

## ***THE HUMAN MOMENT OF THE SOUL***

LORENZO BARTOLUCCI, Stanford University

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This article explores the idea of the soul through the framework of two of the most elusive terms in Dante's *Commedia*, "umano" and "persona." It begins with an analysis of the soul's formation, outlined in *Purgatorio* 25, by way of the conjunction of corporeal matter and a supernal "spirito novo," which after death seems to ascend beyond the realm of human existence. This account is then contrasted with the etymological and theological affordances of the concept of personhood, which frames the body as the form—the "mask" of flesh and bones—that continues to individuate the soul after death, immortalizing rather than transcending the human moment of its origin. From the examination of these disparities emerges a new perspective on Dante's conception of human existence, illustrating its complex but fundamental place within the idea of perfection at the heart of his poetic universe.

Keywords: Dante Alighieri, Body, Human, Perfection, Person, Self, Soul

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Che la vera poesia abbia sempre il carattere di un dono e che pertanto essa presupponga la dignità di chi lo riceve, questo è forse il maggior insegnamento che Dante ci abbia lasciato.

—Eugenio Montale

### *1. Introduction*

What is the soul? The ways in which medieval thinkers were able to raise this question—the difference, as Mikko Yrjönsuuri recently put it, "between the soul being a form and a thing"—continue to command attention, and even a touch of yearning: "Can we, as people of the third Millennium, learn something from such discussions?"<sup>1</sup> There is an enduringly suggestive quality about the prospect of an epistemological "consensus" not yet "haunted by the

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<sup>1</sup> Mikko Yrjönsuuri, "The Soul as an Entity: Dante, Aquinas, Olivi," in *Forming the Mind: Essays on the Internal Senses and the Mind/Body Problem from Avicenna to the Medical Enlightenment*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 59-92, 60.

specter of Cartesian dualism,” in Peter King’s phrase, and still at home in the epigrammatic conciseness of the Augustinian vision of human nature as “a rational substance consisting of soul and body.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, such suggestiveness implicates a number of “puzzling” philosophical questions that, to this day, remain unresolved, beginning with the qualification St. Augustine himself appended to his formulation: “But even if we so define man as to say: ‘Man is a rational substance consisting of soul and body,’ there is no doubt that man has a soul which is not body, and a body which is not soul.”<sup>3</sup>

What does this mean? If there is no doubt that body and soul are not to be mistaken for the same thing, how exactly are we then to think of their unity—their consubstantiality? This contention marks the outline of an imaginative blind spot where Dante continues to light the way. Chronicling his own endeavor to find an orientation with respect to these issues—the nature of the soul and its connection with bodily existence—his works lay down a path of words and images, along which the questions that still “puzzle” philosophers turn into so many pieces of a poetic vision reaching into the ineffable recesses of what we are.<sup>4</sup> This article will trace a course along that path, in order to identify some of the insights that such a vision still has to offer in the third millennium.

The interest of Dante’s view of the soul, of course, owes as much to the creative as to the philosophical terms of his approach. A crucial result of his writings was the consolidation of a speculative vocabulary that Italian did not yet fully possess, with an eye to enabling the existence and enhancing the expressiveness of a vernacular philosophical discourse, rather than safeguarding the orthodoxy of its individual assertions. For this reason, alongside genealogies of Dante’s doctrinal affiliations,<sup>5</sup> it seems wise to highlight the

<sup>2</sup> Peter King, “Body and Soul,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. John Marenbon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 505–24, 505.

<sup>3</sup> King, “Body and Soul,” 506; Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15.7.11 [trans. from *On the Trinity: Books 8–15*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)].

<sup>4</sup> King, for example, still commits to Duns Scotus’s version of the theory of hylomorphic compounds as the “apex” of the Augustinian vision of consubstantial unity. Jérôme Baschet, by contrast, frames the relationship of soul and body as one of “dynamic dualism” (“Âme et corps dans l’occident médiéval: Une dualité dynamique, entre pluralité et dualisme,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 112 (2000): 5–30). An essential study of the peculiarity of Dante’s approach remains Robert Hollander’s “Dante *Theologus-Poeta*,” *Dante Studies* 94 (1976): 91–136 (repr. in *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 118 (2000): 261–302).

<sup>5</sup> From Giovanni Busnelli and Giuseppe Vandelli’s analysis of his debt to Aquinian Scholasticism (Dante, *Il Convivio*, 2 vols., eds. Giovanni Busnelli and Giuseppe Vandelli (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1964)) to Bruno Nardi’s vindication of the influence of

syncretic and heterogenous character of his relationship to his sources, as Cesare Vasoli remarked in the context of the *Convivio*: “After all... it is still a book that endeavors, in every sense, to ‘divulge’ philosophical knowledge by using a language that does not yet have its own speculative ‘vocabulary!’”<sup>6</sup> Dante’s nascent vocabulary, in other words, provides a unique framework to chart the contours and the development of his speculative insight. The semantic vicissitudes and oscillations of particular terms disclose a window into the process of linguistic stabilization, wherein the work of the poet’s imagination created and deployed the terms of a novel philosophical attitude. And the question of the soul’s relationship to the body lies at the very center of this creative process.

The salience of this issue for Dante is well-documented by the *Convivio*, where the variety of meanings the word “soul” (“anima”) takes on testifies to the complexity of its incorporation into his speculative register. When it comes up in the first Canzone (“Io vi dirò del cor la novitate / come l’anima trista piange in lui, / e come un spirto contra lei favella...” vv. 10-13<sup>7</sup>) Dante rapidly clarifies that “soul” is here used as a metonymy for the strength with which Beatrice’s “memory” holds sway over his heart (2.6.8). In Book 3, however, the same word becomes a synonym for the loving “affection” (“la mia anima, cioè lo mio affetto,” 3.3.14) that fails to express itself into words; and in Book 4 it characterizes the five vowels as the essence, “the soul and the tie,” of words and language itself (“cinque vocali, che sono anima e legame d’ogni parole,” 4.6.3). There are places where such denotative freedom famously seems to bring the discourse of the *Convivio* on the verge of dualism (“In prima è da sapere che l’uomo è composto d’anima

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Albert the Great (see esp. *Saggi di filosofia dantesca* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1967)) and John Freccero’s emphasis on the Augustinian nexus of linguistic and bodily signification (*Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986)), to mention just a few.

<sup>6</sup> My trans. from Vasoli’s commentary to his edition of the *Convivio*: “E, del resto, il *Convivio* è pur sempre un libro che si propone, in ogni senso, di ‘divulgare’ la sapienza filosofica, usando una lingua che non ha ancora un proprio ‘lessico’ speculativo!” (in Dante, *Opere minori*, Tomo I, Parte II, eds. Cesare Vasoli and Domenico de Robertis (Milano: Ricciardi, 1988), 307). Vasoli helpfully anchors the point in Kenelm Foster’s argument that Dante was “ben più preoccupato di proclamare la nobiltà e la bellezza della vita intellettuale, che non di analizzarne partitamente la natura” (“Tommaso d’Aquino,” in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, 6 vols., ed. Umberto Bosco (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970)). See also Marianne Shapiro’s study of the Dantean body as the “knot” of an unstable ontology, *Dante and the Knot of Body and Soul* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> All passages from the *Convivio* are quoted from Vasoli’s edition. Translations of particular terms and phrases are based on *Il Convivio (The Banquet)*, trans. Richard H. Lansing (New York: Garland Library of Medieval Literature, 1990).

e di corpo,” 4.21.2), and it eventually lays bare the full scope of Dante’s ambivalence about the soul’s nature in the form of a seemingly irreconcilable assertion, namely that the “human” soul (“l’anima umana, che è forma nobilissima di queste che sotto lo cielo sono generate,” 3.2.6), following death, “endures perpetually in a nature which is more than human” (“ché [l’anima poi che è] partita, perpetualmente dura in natura più che umana,” 2.8.6).

We may look on this ambivalence as Dante’s version of the blind spot highlighted earlier in the Augustinian definition of human nature.<sup>8</sup> Paul Dumol has underlined the untenable “implications of superiority,” for instance, that seem to accompany the idea of a soul ascending beyond the realm of the human—a soul that in the final analysis, therefore, would hardly seem to be human at all.<sup>9</sup> *Vis à vis* exegetical fixes of this kind, the *Commedia* is generally accorded the final word as a moment of reckoning, correction, and self-refutation, giving Dante an opportunity to revisit contradictions from his earlier work. Over the course of this article, however, I will argue that with respect to the nature of the soul, the *Commedia* stages the exact opposite move: not a refutation, that is, but a radicalization of the imaginative paradox involved in the unity between the immortal existence of the soul and its mortal human origin.<sup>10</sup> Analyzed in the context of the process of stabilization

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<sup>8</sup> Terms like “ambivalence” and “paradox” (further in this paragraph) may appear at odds with the idea of the rational soul as the “incorporeal and subsistent principle” that survives the body after death (Aquinas, *Summa theologiæ* 1a.75.2, trans. from *Man* (1a.75–83), ed. and trans. Timothy Suttor, vol. 11 of *Summa Theologiæ*, 60 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); see also *Quæstiones disputatæ de anima* 14, and Aristotle’s *De anima* 1.4.408b18–30, 2.2.413b25–27, 3.4.429b5), which clearly underlies that of a soul enduring “in natura più che umana.” While the Scholastic argumentation accounts for Dante’s understanding of the soul’s survival after death, however, it also discloses a space for imaginative inquiry—that is to say, for the exploration of the soul’s connection to the embodied dimension of existence it must eventually return to, which Dante takes up in the *Commedia*. In the context of this exploration, the question of the nature of human existence with respect to its “incorporeal and subsistent principle” becomes salient precisely because it faces the poet with an imaginative (if not doctrinal) paradox.

<sup>9</sup> Paul A. Dumol, “Soul,” in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard H. Lansing (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> The notion of immortality must be clearly positioned with respect to the Neo-Aristotelian tradition, particularly in regard to two potential objections: that immortality, in the context of that tradition, is more properly characterized as a possibility, rather than the premise, of the soul’s existence; and that it is circumscribed to the intellect, the soul’s highest faculty—a claim frequently linked to Dante’s specific reference to “our intellect,” as distinct from “memory,” undertaking the journey towards God (“perché appressando sé al suo disire, / nostro intelletto si profonda tanto, / che dietro la memoria non può ire,” *Par.* 1.7–9). The latter interpretation becomes less restrictive when we consider the wide range of connotations the term “intellect”

unfolding through Dante's vernacular terminology, in fact, the poem's investigation of this paradox sheds a suggestive new light on one of the most "puzzling" questions that its age, indeed, has bequeathed to us: What exactly does it mean for the soul—and therefore for us—to be human?<sup>11</sup>

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accommodates (see Cesare Vasoli, "intelletto," in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, for a detailed review of doctrinal and literary usages) and that Dante's principal theological sources agreed on the intellect's consubstantiality with and privileged participation of God's divine nature (and so did Dante, of course, as discussed later in the analysis of *Purg.* 25), but not on its ultimate separation from the soul's other faculties and embodied existence (in addition to Augustine's passage referenced earlier, see Aquinas's definition of personhood discussed later in this article, as well as his more extensive argument in *De unitate intellectus contra averroistas* (esp. 1.25-26: "Most clearly therefore it appears without any doubt... that the intellect is something belonging to the soul which is the act of the body," trans. from *On the Unity of the Intellect Against the Averroists*, ed. and trans. Beatrice H. Zedler (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1968)) and Richard of St. Victor's description of the mind's return to the body after its mystical conjunction with God (*De gratia contemplationis* 6.23)). Dante's reference to "our intellect" as the faculty enabling or even properly undertaking the journey towards God, therefore, does not imply its exclusive immortality after death. As we will see, in fact, Dante's meticulous exploration of the soul as an entity gathering in itself "e l'umano e 'l divino" (*Purg.* 25.81), combined with his emphasis on the corporeality of souls in the afterlife, strongly suggests the opposite. Likewise, the fact that all his encounters with individual souls—damned, penitent, and blessed—undergird different facets of that exploration also restricts the purview of the first objection to the realm of Dante's philosophical background, rather than doctrinal commitments made in the poem.

<sup>11</sup> The question naturally needs to be situated with respect to one of Dante's most famous neologisms, "trasumanare": "Trasumanar significar *per verba* / non si poria; però l'esempio basti / a cui esperienza grazia serba" (*Par.* 1.70-72). Reading this tercet as an indication that every soul returning to God ascends permanently "beyond the human," in fact, would invalidate any inquiry into human aspects of Dante's conception of immortality. There are at least three reasons, however, to call such a reading into question. It is crucial to remember, first of all, that Dante does not coin the term "trasumanare" to make an ontological statement, but to describe how he felt at a very specific moment, looking at Beatrice while she was turned toward the heavenly spheres ("Beatrice tutta ne l'etterne rote / fissa con li occhi stava; e io in lei / le luci fissi, di là sù remote," *Par.* 1.64-66). The word, therefore, does not so much fix a state of being as capture an experience defined by its extraordinarily liminal quality (as highlighted by the very nature of the neologism, only used as a verb and rooted in a prefix underscoring the "transient" character of the action, rather than its conclusiveness), the experience of a human being absorbed in contemplation of the divine. In the second place, indeed, while warning that such an experience cannot be described directly ("significar *per verba* / non si poria"), Dante also compares it to an example ("però l'esempio basti") that foregrounds precisely that liminality, the story of Glaucus's transformation into a sea-god: "Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei, / qual si fè Glauco nel gustar de l'erba / che 'l fè consorto in mar de li altri dèi" (*Par.* 1.67-69). It may be tempting to read "consorto... de li altri dèi" as an allusion to the soul's definitive passage beyond the human realm; yet in Ovid's version of the myth, which Dante drew from, it is not by following the example of gods that Glaucus ends up tasting the magical herb, but that of the fish he has caught (*Metamorphoses* 13.936-

The soul, the poet Statius explains in *Purgatorio* 25:

Quando Lachesis non ha più del lino,  
solvesi da la carne, e in virtute  
ne porta seco e l'umano e 'l divino. (*Purg.* 25.79-81)<sup>12</sup>

What exactly does it mean for this “human” aspect, so clearly distinct, to be also so perfectly conjoined with the divine, “more than human” dimension of immortality? This concern will take us to the heart of Dante’s exploration of the nature of the soul, guided by two of the most prominent and elusive words in his poetic vocabulary, “umano” and “persona.” The contrasts and the synergy between these two terms, as we will see, animate a dovetailing vision of human existence as the moment in which the soul attains its eternal individual form: a vision of mortality, that is to say, as the form of immortality itself.<sup>13</sup> And what the soul’s human origin

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39: “My catch, on touching the grass, began to stir, then to turn over and to move about on land as in the sea. And while I paused in wonder they all slipped down into their native waters, abandoning their new master and the shore,” trans. from *Metamorphoses, Volume II: Books 9-15.*, trans. Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library 43 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958): the (pagan, it is worth recalling) divinity Glaucus ascends to, in other words, represents not a passage, but an intermediate status (an incarnated “transience”) between human and marine worlds (commentators have remarked how subtly “trasumanare,” incidentally, underlines that the comparison with Glaucus constitutes a “transumptio,” the layered metaphorical procedure at the foundation of Dante’s allegory (see Robert Durling’s note to his translation of *Par.* 1.70, as well as Francesco Tateo, “transumptio,” in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*). In the third place, just as “trasumanare” evokes Dante’s memory of what it feels like to “go beyond the human,” so the very effort to match his poem’s human language, by way of this neologism, to the peculiarity and the intensity of that experience testifies to the latter’s importance for the enrichment of human existence—an existence which has been vertiginously elevated, and even transformed, but not obliterated by that instant in contemplation of Beatrice’s eyes raised to the heavenly spheres (see Maurizio Dardano, “trasumanare,” in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, for similar examples of such experiential synthesis in the language of *Paradiso*), reinforcing rather than foreclosing the notion of the soul’s enduring humanity.

<sup>12</sup> All passages from the *Commedia* are quoted from Petrocchi’s edition (*La Divina Commedia*, 3 vols, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Milano: Mondadori, 1994)). Translations of particular terms and phrases are based on *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols., ed. and trans. Robert Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997-2011), in reason of its adherence to philological and philosophical nuances despite divergences of lineation.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to emphasize the difference between Dante’s imaginative exploration of the soul’s individuation, which this article examines, and the conceptual underpinnings of that exploration, which have already been extensively accounted for among Dante’s philosophical sources (all the way to Aristotle’s definition of the soul as “the cause and principle of the living body” (*De anima* 4.4.415b8, trans. from *De Anima*, ed. Christopher Shields (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016)) and Avicenna’s delineation

ultimately discloses, in this way, is the essence of Dante's entire universe—the moment wherein the whole of God's creation gives lasting form to its perfection.

## 2. *Human Perfection*

Within Dante's outlook, perfection was a straightforward idea with critical nuances. In the general sense of the absence of defects, it proceeded directly from the Aristotelian idea of form, which encompasses both the organic principle in which an entity originates as well as the articulation and fulfillment of that principle in its material existence.<sup>14</sup> In Dante's version of Aristotle's argument, in the *Convivio*: "Ciascuna cosa è massimamente perfetta quando tocca e aggiugne la sua virtude propria, e allora è massimamente secondo sua natura" (4.16.7). Perfection coincides with a thing's nature understood, at once, as the starting and the ending point of its existence. Which is to say that the existence of any given thing unfolds as a return to the full, originary premise of its being. The importance of this conception in the philosophical framework of the *Commedia* is outlined in *Paradiso* 29, where Beatrice explicitly identifies the perfection of the whole of creation with its moment of origin:

Forma e materia, congiunte e purette,

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of souls arising from a common human "quiddity" (see esp. *Logic* 1.5.1-2 and *Psychology* 12 from the *Book of Healing*). It is not with another cataloging of those sources that this study is concerned, nor with the (relatively superfluous) question of Dante's theoretical conception of the soul's individuation, but rather with the adaptation of that conception to the emergent language and vision of the *Commedia*.

<sup>14</sup> See Alessandro Niccoli, "perfetto," and Enrico Malato, "perfezione," in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*. Caroline Walker Bynum vividly retraces the Aristotelian background of Dante's approach to the ideas of perfection and embodiment: "Although discussion stayed in the narrow confines of the university and theologians indeed remained uncomfortable with some of its ramifications, unicity of form and formal identity became fairly widespread assumptions... Awareness of the implications of unicity of form and an intense self-consciousness about somatomorphic representation enable Dante to solve the identity problem and quell the ambivalence at the heart of the Augustinian notion of yearning for body" (*The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 277-98). For Aristotle's argument, see esp. *Physics* 2.1: "The nature of a thing, then, is a certain principle and cause of change and stability in the thing and it is *directly* present in it... form is a more plausible candidate for being nature than matter is because we speak of a thing as what it actually is at the time, rather than what it then is potentially... that which is growing is proceeding from something to something—that is what it means to be growing. What, then, is the endpoint of growth? It is not that which the growing is from, but that which the growing is into. From which it follows that form is nature" (trans. from *Physics*, ed. and trans. Robin Waterfield and David Bostock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)).

usciro ad esser che non avia fallo,  
 come d'arco tricordo tre saette. (*Par.* 29.22-24)

The beginning of the universe coincided with “pure” absence of defects, whose entire form was realized and immanent in its material existence. The temporal universe inhabited by human beings, accordingly, is structured by a constant tension towards that primeval state of perfection. At the heart of the cosmos’ concentric spheres lies the “lowest” realm, as Beatrice says, of “pure potentiality” (“pura potenza tenne la parte ima,” *Par.* 29.34), earthly matter at the ready for a divine form to wrest it out of its inertness. At the opposite end, outside of space and time, is the Empyrean, the realm of “pure act” where the formative principles of everything that exists immortally dwell (“e quelle furon cima / nel mondo in che puro atto fu prodotto,” *Par.* 29.32-33). As God’s creative power brings these to descend, mortal beings emerge and then again plunge back into the inert passivity of matter.<sup>15</sup> Approaching and then again removed from one another, matter and form thus exist in a perpetual tension to overcome separation towards their originary, perfect state of co-immanence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The descent of God’s creative power occurs through the motion of the highest sphere, the *primum mobile*, as Beatrice specifies in the next canto (“Fassi di raggio tutta sua parvenza / riflesso al sommo del mobile primo, / che prende quivi vivere e potenza,” *Par.* 30.106-108). In line with the reading developed here, that motion constantly modulates the region between Earth and the Empyrean through the tension of matter and form (“nel mezzo strinse potenza con atto / tal vime, che già mai non si divima,” *Par.* 29.33-36).

<sup>16</sup> It may be objected that this interpretation superimposes a temporality beyond the actual scope of Beatrice’s words, which describe the atemporal order of creation’s constituents (the “pure act” of angelic intelligence, the “pure potentiality” of matter, and the “unmediated” being of the heavens), in line with the Aristotelian conception of the cosmos (see Aristotle’s *De caelo*, *Physics* 8, and *Metaphysics* 12). This reading does not call that conception into question, nor does it seek to impose a Neo-Platonic perspective on the passage: the aim is rather to outline the relationship, in the poem’s own terms, between the originary, eternal order of the universe and the temporality that human souls are born into and move through. What Beatrice articulates is still, after all, an account of creation, laying out the fundamental structure of a universe whose perfection, on the scale of the individual soul, unfolds through the experience of time. As Piero Boitani effectively puts it: “This is a canto which predicates being in its primeval forms, and which moves through time and space to hover over out-of-time and outside-space... In short, Dante’s is a complete rewriting of Genesis... moving to the heart of the matter, the substance of things. Form and matter: each in absolute, singular, purity, or united: that is to say, pure form (or pure act), angelic intelligence; pure matter (or pure potency), prime matter; and form-and-matter together, a compound of both, the heavens. The three things together take the place of the biblical heaven and earth, constituting the object of the Big Bang, and the foundations of the universe” (“The poetry and poetics of the creation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 218-235, 226-28). For further discussion of the innovativeness of Dante’s



Stadius's outline of a soul gathering both "the human and the divine" into itself might appear difficult to reconcile with a universe structured by the separation between matter and immortal form.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, in fact, such a notion is consistent with that of human nature as a hylomorphic substance arranging matter into the soul's form. On the other hand, even Aristotle's version of hylomorphism had to leave room for the separability of "some parts" of the soul from its material body.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, indeed, things would seem to stand much more neatly in the *Convivio*, where the immortal "part" of the soul is singled out as a divine form that, at death, returns to God ("con quella parte de la nostra anima che mai non muore, a l'altissimo e gloriosissimo seminadore al cielo ritorna," *Conv.* 4.23.3). The human body, by contrast, is cast as a mortal "prison" in which the soul, until death, is held captive ("mentre che l'anima è legata e incarcerata per li organi del nostro corpo," *Conv.* 2.4.17). The *Convivio*, therefore, would seem to provide a first and unambiguous answer to the question set forth in the introduction concerning the exact nature of the soul's "human" aspect: for the essence of human nature, in these terms, squarely correlates with what Robert Harrison has called, after Giambattista Vico, "a connection with the humus," the mortality of the body

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account, see also Boitani's 'La creazione nel *Paradiso*', *Filologia e critica* 33 (Jan.-Apr. 2008): 3-34, as well as Alison Cornish's "Planets and Angels in *Paradiso* XXIX: The First Moment," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 108 (1990): 1-28, and her reading of *Paradiso* 29 in connection with the "mind-body problem" in "*Paradiso* 29: Saving the Appearances," *Dante Studies* 137 (2019): 107-23. These accounts also importantly engage with the relevance of this passage for what Teodolinda Barolini terms the "poetics of the new" linking pilgrim's and reader's experience in the journey of poetic creation ("Infernal Incipits: The Poetics of the New," in *The Undivine "Comedy": Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 21-47).

<sup>17</sup> For a review of the tension between philosophical argument and theological cogency in Stadius's speech, see Paolo Falzone's "Filosofia e teologia nel canto XXV del *Purgatorio*," *Bollettino di italianistica* 1 (2006): 41-72. Of special interest is the comparison with Virgil's shorter account of the physicality of souls in the afterlife, in *Purgatorio* 3, as well as the discussion of Dante's approach to the philosophical problem of embodiment and the need to reconcile rational argument with the primacy of faith and revealed truth. See also Zygmunt Barański's "Canto XXV," in *Lectura Dantis Turicensis*, eds. George Güntert and Michelangelo Picone (Firenze: Franco Cesati, 2001), 389-406.

<sup>18</sup> See Aristotle, *De anima* 2.1.413a3-7: "Therefore, that the soul is not separable from the body, or some parts of it if it naturally has parts, is not unclear. For the actuality of some parts belongs to the parts themselves. Even so, nothing hinders some parts from being separable, because of their not being the actualities of any body" (trans. from *De Anima* (2016)).

destined to be buried in the earth, returning to matter and its inanimate, immoveable place thereafter.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to observe that, for all its corrective impetus, Statius's account of the genesis of the soul in *Purgatorio* 25 does not actually stray far from this conception, since it also clearly distinguishes between an earthbound and a heavenly power that concur to shape the individual soul.<sup>20</sup> The first of these is the "power to shape" ("virtute informativa," *Purg.* 25.41), the organic principle infused by the father's sperm ("sangue perfetto," *Purg.* 25.37), which guides the development of the human embryo into a body equipped with all sensory organs:

Anima fatta la virtute attiva  
 qual d'una pianta, in tanto differente,  
 che questa è in via e quella è già a riva,  
 tanto ovra poi, che già si move e sente,  
 come spungo marino; e indi imprende  
 ad organar le posse ond'è semente. (*Purg.* 25.52-57)

The second power ("spirito novo") descends then from God ("lo motor primo") complementing body and senses with the possible intellect:

... lo motor primo a lui si volge lieto  
 sovra tant'arte di natura, e spira  
 spirito novo, di virtù repleto,  
 che ciò che trova attivo quivi, tira  
 in sua sustanzia, e fassi un'alma sola,  
 che vive e sente e sé in sé rigira. (*Purg.* 25.70-75)

Far from breaking with the *Convivio*, therefore, Statius's recapitulation goes a long way in consolidating the idea of the soul's composite nature that Dante had first outlined there. Notably, this is just as true of the similarities as it is of the differences between the two accounts. The two formative powers that Statius describes, for instance, are a simplification of many more that were originally listed in the *Convivio*,<sup>21</sup> highlighting Dante's intent to shift

<sup>19</sup> Robert P. Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 34. For the etymological nexus proposed by Vico, see "Principj di scienza nuova" § 12: "La seconda delle cose umane, per la quale a' latini, da «humando», «seppellire», prima e propriamente vien detta «humanitas», sono le seppulture" (from *Scienza nuova*, ed. Paolo Rossi (Milano: Rizzoli, 2012)).

<sup>20</sup> About Albert the Great's influence on this aspect of Statius's speech and Dante's account of the "virtute informativa," see note 29.

<sup>21</sup> See *Conv.* 4.21.4: "E però dico che quando l'umano seme cade nel suo recettaculo, cioè ne la matrice, esso porta seco la virtù de l'anima generativa e la virtù del cielo e

emphasis, in this later categorization, from the specification of each power's physiological function to their origins: to the distinction, that is to say, between the human realm of the body and the divine realm of the "spirito novo." As a result, the *Commedia* would also clearly appear to associate the "human" dimension of existence with the prison of flesh that the soul, at death, leaves behind. On the one hand, human life is marked out as the moment in which the soul originates in the form of an individual. On the other hand, that form is still eventually destined to be "released from the flesh," transcending the mortal "humus" to which the body returns and bringing the human moment of the soul's existence to an end.

So, it would appear—yet herein precisely lies the paradox. For if Statius's account also unfolds along a clear separation between the soul's human origin and its immortal destiny, how are we then to account for the statement that the soul, upon leaving the flesh, carries off "both the human and the divine"?

Quando Lachesis non ha più del lino,  
solvesi da la carne, e in virtute  
ne porta seco e l'umano e 'l divino.

One way around the quandary would be to interpret the notation "in virtute," here, to mean that human and divine elements leave the flesh as manifest "potentialities," in continuity with the two formative powers they arose from.<sup>22</sup> In this reading, the image of

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la virtù de li elementi legati, cioè la complessione; e matura e dispone la materia a la virtù formativa, la quale diede l'anima del generante; e la virtù formativa prepara li organi a la virtù celestiale, che produce de la potenza del seme l'anima in vita."

<sup>22</sup> This is the reading reflected in Durling's translation ("When Lachesis has no more thread, the soul / is released from the flesh, and it carries off in its / powers both the human and the divine") though not, for instance, in Longfellow's non-committal adherence to Dante's wording ("Whenever Lachesis has no more thread, / It separates from the flesh, and virtually / Bears with itself the human and divine," from *The Purgatorio*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005)), nor in W. S. Merwin's version, which keeps its ambiguity ingeniously at arm's length ("When Lachesis has no more flax, the soul is set / free of the flesh, and it takes with it / its latent self, human and divine," from *Purgatorio: A New Verse Translation by W. S. Merwin* (New York: Knopf, 2001)). As Philippe Delhaye and Giorgio Stabile clarify in their entry on "virtù" in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, Dante's flexible use of the term ("indica fundamentalmente una 'capacità naturale a operare,' sia nel senso di 'disposizione' o 'idoneità' a esplicare un'azione, sia in quello di 'potenza' o 'energia' esplicata") leaves the question open as to whether he intended such denotational continuity within Statius's speech. An alternative confutation is offered by Falzone, who traces the phrase "in virtute" back to Aquinas's interpretation of Augustine's *De spiritu et anima*, indicating that the soul survives as the active subject of its formed powers ("Filosofia e teologia," 65-66)—a persuasive reading that, however, does not address the issue of embodiment discussed later in this article. Durling, interestingly, attributes his terminological choice to the unprecedented quality of

the Fates' unweaving thread ("solvesi... porta seco") would then correspond to the literal extrapolation of the unitary form the self generated by the conjunction of "virtute attiva" and "spirito novo," configuring the soul as its enduring spiritual mold. Even casting pricklier hermeneutical issues aside,<sup>23</sup> however, such an interpretation is difficult to reconcile with the idea of selfhood that actually oriented Dante's epistemological and imaginative outlook. As Timothy Reiss has shown, there is a fundamental distinction to be made between later notions of "self-fashioning," anchored in Renaissance and Cartesian conceptualizations of individuality as a separate, internal essence, and the sense of embedded "passibility" that, by contrast, shaped the understanding of human nature characteristic of the proto-humanistic cultures of medieval Europe:

*Passibility* was the fundamental nature of the human being *as* human. Its relation to the endlessly multiple matter, qualities and events of its surroundings—divine, animate, social, physical—was one of being always and constantly affected by simply being in them, more exactly, being *of* them.<sup>24</sup>

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Dante's conception: "Naturally enough, there is nothing in earlier literature, theological or otherwise, like this passage, but it is integral to Dante's conception of the unified human person" (Durling's note to *Purg.* 25.79-108).

<sup>23</sup> As Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi's observes: "l'espressione *in virtute* non può significare «in potenza», cioè «non in atto», come molti spiegano, perché nella terzina seguente è detto chiaramente che le facoltà intellettive (*il divino*) restano *in atto* anche più acutamente di prima. Si dovrà dunque intendere *virtute* come «virtù sostanziale»... Tutte le potenze, «umane e divine», sono infatti radicate («in radice», come si esprime Tommaso) nell'essenza stessa dell'anima" (note to *Purg.* 25.80-81, in *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milano: Mondadori, 1991-97)). Like Durling in the comment to his translation (see previous note), Chiavacci Leonardi also contextualizes this line within the novelty of Dante's conception extending to the invention of aerial bodies (discussed later in this article): "L'anima separata... non ha fortuna nella *Commedia*. Tanto intenso è il desiderio di Dante di dar risposta alla sua profonda aspirazione, che egli stesso crea la modalità di questa corporeità spirituale... Se ci sono infatti vaghi e discussi precedenti all'idea di un corpo sottile, etereo, nei padri più antichi della Chiesa... l'idea di come esso potesse formarsi (per la stessa virtù, rimasta intatta e portata nell'aldilà, che formava le membra corporee nel seno materno, ed ora le imprime nell'aria circostante) appare del tutto dantesca... La ragione profonda di tutto il discorso è l'idea che l'uomo è sempre, anche dopo morto, non puro spirito, ma anima e corpo, vale a dire *umano e divino*, storia ed eternità" ("Introduzione al canto XXV"). Along similar lines, how to correlate an eventual self-sufficiency of the spiritual element with Beatrice's characterization of primeval perfection as "Forma e materia, congiunte e purette"? Any reading of "in virtute" as "in potentiality" seems bound to raise problems with respect to the emergent speculative framework of the *Commedia*.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy J. Reiss, *Mirages of the Self: Patterns of Personhood in Ancient and Early Modern Europe*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 97. As Reiss succinctly puts it in the introduction, "There was no idea of a self free and independent in its will, intentions and choices; none of a separate, private individual" (3). For a reprisal of his discussion in connection with Dante, see Barbara Newman's *The*

In this earlier conception, rooted in Averroes's distinction between eternal "material" intellect and the "passible and corruptible" intellect of human beings (in Book 3 of his *Long Commentary* on Aristotle's *De anima*, which Dante knew well), the existence of the individual soul unfolds through the relations (the constant "give and take in the universe") defining and embedding it in its proper place in the world.<sup>25</sup> Any separation of that existence from a material sensible body, consequently, would have been all but inconceivable, and the rarefaction of the soul's "human" aspect into a disembodied formal power all but unintelligible, to Dante himself—a hermeneutical shortcut that, for all its seductiveness, would not take us far into the riddle of Statius's words.

### 3. *The Organics of Personhood*

How does the soul remain human after relinquishing its mortal body? An alternative approach to the paradox just outlined is offered by another word Dante often employs in reference to human beings, "persona," whose etymological ramifications are especially significant in the context of this discussion.<sup>26</sup>

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*Permeable Self: Five Medieval Relationships* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Reiss, *Mirages of the Self*, 106. For Averroes's discussion of the relationship between material and passible intellect, see esp. *Long Commentary* 3.20: "You ought to know that use and exercise are the causes of what appears to be the case concerning the potency of the agent intellect which is in us for separating [things] and the material intellect for receiving [things]. They are, I say, causes on account of the positive disposition existing through use and exercise in the passible and corruptible intellect which Aristotle calls passible, and [which] he said plainly is corruptible. If not, it would happen that the power which is in us making the intelligibles would be material and likewise the passible power. For this reason no one can reason on the basis of this that the material intellect is mixed with the body" (trans. from *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Richard C. Taylor (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009)).

<sup>26</sup> It may be observed that the concepts of "soul" and "personhood," in the Neo-Aristotelian tradition, are typically discussed in terms of the distinction between "soul" and "intellect," which is indeed crucial to Dante's description of his soul's ultimate conjunction with the universal "mover" (God's active intellect) at the end of the poem: "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.* 33.143-45). The value of focusing on the relationship between soul and personhood, in this perspective, is that it provides an avenue to consider the human end of that same conjunction, that is to say, the soul's transformation over the course of its journey towards it. With regard to the poem's conclusion, indeed, Chiavacci Leonardi argues that "*amor vada qui inteso non tanto come quello di Dio che muove l'universo, ma come quello (suscitato da Dio) dell'universo che lo fa muovere, volgere verso di lui... nel canto I era stato detto... che dalla direzione centripeta impressa da Dio verso se stesso a tutte le creature si diparte talvolta l'unica tra esse—l'uomo—che per la sua libertà ha il potere di*

The semantics of personhood harken back to the Latin verb “personare” (“to sound out through”), which describes the way actors in antiquity spoke through masks representing their characters on stage. “Persona” was the name of the mask—of the figure brought to life by the actor’s body and voice.<sup>27</sup> These associations percolated into Dante’s idiom through the theological appropriation of St. Thomas Aquinas, who in the *Summa theologiæ* elevated “persona” to index of all the “principia individuanti hominem”—everything that characterizes a human being as an embodied and individuated self. Indeed, embodiment is the key detail of Aquinas’s definition: “‘person’... used of human nature refers to *this* flesh, *these* bones and *this* soul which are the sources of man’s individuality.”<sup>28</sup> Flesh and bones precede the soul as the scaffoldings of its individual form: as the bodily mask through which the divine power, as Statius puts it, “breathes” a new spirit (“spira / spirito novo”) into the existence of a soul.<sup>29</sup> What this implies is simple

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resistere a tale divino impulso; ma l’uomo, una volta unito per grazia a Dio, non corre più questo rischio, in quanto la sua libera volontà si identifica con quella divina... Tale è la condizione di Dante alla fine del poema, stabilito nel puro amore di Dio” (note to *Par.* 1.145, in *La Divina Commedia* (1991–97)). The exegetical angle taken up in this section, accordingly, complements Dante’s recognition of the divine intellect at the heart of creation with a mapping of the soul’s course toward that recognition.

<sup>27</sup> See “persona,” in *L’Etimologico: Vocabolario della lingua italiana*, ed. Alberto Nocerini (Milano: Le Monnier, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiæ* 1a.29.4 (trans. from *The Trinity* (1a.27–32), ed. and trans. Ceslaus Velecky, vol. 6 of *Summa Theologiæ* (2006)). Byrnum pregnantly captures the persistent suggestiveness of embodiment in doctrinal disquisitions about identity: “By the early fourteenth century, it was possible—at least for logicians and theologians—to think of survival and identity of self without continuity of material particles. But hundreds of years of insistence on bodily resurrection had come to locate in ‘soul’ much of our commonsense understanding of ‘body’... Although soul now seemed to carry not only the particularity of self but also the pattern of body, it needed body as a place to express that particularity and pattern. Even Dante (d. 1321), who made technically correct use of the Thomistic notion that soul accounts for identity... depicted his beloved Beatrice in the last cantos of the *Divine Comedy* not simply as soul... [and] gave to his eponymous self a vision of the heavenly choir in their resurrection bodies even though his poetic encounter was set before the end of time” (*The Resurrection of the Body*, 10–11).

<sup>29</sup> This definition is also notably in line with Albert the Great’s description—based on Avicenna’s theorization—of the formative power that prepares the body in which the rational soul is received (see *De animalibus* 16.1.4–12 and *De anima* 1.2.7; also Eugenio Massa, “Alberto Magno,” in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*), a fundamental source of Statius’s organological account analyzed in this section. The agreement is pivotal in the context of Aquinas’s and Albert’s divergences regarding the role of potentiality in the interaction of matter and form (see esp. Nardi’s “La dottrina d’Alberto Magno sull’‘inchoatio formae,’” and “Alberto Magno e San Tommaso,” in *Studi di filosofia medievale* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1960), 69–101, 103–18, as well as

but paramount, for the body is unambiguously singled out as the catalyst of the process of individuation in which the soul originates. Such a conception noticeably diverges from the one outlined in the *Convivio*, where Dante characterizes the soul not as the endpoint but rather as the “cause,” the antecedent principle of bodily existence (“l’anima è atto del corpo; e se ella è suo atto, è sua cagione,” *Conv.* 3.6.11). It is essential, therefore, to verify how far the *Commedia* ventures from that initial position.

According to *Purgatorio* 25, as we saw, no soul exists prior to the human flesh and bones that have been prepared to bring it into existence, since the “spirito novo” descends only once the embryo has grown into a body that “moves and has feeling” (“che già si move e sente”). Statius further underscores the body’s incarnational primacy by leveraging another key concept, that of “organo,” which describes all the sensory organs connecting the human body with its surroundings.<sup>30</sup> The verb “organare” is the one he uses in reference to the work of the “virtute informativa,” which “imprende / ad organar le posse ond’è semente,” organizing the fetus in accordance with the body’s five senses (“posse”). It is very significant, therefore, that the selfsame “virtute” then prepares an additional “organo” to enable the infusion of the “spirito novo” into the body—the brain:

... quest’è tal punto  
che più savio di te fé già errante,  
sì che per sua dottrina fé disgiunto  
de l’anima il possibile intelletto,  
perché da lui non vide organo assunto.  
Apri a la verità che viene il petto;  
e sappi che, sì tosto come al feto  
l’articular del cerebro è perfetto,  
lo motor primo a lui si volge lieto  
sopra tant’arte di natura, e spira  
spirito novo, di virtù repleto. (*Purg.* 25.62-72)

The embattled articulation of this idea, pitched emphatically against Averroes’s (“più savio di te”) “erratic” theorization of an extracorporeal intellect, underscores its importance for Dante’s own conception of the soul’s nature.<sup>31</sup> The existence of a designated organ

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Dal “*Convivio*” alla “*Commedia*” (*Sei saggi danteschi*) (Roma: Istituto storico italiano per il medio evo, 1960)).

<sup>30</sup> See Alessandro Niccoli, “organo,” in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*.

<sup>31</sup> For a recent integration to discussions about Averroes’s theory and the Latin Averroists’ arguments, see Peter Adamson’s *Philosophy in the Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

for the incorporation of the “*spirito novo*,” as a matter of fact, foregrounds a subtle but fundamental aspect of the soul’s incarnation, namely the material equalization of its human and divine constituents. If “*virtute informativa*” and “*spirito novo*,” in fact, equally depend on bodily organs to converge into a new, personified existence, then the body not only prefigures, but actively shapes, and indeed manifests, the eternal form of the soul: it is the most literal version imaginable, in other words, of the Aquinian mask of flesh and bones (it seems especially meaningful, in this sense, that of all possible characters Dante chose Statius, a poet from antiquity, as the mouthpiece for this recuperation of the performative and incarnational roots of the idea of “*persona*”). Moving beyond the causative differentiation of the *Convivio*, the *Commedia* thus posits human personhood in its material, flesh-bound entirety (“*this* flesh, *these* bones and *this* soul”) as the one and only form in which it will ever be possible for the soul to exist—an existence tied *in perpetuo*, as Reiss noted, to the experience of inhabiting a particular body in the world.

This reading finds confirmation in the poetic invention of aerial bodies, which Statius brings up to illustrate the soul’s continued existence after death.<sup>32</sup> For it is precisely through an impulse to replicate the body’s presence that the soul survives, as he explains:

Tosto che loco lì la circunscrive,  
la virtù formativa raggia intorno  
così e quanto ne le membra vive. (*Purg.* 25.88-90)

Incarnation endures as the paradigm of the soul’s immortality. A paradigm, it must be observed, that unfolds in no abstracted or disembodied potentiality, but by virtue of a “formative power” strikingly akin to the “*virtute informativa*” that generated the soul’s first, human body. Statius pairs up two adverbs to highlight this parallel and the fact that the soul, in this way, persists not as a ghostly form, but in “radiant” reminiscence of its bodily existence: “*così e quanto ne le membra vive*”—as lifelike as the living body, in outer aspect as well as intensity of feeling and thought. Such insistence underscores the deeply literal sense in which the aerial body provides “a constitutive mechanism for our continued human personhood after death,” as Heather Webb has noted, “just as the embryonic body

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<sup>32</sup> For a review of derivative and original aspects of the idea of aerial bodies, see Falzone, “*Filosofia e teologia*,” 70-71, and Chiavacci Leonardi’s commentary quoted in note 23.



and infused soul are constitutive of our humanity at birth.”<sup>33</sup> Statius reiterates this continuity, once again, through the incarnational semantics of “organo”:

Però che quindi ha poscia sua paruta,  
è chiamata ombra; e quindi organa poi  
ciascun sentire infino a la veduta. (*Purg.* 25.100-102)

The soul unfolds into the air as an immortal, self-organizing presence, identical with the personified form of its body—transcending, yes, its human mortality, and yet never the human moment of its origin.

#### 4. *Transcending Bodies*

Even this poetic revisitation of personhood, nevertheless, presents a difficulty. If the soul, in fact, lives on in immortal perpetuation of its human origin, what is decisive—or even just distinctive—about its passage out of mortality? It is time to take another look at Dante’s statement, in the *Convivio*, that the soul after death transitions into “a nature which is more than human” (“perpetualmente dura in natura più che umana,” 2.8.6), with all the elements now in place to see why this is a notion that the *Commedia* does not disavow, but actually follows through to its ultimate, revealing consequences.

In and of itself, the permanence of human personhood does not imply that the soul remains anchored to the bodily realm of matter—its “connection with the humus”—particularly when we recall that matter, as Beatrice explains in *Paradiso* 29, is a dimension of “pure potentiality”: that which must be transcended to reach the divine realm of “pure act.” In the conclusion of his speech, Statius gestures precisely towards this transgression as the marker of the soul’s passage out of human existence. Once the soul has been released from the flesh, its inner motions manifest with an immediacy that would have been unimaginable through the mediation of an earthly body:

Secondo che ci affiggono i disiri  
e li altri affetti, l’ombra si figura;  
e quest’è la cagion di che tu miri. (*Purg.* 25.106-108)

This tercet describes the aerial body as a purified (“wondrous,” indeed) manifestation of the soul. To tease out the significance of this

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<sup>33</sup> Heather Webb, *Dante’s Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17.

characterization, it is helpful to contextualize it within the notion of “pureness” that Dante derived from St. Albert the Great, explicated in the *Convivio* by way of the following simile. Just as the light of the sun shines more or less manifestly through earthly bodies according to their “diaphanousness” (“Vedemo la luce del sole, la quale è una, da uno fonte derivata, diversamente da le corpora essere ricevuta”), so God’s divine power is more or less manifest according to the degree in which a creature’s material existence obfuscates its nature, that is to say, the actualization of its form (which, as we saw, is both cause and endpoint of the existence of everything God creates).<sup>34</sup> Angels, entirely separate from matter, are therefore the “purest” of all beings. Human beings, by contrast, are caught up in their earthly bodies “sì come l’uomo ch’è tutto ne l’acqua fuor del capo, del quale non si può dire che tutto sia ne l’acqua né tutto fuor da quella” (*Conv.* 3.7.5). At the same time that the body’s flesh and bones individuate it as a personified self, they also constrain the soul to an interior, invisible, “impurely” manifest existence.

At the same time that the soul is given form, it is also concealed by the mask of the body—a mask that “desires / and other feelings” need to traverse until death, at last, allows them to transcend it. In this sense, Statius’s speech clearly characterizes death as the passage into a different state of affairs: “Secondo che ci affiggono i disiri / e li altri affetti, l’ombra si figura”—in contrast with the impurity of the flesh, the aerial body configures an instant correspondence between the soul’s inner movements and their visible manifestation. Concurrently, it is also crucial to notice how carefully Statius’s wording emphasizes the affinity, rather than the discrepancy, between the workings of earthly and aerial body. The reappearance discussed earlier of the verb “organare,” just two tercets before this passage (“e quindi organa poi / ciascun sentire infino a la veduta,” *Purg.* 25.101–102), punctuates a parallel between

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<sup>34</sup> See *Conv.* 3.7.3–4: “Veramente ciascuna cosa riceve da quello discorrimento secondo lo modo de la sua vertù e de lo suo essere; e di ciò sensibile essemplò avere potemo dal sole. Vedemo la luce del sole, la quale è una, da uno fonte derivata, diversamente da le corpora essere ricevuta; sì come dice Alberto, in quello libro che fa de lo Intelletto, che certi corpi, «per molta chiaritade di diafano avere in sé mista, tosto che ’l sole li vede diventano tanto luminosi, che per multiplicamento di luce in quelle e ne lo loro aspetto, rendono a li altri di sé grande splendore», sì come è l’oro, e alcuna pietra. «Certi sono che, per esser del tutto diafani, non solamente ricevono la luce, ma quella non impediscono, anzi rendono lei del loro colore colorata ne l’altre cose. E certi sono tanto vincenti ne la purità del diafano, che divengono sì raggianti, che vincono l’armonia de l’occhio, e non si lasciano vedere senza fatica del viso,” sì come sono li specchi. Certi altri sono tanto senza diafano, che quasi poco de la luce ricevono, sì come la terra.”

the processes of corporal mediation and aerial “figuring,” which indexes them as different but intimately interrelated stages in the soul’s progression towards its fully manifest form. A progression by way of which “the self, including its physical characteristics and qualities,” as Manuele Gragnolati has put it, “seems to be wholly packed into the self-sufficient souls of the *Commedia*.”<sup>35</sup> In its aerial body the soul finally shines forth, wholly packed into the “pure” and unobstructed immanence of the self in the world.

In this way, far from refuting the notion of a human form ascending into “a nature which is more than human,” the *Commedia* vividly radicalizes Dante’s effort to come to grips with the imaginative paradox that notion entails. A powerful dramatization of this effort is his failed embrace with the singer Casella, in *Purgatorio* 2, which (rather topically) may appear to run counter to the reading developed so far. While the intensely physicalized souls in *Inferno* would seem to conform easily,<sup>36</sup> in fact, to an interpretation of aerial “figuring” as a fuller and unobstructed manifestation of the soul, this episode famously signals an abrupt cessation of all physical contact upon reaching the Mountain of Purgatory, which is less intuitive but equally important to account for. Casella has just arrived at the foot of the Mountain after three months spent on the banks of the river Tiber, waiting for his will to conform to God’s “just” wish for his penitence and redemption (“ché di giusto voler lo suo si face,” *Purg.* 2.97). And as soon as he recognizes Dante, he makes towards him:

Io vidi una di lor trarresi avante  
per abbracciarmi con sì grande affetto,  
che mosse me a far lo somigliante.  
Ohi ombre vane, fuor che ne l’aspetto!  
tre volte dietro a lei le mani avvinsi,  
e tante mi tornai con esse al petto. (*Purg.* 2.76-81)

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<sup>35</sup> Manuele Gragnolati, “Nostalgia in Heaven: Embraces, Affection and Identity in the *Commedia*,” in *Dante and the Human Body: Eight Essays*, eds. John C. Barnes and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 117-37, 120. See also “Embryology and Aerial Bodies in Dante’s *Comedy*,” in *Experiencing the Afterlife: Soul and Body in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 53-87.

<sup>36</sup> Think of Dante’s repeated physical contacts with Virgil, for instance, or the way he caresses Brunetto Latini (*Inf.* 15.25-30) and yanks at the hair of Bocca degli Abati (*Inf.* 32.97-123). As Rebecca West remarks: “The *Inferno* is the most sense-oriented of the Canticles. There Dante often both is touched and touches... his guide and certain shades, both loved and despised” (“On the Sense of Touch in the *Divine Comedy*,” *Lectura Dantis* 5 (Fall 1989): 46-58, 49). See also Falzone, “Filosofia e teologia,” 48-56, for a review of the philosophical debate on this issue.

Dante's marvel ("Di maraviglia, credo, mi dipinsi," v. 82) spotlights the occurrence's unprecedented quality, amplified by the contrast with Casella's lack of surprise at his own failed attempt to embrace the old friend. Such is the consequence, he seems to suggest, of having left one's mortal body behind: "Così com'io t'amai / nel mortal corpo, così t'amo sciolta" (vv. 88-90). The function of this encounter within the larger theological framework of the *Commedia* has been the object of long and insightful examination, offering an array of contextual solutions to the apparent contradiction between Dante's depiction of his interactions with souls up until this moment and Casella's sudden disembodiment.<sup>37</sup> What remains troubling for the present discussion, nevertheless, is the potential implication of Casella's words that removal from the mortal body has weakened, rather intensified, the manifestation of the soul's "disiri / e li altri affetti." If Casella's "love" for Dante is unchanged, why can't he follow through with the impulse to embrace him? How does this inability match the idea of a soul more immediately and purely manifest in its aerial body?

Casella's description of his new condition, it will have been noticed, anticipates the exact same figuration of the soul's transition into immortality that later reappears in *Purgatorio* 25—that of a thread "unwoven" from the flesh ("sciolta"). Resonances of this kind are integral to the internal structure the *Commedia*, and by alerting the reader to the continuity between the two episodes, this one draws attention to their correspondence as well as their complementarity in the poem's unfolding inquiry into the nature of the soul. As a matter of fact, the continuation of that same passage in

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<sup>37</sup> Notably, among recent interventions, Lino Pertile's reading of Cato's later injunction to the penitent souls ("Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio / ch'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto," *Purg.* 2.122-23) correlating their mortal "raiment" with the "condizione di corruttibilità fisica e spirituale in cui, con il primo peccato, caddero i protoplasti e con essi l'intero genere umano" ("Lo scoglio e la vesta," in *La punta del disio. Semantica del desiderio nella Commedia* (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2005), 59-83, 67), as well as Angelo Maria Mangini's reappraisal of the connection between Cato's and Virgil's earlier reference to that same "raiment" ("la vesta ch'al gran di sarà sì chiara," *Purg.* 1.75) as complementary parts of Dante's appropriation of the Pauline doctrine of "purificazione/expoliatio" ("Virgilio, Catone e la "vesta": due versioni della salvezza," *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 90 (Apr. 2015): 191-208). These accounts provide suggestive frameworks to interpret the contrast between the physicality of the damned and Casella's disembodiment in the context of their opposite moral turns, respectively towards and away from, sin and the impurity of earthly existence. See also Kevin Marti's discussion of Pauline imagery and the theme of resurrection in "Dante's 'Baptism' and the Theology of the Body in *Purgatorio* 1-2," *Traditio* 45 (1989-90): 167-90, and Rachel Jacoff's "'Our Bodies, Our Selves': The Body in the *Commedia*," in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and its Afterlife. Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, eds. Dana E. Stewart and Alison Cornish (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2000), 119-37.

Stattius's speech provides an illuminating gloss on the phenomenology of the failed embrace:

Quando Lachesis non ha più del lino,  
solvesi da la carne, e in virtute  
ne porta seco e l'umano e 'l divino:  
l'altre potenze tutte quante mute;  
memoria, intelligenza e volontade  
in atto molto più che prima agute. (*Purg.* 25.79-84)

As the body is relinquished, the unification of human and divine elements into the soul's immortal substance arranges its faculties into a precise hierarchy, dimming out the sensory ("l'altre potenze," the "posse" shaped earlier into the organs by the "virtute attiva," *Purg.* 25.52-57) while sharpening the rational ones: memory, understanding, and will.<sup>38</sup> In accordance with this arrangement, the latter three faculties' central role in the purgatorial journey of redemption has been extensively noted and analyzed, beginning with Charles Singleton's reading of *Purgatorio* in light of the *Commedia*'s larger concern with the theme of conversion, the soul's "turn" from earthly sin towards God.<sup>39</sup> In this connection, particularly relevant here is the correlation between one of these faculties, the will, and what Jacques Le Goff has called the "symphony" of purgatorial temporality, "a composite of the experience of each of the souls undergoing trial in the space between earth and Heaven... between the memory of the living and the anxiety of the dead."<sup>40</sup> As the souls that Dante meets on the Mountain of Purgatory repeatedly testify, the experience of conversion is indeed one of trying, gradual release from the vagaries and distractions of earthly life, in anticipation of the final ascent into Heaven and God's eternal light. Along the way, a "continual dialectic between forward motion and backward glance, voyage and repose,

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<sup>38</sup> The three faculties of the rational soul, as set forth in Augustine's *De Trinitate* 10.12.17-19. Dante outlines his conception of the will as a rational faculty in *Purgatorio* 18 ("Or perché a questa ogn' altra si raccoglie, / innata v'è la virtù che consiglia, / e de l'assenso de' tener la soglia. / Quest'è 'l principio là onde si piglia / ragion di meritare in voi, secondo / che buoni e rei amori accoglie e viglia," *Purg.* 18.61-66).

<sup>39</sup> Charles Singleton, "In Exitu Israel De Aegypto," *Annual Report of the Dante Society, with Accompanying Papers* 78 (1960): 1-24. For a review and integration of Singleton's thesis foregrounding the link between the performance and the embodiment of salvation, see Albert Russell Ascoli's "Performing Salvation in Dante's *Commedia*," *Dante Studies* 135 (2017): 74-106.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 353. See also Barbara Reynolds's discussion of the failed embrace in "The Morning Sun," in *Dante: The Poet, The Political Thinker, The Man* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 251-57.

illicit curiosity and necessary desire,” as Teodolinda Barolini has remarked in reference to Dante and Casella’s encounter, tracks “the will’s transition—in time—from mortal to immortal objects of desire”: the soul’s transformation, moment by moment, as the will shifts between the “memory” of living and the “anxiety” to turn away from it, toward its ultimate destination.<sup>41</sup>

This dynamic is key to see how Statius’s words help to clarify the problem of the failed embrace. For it is at a very specific moment in the transitional temporality just outlined, as we saw, that Dante and Casella meet—when Casella’s will, after three months of wait on the Tiber’s bank, has turned in the same “just” direction as God’s own:

... Nessun m’è fatto oltraggio,  
 se quei che leva quando e cui li piace,  
 più volte m’ha negato esto passaggio;  
 ché di giusto voler lo suo si face  
 veramente da tre mesi elli ha tolto  
 chi ha voluto intrar, con tutta pace. (*Purg.* 2.94–99)

As a reflection of the “sharper” motions of his will and the other rational faculties, which have now taken over the “muted” sensory ones, Casella’s inability to touch or be touched becomes legible not as a failure to manifest his love for Dante, but as the clearest possible “figuration” of his newfound resolve to turn away from such earthly affections towards God, “from mortal to immortal objects of desire.”<sup>42</sup> The contrast with the physicality of the souls in hell,

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<sup>41</sup> Barolini, *The Undivine “Comedy*, 101–103. For Barolini, the encounter dramatizes the very “essence” of this dynamic: “Indeed, the experience of purgatory is the conversion of the old back into the new: the unmaking of memory, in which the once new has been stored as old. No episode in *Inferno* or *Paradiso* captures the essence of the earthly pilgrimage like the Casella episode at the beginning of *Purgatorio*, whose structure faithfully replicates life’s—and terza rima’s—continual dialectic between forward motion and backward glance, voyage and repose, illicit curiosity and necessary desire” (101).

<sup>42</sup> A figuration that does not contradict or exclude that of the other two rational faculties, importantly, but is equally legible as a reflection of the alignment of all three with God’s will—of Casella’s understanding, enabling discernment of the necessary turn from mortal to immortal objects of desire, as well as his memory (as discussed later in this paragraph). The fact that it was a strange choice for Dante, based on philosophical precedent, to include memory among the faculties that are intensified, rather than weakened, by the soul’s passage into the afterlife (for a review of this discussion, see Falzone, “Filosofia e teologia,” 66–67) leaves room for the hermeneutical task of discerning its role in the phenomenology of aerial figuring. A corroborating intertext here is the other failed embrace of *Purgatorio*, between two souls this time whose wills have similarly turned away from earthly affections, Virgil and Statius: “Già s’inchinava ad abbracciar li piedi / al mio dottor, ma el li disse: “Frate, / non far, ché tu se’ ombra e ombra vedi.” / Ed ei surgendo: «Or puoi la quantitate /

from this vantage, appears equally coherent with the defining turn of their will in the exact opposite direction, away from God towards the eternal, tormenting “memory” of the life that led them to damnation.<sup>43</sup> Indicatively, it is worth recalling that when that same memory stirs in Casella at the sight of the old friend, the “affetto” still radiates so powerfully through his vanishing figure that it instantly communicates itself to Dante, dramatically “moving” him before he has even had time to recognize who it is that he is trying to embrace (“Io vidi una di lor trarresi avante / per abbracciar mi con sì grande affetto, / che mosse me a far lo somigliante,” *Purg.* 2.76-78). Even as the soul embodies its turn towards God so purely as to literally fade out of the embrace of a “living,” mortal object of desire, the human transport of that desire (of Casella’s “disiri / e li altri affetti”) never transpired so immediately as from this aerial body transcending away into eternity. And precisely the paradox of this transcending immanence is what Dante’s imagination ultimately sought to confront.

### 5. Ripening

From a theological standpoint, Dante’s inquiry into the relationship of soul and body reaches its climax in *Paradiso* 7, where Beatrice takes up the question of divine justice in the context of Christ’s crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem (“come giusta vendetta giustamente / punita fosse,” *Par.* 7.20-21) and lays out a complete theory of incarnation and resurrection (both words that only appear in this canto). One of the doctrinal foundations of her speech, especially interesting for the present discussion, is the originary emanation of human nature (foreshadowing the account of universal creation of *Paradiso* 29) directly from God’s divine power (“La divina bontà... // che dispiega le bellezze etterne,” vv. 64-66), in a perfect “resemblance” subsequently corrupted by sin (“Di tutte queste dote s’avvantaggia / l’umana creatura... // Solo il peccato è quel che la disfranca / e falla dissimile al sommo bene,” vv. 76-80).<sup>44</sup> The restoration of that originary affinity is at the heart of the

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comprender de l’amor ch’a te mi scalda, / quand’io dismento nostra vanitate, / trattando l’ombra come cosa salda.” (*Purg.* 21.130-36).

<sup>43</sup> As Singleton noted in his commentary to *Inferno*, in fact, through the descent down the circles of hell “the wayfarer will encounter souls that are much more substantial and corporeal,” reinforcing the sense of a correlation between the physicality of the damned and the degree of their will’s turn (quite literally) into the earthly depths of sin (*Inferno, 2: Commentary*, vol. 1, part 2 of *The Divine Comedy*, 3 vols., ed. and trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970-75), 100.

<sup>44</sup> The direct antecedent of Dante’s elaboration of this doctrine is the discussion of the human soul’s excellence and qualities in Book 3 of the *Convivio*: “E quella anima

great speculative innovation that concludes the canto—an “argument” for the immortality not only of the soul, but also of the body:

L’anima d’ogne bruto e de le piante  
 di compassion potenziata tira  
 lo raggio e ’l moto de le luci sante;  
 ma vostra vita senza mezzo spira  
 la somma beninanza, e la inamora  
 di sé sì che poi sempre la disira.  
 E quinci puoi argomentare ancora  
 vostra resurrezion, se tu ripensi  
 come l’umana carne fessi allora  
 che li primi parenti intrambo fensi. (*Par.* 7.139-48)

Unlike the mortal souls of animals and plants, generated by the refraction of divine power through a “potentiated” medium of earthly matter, the direct “inspiration” of human beings (ever since the creation of Adam and Eve, “li primi parenti”) from the source of that power (“la somma beninanza”) argues not just for their immortal nature, but specifically for that of the “flesh” in which they first came to life. While Dante probably derived this idea from St. Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo?*, the details of its elaboration here are unprecedented, and crucial for his larger imaginative quest.<sup>45</sup> For

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che tutte queste potenze comprende, e perfettissima di tutte l’altre, è l’anima umana, la quale con la nobilitate de la potenza ultima, cioè ragione, partecipa de la divina natura a guisa di sempiterna intelligenza; però che l’anima è tanto in quella sovrana potenza nobilitata e dinudata da materia, che la divina luce, come in angelo, raggia in quella: e però è l’uomo divino animale da li filosofi chiamato” (3.2.14). Commentators have acknowledged the originality of Dante’s refurbishment of this philosophical stance in the *Commedia* (“Dante segue la linea maestra, di Agostino, Anselmo e Tommaso, ma la spiegazione, unica per forza di sintesi e bellezza del linguaggio, che egli dà della difficile dottrina, è ancora il testo più chiaro e convincente... che si abbia sull’argomento,” Chiavacci Leonardi, note to *Par.* 7.61, in *La Divina Commedia* (1991-97)), highlighting the need to inquire into its recapitulative and speculative elements alike. In this sense, other parallels fall beyond the scope of this discussion, but would be worth exploring, between this canto and *Purgatorio* 25, like the echo of the “humiliating” conjunction of divine and human nature in Christ’s incarnation (“e tutti li altri modi erano scarsi / a la giustizia, se ’l Figliuol di Dio / non fosse umiliato ad incarnarsi,” *Par.* 7.118-20) in the soul’s reverse ascent as a “human and divine” entity after death.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Moore’s analysis of terminological correspondences between Beatrice’s speech and Anselm’s argument remains a seminal reference in this regard (“Dante’s Theory of Creation,” in *Studies in Dante. Fourth Series* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 134-65). Anselm’s influence notwithstanding, as Chiavacci Leonardi notes: “L’argomento di Dante, che attribuisce al corpo stesso, indipendentemente dall’anima, il carattere di immortalità in quanto uscito dalle mani stesse di Dio... non si ritrova nei testi comunemente noti della tradizione teologica su questo problema, tanto più che anche per l’anima l’immortalità era considerata generalmente un dono di grazia in quanto non dimostrabile in modo assolutamente certo per via di ragione... Non è dunque da escludere che Dante... abbia ideato lui stesso il suo argomento



the *Commedia*, as we saw, alongside the soundness of its arguments, is after a vision: not simply a justification of the body's ultimate "resurrection," but an intuition of its reality as part of the concrete, unfolding destiny of human existence.

The challenging quality of that intuition briefly surfaces in the strange dichotomy drawn up in this passage between the impermanence of other souls ("L'anima d'ogne bruto") and the enduring wholeness not of the human soul, but of human "life" ("vostra vita")—wherein the very word "soul," surprisingly, seems to stand in for the mortality that human beings, unlike other earth-bound creatures, eventually overcome.<sup>46</sup> What does this mean? Has

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come qui è formulato, dato che il principio della dignità suprema del corpo dell'uomo in quanto tale è tipico del suo pensiero e lo porta anche altrove... ad affermazioni che vanno al di là della teologia corrente al suo tempo." (note to *Par.* 7.145-48, in *La Divina Commedia* (1991-97)). The relevant passage of *Cur Deus Homo?* is Book 2, Chapter 3: "That he rises with the body in which he lives in this life... Hence there is proof that there is to be at some time a resurrection of the dead. For if man is to be restored in perfection, he ought to be reconstituted as the sort of being he would have been if he had not sinned... In the same way, therefore, that if man had not sinned, he would have been bound to undergo change into incorruptibility, likewise it is right that, when in the future he is restored, he will be restored in the body in which he lives in this life... Nothing more just or appropriate can be conceived of than that, just as a human being, if he had persevered in righteousness, would have enjoyed eternal blessedness as an entirety, that is, with soul and body, similarly, if he perseveres in unrighteousness, he should, as an entirety, be eternally miserable" (trans. from Anselm of Canterbury, "Why God Became Man," in *The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998)). The basis of this argument is the Pauline doctrine of the resurrection of spiritual bodies in 1 Cor 15:39-44: "Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body" (trans. from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)).

<sup>46</sup> It is possible to play down the singularity of this dichotomy, as some commentators do (see Alessandro Niccoli's note on this passage in the entry on "vita" in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, for instance, and Chiavacci Leonardi's commentary in *La Divina Commedia* (1991-97)), by reading the term "vita" as a synonym or metonymical equivalent of "anima" ("principio vitale") within the narrower context of Dante's theory of reproduction (as in *Conv.* 4.21.4, where he describes "la virtù celestiale, che produce de la potenza del seme l'anima in vita"—see note 21). While plausible, such a restrictive interpretation seems difficult to reconcile with the expansive eschatological context of *Paradiso* 7, where it gives problematically short shrift to the fact that Dante could easily have smoothed over the terminological ambiguity (including, notably, through the repetition of "anima" in v. 142, which would have added emphasis to the metrical parallel between the two terms of the comparison, without altering the line's syllable count nor significantly impacting the stress pattern), had

the idea of an immortal soul, somehow, become incongruous—insufficient to describe the kind of unmediated unity (“vostra vita senza mezzo spira”) in which humankind originated, and whose ultimate restoration Beatrice is now announcing? It is a singular terminological choice in the *Commedia*, which fleetingly but significantly exposes the imaginative effort catalyzed by one of the poem’s central words: as if the paradox of the soul, for a moment, registered in the very language of that effort, short-circuiting a path to the elusive but necessary questions that poet and reader must ultimately confront. What is the difference, the canto prompts (and then leaves) us to ask, between a “soul” and what here, apparently, can only be termed a “life”? What turns one into the other—our immortal soul, after death, back into the “umana creatura” whose existence was once the full and perfect inspiration of God’s own?

A helpful lens to consider these questions is an idea that all throughout the *Commedia* is associated with the soul’s journey in the afterlife, the process of “ripening” (“maturazione”).<sup>47</sup> In *Inferno*, for instance, the spiritual condition of the damned is repeatedly described a lack of ripeness, as when Dante notices Capaneo’s immovable figure under the fire raining over the violent against God, and asks Virgil:

... chi è quel grande che non par che curi  
 lo ‘ncendio e giace dispettoso e torto,  
 sì che la pioggia non par che ‘l marturi? (*Inf.* 14.46-48)

Later, in Malebolge, rummaging furiously around for the soul of a thief, the centaur Caco similarly roars: “Ov’è, ov’è l’acerbo?” (*Inf.* 25.18). Such insistence gradually conveys the impression of an association that reaches beyond the merely descriptive or metaphorical, and grows still more distinctive in *Purgatorio*, where Dante, for example, addresses the soul of Pope Hadrian IV in the following terms: “Spirto in cui pianger matura / quel senza ’l quale a Dio

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there not been some intent in the arrangement. Indicatively, even translators tend to steer clear of such interpretive narrowing here, including Durling (“but the highest Love breathes your life into / you without intermediary”), Longfellow (“But your own life immediately inspires / Supreme Beneficence”), and Mandelbaum (“but your life is breathed forth immediately / by the Chief Good,” from *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1986)).

<sup>47</sup> It is surprising that this motif has not received more attention. As Byrnum observes: “Such intense particularity characterizes the somatomorphic souls of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*... so glorious and necessary is body to Dante, in all its fullness and complexity, that the aerial body is not enough. We ‘yearn’ for the ‘luster’ and ‘ripeness’ of a resurrection that completes rather than overcomes fertility—and we desire it not only in order to know but also in order to love” (*The Resurrection of the Body*, 298).

tornar non pòssi” (*Purg.* 19.91-92). Indeed, the penitent soul finds the verb so apt that he brings it up again at the end the conversation:

Vattene omai: non vo' che più t'arresti;  
ché la tua stanza mio pianger disagia,  
col qual maturo ciò che tu dicesti. (*Purg.* 19.140-41)

Time and again, the idea of ripening returns less and less as an illustration, and more and more plainly as a nomenclature for the process that Dante observes each soul undergo in the afterlife. As a result, the concepts of redemption and purification (or lack thereof) unfold less and less in the negative semantic field of privation, and more and more openly through an effusive paradigm of increase and fulfillment.

This paradigm evidently adds an important dimension to the earlier discussion about the soul's transition from earthly to aerial body. The direct correspondence between its inner movements and their outer manifestation, in fact, positions the aerial body squarely in the middle of this ripening process, as the visible cipher of the soul's ongoing progression towards redemption and its ultimate destiny—a cipher that already “figures” that destiny, indeed, as the soul's perfect immanence in its bodily form. In line with this reading, the nexus between the ideas of purification and ripeness culminates in Saint Benedict's description of the Empyrean itself, in *Paradiso* 22, as the place where “è perfetta, matura e intera / ciascuna disianza” (*Par.* 22.64-65). The final form that all creation tends towards, eternally actualized where God himself dwells, is the “ripened” manifestation of every desire giving full and perfect expression to divine power (“La divina bontà”). As we saw, this is how Statius had also described the fundamental nature and function of the aerial body—as an immediate manifestation of the soul's desires and affects:

Secondo che ci affigono i disiri  
e li altri affetti, l'ombra si figura;  
e quest'è la cagion di che tu miri. (*Purg.* 25.106-08)

Just as the repetition of the verb “organare,” in *Purgatorio* 25, served to underscore the continuity between the soul's earthly and aerial manifestations, so the emphasis on the conveyance of desire here similarly underlines the importance of its aerial, purely “figured” existence as a stage in the soul's progression toward its ultimate, perfect form.

The parallel, indeed, extends further. For just as the earthly body, as we saw, was prepared by the “virtute informativa” to receive a “spirito novo” that could only come from God, so there is one desire that the aerial body is constitutively unequipped to manifest on its own. Even the blessed souls of Paradise, admitted into the light of God’s presence, still await the fulfillment of this one “disianza,” which reveals both the epilogue of aerial existence as well as the precise nature of the form into which it will finally deliver the “ripened” soul: the reunification with its human flesh.<sup>48</sup> Significantly, the motif of ripeness infuses the entire great paean that Solomon raises to this desire in *Paradiso* 14:

Come la carne gloriosa e santa  
fia rivestita, la nostra persona  
più grata fia per esser tutta quanta;  
per che s’accrescerà ciò che ne dona  
di gratuito lume il sommo bene,  
lume ch’a lui veder ne condiziona;  
onde la vision crescer convene,  
crescer l’ardor che di quella s’accende,  
crescer lo raggio che da esso vene. (*Par.* 14.43-51)

Like a “grateful” fruit into the sun, the soul will “grow” into its complete form—a triumphant, inexhaustible growth, which Solomon fervently exalts as the very principle of the soul’s new existence, endlessly gathering and interfusing its faculties and the radiance of God’s love into the bliss of eternity (“s’accrescerà... // onde la vision crescer convene, / crescer l’ardor... / crescer lo raggio che da esso vene”).

What ripens through this growth, Solomon says, is the wholeness of human personhood, “clothing” the soul again in the mask of flesh and bones that first shaped it into existence. With these words, another important parallel takes shape between the beginning of that existence and its eventual fulfillment. We saw, in fact, that the originary inspiration of the “spirito novo” into the earthly body pivots on the incarnational role of the brain, an

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<sup>48</sup> For recent examinations of the importance of this desire in *Paradiso*, see Gragnolati’s “Nostalgia in Heaven,” 136, and *Experiencing the Afterlife*, 149, as well as Jacoff’s “Introduction to *Paradiso*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 107-24. Specifically in reference to Solomon’s speech, Byrnum further notes that “resurrection was not merely the assertion of wholeness. It was also the object of desire. Even to those schoolmen who imagined heaven as quiet and order, body was a beloved bride. Solomon told Dante the pilgrim that we yearn for body, not only for ourselves but also for those we love, in order that they may enjoy both God and their friends in the flesh and that we may thus delight in God and in them” (*The Resurrection of the Body*, 328).

“organ” especially prepared (“organo assunto”) to equalize human and divine constituents into the material, personified unity of the soul. By designating the soul’s final form as a return to that same unity (“la nostra persona / più grata fia per esser tutta quanta”), Solomon also frames its reconstitution, therefore, as part of a process of spiritual and material synthesis, whereby the soul, as Dante said to Hadrian IV, “matura / quel senza ’l quale a Dio tornar non pòssi.” And what visibly ripens in the aerial body, as the soul progresses through the journey of redemption (“mio pianger... / col qual maturo ciò che tu dicesti”), so dramatically exemplified by the encounter with Casella, is a transformation: the pure and immediate embodiment, as the soul aligns with God’s “just” will, of the growing convergence between its “disiri / e li altri affetti” and “il sommo bene.” Just as the brain originally “perfected” the flesh for its unification with the “spirito novo,” so in the aerial body visibly ripens the form in which the soul, on the Last Day, will be ready to unite with “la carne gloriosa e santa”—the restored and perfect immanence of God’s “divina bontà” in the “umana creatura,” present without obstacle (“sanza mezzo”) in its bodily manifestation.<sup>49</sup>

In this way, the *Commedia* complements St. Anselm’s argumentation with a detailed and powerful vision of the immortality of the body. And we are finally in a position to see how that vision, within the poem’s framework, leads to a deeply consequential solution of the imaginative paradox that Dante ultimately set out to confront. If the fullness of “our” personhood (“la nostra persona”), in fact, consists in the restoration of the soul to the body—of the transcending immanence of the soul’s form to the “humus” that first shaped it into existence—then what ultimately ripens on the scale of this new, divine and human wholeness, is the very state of perfection in which God’s entire creation originated:

Forma e materia, congiunte e purette,  
usciro ad esser che non avia fallo,  
come d’arco tricordo tre saette. (*Par.* 29.22–24)

Beatrice’s words, in this perspective, perhaps finally begin to give us a sense of what she envisioned, when she announced to the pilgrim the fulfillment of all human life (“vostra vita”)—a vision of

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<sup>49</sup> A similar analysis, it worth noting, accounts for the reunification of the damned with their bodies. As Dante’s aforementioned reaction at the sight of Capaneo (“sì che la pioggia non par che ’l marturi”) and Caco’s raging words (“Ov’è, ov’è l’acerbo?”) suggest, in fact, the lack of ripeness manifest in the absence of redemption equally prefigures the fullness of damnation as the perpetuation (and intensification, presumably), in the flesh, of the suffering experienced by the soul in its aerial form.

immortality's very essence, that is to say, ripening on the individual, personified scale of human mortality. Of the perfection of all "unflawed being" in the human moment of the soul.

## 6. *Conclusion*

The *Commedia* concludes with another vision, that of God's universal "knot" ("La forma universal di questo nodo / credo ch'ì vidi," *Par.* 33.90–91) and all of creation issuing forth from the "volume" of its eternal perfection:

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna  
legato con amore in un volume,  
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:  
sustanze e accidenti e lor costume... (*Par.* 33.85–88)

From the depth of this knot, as Dante watches, a human figure gradually begins to radiate: "dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso, / mi parve pinta de la nostra effige" (*Par.* 33.130–31). The final reckoning with the "sommo bene," in other words, grants the pilgrim a glimpse of that originary "resemblance" between human nature and its Creator, to which the soul will be ultimately restored along with its body. Dante does not describe this as his own "effigy," in fact, nor as Christ's or any other particular person's. In perfect pronominal correspondence with Beatrice's reference to all human life ("vostra vita"), all the poem reports is the appearance of "our effigy"—the individual semblance of every human being.

Would it be inaccurate, on these terms, to speak of the anthropocentric character of Dante's poetic universe? This article began by asking what insights Dante's idea of the soul may still have to offer us "people of the Third millennium." Despite its theological commitments, it has long been noted how the *Commedia* achieves a unique imaginative "synthesis of the diverse elements that constituted the contemporary cosmological picture," orchestrating the structures of universe and human body inherited from classical models towards "a full understanding of the order of creation."<sup>50</sup> Along similar lines, I sought to tease out the implications of Dante's imaginative commitment not only to the idea, but to what Eugenio Montale called the "dignity" of our place in the world:

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<sup>50</sup> Theodore J. Cachey, "Cosmology, geography, and cartography," in *Dante in Context*, eds. Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 221–327, 221.

That true poetry has always the character of a gift and that it therefore presupposes the dignity of those who receive it—this is perhaps the greatest lesson that Dante has bequeathed to us.<sup>51</sup>

Would it be inaccurate, after retracing his confrontation with the paradox of the soul, to speak of the gift Dante bequeathed to us as a hard-won persuasion of the dignity of this most elusive, mortal thing—human nature?

It is a question that I hope to leave open for further consideration. One can hardly presume to reach further into it, after all, than Dante himself did when the vision of God's knot, at last, overpowered him:

... ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:  
se non che la mia mente fu percossa  
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne. (*Par.* 33.139-41)

The pilgrim's wings, perhaps, simply collapsed in the extreme leap of desire. And yet ("se non che") his mind also seemed to fuse, at the very same time, with the lightning of revelation that struck it. Perhaps it was no longer a vision he was unequal to speak of, as the divine knot spun him round with "our effigy"—but a premonition of what even Beatrice could only describe as the fullness of a human "life":

... 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.* 33.143-45).

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<sup>51</sup> My trans. (original sentence in the article's epigraph) from Eugenio Montale, "Dante ieri e oggi," in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi danteschi*, 2 vols. (Firenze: Sansoni, 1966), 333 (repr. as "Esposizione sopra Dante" in *Prose 1920-1979*, vol. 1 of *Il secondo mestiere*, 2 vols., ed. Giorgio Zampa (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), 2668-90, 2690).