

THE DIVINE VISION OF DANTE'S *PARADISO*

In Canto XVIII of the *Paradiso*, Dante sees thirty-five letters of Scripture – LOVE JUSTICE, YOU WHO RULE THE EARTH – “painted” one after the other in the sky. It is an epiphany that encapsulates the *Paradiso*, staging its ultimate goal – the divine vision. This book offers a fresh, intensive reading of this extraordinary passage at the heart of the third canticle of the *Divine Comedy*. While adapting in novel ways the methods of the traditional *lectura Dantis*, William Franke meditates independently on the philosophical, theological, political, ethical, and aesthetic ideas that Dante’s text so provocatively projects into a multiplicity of disciplinary contexts. This book demands that we question not only what Dante may have meant by his representations, but also what they mean for us today in the broad horizon of our intellectual traditions and cultural heritage.

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THE DIVINE VISION
OF DANTE'S *PARADISO*

The Metaphysics of Representation

WILLIAM FRANKE



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-009-01691-9 — The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradiso
 William Franke
 Frontmatter
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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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 a department of the University of Cambridge.

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 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009016919

DOI: 10.1017/9781009037839

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First published 2021
 First paperback edition 2023

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

NAMES: Franke, William, author.

TITLE: The divine vision of Dante's Paradiso : the metaphysics of representation / William
 Franke.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press,
 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2021010782 (print) | LCCN 2021010783 (ebook) | ISBN 9781316517024
 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009037839 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Dante Alighieri, 1265–1321. Paradiso. Canto 18. | Revelation in literature. |
 LCGFT: Literary criticism.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PQ4454 .F73 2021 (print) | LCC PQ4454 (ebook) | DDC 851/.1–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021010782>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021010783>

ISBN 978-1-316-51702-4 Hardback
 ISBN 978-1-009-01691-9 Paperback

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Prologue

Subject and Scope of the Work

This book offers a sharply focused reading of one of the most extraordinary passages at the heart of Dante's *Paradiso*. In Canto XVIII, Dante sees thirty-five letters of Scripture – DILIGITE IUSTITIAM / QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM – “painted” (“dipinto”) one after the other in the sky. After a dazzling song and dance, each of the incandescent letters breaks up into its component sparks, each spark a blessed soul. These soul-sparks then regroup to form the next letter in the series. The last letter, M, finally metamorphoses into a figure – the emblematic sign of the Roman Imperial Eagle outlined in its head and wings. Considered specifically from a literary-theoretical point of view, this scene is arguably the most challenging and intriguing in the poem. In some vertiginous regards, this epiphany encapsulates the *Paradiso* as a whole by staging its ultimate goal – the divine vision – self-reflexively in a *mise-en-abîme* as an instance of the writing of letters.

In this cosmic staging of letters from Holy Scripture, the inner, spiritual experience of Dante's *visio Dei* takes on an external, aesthetic form as a written figure. Words and letters that are revealed from heaven show forth also as a consummate poetic creation. In teasing ways, this extraordinary revelation of Scripture constitutes an exception within a poem in which the divine vision as such tends to withdraw behind the veil of ineffability that is tirelessly evoked from beginning to end. This exception, in which God is directly envisioned in the letters of Scripture, each one being individually contemplated as a divine Name, serves to reveal the enabling condition of the entire poem, namely, writing, since the poem in the end is made up of nothing but writing. The divine vision is displayed here as revealed in the poem's material means – writing – which is itself then broken down into its own basic building blocks, *viz.*, letters. These letters, furthermore, dissolve into what appear to be random sparks,

though actually they are providentially guided soul-lights forming, as if by a miracle, into the intelligible shapes of letters and even spelling out a verse from Scripture, hence the divine Word.

The monograph in hand presents a reading of this particularly provocative passage near the climax of Dante's complete oeuvre. At the same time, such an exegetical exercise also furnishes the occasion for investigating some fundamental theoretical issues concerning, notably, the metaphysics of representation, particularly with respect to God. The scene probes the epistemological conditions of possibility of a vision of theological transcendence. For this purpose, Dante employs poetic modes as his indispensable means. Dante's text raises key questions regarding representation in language of the ultimately real, questions that are decisive today for criticism throughout the humanities and social sciences and even more broadly across the entire spectrum of discursive disciplines. These questions and their analogues are inseparably literary-critical, philosophical, and theological, and they infiltrate the domains of the ethical and the political as well.

The book, accordingly, aims to interpret Dante's paradisiacal vision of writing in terms opening it up to philosophical analysis and, furthermore, to speculative contemplation that is simultaneously aesthetic and spiritual in nature. The Heaven of Jupiter (or Jove, "Giove," as this heaven is christened explicitly in XVIII. 95) is, in crucial respects, the metaliterary pivot-point where the poem probes most searchingly its own creative source springs and the poetological methods that make it materially feasible as a linguistic performance. In the passage placed under scrutiny (*Paradiso* XVIII. 71–136), the poem reflects upon itself both in its theological underpinnings and in its literary techniques. It turns attention specifically to the material substrate and scriptural medium comprised by its own representational apparatus as the vehicles and pragmatic instruments for its actualization of a mystical experience.

In following up Dante's literary visions with philosophical reflections, I am continuing a procedure already at least implicit within the poem itself. I intend, furthermore, that the book should be useful to many diverse readers looking to find in Dante something answering to their own interests and quests. It aims to interest researchers, for example, investigating the relation between word and image in art history and aesthetic theory, as well as those sounding the materialities of signification in media studies. But the consequences for these and for other disciplines are left largely to be drawn by scholars working in those fields.

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The book offers a kind of *lectura Dantis* focused on one heaven of the *Paradiso*, yet it also enfoldes in embryo a philosophical interpretation of modernity as it emerges from the intellectual and spiritual matrices that Dante discloses in this astonishing and perspicuous epiphany. This interpretation is extended to other passages of the *Paradiso* in a companion work titled *Dante's Paradiso and the Origins of Modern Thought: Toward a Speculative Philosophy of Self-Reflection* (Routledge, 2021). Here, in contrast, I remain focused on a single – albeit superlatively significant – juncture of the poem.

Unlike the traditional *lectura Dantis*, the present work proposes not only to “read” the text as accurately as possible, adhering strictly to Dante’s own views, but also to meditate independently on the philosophical, theological, political, ethical, and aesthetic ideas that Dante’s text so audaciously projects onto a multiplicity of disciplinary backgrounds. The question is not only what Dante may have meant by his representations, but also what they can mean for us today in the broad horizon of our intellectual traditions and cultural heritage.

Thus, like my previous books on Dante, this book, too, is a work of philosophical reflection. It interprets Dante’s text as disclosing to us the nature of a fundamental idea in philosophy, namely, that of mediation. This idea evolves in the course of intellectual history. Mediation of supersensible ideas by their sensible instantiations through metaphysical “participation,” as laid out in Plato’s philosophy, eventually turns, particularly with Hegel’s thinking, into dialectical mediation of material and ideal phenomena dynamically by their negations. These mediations make up the course of world history, with its triumphant progression and tragic struggles. Mediation, as an overarching trope connecting the universe together in this culminating Hegelian paradigm, is subsequently dismantled by the deconstruction of representation through writing – or *écriture* – with Hegel’s postmodern heirs, signally Jacques Derrida.

This entire trajectory, with its divergent possibilities, is prefigured by Dante’s poetics aiming at a kind of comprehensive theological revelation of the relation of all reality to its ungraspable Ground, which must be imagined as both necessary and impossible. Ultimately, this is a *negative*-theological revelation – and thus also a withdrawal from revelation – since Dante’s vision suggests that revelation as mediation takes place essentially in the gaps opened up by ruptures in the chain of rationally demonstrable links between divinity and its material manifestations. At its most intense and climactic moments in its “figuration of Paradise,” the “sacred poem” must “jump, like someone who finds their path cut off” (“e così, figurando

il paradiso, / conven saltar lo sacrato poema, / come chi trova suo cammin reciso," XXIII. 61–63).

Dante's text, moreover, displays how these gaps can be filled in by the "revelatory" work of the imagination operating in a state of ecstasy. Dante's imagining of the Empyrean, where God governs directly and without any means of mediation ("dove Dio senza mezzo governa," XXX. 122) purports to convey a kind of unmediated vision. This is where Dante sees the face of Beatrice "without admixture of any medium" ("ché sua effigie / non discendea a me per mezzo mista," XXXI. 77–78). And yet, the scene of letters flashing in the Heaven of Jupiter contemplates how the medium of writing is itself intrinsic to the vision – how Dante's vision of God is an irreducibly *written* vision. In the end, this theophany of letters in *Paradiso* XVIII graphically shows that the medium itself is what Dante immediately views. In this scene, Dante totally mediates the divine Absolute with his vision's own *literary* medium. His vision of God is literally a written vision and is hardly imaginable apart from this written form. Such are among the consequences of his Christian understanding of the revelation of God as Incarnate Word apprehended in and through Scripture. The incarnation of the Word specifically in writing reveals another face of this doctrine, one that poetry alone can expound and explore.

For the record, the original and working title for the manuscript of this book throughout the course of its elaboration was "The Written Vision: Scripture as Theophany in Dante's Heaven of Jupiter." Publishing has its own exigencies and imposes them now especially in determining books' titles as they go on the market, but the seed of the work's conception preserved in its original title is worth bearing in mind. This title is a (re) source that makes it possible to grasp the internal coherence of the book and that accurately expresses the essential insight from which it springs in all of its overflowing implications.

Method of Inquiry and Bifocal Structure

In order to accommodate the different purposes of primarily literary readers together with those who are more philosophically minded, I have capped the extent to which the philosophical inquiry is pursued in the main chapters by moving a substantial amount of material to Excursuses. This allows the reader to focus on the book's critical interpretation of the passage from the *Paradiso* without being unduly sidetracked by its philosophical ramifications. As a result, the "Excursuses" are something more than what this expedient rubric might suggest. They are integral to the

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philosophical reflection proposed by the book, but they are supplementary with respect to its literary-critical agenda. The successive subsections in each main chapter already tend in this speculative direction, so I do not mean to suggest anything like a neat division between criticism and philosophy – or between exegesis and theoretical reflection. Quite the contrary. In the course of the more exegetical segments, I have always already adumbrated the paths that speculative inquiry would pursue, even where the further development of such connections is deferred to the Excursuses.

Nonetheless, the structure of the book, as articulated into two parts, mirrors its hybrid nature and inflects its contents in a way meant to assist different sorts of readers in finding their way to what interests them most. Relegating the further pursuit of the theoretical arguments to separate Excursuses enables the reader to ponder the reading of the primary poetic text – *Paradiso* XVIII. 70–136, followed by cantos XIX and XX, all of which together comprise the Heaven of Jupiter – through to the end without examining in all their details the more far-reaching ideas concerning language that come up along the way. Nevertheless, both of these registers are fully intertwined in Dante's overall vision and, consequently, in the conception of the book.

Although wide-ranging theoretical issues are raised by the poetic text and its interpretation as it unfolds in the discussion in the chapters, there are limits as to how much of this material can be absorbed and supported by a unified structure of continuous exposition. Giving a coherent reading of the Heaven of Jove is wedded here to a broader enterprise of following up and working out the intellectual implications and speculative suggestions of Dante's scene in terms engaging philosophical and theological thought and literary theory in our own time. The scene's representation of an apotheosis of letters of Scripture flickers with insights for elucidating the nature and origins of language considered as originary theological revelation. This speculative *élan* is not only my own penchant: it belongs also intrinsically to Dante's project itself. The text calls to be read as a synthesis, if not a summa, of ideas that probe perennial philosophical and theological questions concerning language, its origins, its seemingly miraculous capacities, and its limits – especially as a vehicle of divine revelation.

My expository division between the literary vision and pertinent philosophical reflections is thus merely heuristic and highly porous. It is not even fully consistent, since it applies only in a reduced degree to the first chapter, where I feel the need to outline in some detail the theoretical issues that are central to the book as a whole. In any case, this method

distinguishes exegetical and speculative moments not in order ultimately to separate them but rather to articulate their synergisms more effectively.

Dante's vernacular masterpiece opens itself to the dynamism of language and life: it relinquishes the static ideal of an unchanging law and linguistic norm. This has generally been viewed as a mark of Dante's modernity and can even be taken as representing a decisive break with a medieval transcendental theological viewpoint in favor of a more secular outlook. Still, it is important to see that the sources of this insight are, nevertheless, theological in nature. I intend by this close – and, at the same time, also distant – reading of a particular text by Dante to illustrate more broadly the theological inspiration of some of the most path-breaking insights of the modern world. My reading of Dante thus views him in his historical context designedly from the distance of our own.¹

This, then, is an example of how the study of Dante can be pursued not exclusively for the sake of a more accurate understanding of his text alone, but also as a means of deepening our knowledge of certain pivotal topics in the humanities and of their high degree of relevance to human concerns generally. This book endeavors to link the extraordinary insight into language opened up by Dante's inventions in the *Paradiso* to some of the most challenging thinking about language in contemporary thought, especially in linguistically oriented philosophies.

The *Paradiso* comprises something of a poetic encyclopedia or compendium of theories of language, and the book in hand touches on a considerable range of them. In terms of contemporary forms and equivalents, it privileges post-structuralist theories of language for their affinity with Dante's premodern poetic adventure specifically in the *Paradiso*. This affinity owes much to the negative-theological matrix within which crucial aspects of Dante's culminating work are embedded. The French thinking of "difference" figures prominently in this approach, just as it figures prominently in the theoretical debates concerning critical theory in recent decades. However, the present work places this French deconstructive theoretical background into an integrated frame with the German hermeneutical tradition. These two broad currents in theory – the German hermeneutic and the French deconstructive – informed, respectively, my previous two monographs dedicated entirely to Dante: *Dante's Interpretive Journey* (1996) and *Dante and the Sense of Transgression: "The Trespass of the Sign"* (2013). The present book brings these strands together – by leading

¹ The paradigm of "distant reading" refers especially to Franco Moretti, *La letteratura vista da lontano* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005). In English, see Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).

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them both back to their common origins and interests in phenomenology broadly conceived. It therewith brings to Dante's poem a more unified view of contemporary theory, employing a fuller range of its resources and directly exploiting them for detailed exegesis of specific passages of the poem.

Of course, some other recent developments within the ambit of theory, such as iconology and media studies, with their focus on the materialities of culture, are also rife with resources for illuminating Dante's text. They, too, have an appreciable impact on the interpretations offered here in the wake of art-historical and cultural theorists such as Hans Belting, Georges Didi-Huberman, Jean-Claude Schmitt, and Friedrich Kittler. These authors' studies have shown the dialectic of presence and absence in the image to be key to evoking otherworldly experience and to representing communication with the gods or the divine – generally viewed from an anthropological perspective. The complex interplays of word and image, of painting and writing, of visibility and legibility, have been analyzed in ways that can brilliantly illuminate Dante's poetic representations of writing as a visual epiphany in the form of Scripture. These resources help us to work out the reasons why divine presence, however pictorial and positive, is experienced necessarily in a negative mode. Even the “presencing” of the divine in incarnate forms of flesh, or in material images, remains “writing” in the sense of the presencing of an absence.

Kittler's *Die Wahrheit der technischen Welt: Essays zur Genealogie der Gegenwart* (2013) furnishes a broad historical background reflecting on some of the more technical and even technological aspects of the representation of presence and of truth in images, and this treatment casts new light useful for interpreting Dante's technically self-reflective vision of God in and through writing in heaven. In *Das Nahen der Götter vorbereiten* (2011), Kittler directs his thinking to the implications of mediality specifically for representing and for “preparing for” the “nearing of the gods.” His interpretation of Wagnerian opera, furthermore, enables us to find refracted there one possible, suggestive destiny of Dante's spectacle in the Heaven of Jupiter, which likewise fuses sound and light, *son et lumière*, in a synaesthetic, dramatic, and lyrical *Gesamtkunstwerk* revealing divinity.

Several of my literary-critical books allude to more detailed readings of texts from Dante's *Paradiso*. They reference a few journal articles, but for the most part this referral has been in the mode of promise. Much of my theoretical reflection on the *Paradiso* has gone into print in advance of extended critical reading of relevant texts. The present volume intends to make good on these promises and to show in more detail what I am talking

about in terms of the specifics of Dante's text when I write about theological transcendence through language and the apotheosis of lyric in the *Paradiso* as Dante's final testament. There is a certain limit to what philosophical interpretation of Dante's text can achieve. Beyond that limit, only very specific attention to the detail of his textual performances can take our understanding further. A degree of penetration can be gained by conceptualizations such as "mediation," but this can go only so far before it is necessary to return to Dante's own images and the singular experience that they embody in order to follow his thought. Only so does this thought release its store of seeds and sparks and make manifest its uniquely fecund insights. Image and concept emerge into clarity only through their reciprocal interaction and thoroughgoing interpenetration.

Hence the book's distinctive bifocal structure, which requires still a further word of explanation. The Excursuses sometimes summarily restate theses of the chapters in order to bring out further connections, moving in directions complementary to those taken by the expositions in the main text. The Excursuses are aligned loosely with the respective chapters (Chapter 1 with Excursus I, and so forth), supplementing their arguments with further reflections. However, their relevance spills over into other chapters as well. Most importantly, the Excursuses are linked together so as to enable them to be read most profitably in series after the main body of the chapters. Their diverse considerations follow coherently upon one another. They consist largely in philosophical elaborations that are not strictly necessary in order to follow the principal reflection proposed in the corresponding chapters from beginning to end. Some of these elaborations engage philosophical traditions and resources that are not necessarily familiar to readers of Dante. The excursus-structure enables them to be explored on an elective basis by removing them from the principal axis of the argument. This strategic division between what is indispensable and what is enhancement aims to make the work readable for all and yet rewarding also for the keenest and most initiated, in spite of its wide interdisciplinary stretch.

The ambition of the book is not only to elucidate a crucial passage in the *Divine Comedy* but also to think through the status of language as an event of revelation in terms spanning from the theological outlook of Dante to the phenomenological methods of Heidegger, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and contemporary theological thinkers in their wake. This book makes an original contribution to understanding some of the most fundamental and perennial questions of philosophy and theology, as well as of literature. As just mentioned, the book is designed to accommodate various types of

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readers whose disciplinary competences may not encompass the whole range of fields involved. Still, that such an overarching interdisciplinary and speculative project be undertaken is proposed as one way of answering to Dante's own veiled challenge, expressed in his ardent desire to "spark" what he imagines as a glorious burst of light for human culture. As *Paradiso* I. 34, with false modesty, attests: "A great flame may follow a little spark" ("poca favilla gran fiamma seconda"). In evoking Jesus's promise of the sending of the Holy Spirit in order to accompany his disciples and their acts after his departure (John 14:15–18), Dante intimates that his own work takes root and bears fruit only in the answering works that it is able to spark. He is echoing, most exactly, the Epistle of St. James 3:5: "Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!" ("Ecce quantus ignis quam magnam silvam incendit!") in his transmission of the sparks of Scripture to future literary lights and poetic beacons.

Acknowledgments

A first sketch of my interpretation of Dante's Heaven of Jove appears in "Scripture as Theophany in Dante's *Paradiso*," *Religion and Literature* 39/2 (Spring 2007): 1–32. This paper was delivered as the 2006 Annual Lecture in Religion and Literature at the University of Notre Dame at the invitation of James Dougherty, Donald Werge, and Kevin Hart. I presented a different, complementary approach to the topic in "Schrift als Theophanie in Dantes *Paradiso*: Das Medium als Metapher für die göttliche Unmittelbarkeit" in the context of a comparative literature conference that brought this work into dialogue with media studies: "Schrift und Graphisches im Vergleich," XVII. Tagung der DGAVL (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Vergleichende und Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft), at the University of Bochum, Germany, 2017. A fragment adapted from Chapter 1 of this book appears in German, together with other papers from the conference, in *Schrift und Graphisches im Vergleich: Beiträge zur XVII. Tagung der DGAVL in Bochum vom 06. bis 09. Juni 2017*, eds. Monika Schmitz-Emans, Linda Simonis, and Simone Sauer-Kretschmer (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2019), 59–70. Another extract from the first section of Chapter 4 was adapted for publication as "The Vision of Language in *Paradiso* XVIII in Light of Speculative Grammar" in *Miscellanea in onore di Antonio Lanza*, vol. 2, eds. Marcellina Troncarelli and Marta Ceci (Rome: Serra, 2020), 215–25.

I also gratefully acknowledge the helpful recommendations of the anonymous readers for the Press.

Note on Translations and Primary Source Editions

All translations not otherwise attributed are my own. The default reference throughout is to Dante's *Paradiso* cited by canto and verse from Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67). Dante's "minor" works are cited from *Opere minori*, 2 vols., eds. A. Frugoni, F. Brugnoli, et al. (Milan: Ricciardi, 1979–88).

Bible quotations are from the Authorized King James Version (1611) checked against and corrected, where necessary, by the *Bibliorum Sacrorum iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam Nova Editio* (Vatican: Typis Polyglottis, 1959) and *The Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1968).