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Collective Individuality: Dante's Moral Philosophical and Psychological Message in *Paradise XXXI**

This research concerns the relationship between collectivity and individuality in human society, a relationship that is often problematic and that we observe by referring to the philosophical symbolism of Dante's poetry in order to find a harmonious solution. The relationship between collectivity and individuality, which is at the center of this philosophical-moral analysis from a Christian perspective, has a necessarily meta-historical nature. It concerns Dante's time, our time, and every human time in which the same essential Truth is always manifested: the harmonious Truth of Love revealed by Christ. Christianity, in fact, always values the specificities of every man, indicating, however, the salvation of the individual (that is, his or her full realization) in the ability to establish positive relationships with others, going beyond selfishness; in this sense, the Christian Church, understood as the community of the

* The English text of Dante's poem is taken from: *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Inferno – Purgatorio – Paradiso*, transl. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982–1984–1986).

faithful, appears as a family.¹ And Dante gives voice to this concept in his poem.

Through the present hermeneutic analysis, the main poetic-philosophical symbols of canto XXXI of *Paradise* are examined, reflecting on the emblem of the White Rose, in which the human conscience discovers how to participate in a collective joy without renouncing a particular and individual form of satisfaction.

The hermeneutical method applied in this study and generally followed by me in my critical research is affected in a broad sense by the medieval scholastic approach, valuing and philologically respecting the text, analyzed in its objective literality, before proceeding to a survey of its allegorical, moral and anagogical symbolism. All this according to an individual perspective that establishes dialectical connections between the main meanings of the poetic writing under consideration. In a similar methodological direction, following Dilthey's indication, I try to reconstitute Dante's experience (*Erlebnis*), that is, the specific spiritual meaning attributed by the poet to his life experience, analyzing his famous poem. This type of critical investigation, therefore, can be defined as a subjective reconstruction in which the interpreter creates links between himself (his own interpreting existence, in the Heideggerian and Gadamerian sense) and the symbolic text, according to a dynamic vision of truth as a transformation process in which the sacred continually reveals and hides itself, offering itself to be examined through what is defined by Paul Ricoeur as the epistemology of the symbol.²

In his *Epistle to Cangrande*, the Florentine poet defines the *Divine Comedy* as a work of moral philosophy. In this way, he indicates that his book has mainly a practical purpose, which he presents in Latin with these words: "Removere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis".³ As we can read, Dante wants to help each of us to overcome existential anguish to achieve ideal happiness. It is a question of a psychophysical balance, in which the fundamental parts of con-

¹ See Salvatore Natoli, "Cristianesimo come etica universale?", in: Papa Francesco, *Fratelli tutti – Sulla fraternità e l'amicizia sociale. Commenti* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2020), 228.

² See Maurizio Ferraris, *Storia dell'ermeneutica* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008); William Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Henning Salling Olesen, "Cultural Analysis and In-Depth Hermeneutics", *Historical Social Research* 38(2) (2013): 7–157; Andrzej Wierciński, *Hermeneutics between Philosophy and Theology: The Imperative to Think the Incommensurable* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2010).

³ Dante, *Epistulae*, XIII, 15.

sciousness can be harmonized. The journey into the other world portrayed by the poet, who describes with free imagination symbols and emotions of his own visionary transcendental experience, alludes to a precise purifying and liberating psychic itinerary. Indeed, hell represents the pain in which our consciousness becomes imprisoned due to selfishness; purgatory shows a way to interact with the same pain, use it and transform it to elevate us; finally, heaven reflects the idea of conquering our ideal state of being, which is loving, generous and happy, that is, fully satisfied. Such a state indicates our First Origin and the necessary final goal of all human existence.

Dante imagines the world as a sphere that, in the north, is occupied by all the emerged lands ranging from the east (specifically from India) to the western end of the Mediterranean: Morocco and Spain, with the Pillars of Hercules as the extreme limit. These are the parts of the civilized world that were known in the Dantean time.⁴ The other hemisphere of our globe, the southern one, is all water, with only a small island in the center: purgatory, the antipodes of Jerusalem. Hell opens like a huge cone overturned under this last place – Jerusalem – which is the city where, from a Christian point of view, the greatest crime was committed: namely the killing of the Savior, Jesus of Nazareth.

Descended into hell in the company of the great poet of Rome, Virgil, emblem of the wisdom of the classical world and, therefore, on a psychic level, a symbol of our reason, Dante reaches Lucifer, the emperor of the painful kingdom. Lucifer is a metaphor for the selfishness that causes every human pain and anguished loneliness by generating uncontrolled passions, violence, and fraud – specific effects that are all indicated by the nine areas of hell.

Lucifer is at the center of a frozen lake, the Cocytus, which represents the freezing of tears caused by every human pain in the whole historical time. This same lake is also a metaphor for the heart of ice that belongs to sinners punished in the last infernal zone. The frozen heart has led them to the most horrendous act, the betrayal.⁵ Here, in Cocytus, the pilgrim of the other world, on Virgil's recommendation, begins

⁴ See Richard J.A. Talbert, Richard Watson Unger, *Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Fresh Perspectives, New Methods* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 129.

⁵ See Bruno Nardi, *Il canto XXXIV dell'Inferno* (Roma: Casa di Dante / Torino: S.E.I., 1952); Giorgio Petrocchi, "Il canto XXXIV dell'Inferno", in: *Lecture dante-sche*, ed. Giovanni Getto (Firenze: Sansoni, 1964); Kathleen Verduin, "Dante and the Sin of Satan: Augustinian Patterns in Inferno XXXIV", *Quaderni d'italianistica* 4(2) (1984): 22–27.

to interact with evil, using it and making it an instrument of liberation.⁶ The body of the satanic monster, human and bestial at the same time, is full of hairs stiffened by the cold wind that Lucifer causes with the motion of his wings. Dante now uses those hairs as a ladder and descends, reaching the navel of the world: the center of gravity which attracts all weights, that is, our selfish errors.

Above Lucifer, Dante symbolically turns upside down. He goes to the extreme low, where the weights of the world arrive by force of gravity. Then he changes orientation, stooping and looking for his feet. So, he realizes that, in going further, his descent becomes a climb. The symbolism indicates that, in a Christian sense, humility exalts and, therefore, can drive the poet to the shores of purgatory.⁷

Just as he asked, I clasped him round the neck;
and he watched for the chance of time and place.
And when the wings were opened wide enough,

He took fast hold upon the shaggy flanks
And then descended, down from tuft to tuft,
between the tangled hair and icy crusts.

When we had reached the point at which the thigh
Revolves, just at the swelling of the hip,
My guide, with heavy strain and rugged work,

reversed his head to where his legs had been
and grappled on the hair, as one who climbs –
I thought that we were going back to Hell.

Inf. XXXIV, 70–81

The pilgrim Dante is now inside a “small sphere” (“picciola sfera”),⁸ that is, a small dark spherical cave down there, under the frozen lake. From this, following the sound of a stream, flowing from above,⁹ he travels through a cavern in the interior of the southern hemisphere and, finally, comes out to see the stars again. He is now at the base of purga-

⁶ See Marino A. Balducci, “Grottesco teologico nell’Inferno di Dante”, *Dante* 16 (2020): 55–65.

⁷ For a deep reflection on Dante’s cosmology and anthropology, see Patrick Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher. Man in the Cosmos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁸ *Inf.* XXXIV, 116.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 127–132.

tory, which represents a parallel reality to that of living creatures in the north. This is a fictional, imaginary place, compared to the normal geography known in the Middle Ages. However, Dante tells us by symbols that the purgatorial island belongs to us; it is another unknown reality that opens below our feet.

On the concept of the imaginary, not as non-existent but as “another reality” (in geometry and in the *Divine Comedy*), the great Russian scientist and philosopher Father Pavel A. Florensky proposed enlightening reflections. According to him, the fact that a geometric figure disappears does not mean that it has been destroyed, but that it has simply passed over to the other side of a surface. At this point, this figure becomes accessible to those on the other side of the surface itself. In the same way, we must not understand the imagination of the parameters of a body as a sign of its unreality, but only as a sign of its passage to another reality. In a mathematical sense, the range of imaginary numbers is real and accessible. We should therefore be able to imagine space as double, made up of real and imaginary surfaces coinciding with the Gaussian coordinates. In this way, the passage from the real surface to the imaginary one is only possible through a gash in space and through the exstrophy of the body through it.¹⁰

The poet explains that the original Garden of Eden, where, according to the Bible, we were created, initially represented the entire land mass of the globe, and was in the south. This mass then turned upside down and reached the north to escape frontal contact with the fallen demon, Lucifer, at the time of our first sin, the sin of Adam.

And now you stand beneath the hemisphere
opposing that which cloaks the great dry lands
and underneath whose zenith died the Man

¹⁰ According to Florensky’s interpretative perspective, the *Divine Comedy* acquires prophetic value, also in a scientific sense. So, for him, Dante’s poem unexpectedly ends up not being behind but ahead of our contemporary science, especially for the heavenly vision of the Empyrean. See Natalino Valentini, *Il Dante di Florenskij. Tra poesia e scienza* (Torino: Lindau, 2021), 80–81. For an introductory synthesis of Florensky’s thought see Diana Del Mastro, “Ontologia ed epistemologia nell’itinerario scientifico e spirituale di padre Pavel A. Florenskij”, *Studia Koszalińsko-Kołońskie* 27 (2020): 349–358; Joseph H. J. Leach, “Parallel Visions. A Consideration of the Work of Pawel Florensky and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin”, *Theandros* 4(1) (2006), access 09.08.2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070928090836/http://www.theandros.com/parallelvis.html>.

whose birth and life were sinless in this world.
Your feet are placed upon a little sphere
that forms the other face of the Judecca.

Here it is morning when it's evening there;
and he whose hair has served us as a ladder
is still fixed, even as he was before.

This was the side from which he fell from Heaven;
for fear of him, the land that once loomed here
made of the sea a veil and rose into

our hemisphere; and that land which appears
upon this side – perhaps to flee from him –
left here this hollow space and hurried upward.

Inf. XXXIV, 112–126

Therefore, according to Dante's perception, in the north we always live in the wrong position with respect to the origin: we are upside down, and, out of metaphor, we perceive reality in a distorted way – with selfishness, in solitude. This causes us mental discomfort and, therefore, pain. In fact, our real homeland is elsewhere.

The purgatorial island has a high mountain, which, traveling all the way through it, leads to the plateau on top, where an uncontaminated portion of the original Edenic Garden remains. Here the poet arrives, striving with effort as a pilgrim representing mankind. From this beautiful Garden, it is possible to ascend to heaven.

In Dante's vision presented in the last book, *Paradise*, our globe appears as surrounded by nine skies, that the poet crosses with his loving immersion in the eyes and conscience of his second guide Beatrice.¹¹ She is the woman he has always loved among the living, and who, after her death, assists him in the transcendental experience, since the infernal beginning of it, being the spirit who summoned Virgil to help her beloved Dante, as a first necessary guide representing a rational approach to the truth.¹²

In the skies, Dante meets with different groups of heavenly souls, who gradually appear to him and reveal the deepest realities of the divine kingdom. His consciousness, little by little, amplifies, and then goes beyond that last sky and border, realizing that elsewhere is the primary

¹¹ See *Par.* I, 64–93.

¹² See *Inf.* II, 52–118.

blessed seat of those same spirits he has just met. It is the Empyrean, beyond time and space,¹³ the dimension of divine infinity. The Empyrean, to the uncertain eyes of the pilgrim poet, seems at first a great river of light, then is specified as a White Rose and, therefore, as a convent¹⁴ with thrones where all the blessed souls are seated, around their Queen,¹⁵ Mary the Virgin, who is revealed by Saint Bernard in canto XXXI of *Paradise*,¹⁶ replacing Beatrice herself with his own mystic teaching.¹⁷

And he, the holy elder, said: "That you
may consummate your journey perfectly –
for this, both prayer and holy love have sent me

to help you – let your flight fly round this garden;
by gazing so, your vision will be made
more ready to ascend through God's own ray.

The Queen of Heaven, for whom I am all
afame with love, will grant us every grace:
I am her faithful Bernard [...].

Par. XXXI, 94–102

The theme of "honey" is characteristic of this last eternal space-non-space of paradise. It is associated with the same Saint Bernard, who was commonly called *Doctor Mellifluus* for the very sweet Marian discourse that particularly marks his theological reflection. This theologian investigated the fundamental importance of Our Divine Lady for the salvation of mankind.¹⁸ She is the door of Christ; her humility has favored the birth of God as a man to make us all divine, that is, to bring us back

¹³ See Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's "Comedy"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 182.

¹⁴ On the Empyrean as a flower-garden and city of the blessed souls, see Rachel Jacoff, "Lectura Dantis: Paradiso XXXI", *Quaderns d'Italia* 16 (2011): 104.

¹⁵ See *Par.* XXX, 55–132.

¹⁶ For a general overview of this canto, see John A. Scott, "Paradiso XXXI", in: *Lectura Dantis Turicensis: Paradiso*, ed. Georges Güntert et al. (Florence: Cesati, 2002), 473–489.

¹⁷ See Lino Pertile, "Does the Stilnovo Go to Heaven?", in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. Teodolinda Barolini et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 111: "Beatrice deve scomparire non perché ella ama Dio più che Dante, ma perché Dante deve amare Dio più che Beatrice".

¹⁸ See Jean Leclercq, *San Bernardo e lo spirito cistercense* (Magnano: Qiqajon Edizioni, 1998); Victor A. Murray, *Abelard and St. Bernard* (Manchester–New York: Manchester University Press / Barnes & Nobles, 1967); Ambrogio Piaz-

to the Edenic origins, allowing us to go further towards the infinite joy represented in heaven by the Empyrean. Within the White Rose, which symbolizes the return to perfect innocence,¹⁹ a myriad of angels, emblems of pure ideas of the various divine aspects, continuously fly, from one side of the flower to the other, in width and height. They look for nectar to make honey. They must, therefore, communicate with the psyche of men and women of all times, the heavenly spirits, to give energy and concreteness to the effort of their abstract thoughts, “actualizing” ideas. At the same time, the blessed souls of heaven spontaneously offer their nectar, that is, their individual existential experience, which is reflected with rays of clear light from their conscience.

So, in the shape of the white rose, the holy
Legion was shown to me – the host that Christ,
with His own blood had taken as His bride.

The other host, which, flying, sees and sings
the glory of the One who draws its love,
and that goodness which granted it such glory,

just like a swarm of bees that, at one moment,
enter the flower and, at another, turns
back to that labor which yields such sweet savor,

descended into that vast flower graced
with many petals, then again rose up
to the eternal dwelling of its love.
Their faces were all living flame; their wings
were gold; and for the rest, their white was so
intense, no snow can match the white they showed.

Par. XXXI, 1–15

zoni, *Introduzione a Bernardo di Chiaravalle. Il dovere di amare Dio* (Alba: Edizioni Paoline, 1990).

¹⁹ The experience of paradise becomes for Dante a progressive recognition of the eternal reality of justice and purity immersed in the human soul. The culmination of all this is described in canto XXXI, depicting the White Rose. See Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 245: “Three transitions render the pilgrim’s experience of Paradise, each one more effective than the previous: he has come to the divine from the human, to eternity from time, and — reversing directionality, and importing the proper name ‘Fiorenza’ (like the previous ‘Laterano’) into the string of abstract nouns (‘divino’, ‘umano’, ‘eterno’, ‘tempo’), we arrive at the stunningly localized third transition — from Florence to a people who are just and sane”.

The survival of the soul in heaven – in a Thomistic and Dantean sense – is a polypsychism. The souls survive individually in spiritual bodies, which appear identical in all respects to those of flesh: with sensations, memory, intellect, and will even more acute than those of the living.²⁰ Their bodies are material, but they are not made up of our concrete matter that dies, that is formed by the four elements (water, earth, fire, and air); they are rather of quintessential matter, which is called “etheric”, that is, spiritual, immortal, and intangible because it is not concrete.²¹ Dante reveals how, in the other world, the dead exist with a perfect memory of the various moments of their existence, of every experience they had in the northern world while alive.²² They are also in contact with the present of the living. Their memories are sweet and painful until, at the end of the purgatorial journey, they are purified in the waters of Eden to guarantee serene access to paradise in pure joy.

Thus, the blessed souls subsist in God in the infinite paradisiac Empyrean, and they all look at the Supreme Creator, who seems to be the only star but is Trinitarian in essence. God is alone and is together with others in a familiar, fraternal way. Certainly, the Christian idea of God appears irrational and contradictory to our mortal mind thinking in binary ways, excluding opposites. Indeed, from our point of view, the only one is not the many, the only one is not plural.

There I saw faces given up to love –
graced with Another's light and their own smile –
and movements graced with every dignity.

By now my gaze had taken in the whole
of Paradise – its form in general –
but without looking hard at any part;

Par. XXXI, 49–54

Here, inside the White Rose, Dante, observing the paradisiac souls, implicitly confronts the mystery of the Trinity, represents it, and dynamically solves it in a poetic effusion. The Father is the creator, the Son is the creature: they subsist together, forming identities through the Spirit,

²⁰ See *Purg.* XXV, 79–108.

²¹ *Ibidem*

²² See Marino A. Balducci, “Dante, l’acqua e l’analisi della coscienza. Cosmologia psicosimbolica nella Divina Commedia”, *Romanica Cracoviensia* 12 (2012): 161–183, <https://www.wuj.pl/UserFiles/File/Romanica%2012/18-Balducci-RC-12.pdf>.

who is pure essence of love.²³ The Father creates in love and the Son returns love when, like Jesus, the human creature can love perfectly, that is, to love all friends and enemies without distinction, to love the sweet and the bitter, life and death. All the souls here, in the Empyrean, imitate a similar kind of love.

In Christianity, the Son also represents the idea of the God hidden within all men,²⁴ beyond our sin, namely the space of conscience that is controlled and tortured by diabolical selfishness, generating anguished loneliness.²⁵ As the poet symbolically shows us in the *Divine Comedy*, the earth of which we are physically made, the earth of Adam, is not all contaminated through original sin. In that earth, which is also symbolic of our psyche, remains the “small island” (purgatory), below us and our selfish world, from which we can always reach Eden, once again, and then heaven.

The Highest Good, whose sole joy is Himself,
made man to be – and to enact – good; He
gave man this place as pledge of endless peace.

Man’s fault made brief this stay here; and man’s fault
made him exchange frank laughter and sweet sport
for lamentation and for anxiousness.

Below this mountain, land and water vapors,
which follow heat as far as they are able,
produce their perturbations; to prevent

them from molesting man placed here, this mountain
rose up this close to Heaven; from the point
where its gate locks, it is free of such disturbance.

Purg. XXVIII, 91–102

It is important to remember that, under the frozen lake of Luciferian selfishness described in the first book of the *Divine Comedy*, there is a sphere of emptiness. It is a cave, where the poet can enter after having turned upside down. The metaphor indicates that we can notice this sphere, if we have the courage to die to ourselves, to our selfishness, developing a totally humble attitude. Such an empty womb, hidden in-

²³ See *Par.* XXXIII, 82–132.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 131.

²⁵ See Maurizio Malaguti, *La metafisica del volto. Una lettura di Dante* (Milano: Biblioteca Franceseana, 2020), 22.

side the earth, introduces to the idea of a mysterious reality: that of an immaculate purity, within the depth of matter and consciousness. It is a purity that is always with us and only awaits to be fully discovered, to be woken up. It is an oxymoron: a void... full of meaning, a hidden treasure. This specific Dantean emblem seems to be linked to the theological concept of the Immaculate Conception, which was so important to the Franciscans from their origin, that is, from the 13th century on.²⁶ Indeed, Dante was very close to them and their ideas from a spiritual point of view. In Christianity, the humble Mary of Nazareth represents the concept that the bottom of the creation, namely the material reality to which the Virgin belongs, can be able to welcome the high spiritual plane (the divine one), reflecting it through the human soul when the last becomes an expression of a pure amorous faith, going beyond every dualism that comes from mental pride. Thus, also matter – in humanity – can be deified. The purified and happy spirits that Dante admires, on the fragrant petals of that White Rose, have gradually managed to conquer this Marian victory. Through perfect love, in imitation of Christ, they have become divine children, devoted to the Mother of the Savior, whom everyone honors as Queen of Heaven. There is no rancor, selfishness, and pain: these emotions are forgotten. In this renewed humanity, everything unites: the divine and the human, the high creator and the low creatures. The individual solitude of each person and the assembly of holy souls in that heavenly flower, described as a convent (“convento de le bianche stole”).²⁷

How is this fusion between the single and the many possible? The solution is love, which takes us beyond human points of view of the north, in which we live, and beyond the physical-mathematical rules of the world we know. In this imaginary (however real for Dante) southern realm, complementary to ours,²⁸ the purified souls immerse themselves in the great paradisiac sea of light, with purified etheric bodies that, in their loving feelings, perfectly reflect divine love, each in its own way, according to personal characteristics. They are like different mirrors, in a psycho-physical sense. They individually reflect the light of passionate

²⁶ See *Congresso Mariologico Franceseano. La Scuola Franceseana e l'Immacolata Concezione* (Città del Vaticano: Pontificia Accademia Mariana Internazionale, 2004); Giovanni Morello, Vincenzo Francia, Roberto Fusco, *Una donna vestita di sole: l'Immacolata Concezione nelle opere dei grandi maestri* (Milano: Federico Motta, 2005).

²⁷ *Par.* XXX, 129.

²⁸ Cfr. Valentini, *Il Dante*.

knowledge that comes from the divine above and exchange it affectionately and altruistically among themselves. They enter each other with their memory and personal interpretation of the reality and then know each other: they weave emotions and thoughts in total agreement.

That Good, ineffable and infinite,
which is above directs itself toward love
as light directs itself to polished bodies.

Where ardor is, that Good gives of Itself;
and where more love is, there that Good confers
a grater measure of eternal worth.

And when there are more souls above who love,
there's more to love well there, and they love more,
and, mirror-like, each soul reflects the other.

Purg. XV, 67–75

In this loving mirroring, everything is relativized. In this White Rose, there is the top and the bottom, like the near and the far, among the various fragrant petals. However, in the paradisiac reflections also the distant is in the near and vice versa. There is a perfect agreement in the celestial souls: God goes to mankind reflecting Himself, mankind reflects God. Our essential purpose is fulfilled: now, the identification with the Father is complete.

In the Empyrean, Dante, as a pilgrim of the skies, has become accustomed to the splendor of the blessed bodies. Before, his eyes could not see the specific features of the heavenly spirits, but only light, their emanation of light. On the contrary, now for him the dead have their faces,²⁹ precisely identified as they will be in the future, after the Last Judgment: “Vedëa visi a carità süadi,/ d'altrui lume fregiati e di suo riso”.³⁰

²⁹ Also Rachel Jacoff (see *Lectura*) reflects on this theme, noting what from her point of view appears as a paradox, namely the presence of the future in the present of Dante's experience: “L'affermazione di Dante secondo la quale egli vede i beati come saranno alla fine del tempo è non soltanto eterodossa, ma anche problematica entro i termini del suo mondo poetico. Poiché Dante dichiara che l'anfiteatro dei beati non è ancora completo, si potrebbe dire che allo stesso tempo egli lo vede e non lo vede come sarà alla fine del tempo. Qui abbiamo uno dei paradossi del paradiso dantesco: al protagonista è concessa una veduta di ciò che non è ancora successo”.

³⁰ *Par. XXXI, 49–50.*

It seems impossible, contradictory: the future... within the present.³¹ Instead, everything is normal and necessary, if here, as it is, we are beyond time, in the bosom of Eternity. In paradise, all times, together with space, freely recombine in love. Heavenly souls contemplate themselves in multiple moments: in Dante's time, in their individual historical times and also – through perfect memory and foresight – in all times up to the Final Judgment.

Pavel Florensky inspired by the *Divine Comedy*, compared Dante's Em-pyrean to the mathematical idea of the "hypersphere", which includes and is included.³² The analogy is truly impressive and appropriate. Indeed, God includes all the souls of that White Rose, and they, in turn, loving Him in themselves as individuals, but also loving him fraternally in all other souls, can include Him, reflecting Him by infinite combinations. In this way, a true equivalence of infinity is constituted. By divinizing itself in the mystery of love, humankind too – like God – succeeds in uniting its own individuality with plurality: both characteristics remain together. There is no antinomy, everything is logical, in this "different logic", as Florensky states following the metaphysical implications of Cantor's mathematical thought, and thus deepening the sense of the original and final (eschatological) link between finite and infinite.³³

Envious selfishness limits, imprisons, and plunges into hell; but all is not lost, according to the third vision of the *Divine Comedy*. The individuation of the soul does not appear as an irredeemable fault; on the contrary, it allows the One God to become multiple and familiar, in perfect unity of love, that is, as the Holy Spirit. This complex Christian theological concept is exemplified by Dante's symbolism. Beatrice, the woman loved by Dante before her death, in the *Divine Comedy*, as a celestial spirit and a reflection of God, in full humility descends from heaven into hell to help her beloved, the Florentine pilgrim, who is an emblem of humanity impoverished and confused by bestial passions.

³¹ Canto XXXI of Paradise is all a crescendo of antitheses that sharpen the sense of the transcendental reality described by the poet. See John A. Scott, *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 207.

³² See Giuseppe De Cecco, "Dante e l'ipersfera", *Itaca. Viaggio nella Scienza* 17b (2021): 63–71; Natalino Valentini, *Dante e gli immaginari in geometria di Pavel Florenskij: tra Medioevo e scienza contemporanea* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2021).

³³ See Pavel A. Florenskij, "I simboli dell'infinito (Saggio sulle idee di G. Cantor)", in: *Il simbolo e la forma. Scritti di filosofia della scienza*, ed. Natalino Valentini et al. (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007), 26.

O lady, you in whom my hope gains strength,
 you who, for my salvation, have allowed
 your footsteps to be left in Hell, in all

the things that I have seen, I recognize
 the grace and benefit that I, depending
 upon your power and goodness, have received.

You drew me out from slavery to freedom
 by all those paths, by all those means that were
 within your power. [...]

Par. XXXI, 79–87

Christian salvation begins from darkness, from that malignant infernal horror which is faced without disgust by those who are blessed and perfect. In this sense – humbly and, as we have said, maternally – Beatrice descended from the celestial splendors, inspired by the sweetness of the Virgin Mary and the intellectual light of Saint Lucia.³⁴

Returning another time to the symbol of the White Rose, if we observe the thematic-conceptual recurrences that characterize canto XXXI of Dante's *Paradise*, we note that it too (like the rest of the *Divine Comedy*) is distinguished by a symphonic movement,³⁵ that is, by circular references to fundamental recurring themes. In this case, we have two themes: "water" and "war", the latter as man's violence against another man and as bloodshed. The second theme is certainly surprising in this celestial context, but it has a coherent meaning as a symbol.

Precisely, we see the first theme in the description of sinful humanity, always in conflict in the hemisphere of Satan (our northern hemisphere), whose socio-political tensions are compared in this poetical text to a sea storm ("procella").³⁶ This same first theme characterizes other parts of canto XXXI. Beatrice, making room for San Bernard, distances herself from her beloved Dante for a long way, as much as the depths of the sea ("mare").³⁷ Furthermore, the divine light observed by her is defined as an eternal, inexhaustible source ("eterna fontana").³⁸ Then,

³⁴ See *Inf. II*, 94–108.

³⁵ See Marino A. Balducci, *Il preludio purgatorio e la fenomenologia del sinfonismo dantesco. Percorso ermeneutico* (Monsummano Terme–Pistoia: Carla Rossi Academy Press, 1999).

³⁶ *Par. XXXI*,

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 75.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 93.

Dante compares himself to a pilgrim who leaves the Adriatic coast of Croatia³⁹ to go to Rome and see the miraculous relic of Veronica; in this too, indirectly, the marine suggestion returns.

The second theme is shown in the description of all the blessed spirits in paradise, as if they were a holy army ("milizia santa"),⁴⁰ married to Christ through his sacrifice, thanks to his shed blood ("che nel suo sangue Cristo fece sposa").⁴¹ Furthermore, the luminous apex of the White Rose, where the Madonna is seated, is compared to the flamboyant painted banner of the kings of France, brought into battles at the head of their army; but here the poet mentions it only for its luminous golden embroidery, defining it as peaceful ("pacifica orifiamma").⁴²

The symbolism of these two themes, to which the motif of conflict is joined, is not contradictory in this context, or rather, it shows us that in heaven, what appears as contradictory, according to our northern dualistic thought, finds a profound original harmonization. As Pope Pius XII recalled in his encyclical letter *Doctor Mellifluus*,⁴³ Saint Bernard shows us with his theological thought that in Mary, who is the Queen of Heaven and the supreme summit of this White Rose of Dante's vision, opposites unite in peace: a profound mystical peace that, in love, reconciles what appears superficially different within our world. She is the protector of humanity and loves all her children, promoting harmony. She is the star of the sea (*Maris Stella*) that helps to escape from storms because she is humble, even as Mother of God.

As Dante shows us, following the theological reflection of Saint Bernard,⁴⁴ Mary is in heaven but also in the depths of matter: it is she, in fact, who pushes Beatrice into hell to help the poet (and all of us) to overcome the demons, namely the proud contradictions of the northern hemisphere.

Mary is the basis of everything. For Dante's symbolism, she is the maternal love of the Father Creator, that remained deep inside the earth he created and shaped, not completely corrupted by Lucifer, who fell like a worm from heaven to pierce the globe when Adam committed original sin. In fact, Eden is saved in the south, in that part of which we

³⁹ Ibidem, 103.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 2.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 3.

⁴² Ibidem, 127.

⁴³ *DM*, 1948, access 09.08.2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/la/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_24051953_doctor-mellifluus.html.

⁴⁴ *Hom. II* super «Missus est», 17: *PL* 183, 70BCD, 71A.

have said: the one where the small island is and where the purgatorial mountain rises.⁴⁵ Here the earth is pure, not touched by the satanic monster. Between it and the matter of purgatory, there is, under Lucifer, the small hollow sphere of which we have already said.⁴⁶ On a psychological level, this empty sphere emblemizes the ideal state that predisposes to the purification of consciousness. As a theological symbol, the same sphere seems to represent a specific allusion to the virginal womb of the Madonna and, therefore, to her humility which makes the incarnation of Christ possible. The soul must empty itself of its pride, a sin that leads us to mistakenly believe that we can attain joy with presumption and selfishness. Joy is nothing but a gift: we cannot conquer it alone. Man must forget himself, entrust himself, abandon himself... This is humbleness. We are faced with a mystical approach to truth which, according to the Christian point of view, coinciding with Dante's, can be neared from our northern perspective, but can never be conquered; that is, we cannot appropriate it through clear perceptions, expressible in a lucid speech as a fruit of our human thought. The mystical approach is essentially sentimental and allusive: it perceives the ultimate truth but does not describe it. It can only suggest this truth on a metaphorical-symbolic level.

In Dante's case, the metaphor becomes particularly striking because it is of an artistic nature. The poetry of the *Divine Comedy*, with its arcane music and that continuous flow of reflections and images from very different contrasting fields – low and sublime – gives us the feeling of an almost impossible approach to the plane of the ineffable. Of course, for us modern people, Dante's word is archaic and difficult; the references to its cultural sources are complex, distant, and, above all, the allusions to the history and characters of its time are difficult to perceive during a first reading. However, this is of no fundamental importance. In fact, the poem has its music, inviting us to abandon ourselves to it for being led higher than the objective meanings of the words.

In this abandonment, we are not alone. Indeed, as readers and as interpreters, we can achieve a productive encounter. This is an initiatory emotion, so to speak. It introduces Dante's truth and favors a nearing to its secret meanings, with the same fruitful fusion of horizons ("*Horizontverschmelzung*"), in this case, ours and Dante's, which is proposed to us by Gadamer.⁴⁷ Dante's mysticism and Heidegger's vision have much in common, beyond the outward differences of language. Both Heidegger

⁴⁵ See *Inf.* XXXIV, 121–126.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 112–120.

⁴⁷ See H-G. Gadamer, *Verità e metodo* (Milano: Bompiani, 2000), 436.

and Dante feel thrown out of their homes. For the first, the house is Being. For the second, it is Florence, and his political exile from this city becomes something metaphorical and metahistorical. It is exile from Eden, from the place of our human friendship with God. Nonetheless, the anguish of distance and the pain of the exiled person are functional to a return, which leads to further acquisitions: not only Eden will be reconquered, but it will be possible to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And a return is possible only by getting out of the selfishness that killed that friendship with Being (by its nature unfounded), due to our pride in saying it, that is, in describing it in metaphysical terms trying to identify it precisely, and therefore to limit its dynamic illimitable nature. We do not return to Being with the means offered by our proud and arrogant human thought. Being is not conquered in an impossible duel. We can only humbly wait to be won by it. Indeed, we meet it in our abandon, defeated in every foolish rush to define and possess.

Heidegger speaks of a particular abandonment (*"Gelassenheit"*), which always preludes an encounter (*"Gegent"*).⁴⁸ And the pilgrim begins the saving journey of the *Divine Comedy* by abandoning himself to the otherness, represented in this case by the great poet Virgil, the ghost of a book imprinted in Dante's poetic memory, and an emblem of the classical world which has distanced itself from Being, in its pride to rationally define the latter. So, the encounter that opens Dante's poem is symbolic of the denial of narcissistic isolation and of a saving willingness to listen to others. Moreover, Virgil, specter of hell, is also driven by a chain of pure feminine, heavenly spirits which he listens to: Beatrice, Saint Lucy, and the Madonna.⁴⁹

The affective, loving (and therefore mystical) maternal-feminine brings back into the House of the Father. Virgil's rational word is therefore a prelude to the void of words, which is an emotional, feminine, loving fullness of ineffable wisdom. Such an emptiness will purify and still lead to other words connected – on a superior heavenly level – to harmonious and harmonizing thoughts. These words (and thoughts) are no longer rooted in the conflicting dualism of our Northern world, where white is the absolute opposite of black; on the contrary, in paradise everything merges, bringing to light our original unifying purity.

⁴⁸ See M. Heidegger, *L'abbandono* (Genova: Il melangolo, 2004), 47–77.

⁴⁹ See *Inf.* II, 52–114.

Virgin mother, daughter of your Son,
 more humble and sublime than any creature,
 fixed goal decreed from all eternity.

You are the one who gave to human nature
 so much nobility than its Creator
 did not disdain His being made its creature.

That love whose warmth allowed this flower to bloom
 Within the everlasting peace – was love
 rekindled in your womb; [...]

Par. XXXIII, 1–9

As we read at the opening of the last canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Love is always lit in the womb of this world. Its secret light originates beyond hell, starting from that small sphere of emptiness that we can associate with the virginal womb of the Madonna. Therefore, below us and our northern hemisphere, matter is still amorous, harmonizing, and pure. We can find this purity by digging into the earth, that is, into our consciousness.

In the last canto of his poem, the poet, following Saint Bernard, prays to the Virgin to obtain the grace of divine vision. Now, Mary is basically defined as that place-non-place where Dante himself is, as a pilgrim. This is the Empyrean, just as it is described by Pavel Florensky.⁵⁰ Like the Empyrean, the Virgin is a "hypersphere", as we can verify at the end of this hermeneutic analysis; in fact, she always includes and is included in infinity, since she is described as the daughter of her own son ("figlia del tuo figlio").⁵¹ Mary, with her absolute humility, allows the distant to be near, awakens divine light in the hell of man, reveals God giving birth to Him. Thus, in loving altruism, the selfish limit of our destiny, the loneliness and our anguish are destroyed.

⁵⁰ See Valentini, *Il Dante*.

⁵¹ See *Par. XXXI, 1*.

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Summary

This is a philosophical-moral study on the concept of altruistic happiness, through a hermeneutic analysis of a fundamental episode of the *Divine Comedy*. The symbol of the White Rose, contemplated by Dante in *Paradise XXXI*, represents the communion of saints, that is, of those who can experience in their psyche the extinction of desire in full joy. The kingdom of heaven is seen by the pilgrim poet as a beautiful flower with many petals. Its value is in the whole, the flower, but also in its individual parts, the petals. The salvation of the soul is therefore linked to altruism, to denying ourselves for our neighbors, in the name of a collective good. However, the poet shows us that every human individuality is precious, and the paradisiacal abolition of egoism is not the destruction of the uniqueness of the soul but the fulfillment of the self. Inside hell, which is described by Dante like an emblem of selfishness, Beatrice appears as a divine creature, ready to save her beloved poet. This means that Christianity starts the process of human salvation from the lowest material depth of the universe. Consequently, the low is not the opposite of the high, since there is also a high within that low. The individual, if purified from selfishness, becomes in the kingdom of heaven the independent and complementary mirror of a universal joy, a collective joy. Dante, deeply linked to Franciscanism, defends the Mariological concept of "Immaculate Conception" and, in the *Divine Comedy*, offers us a philosophical-moral message that translates the profound meaning of this same theological idea into secular terms. The solitude of the individual matter that forms the body of every man is only apparent. We are not alone. There is another invisible, silent, very pure reality that has sunk into this matter of ours and into consciousness. This reality can save mankind and bring every person back into joyful wholeness.

Keywords: Dante, *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise XXXI*, White Rose, St. Bernard, Virgin Mary, Beatrice