Towards an Understanding of the Beatific Vision in Dante and Late Medieval Culture

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In the Commedia, Dante is – as noted in the letter to Can Grande – telling a story beginning in a state of misery and ending in one of happiness. Of course, he is not writing a simple commedia; he is writing what is both a particular commedia (that of himself as fictive traveller) and, more importantly, the quintessential one. It is our journey he is narrating; after all, it all takes place ‘nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita’. It is a journey beginning in our respective dark woods, but the journey’s end is not infinitely disparate: it is one and the same for us all, and its aim is to see God’s face. It is a journey not normally completed while we bear our mortal coils, but rather only after our death.

Dante’s description of God’s face is to be found at the end of his poem:

Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza
de l’alto lume parvermi tre giri
di tre colori e d’una continenza;
e l’un da l’altro come iri da iri
parea reflesso, e ’l terzo parea foco
che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri.
[...]
Quella circulazion che si concetta
pareva in te come lume reflesso,
da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,
dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
per che ’l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.
(Par. XXXIII, 115-120; 127-132)

This article wishes to share briefly some approaches to medieval visions of God, and how Dante’s own vision is a part of this tradition. In particular a possible
source for this in Dante's lifetime will be presented – a source that, I believe, has not been noted hitherto as such.

Any such visionary matter could have its ultimate root only in Sacred Scriptures. Several biblical passages deal with seeing God. The best known of these is probably St Paul's declaration, ‘At present, we are looking at a confused reflection in a mirror; then, we shall see face to face; now, I have only glimpses of knowledge; then, I shall recognize God as he has recognized me’.

This does not mean that, in some form, it is impossible to see God's face: for example, Jacob proclaims his salvation after seeing God directly. Yet the passage that may best capture most of the nuances relating to the beatific vision may be witnessed during the great journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. After Moses received the Ten Commandments and in his fury destroyed the tablets, the prophet tried to make peace between the Lord and his people who had just scorned him by making the golden calf. Moses tried to get the Lord to lead the people to the Chosen Land, and the Lord said that despite his anger these people would indeed make the journey to the Chosen Land, and that they would be accompanied by the Lord's presence.

Moses told God, in essence, that it would be difficult for him to persuade the people of this unless he could convince them that he, Moses, had at least seen this Lord who was to be accompanying the group on its journey. With one of history's great moments of chutzpah, Moses declared: 'Give me [...] the sight of thy glory'. Moses may have thought he was being coy in expressing his desire in this way: it would have been much too bold for him to say he wanted to see God's face. The Lord, unsurprisingly, was not fooled by the rhetoric of Moses and replied: 'my face [...] thou canst not see; mortal man cannot see me, and live to tell of it.'

Moses continued to insist, and finally the Lord said, almost as in exasperation: 'There is a place here, close by me, where thou mayst stand on a rock; there I will station thee in a cleft of the rock, while my glory passes by, and cover thee with my right hand until I have gone past. So, when I take my hand away, thou shalt follow me with thy eyes, but my face thou canst not see.' According to Jahweh, then, seeing God's back is the most that people can possibly hope for, in this life at least (if at any point at all, for Jewish theology is divided as to whether there is a Paradise in the afterlife).

How might Dante have accounted for this desire on the part of Moses to see God's face? Probably in the way he would have said we all wish to see it. In his essay on Dante's vision of God, Kenelm Foster recalls the famous passage from the Convivio: 'Lo sommo desiderio di ciascuna cosa, e prima da natura dato, è lo ritornare a lo suo principio.' The final canto of the Paradiso presents several precise descriptions of God: as source of the whole cosmos (Par. XXXIII, 85-90); in his triune nature (114-120, 124-126); and as united with human nature by the incarnation (127-132). It is within this final vision, within which the pilgrim sees 'our image' in God, that the voyage ends. God's ultimate gift is of himself, and to take upon himself human nature.

This issue was not one forced upon Dante over the course of the thirteenth century by the scrutiny of the papacy. For example, see the following passage from the Beatific Vision reads in part:

By our Apostolic authority, it is required that all who from the moment of their death [...] that all these things shall be in the case of those who have been, are and shall be in paradise [...] (and) that the soul, through the medium of an intuitive and face-to-face object; but rather that the soul opens the eyes which was once shut and is by it truly

But popes never make such promises. Dante's sole job is simply to demonstrate the divine intention of all clarification, and this clarification of all things created by his predecessors.

By the time of All Saints' day, 1829, the papal prelates were old. Perhaps moved by a concern of an order he had delivered a sermon on the Church from heaven. Perhaps it was their other piety: the Pope stated his opinion clearly, as in a mirror; that on this whither is an expectation of the reward of the faithful: the only at that time that the Pope wished to consider this subject in various letters, treatises and

One of the matters on which the most esteemed doctor of the papal curia, a favorite of Pope, the Pope, who had been the most recent death of the papacy, by the very same Pope, John XXIII, to the most recent death of the pope, that the final end of the soul, and that this is a final life in Paradise.

The Pope sent his sermons (who was soon to succeed as Pope) also engaged the assistance of the best biblical, liturgical and philologis
take upon himself humanity; these final causes are evident in the final vision.

This issue was not only treated as a matter of course by various theologians over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it also received intense scrutiny by the papacy. Foster notes the 1336 decree by Pope Benedict XII, which reads in part:

By our Apostolic authority we define that the souls of all the saints, [ ... ] in whom, when they died or shall come to die, nothing remained or shall remain to be purified, and likewise of all those who have needed or shall need such a purification after death [...] that all these souls, immediately after death or after the said purification, in the case of those who need it, and even before the resumption of their bodies [...] have been, are and shall be in heaven, in the heaven of heavens and the celestial paradise [...] [and] that they have seen and shall continue to see the divine essence in an intuitive and face-to-face vision, no creature intervening in the manner of an object, but rather that the divine essence itself immediately, nakedly, clearly and openly manifests itself to them; and that they thereby enjoy the said divine essence [...] [and] are by it truly beatified and possess life and repose eternal.9

But popes never make such declarations concerning theological issues lightly or simply to demonstrate their acumen; there is always a situation necessitating clarification, and this clarification by Benedict was necessary after the situation created by his predecessor, John XXII.

By the time of All Saints’ Day in 1331, the Pope, John XXII, was about 87 years old. Perhaps moved by an increasingly stark appreciation of his own mortality, John delivered a sermon on that day in which he considered whether the saints in heaven had already been permitted the beatific vision of the essence of God. The Pope stated his opinion that the souls in heaven can presently see God only unclearly, as in a mirror; their ultimate joy could only be found in their confident expectation of the reward they will receive at the Last Judgement, for it could be only at that time that they could see God’s glory completely. The Pope went on to consider this subject in a series of sermons over the course of the succeeding Christmas and pre-Lenten seasons. These led to heated controversy, giving rise to various letters, treatises and sermons in opposition to this view.

One of the matters at the heart of this debate was the opinion of the most esteemed doctor of the preceding century, Thomas Aquinas – the very man who had been the most recently canonised saint, and who had in fact been canonised by the very same Pope, John XXII. Thomas had made it clear in the Summa contra gentiles that the final end of humanity, that which all of us seek, is to see the face of God, and that this is available only to the holy, immediately upon their arrival in Paradise.10

The Pope sent his sermons to a group of theologians, including Jacques Fournier (who was soon to succeed John as Pope Benedict XII), asking their opinion. He also engaged the assistance of scholars, requesting that they provide him with biblical, liturgical and patristic material supporting his stance. Not long after-
wards, by the end of 1332, formal debates on the subject were held at several universities (such as Paris, Avignon and Naples) and at the imperial court in Munich. Much in these debates proceeded along factional or ideological lines. For example, most Dominicans preferred to stand alongside their recently canonised confère Thomas, and the imperial court – which had given succour to the 'spiritual' wing of the Franciscans after they were found in error (if not in heresy) – used these debates in an attempt to show that the Pope was himself in error. Even more 'mainstream' Franciscans were not entirely in accord with John's stance.

Matters reached the point where one's opinion could be held so strongly against papal opponents that one of them, the Dominican Thomas Waleys, was put before inquisitors and imprisoned. Waleys appealed to the Pope, and his trial was transferred to the Curia on 22 October 1333. The French King Philip VI passionately attacked the papal stance, adding to the increasingly tumultuous atmosphere. The Pope then became more conciliatory: he stated that his aim had been merely to elicit learned debate on the topic, and that he had not wanted to declare anything formally against the Church's doctrine. With the help of his cardinals, he drafted a declaration stating that the souls of the saints in heaven do indeed see God's face, as far as the condition of the souls separated from their bodies permits.

This was written on 3 December 1334; on the following day John died. His successor, Benedict XII, put an end to the debate with his constitution Benedictus Deus: it rejected John's original opinion.11

So this was no idle debate: its subject was close to the hearts and minds of many throughout Christendom, and people felt their reputations – even orthodoxy itself – were on the line.

Dante's writings on the beatific vision, although never cited in these debates, were therefore clearly related to a topic held to be of the greatest importance. Despite his initial misgivings, denying being Enea let alone Paolo, Dante felt himself to be comfortable in taking himself to see God, and he took this comfort, I believe, less from the turbulent world of theological debate and more from the comparatively solid ground of contemporary spirituality and hagiography. This is an extremely fecund area for Dante studies. I am not the first to say so: as far back as Frédéric Ozanam one finds calls to this effect.12 Over the course of Dante scholarship, the realms of supposedly secular literature, and of philosophy and theology, have drawn the overriding bulk of attention, but I submit that scholars should devote at least as much attention to the works that shaped the spiritual outlook of Dante and of his readers. Very briefly, I propose to support this through indications to the writings and artistic images of Hildegard of Bingen, and especially to the hagiographical writings of Italy in Dante's time.

As far as Hildegard is concerned, we have someone who very obviously and repeatedly declared her visions. She not only did so in writing; she also produced images to illustrate her experiences (written between 1141 and 1158), and the illustrated manuscripts is held up to us by her recording her visions of the Holy Ghost, and she is also known as 'the confessor Volmar. More than one vision of the Trinity, but in which the three persons were recently demonstrated, in 1889, in a manner she says in her Scivias, reinterpreted, and acting as a compound person, as the Holy Ghost and the Holy Spirit bear a name, represent a power. Although they are united in the unity of simple and unchangeable essence.

Other holy people, close to us with further grist for the mill, is Actus beati Francisci et S. B. Beatrice de Silva, 1330s.10 Here we find Francis, the earliest of the great scholars, and especially Giovannetti...
images to illustrate her text. The most famous of these works is the Scivias (written between 1141 and 1151), and the most intriguing of this work’s illuminated manuscripts is held in Eibigen’s Abtei Sankt Hildegard. Images abound of her recording her visions: some are portrayed clearly as inspired by the Holy Spirit, and she is also depicted taking notes under the watchful eye of her confessor Volmar. More importantly for our purposes, Hildegard depicts her vision of the Trinity, but it is not one of the face of God. Rather, it is a sort of pillar, in which the three persons unite to sustain all of creation. As Beverly Kienzle has recently demonstrated, Hildegard’s view of Heaven was incredibly architectonic: she says in her Scivias, regarding a very unusual, nonfigural, image of the Trinity, acting as a compound pier forming the corner of a building: ‘Thus God, the Word and the Holy Spirit bear witness altogether because they are not separated in their power. Although they are distinguished in persons, they work similarly in the unity of simple and unchangeable substance.

Other holy people, closer to Dante geographically and chronologically, provide us with further grist for our mill. Perhaps the most celebrated single text is the Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius, likely compiled in its present form in the 1330s. Here we find Fra Egidio taken up to the third heaven, in the manner of Saint Paul; here we witness Bernardo da Quintavalle taken frequentissime to God, and especially Giovanni d’Alvernia who:

was raised in so much praiseworthy light that he saw all created things in the Creator, both celestial and earthly, and all things distinct in their ordered grades [...] thus his soul saw nothing except God in all things and above all things and through all things and outside all things; and there he saw three persons in one God and one God in three persons [...] And moreover it had been shown to him in the same vision those things which had been made by Christ from the fall of the first man all the way to the entrance of Christ into eternal life.

All this, taken in the Apocalypse-steeped spirituality of the time, leads us to see that Dante’s approach is at once completely ‘normal’ (if the term can be used to describe the sight of God), yet exceptional: Dante scholars have not yet, to my knowledge, found an image, contemporary with Dante, of the Trinity in which the three persons appear the same, yet which demonstrates a special presence of the Son. At the risk of repeating what may have already been done, I would like to point us in the direction of Pietro del Morrone, better known as Pope Celestine V.

Pietro del Morrone was in fact born Pietro Angelerio in 1210, in the village of Sant’Angelo Limosano in what is today the province of Isernia, in the region of Molise. The second of twelve children, he was a devout child who at the age of twenty became a hermit. He wandered the central Apennines, particularly the Maiella and most especially its spur known as the Morrone – hence, the name by which he became known, at least to some. His holiness was such that he founded many monasteries to accommodate his followers. At the age of 84, he probably
thought he would be ending his days in peace in his beloved hermitage, so he must have been shocked when he received word that he had been elected pope. Under his new name, Celestine V, he instantly created havoc by his obvious ill-suitability to the task of running the Church Militant, and not long after his election he became the only pope in the history of the Church to resign voluntarily. He died a year-and-a-half later, aged 86, having been succeeded on the papal throne by Benedetto Caetani with the name Boniface VIII.

Although he was regarded by many as 'vir simplex et illetratus', we do have a text that in all likelihood was written or dictated by him. Known by its rubric, the De uita sua, this account narrates the first half of Pietro's life, and pays particular attention to the many miracles he worked, received or witnessed. These miracles could hardly have begun earlier than they did: it is noted that when his mother gave birth to him, she not only had visions concerning his future sanctity but also found that he was born, as it is said, 'wearing the shirt', that is, bearing his amniotic sac. This is significant in its relation to rural popular culture in Italy, as such births were deemed to indicate the great magical powers of the child born in this way; an example of this is to be found in another part of the peninsula at a later date: the sixteenth-century 'benandanti' made famous by the historian Carlo Ginzburg.

What I want to draw attention to is one of several visions received by the young hermit. As Pietro tells it, he had a vision following a particularly awkward moment: he had been troubled by having had a nocturnal emission, and was concerned that he was not in a sufficiently pure state to carry out his priestly duties and celebrate Mass. He asked his confreres, who contradicted each other in their advice, so he turned to God for an answer. In a vision, he saw himself riding a donkey to an elevated castle that greatly resembled a monastery; it was even filled with white-garbed monks. He rode the donkey up a set of stairs leading to this structure, but after ascending a few steps the beast relieved itself profusely. Pietro, seeing this, felt ashamed and wished not to continue the ascent; but Christ appeared to him, telling him not to stop just because the beast did what beasts do. At this point, Pietro awoke, and joyfully understood that he could continue his spiritual journey, as he was not at fault for what had happened.

The point that makes this anecdote noteworthy is the way that Christ is described. First, as we have seen, he appears at the apex of an upward, spiritual journey, but the factor that draws our attention is how he is portrayed. When Pietro looks up at the entrance to the monastic palace, he in fact sees three similar and equal persons, appearing as one; however, one of these appeared to be as Christ.

This is the earliest appearance of the Trinity in visionary literature that portrays the Godhead as similar and equal, but with a special distinction for the appearance – surely a typically human one – of Christ. In these elements, this description is not dissimilar to that provided by Dante in Paradiso XXXIII. But unlike the Giovanni d'Amico, which was written in the sixteenth century and not before Dante had begun the Divine Comedy, there is no strong evidence for the eyewitness appearance of Christ the Hippo taught that miracles and visions could grant the beatific vision.

In conclusion, I would like to turn to the bibliography of the Commedia. Dante Alighieri, Opera. In this work, I can compare and contrast the treatment of the character of the Commedia with, for example, the 'sacred' images created by St. John's journey, and then to construct a possible non-existent treatment of the story. Surely, given the importance of the pilgrim, and all his contacts with the afterlife, it is imperative that we consider some of the care afforded

Notes
5. Exodus 33, 18: 'Ostendens...'.
6. Exodus 33, 20: 'Non pro...'.

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unlike the Giovanni d'Alvernia's vision as portrayed in the Actus beati Francisci, which was written in the 1330s, Pietro's vision – in the version that has reached us – was written no later than the beginning of the fourteenth century: that is, before Dante had begun to write the final cantica of the Commedia.\(^{23}\)

There is presently no proof that Dante had read Pietro's autobiography. However, the coincidence that the one composition follows so closely on the other must be explored; in particular, other spiritual and visionary works must be examined for their descriptions of the Trinity and the particularly human appearance of Christ therein.\(^{23}\)

And Dante's precise place in the traditions of exegetical and theological understanding of the beatific vision must, of course, also be determined. This can only be the subject of other studies, yet for now we might find in Augustine the closest major figure to Dante in this regard. With remarkable consistency, the Bishop of Hippo taught that miraculous interventions, accorded to those of perfect lives, could grant the beatific vision fleetingly to people before they died.\(^{24}\)

In conclusion, I would invite the reader to examine any comprehensive bibliography of the Commedia, and to note the large number of works dealing with, for example, the 'selva oscura' or other noteworthy episodes of the Pilgrim's journey, and then to compare this sizeable corpus of publications to the almost non-existent treatment of the moment that marks the culmination of the journey. Surely, given the importance of the beatific vision to Dante the poet, Dante the pilgrim, and all his contemporaries who took a serious interest in the economy of the afterlife, it is imperative for this path of research to be examined with at least some of the care afforded to more traditional areas of Dante scholarship.

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Notes


2. In line 128, 'te' refers to the 'luce eterna' (124) that Dante is addressing here. All quotations from the Commedia are from La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata, Giorgio Petrocchi (ed.), Florence: Le Lettere, 1994.


5. Exodus 33, 18: ‘Ostende mihi gloriama tuam.’

6. Exodus 33, 20: ‘Non poteris videre faciem meam non enim videbit me homo et vivet.’


15. Beverly Kienzle's paper ('Constructing Heaven in Hildegard of Bingen's *Expositiones evangeliorum*) was presented at a conference at the University of Bristol in July 2004, and will be published in *In the Middle Ages*, Routledge, York: Routledge, 2006. Filus et Spiritus san- quamuis in personis incommutabilis substrato, in 472 (with colour reproduction) translation is from: Hild- Bear & Company, 1986, p. 262).


17. *Actus Beatj Francisci*: for Giovanni d’Alvern- udit omnia creata in ordinate distincta [...] et in terra omnia et extra- tribus personis [...] fuerunt per Christum et aeternam [...]’.


17. Actus Beati Francisci: for Egidio see cap. 1, 5; for Bernardo da Quintavalle, cap. 32; and for Giovanni d'Alvernha, cap. 56: 'Fuit elevatus in Deum tam admirando lumine quod udist omnia creata in Creatore, tam celestia quam terrastria, et omnia suis gradibus ordinate distincta [...] sic anima eius nil uidebat nisi Deum in omnibus et super omnia et intra omnia et extra omnia; et ipsis sem per Deum et unum Deum in tribus personis [...] Fuerunt etiam sibi ostensa in eadem visione quecunque facta fuerunt per Christum a casu primi hominis usque ad ingressum Christi in vitam eternam [...]'.


21. Manuscrit Città del Vaticano, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, A.A. Arm. 1-XVIII, 3327, fols 23v-24r: 'item alio tempore accidit et multa temptatio, quid faceret debet quando ei accideret polluto, si eodem die celebraret an non. Et queras consilium a multis religiosis, unus dicebat sic, alius non; et sic erat in magni dubio, nesciens quid idem faceret. Rogavit ergo Deum, ut ei de hoc auxiliret. Et ecce eadem nocte dormientis uidiebatur ei quod ascendideret quoddam castrum in alto positum; et ingrediens uidiebat magnum claustrum, et in medio claustri portam castri illius, magnum palatium, et per circumvium claustra diversas cellas, in quibus cellis erant irratres induit albis aestibus. Iste uero desiderabat ire in palatium; duciebat autem secum quemdam neclium, quem dimiciere non uidebat. Cepit ergo ascendere gradus scalarum illius palatii, per quos leuiter ascendebat ascellus; et sic ascendens tres uel quatuor gradus, ille multus ascellus

22. The text of the De vita sua, as we have received it, existed as part of the dossier of texts compiled as preliminary documentation towards the canonisation of Pietro; this compilation was effected no later than 1305, when approval was under way for the canonisation process to begin in 1306. We have no evidence that the writing of the Paradiso had been started by this time.


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Augustine, Epistola 147 (‘De videndo Deo’) in Patrologia Latina 33: 596-622.


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