematizes the purgative experience hitherto depicted. In the first instance, the smoke brings about a physical solitude which is highly uncharacteristic of Purgatory Proper. Up to this point, the terraces have been characterized by community: the "sospiri, pianti e alti guai" of *Inferno* (*Inf.* 3.22) are substituted from the first in *Purgatorio* by communal song, prayer, and gesture. While the angry all sing *Agnus Dei* in one voice, and are therefore able to participate in the auditory community of the mountain, the darkness of the terrace severely limits the souls' participation in any kind of physical community, setting Canto 16 in still stronger contradistinction to Canto 15 which, Mazzotta suggests, thematizes the "interconnectivity and reflexivity of all things".⁵⁷ To be sure, the envious are also deprived of their sight, and that of the prideful is limited by their postures, but the fact remains that Dante meets multiple souls on both of these terraces, whereas on the terrace of anger Marco's solitude is emphasized by his being the only penitent encountered. So impenetrable is the isolating darkness that Marco can follow the poets only "quanto mi lece" (*Purg.* 16.34). The smoke of the terrace, that is to say, enforces a solitude of the kind which in *Inferno* is frequently self-inflicted: witness Farinata and Cavalcante's pointed ignorance of one another, or the baseless grandeur of the solitary Capaneus (*Inf.* 10; 14). This state of infernal solitude is developed further as Marco initiates the extended occupation of these central cantos: the nature of free will. At the outset, he articulates a key principle which retrospectively shapes one's understanding of *Inferno*: "'Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia; / non dico tutti, ma, posto ch'i'l dica, / lume v'è dato a bene e a malizia, / e libero voler'" (*Purg.* 16.73-76). It is only at this juncture that Dante provides a crucial gloss to the state of the damned in Hell. Here it is that one learns that they have all, in some sense, chosen to be there.⁵⁸ If, in *Paradiso*, "vision itself is conjoined in God, forming a community of vision that singularly connects each to each," as Heather Webb suggests, then here, as Dante approaches the midpoint of the journey towards Paradise, the lens of the poem redirects the reader's attention back to the blindness and anti-community of Hell (and,

⁵⁶ See John Took, *Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 421.

⁵⁷ Mazzotta, *Reading Dante*, 146.

⁵⁸ See Lino Pertile, "Introduction to *Inferno*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 67-90, 78.

the canto implies, Earth) from this uniquely solitary purgatorial perspective.⁵⁹

This is not the only way in which the purgation of anger is marked out from that of the other vices. There is another unique aspect of this terrace which binds this canto still more closely to *Inferno*. In comparing the retributive systems of the first two *cantiche*, Marc Cogan writes that "Purgatory moves by opposition [...] demanding correction through action opposed to the sin that is to be corrected".⁶⁰ While this summation is true in the case of the stooping prideful and the vigor of the slothful, its wider limitations are plain. Commentators including Fergusson and Kirkpatrick have convincingly argued the darkness of this terrace to be an extension of, and not a direct counterpoint to, the vice of anger, and there are other evident exceptions to Cogan's rule of opposition.⁶¹ The penitent avaricious, after all, are prostrate "Sì come l'occhio nostro non s'adese / in alto, fisso a le cose terrene; / così giustizia qui a terra il merse" (*Purg.* 19.118-120); the gluttonous continue to experience insatiable hunger and thirst; the lustful kiss as their paths converge on the seventh terrace (*Purg.* 22-24; 26-26). Nevertheless, there is a way in which the particular extension of anger is strongly and uniquely linked to *Inferno*. Arianna Punzi's reading that "la cecità non è solo quella concreta che assale i pellegrini nel girone degli iracondi, ma è anche quella della mente che impedisce all'uomo di comprendere la volontà di Dio" aids in clarifying the connection.⁶² *Purgatorio* 16's wider thematic concern, Punzi's reading suggests, is not just the literal blindness of the terrace, but also the spiritual blindness of earthly life and, in a deeper sense, of infernal damnation. The blindness of the penitent angry is temporary, that of the living has the potential to be so. The pervasive infernal resonances of this canto serve to illustrate the radically divergent paths to which earthly spiritual blindness may lead. The facticity of salvation is reaffirmed in this canto, paradoxically, through the foregrounding of its opposite. Opposition has a role to play here, but not as Cogan conceives it. In the following canto, the nature of purgation is framed in terms of reemergence from

⁵⁹ Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 199; see Webb, "The *Inferno* from a Purgatorial (and Paradisiacal) Perspective," in *Critical Insights: The Inferno*, 49-62.

⁶⁰ Marc Cogan, *The Design in the Wax* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 39.

⁶¹ Fergusson, *Dante's Drama of the Mind*, 76; Robin Kirkpatrick, Notes to Dante, *Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin 2007), 397.

⁶² Arianna Punzi, "Centro e centri nella *Commedia*," *AnticoModerno* 5 (1999): 73-90, 76.

infernal darkness, and of the transfiguration of one's internal landscape.

Purgatorio 17

While suggesting that *Purgatorio 17* is “purgatorial” initially seems tautological, the canto is framed in a language which strongly recapitulates the purgatorial mode in a fashion unique to the second *cantica*. As with the previous canto, the evidence for this begins with its incipit, though more subtly:

Ricorditi, lettor, se mai ne l'alpe
ti colse nebbia per la qual vedessi
non altrimenti che per pelle talpe,
come, quando i vapori umidi e spessi
a diradar cominciansi, la spera
del sol debilmente entra per essi;
e fia la tua imagine leggera
in giungere a veder com'io rividi
lo sole in pria, che già nel corcar era (*Purg* 17.1-9)

There is a very clear recapitulation here of the transition between Hell and Purgatory, characterized as both progressions are by a reemergence of light. This return to light, Francis Newman has remarked, signals a need for a new kind of vision, and a new mode of seeing is precisely what is at issue in these opening lines. On the one hand, they recall the *cantica's* immediate emphasis on seeing anew (“a li occhi miei ricominciò diletto” (*Purg.* 1.16)) by dramatising the literal transition from blindness to vision.⁶³ The words *imagine* and *rividi* in fact initiate a canto-wide concentration of the language of sight (“imagine” (21, 31), “visione” (34), “imagar” (43), “veder” (46, 130), “riguardar” (50), “vista” (52)). On the other hand, they place a distinctly purgatorial focus on memory and introspection. Throughout the second *cantica*, memory is seen to be one of the fundamental aspects of Purgatory's penitential system. From Dante's encounter with Casella, whom he implores to sing “Se nuova legge non ti toglie / memoria” (*Purg.* 2.106-107), to his immersion in the waters of Lethe and Eunoe (*Purg.* 33), *Purgatorio* is characterized by the thematization of memory, and the act of remembrance in prayer and thought is fundamental to the theological and metaphysical frameworks of the second *cantica*. Crucially, in this regard, the canto's opening line also anticipates Virgil's words to Dante when he baulks before the flames surrounding Eden: “Ricorditi, ricorditi! E se io / sovresso Gerïon ti guardai salvo, / che farò ora presso più a Dio?” (*Purg.* 27.22-24). Zygmunt

⁶³ See Newman, “St. Augustine's Three Visions and the Structure of the *Commedia*,” 66.

Barański writes of this latter episode that "just as Virgil exhorts his companion to deliberate on what he has heard, so Dante similarly encourages his reader to reflect on the *Comedy*, a basic requirement if he or she is to understand, retain, and act on what the poem reveals," and the same basic requirement is in play throughout this canto.⁶⁴ This appeal to the reader's memory, then, is in itself singularly purgatorial. If, as John Freccero suggests, Dante's authorial addresses "create the author as much as they create his audience," then here the reader is overtly drawn into the re-creative purgatorial act of remembrance, as they have been in the humbling, postural act of reading the vertically arranged acrostic of *Purgatorio* 12.⁶⁵ It is made very clear in *Purgatorio* 17 that *nostra vita* is still at stake at this stage of Dante's journey, as he passes through the numerological and structural *mezzo del cammin*. This is far from incidental wordplay: a microcosmic reading of this canto evinces a crucial interaction between the concepts of *centro* and *mezzo* at this privileged juncture in the poem. The spatial *centro* of Purgatory, between Hell and Heaven, is the physical *mezzo* through which spiritual purification occurs. Further, the coaction of the two phenomena in this purgatorial microcosm serves to underscore Lucifer's state of damnation at the material cosmic *mezzo*, and God's dwelling at an intangible universal *centro*. As ever in *Purgatorio*, one must look backwards as well as forwards in order to progress, and to understand progression. Jennifer Rushworth has aptly surmised that "Purgatory represents the chance to learn how to use language properly again, as well as how to put one's memory to good use," and here, as Dante emerges from the smoke of *Purgatorio* 16, he and his reader are drawn directly into this fundamental lesson which the second *cantica* imparts.⁶⁶

Nor is the memory invoked by the canto's incipit incidental. Aside from the purgatorial redolence of the mountain simile, distinct emphasis is also placed on the language of light and lightness. In contrast with the sharp chiaroscuro of *Purgatorio* 15 and 16, the transition between Cantos 16 and 17 sees a much gentler return of light which recalls the reemergence of the "sereno aspetto / del mezzo" at the beginning of the *cantica* (*Purg.* 1.14-15). The language of light is given all the more prominence by the fact that the events of the canto occur at dusk. The only crepuscular scenes in the *Commedia*, after all, occur on Mount Purgatory and in the

⁶⁴ Zygmunt G. Barański, "Structural Retrospection in Dante's *Comedy*: The Case of *Purgatorio* XXVII," *Italian Studies* 41, no. 1 (1986): 1-23, 14.

⁶⁵ John Freccero, *Dante, The Poetics of Conversion*, 120; see Webb, *Dante's Persons*, 103.

⁶⁶ Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 41.

earthly cantos of *Inferno*. The transitional backdrop of the canto, then, lays heavy emphasis on Purgatory as a realm of time and transition, both of which are intrinsically connected to the *cantica*'s fundamental processes of penitence, and the concurrent cultivation of paradisiacal lightness (*Purg.* 4.88-90). Thematized light and lightness are subsequently brought together with the commencement of the wayfarer's waking dream, whose origin is attributed to a "lume che nel ciel s'informa" (*Purg.* 17.17), and whose first ending "a guisa d'una bulla / cui manca l'acqua sotto qual si feo" (32-33) heightens the canto's occupation with *leggerezza*. Surprisingly, however, in his *Lezioni americane*, Calvino singles out this canto for his discussion not of lightness, but of *visibilità*. Not that this choice is inapposite: in his *lezione* he lays heavy emphasis on the process of internalization implicit in the "alta fantasia" of this canto (*Purg.* 17.25).⁶⁷ As well as being the realm of internal transformation and correction, *Purgatorio* is also the *cantica* most closely occupied with vision and the correction thereof. Certainly, this canto is not as densely ekphrastic as those of the terrace of pride, nor does it indulge in the pageantry of Eden. Rather, as Calvino suggests, it underscores the purgatorial development of internal clarity by means precisely of the physical stillness, the external non-drama of this central canto. The importance of the *alta fantasia*, moreover, extends much further than this. Its recurrence at the very close of the *Commedia* reveals the process of internalization which is at stake in *Purgatorio* 17 to be fundamental to the poem's overarching trajectory towards spiritual recentralization, the conclusion of which is coterminous with that of the poem as a whole.

Thus, one comes to Virgil's discourse on love and free will, which itself constitutes a binding agent between the three cantos in question. It should be noted from the outset that the exposition is rooted in the question of "L'amor del bene" (*Purg.* 17.85), a subject which, far from being exclusive to this canto, is the fundamental concept which *Purgatorio* seeks to elucidate. The *cantica* is founded, after all, on the principle of redirecting its imperfect souls towards the "sommio bene", from which they are only separated by the sins they are purging on the mountain (*Par.* 7.79-81). As is self-evident, the means through which this re-assimilation is achieved are the chief object of this part of Virgil's discourse. Far from merely being a purgatorial answer to *Inferno* 11, however, Virgil here furnishes the key to a deeper understanding of the purgatorial condition, specifically in relation to its end point. As he elaborates on the geographical and theological landscapes of the mountain, he

⁶⁷ Italo Calvino, "Visibilità," in *Lezioni americane* (Milan: Mondadori, 2017 [1988]), 81-100, 88.

says the following: "Quinci comprender puoi ch'esser convene / amor sementa in voi d'ogne virtute / e d'ogne operazion che merta pene" (*Purg.* 17.103-105). In particular, the image of the *sementa* is one which elucidates the divergent paths of the penitents from the damned. For while the corrected love of *Purgatorio* leads to the highly cultivated Garden of Eden and ultimately "l'orto / de l'ortolano eterno" (*Par.* 26.64-65), the wayward seeds of the damned give rise to the gnarled forests and falling leaves that characterize *Inferno*. It is only with these words that Dante-*personaggio* can truly understand the true significance of spiritual cultivation: he has passed the structural and ideological midpoints of the journey, and the path to his salvation is made clear.

The end of the canto, which concludes the first part of Virgil's discourse, also requires particular attention: "L'amor ch'ad esso troppo s'abbandona, / di sovr' a noi si piange per tre cerchi; / ma come tripartito si ragiona, / tacciolo, acciò che tu per te ne cerchi" (*Purg.* 17.136-139). In the first instance, these concluding lines enact in miniature the roles of Dante and Virgil in *Purgatorio* at large. There can be no doubt that the second *cantica* dramatizes Virgil's trajectory towards his final *tacciare*, whose conclusion is signalled upon the poets' entry into Eden: "Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno" (*Purg.* 27.139). More overtly, Virgil's double *te* underscores the importance of the wayfarer's active participation in the penitential processes of the second realm, and particularly the edifying internal transformations which have been the focus of this canto. This need for participation is given all the more weight by the concluding *rima equivoca*, which stresses the personal search which Dante must now undertake. Joan Ferrante has suggested that *rime equivocate* are employed at least in part as a demonstration of poetic skill, and while the densest concentration of such rhymes are to be found in *Inferno* 24 (where Dante prepares to out-metamorphose Ovid and Lucan), the placement of this *rima equivoca* in such a doubly privileged position in *Purgatorio*- at the end of a canto at the core of the poem- bears out the more overt and extended poetics of surpassing at play in the second *cantica*.⁶⁸ More to the point, if the phenomenon of *rima equivoca* "provokes an *aporia* in the reader [...] necessitating retrospection and a re-reading of the *terzina*," then this final *terzina* directly involves the reader in the *ricerca* it demands, even more so given the fact that these *-erchi* rhymes have the additional privilege of being *hapax*

⁶⁸ Joan Ferrante, "A poetics of chaos and harmony," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 181-200, 191.

rhymes in the *Commedia*.⁶⁹ One may search for echoes of this circular rhyme elsewhere, that is to say, but such a search can only lead back to this central moment. Wherever they occur, *rime equivоче* require the reevaluation and recontextualization of the shared rhyming words if one is to successfully discern the meanings they impart. With this in mind, it cannot go unnoticed that the use of *rima equivoca* is in direct contravention of Dante's earlier dictum from *De vulgari eloquentia*, in which he warns of "that unserviceable equivocal [rhyme], which always detracts from meaning in some way" (*DVE* 2.13.12).⁷⁰ Of course, Dante recants many of the stances adopted by his earlier texts in the *Commedia*, but the fact remains that the obfuscation and disentanglement of meaning is precisely what is at stake here in *Purgatorio* 17. This collapsing together of the circle and the search within the structural center of *Purgatorio* bears out the importance of active contemplation and self-scrutiny to the metaphysics of the *cantica* as a whole, constituting as they do a fundamental aspect of *Purgatorio*'s architectonic of memory. This is another crucial facet of the vision, internal and external, that this canto so strenuously emphasizes. The pervasive language of memory and introspection here, moreover, is set in sharp contrast to the subtly proleptic discourse of the following canto.

Purgatorio 18

On a superficial level, one might object that the incipit of *Purgatorio* 18 has little connection to *Paradiso*:

Posto avea fine al suo ragionamento
l'alto dottore, e attento guardava
ne la mia vista s'io pareva contento;
e io, cui nova sete ancor frugava,
di fuor tacea, e dentro dicea: 'Forse
lo troppo dimandar ch'io for li grava'.
Ma quel padre verace, che s'accorse
del timido voler che non s'apriva,
parlando, di parlare ardir mi porse (*Purg.* 18.1-9)

Closer reading, however, reveals the strong intrinsic connection between the two. This becomes most apparent when one interrogates the introduction of the wayfarer's *nova sete*. The movement between *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* will be marked by a radical shift

⁶⁹ K.P. Clarke, "Humility and the (P)arts of Art" in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, vol. 1, eds. George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 203-21, 212.

⁷⁰ "Ipsa inutilis equivocatio, que semper sententie quicquam derogare videtur." Translation mine.

in the function of desire, and here there is an alteration in the way in which purgatorial desire is articulated. Significantly, the new *sete* primed here will be put to the test by Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, whose return sates the "decenne sete" between her death and Dante's arrival at the summit of Purgatory (*Purg.* 32.2).⁷¹ Alongside the paradisiacal prefigurations of these lines, then, the drama of *Vita nuova* is also a vital point of reference here, embedding that text still further in the *Commedia's* interrogation of centrality. Elena Lombardi suggests that Dante characterizes desire in *Purgatorio* 18 as "the osmotic, flexible, quasi-invisible border between the guiltless natural love and the elective love governed by the will."⁷² These lines clearly demonstrate the operation of this osmotic desire. It is also the kind of desire that reigns supreme in *Paradiso*, and Virgil's invitation to speak (which the incipit remarks but does not quote) prefigures the kind of heavenly intuition with which Beatrice will fulfil Dante's desire to learn as he moves through Paradise: "Io veggio ben come ti tira / uno e altro disio..."; "Io dico, e non dimando, quel che tu vuoi udir" (*Par.* 4.16-17; 29.10-11). As Virgil's discourse recommences, moreover, it takes a markedly paradisiacal turn. His opening formulation of "L'animo ch'è creato ad amar presto" (*Purg.* 18.19) encapsulates the state to which the blessed return upon reaching Paradise, in the sense that it signals a purified preparedness to love correctly. As Dante moves to the higher terraces of the mountain, on which excessive and insufficient *amor del bene* are corrected, he sees the penitent souls in the final stages of preparing for the *nova sete* of Paradise which will be defined early in *Paradiso* by Piccarda Donati, and with a similar zeal to the energetic slothful of this terrace (*Par.* 3.70-87). This desire of the blessed will be defined as a perpetual openness to, and contentment in, their allotted experience of divine love (*Par.* 3.43 ff.). Even the souls in the outermost celestial spheres, after all, partake in the centrality of the Godhead remarked above. As Vittorio Montemaggi has observed, it is in Piccarda's canto that humanity's dependence on this love is most clearly articulated.⁷³ If the argument of *Purgatorio* 18 is predicated on earlier theorizations of desire expressed in *Convivio* 4, *Vita nuova* 20, and *Inferno* 5, then this canto in turn serves as a fundamental point of reference for Piccarda's discourse on desire and fulfilment in *Paradiso*.⁷⁴

⁷¹ See Marco Santagata, *L'io e il mondo: Un'interpretazione di Dante* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011), 235.

⁷² Elena Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves, Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 84.

⁷³ See Vittorio Montemaggi, "The Bliss and Abyss of Freedom," in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, vol. 1, 57-76, 72.

⁷⁴ See Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves*, 79; 86ff.; 126.

Further anticipations of paradisiacal discourse arise as Virgil's speech continues, the most evident of these being his account of the natural movement of desire: "Poi, come'l foco movesi in altura / per la sua forma ch'è nata a salire / là dove più in sua matera dura, / così l'animo preso entra in disire, / ch'è moto spiritale, e mai non posa / fin che la cosa amata il fa gioire" (*Purg.* 18.28-33). Tellingly, Beatrice will make use of the same analogy to explain Dante's ascent to Paradise: "Maraviglia sarebbe in te se, privo / d'impedimento, giù ti fossi assiso, / com' a terra quïete in foco vivo" (*Par.* 1.139-141). This connection between the roles of Virgil and Beatrice is strengthened in *Purgatorio* 18 as Virgil defers to her in matters of faith: "Quanto ragion qui vede, / dir ti poss'io; da indi in là t'aspetta / pur a Beatrice, ch'è opra di fede" (46-48), and he will name her again at line 73. In *Paradiso* Beatrice herself will provide the final element of this extended discourse which Virgil cannot provide. Namely, an elucidation of God's bestowal of free will on humanity: "Lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando, e a la sua bontade / più conformato, e quel ch'e' più apprezza, / fu de la volontà la libertate; / di che le creature intelligenti, / e tutte e sole, fuoro e son dotate" (*Par.* 5.19-24). In this regard, *Purgatorio* 18 is by far the most "beatrician" canto up to this juncture in the poem, and will remain so until her return in Canto 30. Mazzotta goes as far as suggesting that Beatrice herself represents the answer to the wayfarer's unanswered questions in this canto.⁷⁵ In the same way that *Paradiso* furnishes a gloss to *Purgatorio*, so it becomes apparent in *Purgatorio* 18 that Virgil has passed the zenith of his authority and influence in Canto 17. He will require aid to rouse the wayfarer from his dream in Canto 19, and shortly thereafter, with the arrival of Statius, he will cease to be "lo mio maestro e'l mio autore" (*Inf.* 1.85) and become one of Dante's two "miei poeti" (*Purg.* 28.146). There is more to be said on Virgil's role in these three cantos, and in the poem as a whole. For the present, suffice it to remark how *Purgatorio* 18 underscores the imminence of Beatrice, and of the theological occupations of *Paradiso*.

The closing lines of the canto also anticipate the supreme imminence for which the third *cantica* prepares: "e tanto d'uno in altro vaneggiai / che li occhi per vaghezza ricopersi, / e'l pensamiento in sogno trasmutai" (*Purg.* 18.143-145). Like *Paradiso*, *Purgatorio* 18 concludes with Dante's preparation to describe a vision, and while not containing the entire universe in the same way as the final paradisiacal vision, the dream of *Purgatorio* 19 will nevertheless recapitulate in miniature the drama of desire played out in the *Commedia* up to this juncture. There is also a clear prefiguration

⁷⁵ Mazzotta, *Reading Dante*, 153.

of *Paradiso* 32 here: the *Commedia*'s penultimate canto constitutes a deep poetic intake of breath before the articulation of the final vision, and the closing lines of *Purgatorio* 18 function in precisely the same way in anticipation of the dream of the Siren. Lombardi has drawn a strong connection between *Purgatorio* 18 and the divine vision, arguing that Virgil's "fin che" (which, as has been seen, connects his discourse and Beatrice's) is resolved only in the highest reaches of *Paradiso*, as Dante reaches the promised end of his desire, and the poem reaches its terminal point of universal centrality.⁷⁶ The wayfarer does not emerge from this microcosm "puro e disposto a salire a le stelle" (*Purg.* 33.145), but in its re-articulation of the nature of love, will, and desire, and in this rehearsal for the final vision at the universally central *punto*, one is given a vital foretaste of the ascent, and what lies beyond it.

The strategies Dante employs to recreate the *Commedia* here in a centrally-situated microcosm demand that one not merely reconsider, but re-experience the *cantiche* to which the respective cantos are intrinsically connected. From the tangible infernal darkness of Canto 16, through the internalized transformations of Canto 17, to the overtly paradisiacal prefigurations of Canto 18, the reader bears witness to the totality of the poem at its structural center. In Cogan's words, *Purgatorio* "has a double aspect: one facing our world, one facing Heaven."⁷⁷ At its structural center, though, this double aspect is amplified to the point that it contains the extremes towards which it looks. Here, then, at the structural heart of the poem, Dante stages a vital recapitulation of its quest for human centrality. This textual center also prepares Dante and the reader for the drama of Eden at the center of Purgatory, as well as the dynamic center of Paradise, while also refocusing their perspective on *Inferno*. Indeed, the pliancy of perspective cultivated at this juncture will be essential to an understanding of the complex dualities of the third *cantica*. Most importantly with this in mind, it also places a focus on earthly concerns as essential forerunners of the drama of Dante's afterlife. Earth is revealed, as it was in *Inferno* 1, to be the stage for the potential human energy which may lead to salvation or perdition: to heavenly centrality or infernal periphery. Here, Pertile's parallel trajectories converge in aid of the poem's interrogation of centrality. As the reader participates in the poem's journey towards a vision of the universe "legato con amore in un volume" (*Par.* 33.86), these cantos, at the structural center of Dante's own *volume*, provide a vital opportunity for the refine-

⁷⁶ See Lombardi, *The Wings of the Doves*, 125.

⁷⁷ Cogan, *The Design in the Wax*, 77.

ment of the multiple perspectives required to navigate the text successfully. In essence, these cantos mirror the function of the *terza rima* in which they are couched: they cultivate mindful retrospection as well as forward propulsion. They also offer a parallel interrogation of centrality in their treatment of Virgil, who is the focus of the next section. Through him, as will be seen, the elements of centrality discussed up to this juncture are bound together, and the scope of the poem's quest for human centrality is widened. It is Virgil who, as well as binding together the structurally central axis described above, plays a vital role in the development of the human centrality at issue in *Paradiso*, despite his physical departure from the poem at the end of the second *cantica*.

VIRGIL AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE HUMAN

Scholars have approached Virgil's dynamic role in the *Commedia* from vastly differing angles, from mapping the poem-wide trajectory from Virgilian *pietas* to Christian *pietà*, to Dante's systematic rejection and re-inheritance of his classical legacy.⁷⁸ A lack of critical focus on centrality in the poem, however, has left a fundamental aspect of Virgil's role unaddressed. Virgil underpins all of the *Commedia*'s inflections of centrality, and particularly its ultimate arrival at the universal centrality of the human, which is this section's chief focus. The evolution of what Auerbach calls the "Virgilian element" in the *Commedia* sees the pagan poet shift from the role of Dante's poetic and physical prime mover in *Inferno*, to a key voice in *Paradiso*'s synthesized figuration of the universal Prime Mover.⁷⁹ A very explicit dramatization of his changing role across the poem can be seen in the physical proximities of the two poets in the central cantos discussed above. An examination of their interpersonal relationship at that crucial juncture reveals that Virgil's is a trajectory parallel to Dante's own towards centrality, and perhaps even a *sui generis* form of salvation, a subject over which critics have been strongly divided.⁸⁰ Despite Virgil's departure from the poem in Eden, Dante contrives to weave his presence into the textual fabric of the third *cantica*, and while scholars have given much attention to the Virgilian undercurrent of *Paradiso*, much less work has been done to elucidate Virgil's importance to the poem

⁷⁸ See Harrison, "The Love that Moves," 41-42.

⁷⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review of Books, 2007 [1929]), 90.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, Mowbray Allan, "Does Dante Hope for Virgil's Salvation?," *MLN* 104, no. 1 (1989): 193-205; Teodolinda Barolini, "Q: Does Dante Hope for Vergil's Salvation? A: Why Do We Care? For the Very Reason We Should Not Ask the Question," in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 151-57.

as it reaches its terminus, and as Dante arrives at the point of universal human centrality. His role in *Purgatorio*'s central cantos provides a valuable insight into his dynamic function across the *Commedia* and reading through the lens of these cantos reveals that Virgil's role in the poem's quest for human centrality runs far deeper than scholars have hitherto acknowledged. It is he who binds the poem's multivalent centralities together, while foregrounding love as a vital thread in its central universal *nodo*.

In the opening tableau of *Purgatorio* 16, Virgil offers Dante his shoulder to lead him through the darkness of the third terrace (*Purg.* 16.9). This opening gesture and moment of contact constitutes a subtle, yet definite reenactment of the haptic relationship borne out between the two poets in *Inferno*, beginning under the gate of Hell and concluding with the ascent on the body of Lucifer (*Inf.* 3.19; 34.82-93). The gesture bespeaks the physical and spiritual dependence of the wayfarer on Virgil both in this canto and, retrospectively, throughout *Inferno*. Such reliance has been plain since the poem's opening scene, where, as has been remarked, Dante requires Virgil's intervention in order to begin his physical journey towards salvation. With this in mind, it becomes clear that one of Virgil's key functions in the *Commedia* is precisely that of a pagan prime mover. Such a status is corroborated both by Dante's drawing from Virgil "lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore" (*Inf.* 1.87), and by Statius' grateful affirmation that "Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano" (*Purg.* 22.73). In both cases, Virgil is shown to be a figure who initiates a course of salvation in his disciples, and salvation, as has been intimated, culminates in the soul's participation in divine centrality. The double *per* of Statius' praise, moreover, lends great weight to Virgil's agency in the initiation both of conversion and, in Dante's case, physical motion. Kirkpatrick has argued that Dante's meeting with Virgil in the *selva oscura* is a moment of conversion in and of itself, and the evidence for this is plain: even the trajectory of otherworldly self-knowledge remarked above begins with Virgil in the *selva oscura*.⁸¹ His introduction to Dante, "Non omo, omo già fui" (*Inf.* 1.67) becomes the template for those of Marco Lombardo, Justinian, and Guido da Montefeltro among many others. Not for nothing is Virgil's name the first spoken by Dante-*personaggio* in the poem (*Inf.* 1.79).⁸² He is the first point of reference to which the poem makes recourse in its journey towards reoriented selfhood. In *Purgatorio* 16, however, Marco's image of the two suns of Church and Empire (*Purg.* 17.106-108)

⁸¹ Kirkpatrick, *Dante's Inferno. Difficulty and Dead Poetry*, 38.

⁸² See Robert Hollander, "Virgilian Tragedy in Dante's Comedy: Note on *Inferno* I.85-87," *Italica* 90, no. 2 (2013): 286-89, 286.

are a subtle yet definite reaffirmation of Virgil's inability to undertake this journey for himself. He, after all, knew only of the latter in his lifetime, and it is this ignorance alone that has precluded his salvation, and his partaking in the celestial centrality of the Empyrean.

In marked contrast, in *Purgatorio* 17 the two poets are pointedly depicted as being in step with one another: "Sì, pareggiando i miei co' passi fidi / del mio maestro, uscì fuor di tal nube" (*Purg.* 17.10-11). Even as Virgil fulfils his role as expositor of secular values and reason in this canto, the poets' equal pace dramatizes the wayfarer's increasing understanding, as well as *Purgatorio's* extended staging of the process of poetic surpassing. The surpassing of Virgil begins as early as *Purgatorio* 6 (28-31), with Dante-*personaggio's* overt challenge to the authority of the *Aeneid*: "El par che tu mi nieghi, / o luce mia, espresso in alcun testo / che decretato del ciel orazion pieghi; / e questa gente prega pur di questo," and *Purgatorio* 17 constitutes a watershed moment in the process. As has been intimated, this canto constitutes the zenith of Virgil's authority before his deferral to Beatrice in Canto 18, and the process of Virgilian surpassing reaches its apex and its end with Beatrice's return in Eden, at the center of Purgatory, framed as it is in distinctly Virgilian language (*Purg.* 30.46-54). Virgil's purgatorial trajectory, then, draws together these elements of centrality in the *Commedia* at the same time as it contributes to Dante's own journey of spiritual and poetic perfection, facilitating his ascent towards the center of Paradise. It is also important to remark the termination of the physical contact of *Purgatorio* 16 in this canto, as it also marks the end of the haptic relationship between the poets which characterized *Inferno* and the first half of the second *cantica*. The extreme contact between the two poets in Lower Hell falls away completely at this point, and Virgil must rely on language alone to bring his charge safely into Eden. This reliance is most overtly dramatized as he helps Dante through the fire before entering the *selva antica*: "Lo dolce padre mio, per confortarmi, / pur di Beatrice ragionando andava, / dicendo: 'Li occhi suoi già veder parmi'" (*Purg.* 27.52-54). These lines illustrate Virgil's rational push, and Beatrice's equal spiritual pull, through the journey of the *Commedia*. They also signal Virgil's importance in the surmounting of the "far-apartness" of the dark and ancient forests which, but for him, would have remained irreconcilable. It is also not incidental that, on the threshold of Purgatory's center, Virgil's language should evince such a strong reaction in Dante: "Tanto voler sopra voler mi venne / de l'esser sù ch'ad ogni passo poi / al volo mi sentia crescer le penne" (*Purg.* 27.121-123). Virgil's last act in the poem is to solidify in Dante the *nova sete* which was introduced at

the poem's structural center. In this way, Virgil's role across *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* inflects the poem's multivalent interrogation of centrality by being the means through which many of its centers are to be understood and (at times literally and physically) negotiated.

Purgatorio 18 is, unsurprisingly given its connection to *Paradiso*, markedly different. As with the third *cantica* at large, it sidelines the interpersonal relationship between the two poets, focusing instead on the drastic shift in Virgil's authority as he defers theologically precise explanations to Beatrice. On a subtler level, however, one need only consider the *capoverso* of Canto 18 for a summation of Virgil's relationship with *Paradiso*: "Posto avea fine al suo ragionamento" (*Purg.* 18.1). He falls silent, but he is still a very marked presence, and though in person he returns to the same "lungo silenzio" from which he began (*Inf.* 1.63), his influence is still keenly felt in the fabric of the third *cantica*. Just as Guido Guinizzelli humbly departs from the poem's narrative "come per l'acqua il pesce andando al fondo" (*Purg.* 26.135), so too does Virgil disappear below the poem's surface without disappearing completely. One need only recall the presence of Ripheus in *Paradiso*, or Cacciaguida's Virgilian gestures to feel his intertextual presence in the poem even after his disappearance in Eden (*Par.* 20; 25.25-27; 17.19). Auerbach's Virgilian element, moreover, persists even in the final canto of *Paradiso*. It is striking that Dante should describe the fading of the culminating vision from his memory thus: "Così la neve al sol si disigilla; / così al vento ne le foglie levi / si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla" (*Par.* 33.64-66). Critics have been swift to identify the Virgilian resonance of these lines. What has been less widely documented is the thread which connects these lines to other central moments in the poem. If one follows convincing readings by the likes of Auerbach and Barbara Reynolds that Beatrice functions throughout the *Commedia* as a Christian sibyl, then not only does she permeate the language of the final vision through its Virgilian allusions, but her first and final appearances in the text are directly mediated by Virgil.⁸³ This beatrician resonance is heightened still further by the image of melting snow, which cannot but recall the Edenic melting of the ice around Dante's heart in Beatrice's presence, prefigured as it is by the recognition of a Virgilian "antica fiamma" (*Purg.* 30.48). These images, then, strengthen Virgil and Beatrice's inherence in the divine vision,

⁸³ See for instance, Boitani, "Thy Sibyl's Leaves," 117-18; Auerbach, *Poet of the Secular World*, 62; Barbara Reynolds, *Dante: The Poet, The Thinker, The Man* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 306ff.

while also recalling the site of Virgil's departure and Beatrice's arrival in Eden, at the center of Purgatory. In this way, Dante contrives to have Virgil present at the culminating moments of all three realms. This through-line underscores Virgil's transition from physical to allusive presence, which in turn mirrors the *Commedia's* trajectory from materiality to ethereality, and from geographical to human centrality.

Virgil's Guinzellian disappearance below the poem's surface is, in fact, overtly dramatized in one of its closing similes: "Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo / che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa / che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo" (*Par.* 33.94-96). It is striking that, at this culminating moment of Christian vision, Dante should open up a dense network of classical allusions from the myth of Jason to Ulysses and, most significantly the present purpose, Virgil. As Dante arrives at the "gracious stillness" of *Paradiso's* conclusion, he invokes Neptune's calming of the storm which shipwrecks Aeneas in Book I of Virgil's poem, which in turn recalls the shipwreck simile of *Inferno* 1 (22-27).⁸⁴ Indeed, so strong are the resonances of the *Aeneid* in Dante's setting of this Christian vision that Jeffrey Schnapp has called the Empyrean a "redeemed double of classical Elysium."⁸⁵ With this image, Virgil is at last allowed to depart from the poem, but not before he has played a seminal role in the staging of the divine vision. Read through the lens of *Purgatorio's* central cantos, it might be suggested that Virgil-*poeta's* voice infiltrates the *Commedia's* final vision in the same way that the voice of Virgil-*personaggio's* penetrates the dream vision anticipated by *Purgatorio* 18 (*Purg.* 19.34-35). Such a reading aids in an appreciation of the dynamic Virgilian element across the three *cantiche*, and of the pagan *Aeneid* as a vital intertext in the culminating moment of Dante's Christian homecoming. By synthesizing the role of Virgil across the poem in the central cantos of *Purgatorio*, then, Dante stresses his (literal) centrality to the framework of the whole, as well as strengthening the multiple perspectives those cantos demand, as they gesture backwards and onwards towards the "extreme circumference" of the poem from the vantage point of its "dead center."⁸⁶

As with the *Commedia's* other central moments, multiple perspectives are required at the witnessing of the final vision. Yet again, it is Virgil who underscores the necessity. The reason for this becomes clear if one accepts Prue Shaw's connection of Dante-

⁸⁴ Williams, "Ice, Fire, and Holy Water," 227.

⁸⁵ Schnapp, "'Sì pia l'ombra d'Anchise si porse,'" 146.

⁸⁶ Bernard Stambler, *Dante's Other World, The 'Purgatorio' as Guide to the 'Divine Comedy'* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), 163.

personaggio's first words in the poem and Aeneas' supplication to the sibyl in the *Aeneid*.⁸⁷ Under such a reading, Virgil's trajectory from the periphery of the *selva oscura* to the central vision of the Godhead becomes complete, as does the poem's coterminous movement from forest-bound disorientation to paradisiacal union. Robert Hollander has surmised that "it was Virgil who, more than any other author [...] helped to make Dante Dante," and the truth of this is evident at every turn of the *Commedia*'s journey towards human centrality.⁸⁸ He provides the physical impetus for the beginning of Dante's quest for reorientation in the *selva oscura*, and it is only after his work is done in the poem at the center of Purgatory that Dante can re-inherit his own name, and progress towards a union with the divine center of the universe. Even at that purgatorial center, Virgil, whose pagan "alta [...] tragedia" is set from the first against Dante's own Christian "comedia" (*Inf.* 20.113; 16.128; 21.2), is present below its surface. The *Aeneid*, which ends with the *umbras* of death (XII.952), underpins the pure light of Dante's final vision, which in turn is prefigured by the dense occupation with light and lightness in the central cantos of *Purgatorio*. In the *Commedia*'s culminating moments, Virgil is gathered into the universal *nodo*, having been a vital agent in Dante's arrival at it. His presence, mediated by the *Aeneid*, reveals that the poem's universal center contains its peripheries, just as its structural center contains the whole.

Virgil, banished in person to the periphery of Hell, reappears as an integral part of Dante's figuration of the *punto* at the paradisiacal center of the universe. Among the dizzying theological paradoxes of the poem's final canto, its distinct Virgilian echoes initially impart the same "sharp tender shock" as Larkin's Arundel Tomb. Indeed, it is a shock not dissimilar to that of his sudden departure at the center of Purgatory. In this sense, Virgil is Lefebvre's "tragic reality" at the universal center of Dante's *Comedy*, and the Virgilian underpinning of the final vision serves the indispensable function of rooting it in the poem's opening periphery. Montemaggi has recently observed that the first time the *Commedia* attaches the word "amore" to a human being, it is to Virgil: "'O de li altri poeti onore e lume, / vagliami 'l lungo studio e'l grande amore / che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume'" (*Inf.* 1.82-84).⁸⁹ It is also the first of only two instances of *amore* being attached to a *volume*, the

⁸⁷ Shaw, *Reading Dante*, 240.

⁸⁸ Robert Hollander, *Dante: A Life in Works* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 117.

⁸⁹ Vittorio Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 208.

second being the universal *volume* of *Paradiso* 33.⁹⁰ The beloved volumes appear at either end of Dante's text: once at the journey's periphery, once at its universal center. Both occurrences pivot around Virgil. The divine *volume* reaches back, at the *Commedia's* conclusion, to redeem Virgil's, and the reason for this is clear. For it is he who, at the poem's structural center, will tell Dante that "né creator né creatura mai [...] fu sanz'amore" (*Purg.* 17.91-92); he provides Dante with the vocabulary to express "d'antico amor [...] la gran potenza" as Beatrice is regained (*Purg.* 30.39); he, Dante's "padre verace" (*Purg.* 18.7) is the standard up to which the poem's other beloved father figures are held. It is Virgil, in short, who underpins the poem's articulation of the centrality of love in all its forms. Through him, each of the poem's variously inflected centralities come together, even as Dante describes the beatitude in which Virgil himself cannot participate. As the poem draws towards its conclusion, Virgil emerges suspended between salvation and perdition. With all of these considerations in mind, then, the fact that his voice is heard so clearly at the poem's universal center: a center of human, divine, and spiritual love, should come as no shock at all.

CONCLUSIONS: THE *CENTRO* BEYOND THE *MEZZO*

With all of these coalescing centralities in operation up to the poem's final moments, it is little wonder that it can only complete its articulation of the difference between *mezzo* and *centro* at its conclusion. In the final cantos of *Paradiso*, Dante overtly explains that "Dio senza mezzo governa" (*Par.* 30.122), and, having navigated the *Commedia's* various problematized centers, this does not come as a surprise. In the Empyrean, after all, there can be no *mezzo*: in a heaven of pure light, the medium through which the divine will is carried out completely falls away. As if to reinforce the point, the word *mezzo* occurs persistently in the cantos of the Empyrean (*Par.* 30.4, 122; 31.78, 128, 130; 32.41), with each occurrence reaffirming its lack of currency in the articulation of divine centrality. Unsurprisingly, it disappears completely in *Paradiso* 33. This is rendered still more suggestive by the fact that Dante has been careful to characterize Lucifer as both a *centro* and a *mezzo* (*Inf.* 34.107; 32.73): his material centrality and his use as a static medium of the wayfarer's conversion are revealed, from this perspective, to be the very elements that set him at the furthest remove from this celestial *centro* that is no *mezzo* at all. With this falling away of the *mezzo*, Dante is at last able to see an image of the

⁹⁰ Ibid., 214.

Trinity which reflects the polycentrism of the *Commedia* itself: "Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza / de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri / di tre colori e d'una contenenza" (*Par.* 33.115-117). These three interlocking divine circles (127-129) form, by virtue of their simultaneous union and distinction, a single, polycentric shape: a form which the earthly mind of *Monarchia* could not comprehend. *Pace* the mathematically rigorous voice of the *Convivio*, the Godhead is both the universal *punto* and a composite *cerchio*. As well as furnishing a gloss to the notion of Paradise as a *deiforme regno*, it also reveals the poem itself as *deiforme*: an entity characterized by the paradoxical interaction of multiple centralities. Here, Virgil's *rima equivoca* at the close of *Purgatorio* 17 achieves its full significance: the circle and the search invoked at the poem's structural center converge to divulge a meaning which the writer of *De vulgari eloquentia* could not perceive, much less express. At its culminating moment, the *Commedia* reveals itself, by virtue of its polycentrism, to share its form with that of its celestial Prime Mover. It is a poetic space which utterly defies any notion of Lefebvrian spatial logic, taking its cue instead from theological order predicated on divine paradox.

Nor is it incidental that the poem's concluding lines bring its structural center back into focus. Even as his descriptive powers fail him, Dante invokes the same phrase which, as Calvino noted, was used to develop the poetics of interiority at work in *Purgatorio* 17: "A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa; / ma già volgeva il mio disio e'l velle, / sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa, / l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle" (*Par.* 33.142-145). Here, as Dante witnesses the universe's divine center, and sees "Nel suo profondo [...] / legato con amore in un volume, / ciò che per l'universo si squaderna" (85-87), he transports his reader back to the structural center of his own *volume*, and the nexus of centralities at play at that turning point in the text. It is here also that the *nova sete* invoked in *Purgatorio* 18 reaches its perfection: as Dante's desire moves "sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa," he becomes the axis, the stable human center around which, in Harrison's terms, it gathers and revolves. Additionally, in choosing the image of the wheel rather than the circle, Dante contrives to give his final heavenly image an earthly point of reference.⁹¹ In place of an abstract image, that is to say, he chooses to refocus the reader's perspective on the Earth, as he does throughout the microcosm at the structural center of the text.

This final gesture towards Earth allows one to appreciate the fullness of the human centrality which has been attained. Freccero

⁹¹ See John Freccero, *The Poetics of Conversion*, 247.

suggests that the poem's close illustrates that "The soul of the universe corresponds exactly to the soul of man, who is indeed a microcosm."⁹² The final vision pushes this notion further, to the extent that the human form and the divine converge at this universal center: "dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso, / mi parve pinta de la nostra effige" (*Par.* 33.130-131). The ultimate fulfilment of Dante's journey, which began in displacement in the middle of *nostra vita*, is the vision of *nostra effige* at the human and divine center of the universe. The Christian *nostos* achieved in *Paradiso* constitutes a collapsing together of the re-centered self and the divine. As Daniel Murtagh has aptly suggested, "the last endorsement of Dante's vocation as a poet, a voyager in words, is the Word who is also a man."⁹³ This endorsement at the apex of the *Commedia's* interrogation of centrality bears out to the letter the artistic credo of Jorge Luis Borges: "el arte debe ser como ese espejo / que nos revela nuestra propia cara" [Art must be that kind of mirror / which shows us our own face. (Translation mine)].⁹⁴ The revelation of the artist's image within the divine, at the end of the *Commedia*, is the final resolution to its destabilized beginning, and all of the centralities at play in the poem return here in this final moment of self-revelation and human recentralization. As Borges himself writes of the *Commedia's* conclusion in the Empyrean, "en esa infinita región [...] lo remoto no es menos nítido que lo que está muy cerca" [In that infinite region [...] what is distant is no less clear than what is very close. (Translation mine)].⁹⁵ All of the poem's centralities and peripheries, however near or distant, are gathered together in this culminating human moment.

And it is not just the poem's own centralities that converge here. That the central Edenic episode of *Purgatorio* should be so closely bound up with *Vita nuova* pushes the reach of its journey towards re-centralization and reorientation still further. *Vita nuova's* own problematizing of centrality in turn points to a corpus-wide occupation with the theme, particularly if one also considers the contributions offered by the *Convivio* and the *Questio de aqua et terra*. Add to this the dependence of the journey on Virgil and the *Aeneid*, even at the point of the *Commedia's* Christian zenith, and its quest for universal human centrality is revealed to be far wider than the poem alone can contain. Its beginning *in*

⁹² John Freccero, *The Poetics of Conversion*, 76.

⁹³ Daniel M. Murtagh, "'Figurando il paradiso': The Signs that Render Dante's Heaven," *PMLA* 90, no. 2 (1975): 277-84, 284.

⁹⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, "Arte poética," in *Poesía completa* (Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2018), 150.

⁹⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, *Nueve Ensayos Dantescos* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1998), 147.

medias res, and its passage through the material center of the cosmos demonstrates, in the final figuration of the Godhead, that it is precisely the *res* that are the problem when it comes to universal centrality. Again, that Virgil should move from a physical to an allusive presence as this truth unfolds underpins his vital importance to the process. By consciously constructing a densely polycentric poetic universe, Dante contrives to have it all ways: he is able to lay significance on encounters and episodes by virtue of their varyingly imparted centralities. His poem glories in its final inability to express the reality of the Godhead *per verba* (*Par.* 1.70): the union of the human and the divine is, the *Commedia* divulges at the last, a phenomenon which no single center, and no single *volume*, can fully articulate.