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Dante's Self-Angelizing: A Prophecy of Egalitarian Transhumanism

Abstract

In this article, I argue that Dante's philosophical goal is what I term "self-angelizing," an ennobling philosophical education granting one the knowledge and power of an angel, which the medieval scholastics conceived as celestial intelligences. Dante's own path to self-angelizing begins in his early New Life, which approaches a living Beatrice as exemplar of terrestrial angels. Next, Dante's middle-period Banquet discusses following Beatrice into self-angelizing through an education in philosophical virtue. Finally, in his climactic Paradise, Dante performs his own self-angelizing. The upshot of this journey is Dante's prophecy of an egalitarian transhumanism.

Keywords: Dante; *Divine Comedy*; angels; transhumanism; egalitarianism

The central figure of the present article is the philosopher-poet Dante as an angelic planetary songbird. By the latter phrase, I mean a divine messenger of powerful-loving-wise justice (and thus an angel), celestially orbiting at a constant critical distance from earthly corruption (and thus planetary), to perform and inspire interpretive performances of sweet radiance (and thus a songbird). In Dante's case, his *Comedy* functions as a textual messenger (angel) of powerful-loving-wise justice, composed from the distance of his twenty-year-long exile from his corrupt Florentine home (planetary) for critiquing the infamous earthly corruption of Pope Boniface VIII, which is still performed to this day, including public recitals (songbird) from which illiterate Italians commit the entire poem to memory.[1]

The inspiration for this composite image began with an observation from Dante scholar Leonardi Chiavecci, as quoted in Hollander and Hollander's acclaimed new translation of the *Comedy*, that "an ancient tradition represented the planets as birds, with rays as their feathers" (Leonardi 1997, 743, quoted in Hollander 2007, 743). According to medieval

[1] For more on the latter tradition, see John Ahern's "Singing the Book: Orality in the Reception of Dante's *Comedy*" (Ahern 1997).

scholastic philosophers, including Muslim thinkers whom Dante cites by name, these planetary birds are the literal referents of monotheism's angels, in perpetual orbital flights, accented by their worshipful "music of the spheres," and thereby shaping the human beings who are already (qua rational beings) partial angels. Against this background, I interpret Dante as suggesting that humans may go farther, becoming full-fledged angels even before death, specifically through the virtue that Dane found spontaneous in Beatrice and then himself pursued through the artifice of a formal philosophical education. The result of this endeavor, as Dante repeatedly frames it in the *Paradise*, is that Beatrice becomes an angelic Daedalus empowering Dante's successful Icarus – as suggested by Dante's surname, Alighieri, "winged messenger of god."[2] Finally, by performing this flight in his poetry, Dante not only self-angelized, but also empowered others' self-angelizing, in an ongoing pursuit of global justice.

The present investigation into Dante's self-angelizing journey will be organized as follows. Its first three sections explore angels' respective roles in Dante's *New Life*, *Banquet*, and *Paradise*. These roles include (in *New Life*) Beatrice as the (initially terrestrial) guardian angel of Florence, and Venus as the angel of Love; (in *Banquet*) the nobility of philosophical knowledge in the Italian language as Venusian food for self-angelizing; and (in *Paradise*) Dante-Icarus flying through a *terza rima* poetic structure that describes and performs a Neoplatonic overflowing sweet radiance. And its final section suggests Dante's poetry is a kind of prophecy, not just of the anticlerical Reformation and humanist Renaissance (as has already been argued in the secondary literature), but also of egalitarian transhumanism, ennobling humans in this life from being mere partial angels to becoming the fully-fledged self-angelized.[3]

Before turning directly to this analysis, it will be helpful to consider a manuscript on transhumanism in Dante that has become influential since I initially completed this study, and which buttresses my own analyses, namely Heather Webb's *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman*. Webb focuses on the what she calls "the aerial body" (usually termed "shades") in *Purgatory* and *Paradise*, which she argues manifest the transhuman personhood of souls that have passed from this life and await their re-corporealization in heaven at the end of the world (Webb 2016, 14). These "souls of the dead," she claims, can "remain persons even in the afterlife" through "gesture, posture, and expression" (14). More specifically, Purgatory is a "laboratory of relationality, in which penitents work out ways of living in the aerial body in order to allow themselves to reconfigure, nurture, and develop their

[2] See, for example, Hugh Shankland, "Dante Aliger and Ulysses" (Shankland 1997).
[3] The most famous of these arguments is that of Eric Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*. (Auerbach 2001).

persone" (24). In this light, Webb concludes that "the souls we meet in *Purgatorio* are working toward a state of being 'transhuman'," which she defines as "achieving a transmortal community in which the plenitude of each individual's person is realized in and through recognition of the personhood of other individuals who constitute that community" (Webb 2016, 25, 26). The difference between Webb and my interpretations of Dante's transhumanism is that for her is not "associated with overcoming or superseding the human, but rather the process of attending, laterally, to interactions with other individuals that find their place within that humanity" (ibid., 27). For Webb too, therefore, Dante's trans-humanizing is something that souls can and should achieve in this life. The highest such exemplar, in Dante's early work, is his own most worldly love, Beatrice (Bice) Portinari.

1. A *New Life* for Earthly Angel Beatrice

Like most medieval philosophers, Dante relies first and foremost on the great synthesizing work of the tenth century Muslim philosopher Abu Nasr Alfarabi, who achieved the synthesis of Aristotelian and Neoplatonist philosophy with monotheistic doctrine that provided a template for later philosophers such as Ibn Sina, Maimonides and Aquinas.[4] The angelology of this tradition, in essence, is that the literal referents of the monotheistic angels are the Neoplatonic celestial intelligences that drive the nine celestial spheres, the homes of the (wandering) stars that are the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Saturn and Jupiter, and the (so-called "fixed") stars of Ptolemaic astronomy. More specifically, theses celestial spheres were identified with the nine orders of angels named in Pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* (namely the Seraphim, Cherubim, Powers, Principalities, Virtues, Dominations, Thrones, Archangels and Angels).

The central challenge of this Alfarabian fusion is reconciling the features of biblical angels with those of the Neoplatonic intelligences and Ptolemaic astronomical bodies. Compared to Dante, prose philosophers like Ibn Sina faced a much easier challenge, since their prose treatises aimed for merely a minimal, coherent concept of the angels. Dante's poetic representations of the afterlife, by contrast, demanded more concrete content, including imagery, words, actions, and some minimal characterization of angels as characters in his narratives.

Dante's self-angelizing ends in *Paradise*, where he is established in a new terrestrial orbit around Florence, Italy, and the globe, as the world's newest angelic-planetary songbird, contributing his own interpretive performance of the sweet radiance of global justice. I

[4] For more on Alfarabi's centrality to medieval philosophy, see Hall 2015.

now return to Dante's self-angelizing beginning. There, Beatrice first appears as a living, breathing terrestrial angel, overflowing the sweet radiance of the Venusian angel of Love onto the modest terrestrial sphere of Florence. Ultimately, however, she leaves her hometown "a widow" by dying and being transformed into a celestial angel – living an angelic "new life" that is perhaps a more fitting referent for the title of this important middle work (Dante 2006, 71).

The reader does not have to wait long for the *New Life*'s first angel. Already in Section II, Dante refers to the nine-year old Beatrice Portinari ("Bice" for short) as an "angel," and then christens her the "daughter of a god" (a phrase he borrows from Homer). This section also introduces the second (and second most important) angel of the *New Life*, whom the poet calls "Love," and whom he will later identify (in *Banquet* II) as an angel moving Venus via the third celestial sphere.

The turning point in the *New Life*'s angelology is found in Section XVIII, in a much-discussed conversation between Dante and a group of Florentine ladies. Overflowing with laughter at the comical figure of Dante's paralyzing love, these women ask him a reasonable question, as follows: "To what end do you love this lady of yours, seeing that you cannot endure her presence?" (without, that is, being so overcome that he almost loses consciousness). Undeterred by their hostile laughter, Dante tries to explain.

> Ladies, the goal of my love used to be the greeting from that lady (perhaps you know who I mean), and in that consisted the bliss which was the goal of all my desires. But ever since it pleased her to deny it to me, my master, Love (and I thank him), has placed all my bliss in something which cannot fail me…In those words which praise my lady (ibid, 35).

Note the remarkable claim here: the Venusian angel "Love" has radically altered the object of Dante's bliss, transferring that bliss from an external greeting to an internal act. In other words, instead of Beatrice as angelic messenger of love to Dante, it is Dante who will be the angelic messenger of love to himself – and thereby also to those who read and hear his poetry.

This is not, however, the end of Dante's conversation with the Florentine women. Unpersuaded by his explanation, one of the women dismisses it as a lie. "If you were telling us the truth," she challenges, "you would have used with a different intention the words that you spoke to us when declaring your condition." Troubled by this argument, Dante "parted from them almost in shame," and to do justice to his interlocutor's legitimate criticism, he afterward "resolved to adopt as the matter of my speech forever after whatever tended toward the praise of that most noble lady" (Dante 2006, 35).

An obstacle, however, immediately presented itself. In Dante's words, "I felt I had undertaken a matter too lofty for me, so that I did not dare begin" (Dante 2006, 35). Despite

this humble gesture, Dante nevertheless immediately presents a poem that is not only justifiably revered as the best poem from the entire *New Life*, but also anticipates his *Comedy* in various ways. Entitled "Ladies who have an understanding of Love," and written in the second person, the ode is dedicated to "not just any women, but only those who are of noble character." Here, Dante speaks, for the first time in the *New Life*'s poems, primarily of Beatrice (as opposed to the suffering he is enduring for love, which dominates all the previous poems in the *New Life*). Moreover, Dante does so in a way befitting the bliss that the Venusian angel has channeled from Beatrice to Dante's praise of her. In other words, having criticized the "Love" angel of Venus, Dante now celebrates an angelized Beatrice.

As if this were not innovative enough, Dante introduces a third angel in the ode's second stanza, who "cries out to the Divine Mind, saying: 'Lord, in the world is seen / a marvel in the actions which proceed / from a soul whose glow reaches all the way up here'" (Dante 2006, 37). Dante then unpacks these lines, as follows: "Heaven, which has no other lack / than the lack of her, demands her of its Lord" (ibid, 37). It seems clear, from these lines, that Beatrice as a living woman was already sufficiently angelic to merit heaven, as evidenced by the fact that her brightness reached all the way there from Florence – being powerful enough to cross the same vast distance as the light of the celestial angels on its reverse journey from heaven to earth.

Just because Beatrice is angel enough to belong in heaven, however, does not entail that she did belong there. As Dante has the supreme being explain to this third angel, the reason she is there is for the sake of Dante and his later readers/listeners. Appropriately, Dante turns in the next stanza to the details of Beatrice's terrestrial angelic powers, noting that, "when she walks abroad / Love casts a chill into base hearts," whereas "whoever could endure standing there and beholding her / would become something noble, or would die" (Dante 2006, 39). Put in Neoplatonic terms, Beatrice overflows the divine light from the Venusian angels, which makes her a new angelic link in the chain of emanation, in response to which Beatrice's beholder either shrinks away (if vicious) or becomes nobler (if already virtuous). Elaborating on the latter case, Dante claims that "when she finds someone who would be worthy / of beholding her, that person experiences her virtue, / because what she gives him redounds to his salvation" (ibid, 39).

Dante already takes a first step in this salvific self-angelizing direction – or a first wingbeat of his Beatrice-born Icarian wings – in the *New Life*'s next section. Noting his ode quickly became popular throughout Florence, which prompted Dante's friend to ask what he meant by "Love" therein, Dante responds with a sonnet. Importing an Aristotelian philosophy of mind into Dante's Neoplatonism of love, this sonnet thereby further buttresses and clarifies Beatrice's angelhood. "Love and the noble heart are one and the same thing," Dante sings, and each of the two (that is, love and the noble heart) "dares as little to exist

without the other / as does the rational soul without reasoning" (Dante 2006, 43). This requires some unpacking. For Aristotle, (a) that which thinks within the thinker, (b) the act of thinking, and (c) that which is thinkable within the object, are strictly identical. Here, Dante seems to suggest the same of love, which is to say that (a) that which loves in the lover, (b) the act of loving, and (c) that which is loved in the beloved are also strictly identical.

Applying this conception to the example of Beatrice, (a) that within the celestial angels which loves Beatrice and makes them wish for her to join them in heaven, (b) their act of loving Beatrice, and (c) that within Beatrice which inspires their love, are strictly identical, too. In short, the (celestial) angels love Beatrice because she is (at that time) already a (terrestrial) angel, and because Beatrice loves like the celestial angels do – since to love in a certain way is strictly identical, on this reading, to be being a certain sort of angel. Dante clarifies this further in the second and final stanza of Section XX's sonnet. He notes, and in a way that again recalls the *Phaedrus*' winged chariot team, that when "beauty appears in a knowing woman," then "a desire for the pleasing thing arises"; moreover, in some cases this desire "lasts so long in the heart / that it awakens the spirit of Love" (Dante 2006, 43). In other words, Beatrice's radiant sweetness, if experienced long enough, could eventually overflow that of the angel of Love into the person perceiving her. In the next section, Dante makes this point more explicitly. Beatrice "converts that potentiality [for Love] into activity," just like the Aristotelian Active Intellect (*Nous Poetikos*) does for humans' potential (or "material") intellects (ibid, 45).

Thought there are multiple additional references to Beatrice's angelhood in the remainder of the *New Life*, for reasons of space I will pass over them and conclude with one last observation.[5] The book ends after discussing the appearance the *Banquet*'s central figure, "Lady Philosophy," followed by the vision that compelled Dante to refrain from speaking of Beatrice until he could do so "in a worthier manner" (Dante 2006, 97). Since, however, Dante has already spoken of her in such an eminent manner in the *New Life*, I wish to suggest that this "worthier" manner refers more precisely to the way in which only an angel can speak to another angel – in this case, the self-angelizing Dante of the *Paradise* speaking to the celestial angel Beatrice. Put differently, whereas the *New Life* speaks of Beatrice as an angel in the worthiest manner that a mere human (as partial angel) can, Dante must then, in order to do justice to Beatrice's angelhood, follow her further, by consuming the enno-

[5] These references include the Florentine people as a whole declaring Beatrice to be an angel, additional sonnets describing other angels as marveling at Beatrice's spiritual powers (when she is received into heaven), and Dante describing himself sketching figures of angels on the anniversary of Beatrice's death (which inspires him to write yet another poem about her).

bling philosophical "Bread of the Angels" in his course of self-angelizing. The recipe for this angelic bread is provided by the *Banquet*, to which I now turn.

2. A *Banquet* of Philosophical Angel Food

Dante clarifies that the collection's title, "*Convito*," means "the Banquet, the glad Life Together" (Dante 1887, 12). Thus, Dante's poetry's first wingbeat of self-angelizing – the *New Life* of the terrestrial angel Beatrice as a celestial angel – leads to its second wingbeat – the *Banquet* as making a "Life Together" with her, by consuming the philosophical knowledge that makes angels what they are, which Dante calls the "Bread of the Angels" (ibid, 12). One link between the early *New Life* and middle *Banquet* can be found in the former's brief discussion about Dante's vernacular Italian language. Dante notes that this vernacular poetry first arose in Italy because male poets wanted to express their love in poetry to women who were (at the time) denied formal education in Latin. In bridging this unjust gap, Italian as a vernacular language comes to possess for Dante a crucial egalitarian power. More specifically, he links the vernacular language to the concept of "true" nobility (as opposed to hereditary variety), which in turn is, as the source of all virtue, the basis for humans' self-angelizing. I will return to this point below, but will I begin with the first course of the *Banquet*'s feast.

Knowledge, Dante claims there, is humanity's "final perfection," and a "most noble perfection" (Dante 1887, 9). Given the abovementioned continuity, for Dante, between types of being, the implication here is that knowledge is the specific way for humans to self-angelize. (As Dante puts it later in the *Banquet*, "in the intellectual order of the Universe, one ascends and descends by degrees almost continuous from the lowest form to the highest," and thus "between the Angelic nature, which is intellectual, and the Human soul there may be no step" (ibid, 123). Adding a first pinch of egalitarian spice to this feast, Dante bemoans the fact that "many are deprived" of knowledge, the highest nobility, due to both internal and external problems, involving body, soul, and society (ibid, 9).

As I noted above, Dante compares this knowledge to the "Bread of the Angels," from which I derive the following argument: Since (a) humans metabolize food into our own being, and (b) knowledge is angels' food, then (c) if we can live off this knowledge, (d) we can become angels too, even though (e) most of us are denied this opportunity, which is (f) clearly inegalitarian and thus unjust. Dante demurely insists that, though he does not sit "at the blessed table" of Beatrice and her fellow angels, he does nevertheless lie "at the feet of those who sit there and gather up what falls from them" (Dante 1887, 11). Somehow, from these mere crumbs of the angelic meal, Dante claim to have prepared the "common Banquet" of this collection of poems, originally intended to number fourteen poems (the

angels' meat) along with prose commentary for each (the angels' bread); and all was to have been in the Italian vernacular (ibid, 11).

Before turning to the Italian linguistic ingredients for this feast, Dante opens the second chapter of this first Treatise (of the four which he completed before ultimately abandoning the project) with a lengthy defense of his decision "to speak of himself" (Dante 1887, 13). His argument here is that "it is worse for any one to blame than to praise himself," because for "a man openly to bring contempt on himself is essentially wrong to his friend, and" – herein lies Dante's ingenuity – "no one is more friendly to himself than the man himself" (ibid, 13). The reason this argument is important is that its unusual conception of friendship recurs in the *Banquet*'s later defense of Dante's Italian vernacular, which he calls the best friend of his entire life. Moreover, the *New Life* already implicitly identifies the Italian language as the second object of Dante's love, since the Venusian angel of love redirected his love from Beatrice to Dante's words in praise of her, and those words of praise were also in the Italian vernacular. Put simply, Dante shifts from loving Beatrice to loving the Italian language that praises her.

Dante sets the table for this linguistic friendship in Chapter 3 of Treatise I of the *Banquet*, describing his twenty-year Florentine exile, and consequent wandering throughout Italy, as his having "gone through almost all the land in which this language lives" (Dante 1887, 17). The climax of this discussion of the vernacular occurs in Chapter 5 of Treatise I, where Dante justifies using Italian rather than Latin for the *Banquet*, which choice he compares to baking bread made of a (less appetizing) "barley-meal and not of wheaten flour" (ibid, 21). All playfulness aside, Dante gives three reasons for this choice of the vernacular over Latin. Italian, he claims, is (1) better fitted than Latin as a medium for prose commentary on Italian poems, (2) more filled with the virtue of "liberality" in regard to his Italian audience, and (3) the object, for Dante, of "one's natural Love for one's own Native Tongue" (ibid, 21).

Getting into the details of reason (1), Dante refers to the *Banquet*'s poems as "songs" that "are all in the language of our people," adding that a vernacular language, like Italian, "being home-made, changes at pleasure" (Dante 1887, 22). Because Latin lacks the vernacular's chameleonic historical nature, Dante concludes, "Latin cannot be acquainted with the Vulgar Tongue and with its friends" (namely, native speakers of Italian) (ibid, 24). Put differently, "without conversation or familiarity, it is impossible to know men; and the Latin has no conversation with so many in any language as the Vulgar has, to which all are friends" (ibid, 25). I identify this claim as the second pinch of egalitarian spice in Dante's philosophical feast; Latin only "knows" and "is friends" with a few (Latin-educated) native Italian speakers, whereas Italian is friends with the entirety of the people, including illiterate poor who still sing Dante's *Comedy* to this day.

This generous friendship shown by the Italian language for the Italian people, which Dante calls "liberality," brings the reader to his second reason for choosing Italian over Latin for his *Banquet*. Dante claims that Italian has three advantages regarding liberality, being able "to give" (1) "useful things" (2) "to many" people (3) "without being asked" (Dante 1887, 29). If this does not already sound reminiscent of the generosity of Dante's angels – overflowing sweet radiance from higher to lower concentric celestial spheres – Dante adds that this liberal power of the Italian vernacular "has a similitude to the good gifts of God, who is the Benefactor of the Universe" (ibid, 29).

Dante then adds a third pinch of egalitarian spice to his Italian philosophical feast in the context of attacking fellow Italians who slander it. Ingeniously, in doing so Dante manages to use the Italian language to reflexively praise "itself." One reason, Dante writes, why an insulting "cry has long been raised against our Mother Tongue," and with so little pushback from the people, is that "From the use of the sight of discretion the mass of the people are debarred" (Dante 1887, 37). More specifically, they are denied the opportunity to develop discretion "because each being occupied from the early years of his life with some trade, he so directs his mind to that, by force of necessity, that he understands nought else" (ibid, 37). To paraphrase this claim in today's social justice rhetoric, lower-SES people tend to lack critical thinking skills because their hyperspecialized and intellectually-stifling jobs blunt their reason into a tool for serving bosses. It is precisely for this reason, to counteract this injustice, that Dante chose to compose his *Banquet* (and later the *Comedy*) in the Italian of the people.

Dante's elaboration of this third reason for choosing Italian is the most important of the three, and it constitutes what is arguably the most moving passage in the entire *Banquet*. This passage begins, in Chapter 13 of Treatise I, with an analogy between (a) flames pouring through the windows of a house (as an indicator of fire within the house), and (b) Dante's love for his Italian (as an indicator that the language itself is equally present "within" Dante) (Dante 1887, 40). Why should this be the case? For starters, Dante argues, a person's "Native Language is nearest to him, inasmuch as he is most united to it," and that native language is also "united with the persons nearest to him, as his parents, and his fellow-citizens, and his own people" (ibid, 41). Moreover, Dante claims to have "received from" Italian "the greatest benefits," which he the lists as follows:

> My Mother Tongue was the bond of union between my forefathers, who spoke with it, even as the fire is the link between the iron and the smith who makes the knife; therefore it is evident that it co-operated in my birth, and so it was in some way the cause of my being. Again, this my Mother Tongue was my introducer into the path of knowledge, which is the ultimate perfection (ibid, 44).

The end of this passage already hints that Italian, via this educational function, shares the nobility of the angels, because the language and angels jointly empowered Dante to philosophy. Moreover, given Moevs' observation that Dante elsewhere uses this quote's blacksmith analogy for the angels (namely, a divine blacksmith using an angel-hammer in the blacksmith's art of shaping the tools that are humanity), the first half of the quote further reinforces Italian's angelic nobility (Moevs 2008, 118).

To compensate Italian (Dante's greatest friend) for its noble angelic gifts to him, Dante claims to be supporting Italian's "self-preservation" through his poetry. His reasoning is that, if the Italian language "could seek anything of itself, it would seek" to "secure for itself a position of the greatest stability," and Italian could not achieve "greater stability" than by "uniting itself with number and with rhyme" (Dante 1887, 44). In short, Dante intended to make – and succeeded in making – Italian nobly immortal by stabilizing it in his *Comedy*. More precisely, since Italian gave Dante the original means to self-angelize, he repaid it by making it more angelic, specifically by augmenting its power to self-angelize his readers and listeners.

On this subject of angelic influence, Treatise II begins by invoking, in its opening poem, the abovementioned angels of Venus, addressed as "Ye who the third Heaven move" (II, line 1). After Beatrice dies, leaving him deep in mourning, there appears to him a "Spirit that descends in your [Venus'] star's rays" (II, line 10). In his prose commentary to this poem, Dante identifies these movers of the third Heaven as "certain Intelligences," adding that "by a more usual form of speech we should call them Angels" (Dante 1887, 52). He later specifies these Venusian angels as members of the angelic order of "the Thrones, in whom the Love of the Holy Spirit being innate, they do their work conformably to it, which means that the revolution of that Heaven is full of love" (ibid, 63-64). In short, since their priority aims no higher than the third Person (the Spirit), their (comparably) lowly sphere is thus dominated by love.

Turning from the literal to the allegorical meaning of Treatise II's poem, Dante reverentially names the divine patron of the *Banquet* as "Lady Philosophy." Referencing a popular Italian saying, Dante claims that, in his grief, while looking for silver, "he finds gold" – specifically in the "sweetness" of "the daughter of God, the Queen of all, the most noble and most beautiful Philosophy" (Dante 1887, 82). Given Dante's reputation as a faithfully religious poet, this is surprisingly high praise from him for a secular discipline. More surprising are Dante's correlative claims that (1) "by Heaven I mean Science," and (2) "by the Heavens ‘the Sciences'" (ibid, 82). And most surprising is Dante's praise of the most controversial group of philosophers during his era, including the Muslim thinkers "Avicenna" and "Algazel," whom, as Dante notes, attribute earthly generation to the angelic "Movers" (ibid, 82, 102). Summarizing these surprises, philosophy is the greatest human pursuit, its

scientific branches are the true heavens, and its figures (including Muslim philosophers) are the true angelic movers in these heavens, shaping historical humanity with their philosophy.

With philosophy thus angelized, Dante's relationship to it begins to mirror his relationship to the *New Life*'s angelized Beatrice. He characterizes this relationship with Philosophy as one involving "persons of unequal position"; and because of this seeming inequality, "perceiving myself lower than that Lady, and perceiving myself benefited by her," Dante therefore "endeavored to praise her according to my ability" (Dante 1887, 100). As with Dante's relationship with Beatrice, and with the Italian language, Dante positions Lady Philosophy as the nobler and more virtuous beneficent influencer in the relationship, to the point that philosophy empowers him to self-angelize. And in response, Dante hopes to pay philosophy's empowering of human self-angelizing forward by augmenting said empowering.

In the case of Lady Philosophy specifically, Dante's augmentation of her empowering means praising her nobility, to facilitate more Italian people reading philosophy and thereby potentially becoming be empowered to self-angelize. More precisely, Dante's justified praise of philosophy takes the form of relating these lofty benefits for him of being her friend, and by implication the similarly lofty benefit for other human beings, too. For starters, Dante writes that, via friendship with philosophy, "the Soul is ennobled and denuded of matter by that Sovereign Power in proportion as the Divine Light of Truth shines into it, as into an Angel" (Dante 1887, 104). Dante elaborates that, along with the Aristotelian human soul's other powers (which it shares with nonhuman animals), the human soul's noblest power is "the true Human Nature, and, to use a better phrase, the Angelic, namely, the Rational," source of "the Love of Truth and Virtue" (ibid, 108). The apparent obstacle, however, to fulfilling this angelic nature – and the reason why humans' rational angelhood is hidden from most of us – is that "although on one side [the human soul] may be free from matter, on another side it is impeded: even as the man who is all in the water but his head, of whom one cannot say that he is entirely in the water, or entirely out of it" (ibid, 122).

Though many commentators dismiss these (and similar) claims as unique to Dante's philosophy-centered middle phase, and as being implicitly retracted by the *Comedy*, I identify many moments in the *Comedy* that reinforce them. Perhaps the most powerful such counterexample is Dante's (endlessly debated) decision to install Cato – a non-Christian Stoic philosopher – as the guardian angel of Purgatory proper. Dante justifies this decision already in the *Banquet*, in the form of the following question: "And what earthly man," he asks and answers, "was more worthy to typify God than Cato? None, of a certainty" (Dante 1887, 274). For Dante, it is not David, Solomon, Peter or Paul who is the most virtuous human of all time, but a pagan philosopher, who is thus angel enough to guide the saved up the mountain to *Paradise*.

3. *Paradise*'s Icarian Angel, Overflowing *Terza Rima*

Having explored Dante's third-person model of angelizing virtue in the *New Life* of Beatrice, followed by his second-person recipe for a philosophical education of self-angelizing virtue in the *Banquet*, I now turn to Dante's first-person performance of self-angelizing, through the concluding philosophical education of the celestial angel Beatrice in the *Paradise*. Dante's performative self-angelizing begins in the opening "Song" (*Canto*). "As I gazed on her," he writes of the celestial angel Beatrice, "I was changed within, / as Glaucus was on tasting of the grass / that made him a consort of the gods in the sea" (Dante 2007, 7). The "Glaucus" reference is to the mythical transhumanizing of a mortal man into a minor sea god, and implies that Dante was similarly apotheosized. As Hollander emphasizes in his commentary, this move is as necessary for Dante as it is daring, since he presents himself "as being inspired by God to write this part of the poem" (ibid, 12). That is, if Dante is actually as divinely-inspired as the authors of the Bible, then he had better be speaking as more than a mere mortal.

Perhaps to make a case for his more-than-humanity, Dante then turns, in the *Comedy*'s second Song, to harmonize the melodies of the *Paradise* with those of his angelic *Banquet*. More specifically, Song Two refers to itself as "angels' bread," implying that it is equivalent not only to the Bible, but also to Aristotle's philosophical truths (Dante 2007, 36). In support of this interpretation, Hollander affirms in his commentary that "the *Paradiso* offered him the opportunity to complete the *Convivio*, now in better, more ‘orthodox' form" (ibid, 84). Continuing this harmonizing of the *Banquet* and *Paradise*, Dante claims a few lines later that the divine "has conjoined us" – meaning Beatrice and Dante himself – "with the nearest star" (ibid, 41). Dante then elaborates on this conjoining, as follows: "The eternal pearl received us in itself, / as water does a ray of light / and yet remains unsundered and serene" (ibid, 41). This passage, Hollander notes, has caused Dante scholars much consternation, with most shrugging their shoulders in defeat. For my part, I suggest that because Beatrice and Dante have become angels, they can therefore manifest their pure angelic acts in any matter whatsoever, notably including the fifth element (which Dante calls "aether," and which according to him constitutes the entirety of the celestial spheres, along with their respective planets).

In other words, perhaps Beatrice and Dante are temporarily manifesting, in Song Two, as angels of the moon, and in this manifestation the two of them overflow (onto Dante's readers and listeners) the truths that he associates specifically with the lunar sphere. The impetus for this interpretation is that, given (a) Dante's deference to Aristotle on all philosophical matters (including, as Gilson notes, overriding Aquinas where the latter and Aristotle disagree), and (b) Aristotle's repeated insistence that there can be no form without

matter, therefore (c) Dante's angels, though divorceable from any specific collection of matter, nevertheless always require some matter or other to manifest at all (Gilson 2007, 135). Support for this interpretation can be found in Dante's insistence, later in the *Paradise*, that the (transhumanized) saved do not literally reside in the celestial spheres, and instead merely manifest in those spheres for the pedagogical benefit of Dante and his audience. It is for this same reason that Beatrice and Dante can conjoin with the moon, namely that in their angelic being they do not materially reside anywhere.

Turning from this angelic manifestation to its purpose – for Beatrice and Dante to act as fellow messengers with the angels of the lunar sphere, helping overflow their sweet radiance – in Song Five, Dante (in Hollander's words) "presents himself as the 'scribe' of Beatrice" (Dante 2007, 140). That is, Dante's scribing makes him an angel of a sphere within and beneath the sphere of the nobler angel Beatrice. This way, his poetry can, in turn, overflow Beatrice's sweet radiance onto the terrestrial sphere beneath him, which is that of his Italian audience. Dante calls himself a scribe again in Song Ten, which contains several insights relevant to the present investigation.

First, Song Ten renews the harmonizing of the *Paradise* with the *Banquet*, echoingly justifying several of the philosophy-centered claims of his middle-period text. These echoes begin with a return to the metaphor of poetic philosophy as the food of the angels (and in the same passage where Dante repeats his self-description as divine scribe). "I have set your table," he begins, addressing the reader/listener. "From here on feed yourself / for my attention now resides / in that matter of which I have become the scribe" (Dante 2007, 257). Song Ten also marks, as Hollander notes, a significant division within the *Paradise*, "separating the planets attained by the earth's shadow from those, beginning with the Sun, that are free from such darkening" (ibid, 266). Second, and as result of the first point from Song Ten, the philosophy-dominated sphere of the sun is implicitly elevated above the less-theatrical philosophical descriptions of the spheres of the moon, Mercury, and Venus. Put differently, the superior and undefiled being of this first nobler sphere (of the sun) are predominantly philosophers, including Aquinas, Solomon, and the infamous Siger of Brybant. Aquinas' nickname was "Doctor Angelicus," which further buttresses this overlap between angels and philosophers. The salvation of King Solomon was a controversial issue in Dante's era, since Augustine had condemned him to hell, but Dante boldly elevates him above even Aquinas, along with the poetry attributed to him (namely *Proverbs* and *The Song of Solomon* from the Bible). As for Solomon's angelhood, Dante later describes him as speaking to him in a voice that was "such perhaps as the angel's was to Mary" (ibid, 373). Solomon is thus a second angel-philosopher, and a scandalous one to boot. Even more controversial is Siger, who was condemned in 1277 as an Averroist, and whom Gilson claims Dante viewed as a champion of philosophy's autonomy from theology (Gilson 1963, 266).

With all three philosophers, it is unsurprising that Song Ten has been identified as what Dante's *Banquet* calls "the celestial Athens," in which locus the poet identifies virtuous Stoics, Peripatetics, and even Epicureans, who in Dante's era were infamous for denying the immortality of the soul (Forti 380, quoted in Hollander 266).

Third, Song Ten features the second of four Icarus-references that constitute (what Hollander terms) Dante's "Daedalus program" in the *Paradise* (Dante 2007, 416). The initial Icarus-reference, from Song Eight, is to "the man / who flew up through the air and lost his son" (ibid, 125). The second reference, here in Song Ten, is the claim that "He who fails to wing himself to fly there [to the "court of Heaven"] / might as well await the dumb to tell the news" (ibid, 209). The penultimate reference is to "the craftsman who, to the practice / of his craft, brings an unsteady hand" (ibid, 347). And in the final reference, Dante describes (in a kind of soliloquy) Beatrice's having "dressed you out in wings for this high flight," using her smile (which, he adds, "made my will put forth its wings") (ibid, 403). Thusly rendered Icarian, Dante can now fly steadier than non-angelized humans, for whom "the will to act and the power to carry through / have wings that are not feathered equally" (ibid, 403).

I now turn to the other central angelizing feature in the *Paradise*, its *terza rima* metrical structure, which both describes and performs the overflowing of the angels. In this way, the self-angelized Dante overflows wave after wave of sweet radiance to provoke the growth of his audiences' loving wings. Regarding this metrical structure, John Freccero notes the following: "Not only was Dante's rhyme form unique, but his organization of tercets into *canti* [plural of *canto*] was also a formal innovation" (Freccero 1998, 261).[6] That is, Dante chose to focus on an "B A B C B" segment of rhymes (rather than on an "ABA BCB" segment. Freccero characterizes this innovation as "a formation motion, closed off with a recapitulation that gives to the motion its beginning and end," in that the middle "B" both recalls and anticipates itself (ibid, 262).

Translating this claim into an image, Freccero observes that the "geometric representation of forward motion which is at the same time recapitulatory is the spiral" (Freccero 1998, 263). Moreover, in the context of the *Comedy*, this geometric figure "also can serve as the spiral representation of narrative logic" (ibid, 263). Put differently, Freccero perceives the *terza rima* as driving the *Comedy* and its story forward, more precisely by making (1) circles at the level of poetic form, that are simultaneously (2) steps or wingbeats at the level of poetic content, the net result of which is (3) a celestial spiral (as also for the

[6] Hollander also emphasizes the influence of the *Phaedrus* on Dante in his commentary on the *Paradiso* (see f.ex. Dante 2007, 74).

Phaedrus's winged chariot team). Finally, on this point, Freccero suggests that one could "ascribe this pattern, not simply to the poem, but to metaphysical reality" (ibid, 264). It is this final point that I wish to run with (and perhaps even fly).

The specific metaphysical aspect that the *terza rima* of the *Comedy* both describes and performs is the overflowing of the angels' sweet radiance of the powerful-loving-wise justice. The following is intended as one possible graphic representation of this idea:

A: god (as father-Person)
B: angels
A: god[1] (as son-Person)

B: angels[1] (generating humanity)
C: Beatrice (as human)
B: angels[2] (longing for Beatrice in Heaven)

C: Beatrice[1] (as angel)
D: Dante (as poet)
C: Beatrice[2] (as poetic character)

D: Dante[1] (as self-angelizing)
E: reader/listener
D: Dante[2] (as fully-fledged angel)

E: reader/listener[1] (as self-angelizing)
F: reader/listener's fellow Italian
E: reader/listener[2] (as fully-fledged angel)

The superscripts after the names here are intended to indicate an overflowed version of the original being. For example, "angels superscript 1" is the way that the angels initially appeared to a human Beatrice, as a function of their partially (a) splashing back, (b) filling, and (c) overflowing down their sweet radiance. Put differently, at each stage, divine powerful-loving-wise justice is transmitted via creative reinterpretation, as a function of the position and perspective of the intermediary. Every line, and every entity named therein, thereby offers a reinterpretation of justice, and all function as the collective angelic message of Dante as self-angelized philosopher-poet.

Reinforcing the importance of the concept of interpretation in this graph is William Franke's interpretation, inspired by Freccero, of interpretation within the *Comedy* as above

all Dante's reader/listener's self-interpretation. Building on Franke's prophetic interpretation of Dante's *Comedy*, since prophecy for him (as inspired by Muslim philosophers such as Alfarabi) is the result of angelic overflowing, his poem constitutes a further overflowing thereof. Additionally, this meta-overflowing reinforces Dante's status as a fully-fledged angel, which empowers him to also empower the self-angelizing of his readers and listeners. As Dante puts it, in *Paradise*, speaking to the Apostle James, "you poured your epistle down on me so that I, / overflowing, now rain your rain on others" (Dante 2007, 683). This act, prophesying its own self-angelizing, is what Franke calls Dante's "creative, seemingly magical working of poetry" (Franke 1996, 50).

No less a philosopher (and Dante commentator) than George Santayana concurs. In his *Three Philosophical Poets*, Santayana compares Dante's "magic" to how "the waves of the sea might receive and reflect tremblingly the light shed by the moon," along with, I would interpolate for Dante, the moon's angels (95). This "magic," Santayana concludes, "on earth, bore the name of love" (Santayana 1910, 95). It is precisely this loving magic, capable of self-angelizing the human beings that encounter it, that I identify as Dante's prophecy of egalitarian transhumanism. In this vision, our terrestrial globe is exclusively populated by beings as resplendent with justice as the angel-philosophers of Dante's *Paradise*. Though this is admittedly a long and difficult trajectory, so too is the arc of Dr. King's moral universe, but our self-angelizing can eventually bend the world to the sweet radiance of justice – "turning" this modest blue globe, like Dante at *Paradise*'s end, with "the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars" (Dante 2007, 917).

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