religions

MDPI

Essay

Dante's *Commedia* as *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*: Charity, Grace, and the Transformation of the *Viator*

Andrea Porcarelli

Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology (FISPPA), University of Padua, 35139 Padua, Italy; andrea.porcarelli@unipd.it

Abstract

This article reads Dante's *Commedia* as a mythic-religious macro-narrative of spiritual transformation. Building on the interpretation of the journey as an *itinerarium mentis in Deum*, it examines the Thomistic degrees of charity—*incipientes*, *proficientes*, and *perfecti*—and their respective *studia principalia* as a framework for interpreting the pilgrim's changing formative priorities. The contribution lies in connecting moral discernment, relational practices, and contemplative adherence within a single account of growth in charity. Close readings of Francesca and Ulysses examine the difficulty of judging apparently compelling forms of love and aspiration; purgatorial intercession shows how progress in the good becomes mutual assistance; and Piccarda's explanation and the examination on charity in *Paradiso* XXVI illuminate the integration of love of God with love of others. Aquinas's formulation is considered alongside its Augustinian source, Bonaventure's contemplative itinerary, and scholarship that distinguishes Dante's penitential ethics from Thomistic moral systematization. Finally, the article explores how the poem's symbolic participation invites readers to examine the orientation of their own desires and relationships, bringing spiritual transformation into dialogue with religious self-interpretation and identity formation.

Keywords: Dante; *Commedia*; Thomas Aquinas; charity; grace; *itinerarium mentis in Deum*; mythic-religious narrative; spiritual transformation

1. Introduction

Dante's *Commedia* recounts a journey whose outcome requires the transformation of the person undertaking it. The pilgrim must learn to judge the suffering he encounters, to order his desires, and to receive guidance and grace. Read through the medieval conception of polysemy, this itinerary can be explored in its literary, moral, theological, and anthropological dimensions. The present essay asks what the degrees of charity can contribute to an account of that transformation, particularly when moral discernment, relationships with others, and contemplation are considered together.

This article takes as its point of departure the possibility of reading the *Commedia* as a large-scale mythic-religious narrative, understanding myth not as a fantastic tale opposed to truth, but as a symbolically dense narrative structure through which comprehensive interpretations of human existence, its destiny, and its relation to the transcendent are articulated. This is also the perspective on myth adopted in the theoretical framework of the present study: a symbolic form of knowledge capable not only of expressing a worldview, but also of contributing to the formation of personal and religious identity.

Methodologically, this study is a hermeneutical and theoretically oriented essay grounded in selected close readings, rather than a systematic review of Dante scholar-

Check for updates

Academic Editor: Christopher Metress

Received: 5 September 2026
Revised: 26 October 2026
Accepted: 30 October 2026
Published: 3 November 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

ship. It brings the *Commedia* into dialogue with Aquinas's account of charity, its immediate Augustinian source, Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, and scholarship on conversion, penitential practice, grace, and reader participation. The theological category is tested against narrative difficulties: the relation between compassion and judgment in Francesca's episode, the ordering of intellectual aspiration in Ulysses's, the efficacy of intercession in *Purgatorio*, and the relation between divine and creaturely love in *Paradiso*.

The *Commedia* reworks a plurality of inherited narrative structures: classical *katabasis*, the journeys of Ulysses and Aeneas, the biblical Exodus, Christian pilgrimage, the medieval visionary tradition, and the paradigm of the *itinerarium mentis in Deum*. These elements are recomposed within an itinerary leading from the dark wood (*selva oscura*) to the vision of God. The outward journey thereby figures an inward transformation, while the distance between *Dante-agens* and *Dante-auctor* allows readers to encounter judgments and desires that the narrative will progressively question.

This interpretation helps explain why Dante's journey cannot be reduced to a succession of places, encounters, and doctrines. Its structure is teleologically oriented: the pilgrim must not merely come to know something of which he was previously unaware; he must gradually become a different kind of subject, capable of judging sin differently, reordering desire, receiving the action of grace, and finally directing intellect and will toward their ultimate fulfillment. Took (2020) has described the three major phases of Dante's journey in particularly effective terms as *self-confrontation*, *self-reconfiguration*, and *self-transcendence*: a descent into the depths of the self, a subsequent reconfiguration of the subject, and finally an opening to a fullness that transcends the self.

It is on this ground that the present article proposes a specific interpretive key, previously explored by the author in studies published in Italian (Porcarelli 2022, 2025) and here reconsidered within a different hermeneutical framework and in dialogue with international scholarship. The proposal begins from Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of the degrees of charity in *Summa Theologiae* (Thomas Aquinas 2000, II-II, q. 24, a. 9), itself situated within a broader spiritual tradition of Augustinian origin. Thomas distinguishes three broad stages in the growth of charity—*incipientes*, *proficientes*, *perfecti*—not primarily as a static classification of believers, but with reference to the different *studia principalia* that characterize their spiritual maturation. The principal task of the *incipientes* is to withdraw from sin and resist its enticements; that of the *proficientes* is to advance in the good and strengthen charity; that of the *perfecti* is to adhere to God and enjoy Him.

The proposal concerns the changing formative priorities of the pilgrim: recognizing what opposes charity, strengthening the capacity for the good, and learning to adhere to God. These priorities provide a way to connect the movement across the canticles with particular changes in judgment and relationship. The framework is offered as a heuristic, not as evidence that Dante adopted ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9 as a compositional code. Its value must therefore be demonstrated through the readings it enables, rather than inferred from the resemblance between two tripartite schemes.

The approach belongs to an established conversation about theological categories and narrative formation. ten Klooster (2019), for example, reads the Beatitudes in *Purgatorio* as markers of moral transformation. Other contributions emphasize charity's communal and scriptural dimensions (Nasti 2007, 2018, 2024) or intercession as participation in divine perfection (Pepper 2025). These studies make it necessary to ask more precisely how the pilgrim's priorities change within relationships already animated by grace. Equally, Corbett's account of Dante's penitential ethics (Corbett 2020) requires us to distinguish the proposed reading of the protagonist's formation from a reconstruction of the sources of the poem's moral taxonomy.

The issue, however, concerns more than the pilgrim alone. The *Commedia* constantly constructs a relationship between Dante's path and that of the reader. Franke (1996) has shown how the protagonist's journey tends to converge with the reader's interpretive journey; Moser (2019), in turn, has emphasized that the poem aims to produce in its readers a moral and religious transformation analogous to that represented narratively in the pilgrim. The reader is therefore not merely the recipient of theological or moral information but is invited to enter symbolically into the movement of the narrative and, through it, to question his or her own understanding of sin, desire, freedom, grace, and the ultimate end of existence.

The thesis is that the *studia principalia* clarify how different forms of attention and action become dominant within the pilgrim's formation, without ceasing to coexist. Charity supplies a common criterion for examining judgments about sin, practices of mutual assistance, and contemplative love. Within the poem's mythic-religious form, these changes become experiences that readers can symbolically enter and bring to bear on their own religious self-understanding.

2. The Commedia as a Polysemic Narrative of a Spiritual Journey

2.1. From the Journey Through the Afterlife to the Itinerarium Mentis in Deum

The motif of the journey is the most evident narrative principle of the *Commedia*, but its function extends beyond movement through the three realms of the afterlife. From the opening lines, the "journey of our life" overlays Dante's individual path with a shared human horizon; the dark wood and the loss of the "straight way" give spatial form to moral disorientation (Dante Alighieri [1966–1967] 1994, Inf. I, 1–3).[1] Thompson (1974), drawing on Charles Singleton, describes this as a "two-fold itinerary":

> It has been the signal merit of Charles Singleton's work to demonstrate that the Comedia represents a two-fold itinerary: Dante's "obvious and external" journey is an analogue of the "invisible and hidden" spiritual course he followed, the *itinerarium mentis ad Deum*. John Freccero, going a step further, has observed that since "pure experience is not directly communicable, being by definition unique," the whole poem is "an extended exemplum of esperienza piena," and that "it is in the experience that we must believe, not in the exemplum, the poem itself, which is his compromise, his expression of what for us is out of reach" (Thompson 1974, p. 9).

Singleton (1958) provides a foundational account of this dimension of Dante's journey. The journey of Dante, the character, extends beyond individual biography to acquire an exemplary and universal significance. The *agens* who travels through *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* is a historically determined individual, yet his story simultaneously points toward Everyman, the human being called to confront his or her moral and religious destiny. The poem's structure thus holds together the irreducible concreteness of Dante's experience and the possibility that readers may recognize in it a figure of their own journey. It is precisely this coexistence that prevents the *Commedia* from being reduced either to a purely spiritual autobiography or to a theological treatise in verse.

Freccero (1986) developed this interpretive line by reading the poem as a genuine "poetics of conversion". At the outset, the relationship between Dante the author and Dante the character is marked by a radical distance: the *auctor* narrates retrospectively a process of transformation that the *agens* has yet to undergo. The journey gradually transforms the pilgrim's understanding of himself and the world, culminating in a transformation of vision that enables him, in turn, to give narrative form to what he has experienced. On this reading, conversion does not occur at a single, identifiable moment but constitutes the dynamic that

gives unity to the poem as a whole. Dante's failed attempt to climb directly toward the sunlit hill is itself programmatic: recognizing the good toward which one should strive is not yet enough to attain it. The problem is not simply knowing the right path, but becoming capable of following it.

It is in this sense that the paradigm of the *itinerarium mentis in Deum* proves especially illuminating. Freccero (1986) reads Dante's journey as a process of spiritual development, a figure of the human journey in this life, while Thompson (1974) situates this pattern within the allegorical tradition of classical epic. In medieval readings of the Aeneid and, more broadly, of the great ancient journey narratives, a physical route could figure an itinerary of the soul toward contemplation and *perfection*. Dante takes up this possibility and transforms it within a Christian horizon, in which the ultimate end is not merely self-knowledge or moral *perfection* but the vision of God. The outward itinerary thus becomes the figure of an inward movement oriented toward a final end.

Bonaventure gives this paradigm a distinctive articulation. His *Itinerarium* moves through six contemplative stages, considering God through and in the vestiges of creation, through and in the divine image within the mind, and above the mind; the seventh chapter presents the passage into mystical rest through Christ crucified (Bonaventure 1891, I, 2–5; VII, 1–6). The ascent requires prayer and grace: the prologue warns that study detached from charity and devotion cannot suffice (Prol., 4). Bonaventure thus helps explain why an *itinerarium mentis* involves a transformation of affect as well as understanding. The title is used here for that broader medieval paradigm, without implying textual dependence. Aquinas's *studia principalia* answer a more specific question within it: which practical concern becomes dominant as charity matures? The two perspectives can be brought into dialogue without identifying Bonaventure's contemplative stages with Aquinas's three degrees.

The poem's integration of classical, biblical, and Christian journey models makes the itinerary more than a sequence of borrowed motifs. Dante turns them into encounters through which the protagonist's ways of desiring, judging, and seeing are tested. The plurality of approaches surveyed by Corbett (2021) provides the critical setting for examining this particular line of development.

2.2. Polysemy and the Plurality of Interpretations

The possibility of bringing different perspectives into convergence finds particularly coherent justification in the medieval conception of polysemy. In the *Convivio* (II, i), Dante himself recalls the distinction among literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses; Epistle XIII, addressed to Cangrande della Scala and traditionally associated with the *Commedia*, applies to the poem the principle that a single narrative may possess several meanings. The example given is the Exodus: Israel's departure from Egypt retains its historical-literal meaning and, at the same time, can signify allegorically redemption, morally the conversion of the soul from the misery of sin to the state of grace, and anagogically the passage to glory. The plurality of senses therefore does not dissolve the unity of the text; rather, it presupposes an analogical relation among distinct levels of meaning.

The spiritual senses also have a substantial history in Dante criticism. Singleton's *Journey to Beatrice* (Singleton 1958), Freccero's poetics of conversion (Freccero 1986), and Ascoli's discussion of allegory (Ascoli 2010) exemplify different approaches to the relation between literal narrative and spiritual meaning. Exodus, pilgrimage, and *itinerarium mentis* foreground, respectively, liberation, the condition of the wayfarer, and the inward transformation of vision and desire. Their convergence helps situate the present inquiry into charity within a tradition of reading rather than substitute a theological scheme for poetic experience.

The distinction between *Dante-agens* and *Dante-auctor* becomes especially significant within this framework. On the literal level, the *agens* is the protagonist of an extraordinary journey through the afterlife; on the moral and spiritual level, his experience can serve as an exemplum for the reader. The *auctor*, looking back on the pilgrim's transformation, shapes the narrative so that readers can follow its stages, confront the protagonist's questions and errors, and gradually arrive at a more mature understanding of the journey. The universal scope of the poem thus does not efface the singularity of Dante's experience; rather, it emerges through it: the journey of one individual becomes a narrative form in which others may symbolically recognize their own.

3. The Degrees of Charity as a Hermeneutical Key

Although Dante's itinerary is clearly moral in character, it is the moral journey of a Christian deeply embedded in the intellectual and religious culture of the Middle Ages and shaped by the theological traditions that informed it. Within this horizon, Thomas Aquinas occupies a particularly important place, offering a theological framework that can illuminate even dimensions of Dante's thought that remain implicit in the poem.

3.1. Between Freedom and Grace: From Augustine to Aquinas

The immediate Augustinian source for Aquinas's three degrees is the fifth tractate on the First Epistle of John, explicitly invoked in the *sed contra* of ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9. Augustine describes charity as born, nourished, strengthened, and perfected (Augustine of Hippo n.d., *In epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos*, V, 4). The context matters: he is explaining the love by which Christ laid down His life and Christians are called to give themselves for their brethren. Maturity therefore has a relational criterion. Paul's desire to be with Christ coexists with his willingness to remain for others, while the following paragraph connects Peter's love of Christ with feeding Christ's sheep (V, 4–5). Augustine's sequence joins adherence to God with service of others; it prevents the *perfecti* from being understood as persons whose contemplation has displaced concern for their neighbor. His account of the Beatitudes in *De sermone Domini in monte* (Augustine of Hippo 1967) supplies a broader context of spiritual progression, but this Johannine tractate is the direct source for the distinction examined here.

Aquinas gives this inherited account a systematic articulation within his treatment of charity. Article 4 of ST II-II, q. 24 asks whether charity can increase; article 9 explains how its continuous growth admits three broad degrees. The Augustinian authority in the *sed contra* is developed in the *respondeo* through an analogy with bodily maturation: different capacities become manifest in different activities and principal concerns. The replies to objections 2–3 then explain why these concerns coexist even as their relative priority changes. The point is the theological articulation of a received tradition, rather than the invention of a previously unknown sequence. Aquinas's account of charity also brings Aristotle's analysis of friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII into relation with John 15:15 and 1 Corinthians 1:9: charity is friendship with God because God communicates His beatitude to human beings (ST II-II, q. 23, a. 1). Within the relation between freedom and grace explored by Ryan (2013), this synthesis explains how an infused virtue progressively shapes the person's own activity.

For Thomas, the human person is ordered to a beatitude exceeding the capacities of unaided nature. The theological virtues are additional principles given by God, with God Himself as their object and end (ST I-II, q. 62, a. 1). He states that "the natural principles of the human person [...] are insufficient to order that person toward the beatitude described above".[2] Reason and freedom are thus elevated toward an end they cannot attain through their own resources alone.

Grace is not merely an external aid added to action. *Gratia gratum faciens* is the principle and root of the infused virtues and disposes the soul for supernatural participation in divine life (ST I-II, q. 110, aa. 3–4). Alongside the theological virtues, infused moral virtues perfect the faculties in relation to the supernatural end (ST I-II, q. 63, a. 3). The gifts of the Holy Spirit dispose the person to respond readily to divine prompting: they are "perfections through which a person is disposed to follow the divine prompting well" (ST I-II, q. 68, a. 2).[3]

Charity has an architectonic role within this life of grace. It is *forma virtutum* because "through charity the acts of all the other virtues are ordered toward the ultimate end" (ST II-II, q. 23, a. 8).[4] It is also friendship with God, grounded in participation in divine beatitude (ST II-II, q. 23, a. 1), and extends to the neighbor within that same orientation (q. 25, a. 1). These two features explain the choice of charity as an interpretive category: it relates the ordering of actions to the end of the journey and makes the quality of relationships relevant to spiritual maturity. The degrees of charity can therefore illuminate how discernment, assistance, and contemplation are connected, rather than merely label three successive destinations.

Dante's treatment of charity draws on a scriptural and theological inheritance that is also active in Aquinas. *Paradiso* XXVI makes that inheritance explicit by naming philosophical argument, Moses, and John among the authorities directing love toward God (vv. 25–45), before joining love of God to love of His creatures (vv. 64–66). Dante gives these resources the form of a personal examination: the pilgrim must account for what he loves and for the gifts that have formed his love. The shared inheritance allows comparison without establishing Dante's direct knowledge of Augustine's fifth Johannine tractate or dependence on Aquinas's article. The present reading uses the latter's articulation of practical priorities to interpret the formation enacted through Dante's encounters.

3.2. The Studia Principalia: The Specific Tasks of Each Stage of Growth

The different *studium principale* associated with each degree specifies the task toward which the person's efforts are chiefly directed. Aquinas's formulation supplies the conceptual core of the present reading:

> "First, a person's principal concern is to withdraw from sin and resist its disordered desires, which move in a direction contrary to charity; this belongs to beginners (*incipientes*), in whom charity must be nourished or fostered lest it be corrupted. A second concern follows: that a person should principally intend to make progress in the good; this belongs to those who are progressing (*proficientes*), whose principal aim is that charity be strengthened in them through growth. The third concern is that a person should principally intend to adhere to God and enjoy Him; this belongs to the perfect (*perfecti*), who desire to depart and be with Christ" (ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9, c.).[5]

These concerns overlap. In his replies to the second and third objections, Aquinas explains that beginners already make progress, while the mature continue to grow; what differs is their principal preoccupation (ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9, ad 2–3). Adherence to God is sought throughout, and vigilance against sin remains necessary. What changes is the task that chiefly directs the person's efforts: resisting sin, strengthening the capacity to act well, or adhering to God. Applied to the pilgrim, this distinction allows us to ask how an encounter develops his judgment, his willingness to assist others, or his capacity for contemplation, while recognizing that these activities remain connected. Thus, Beatrice's rebuke after Virgil has declared Dante's will sound (Purg. XXVII, 139–142; XXX–XXXI) shows that further growth still requires penitential self-examination. Likewise, Beatrice's redirection of his

attention toward the blessed (Par. X, 61–63) shows that contemplation deepens participation in others' good. These continuities make the changing practical priorities, rather than a completed succession of separate activities, the relevant point of comparison.

3.3. The Pilgrim's Formation and the Poem's Moral Ordering

Corbett's *Dante's Christian Ethics* (Corbett 2020, pp. 1–12, 86–104) poses an important historical challenge to any straightforwardly Thomistic account of the poem. He distinguishes Aquinas's reformulation of moral theology from the older vice-centered tradition represented by William Peraldus and argues for the latter's importance to Dante's Purgatory. His emphasis on preaching and penitential practice requires attention to the diverse settings of Dante's ethics. The present framework addresses the protagonist's changing formative priorities, rather than the source of the ordering of the terraces. It does not establish that Aquinas's treatment of the virtues supplied Dante's taxonomy of vice. Compatibility between the two inquiries depends on keeping that distinction explicit: the theological vocabulary of growth in charity may illuminate the pilgrim's experience within an arrangement informed by other traditions.

A second distinction concerns the subject of growth. The damned, the penitents, and the blessed have different eschatological conditions; the *incipientes*, *proficientes*, and *perfecti* designate degrees of charity among those still *in via*. The proposed correspondence concerns Dante's formation through his encounters, not a classification of the souls he meets. The question is how he learns to judge desires, to participate in another's good, and to bring love and understanding into adherence to God. These are the aspects of the poem against which the *studia principalia* will be tested.

4. Narrating the Growth of Charity

The following readings examine charity through changes in judgment, action, and relationship. They concentrate on moments when these changes are difficult or incomplete, and on encounters that connect the pilgrim's formation with the good of others. The resulting account concerns a shifting formative emphasis within the journey, not an automatic progression conferred by movement from one realm to another.

4.1. The Commedia as a Moral Itinerary in Grace

The opening of the *Commedia* places Dante's individual predicament within the shared "journey of our life". His inability to explain how he lost the way gives existential immediacy to moral disorientation: "I cannot clearly tell how I entered there, /so full of sleep was I at that moment/when I abandoned the true way" (*Inf.* I, 10–12).[6] The true way recalls the scriptural horizon of Christ as "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). The opening calls readers to recognize the difficulty of accounting for their own disorder before imagining themselves capable of overcoming it.

Dante's failed attempt to climb the sunlit hill reveals both the obstacles represented by the three beasts and his inability to reach the perceived good by his own efforts. The "other journey" required of him begins with receiving guidance (*Inf.* I, 91).[7] Conversion here involves the willingness to trust another, as well as the recognition that seeing the destination does not yet make one capable of reaching it.

Canto II makes the relational initiative preceding the journey explicit. Virgil has been sent by Beatrice, who has responded to Lucia and to the heavenly lady traditionally identified as Mary. "Three blessed women/care for you in the court of heaven" (*Inf.* II, 124–125).[8] Beatrice herself names love as the motive of her intervention (*Inf.* II, 72). Grace is thus represented through persons who act for the pilgrim's good before he can act adequately for himself. His subsequent growth in charity takes place within a relation of assistance

already established: the opening initiative provides a narrative model for the intercession and care he will encounter and learn to exercise.

4.2. Inferno: Recognizing Sin and Turning Away from It

The principal concern of the *incipientes* is to resist what opposes charity. *Inferno* makes such resistance a problem of discernment: the pilgrim must learn to judge desires and words whose appeal is not simply erased by the punishment of those expressing them. The finality of the damned souls' condition differs from his own capacity to change. Their narratives confront him with attachments and forms of self-understanding from which he is still capable of withdrawing.

The increasing deformation of the sinners gives bodily form to disorder. Ugolino must raise his mouth from the skull he has been gnawing before he can speak: "That sinner lifted his mouth from the savage meal, /wiping it on the hair/of the head he had ravaged from behind" (*Inf.* XXXIII, 1–3).[9] The contrast between the human act of narration and the bestial act from which it emerges makes the encounter disturbing before its story is interpreted. As in Took's account of self-confrontation (Took 2020), ascent requires recognition of what disfigures the human; such recognition does not settle in advance the judgments demanded by each encounter.

The gate's inscription states the finality of damnation: "Through me the way leads to the sorrowing city, /through me the way leads to eternal pain, /through me the way leads among the lost. [...]/Abandon every hope, you who enter" (*Inf.* III, 1–3, 9).[10] For the pilgrim and reader still *in via*, however, contemplation of that finality belongs to a journey in which hope remains possible. The pedagogical ambiguity discussed by Moser (2019) directs attention to the distinction between witnessing despair and adopting it. The beginner's vigilance is sustained by the assistance and hope that made the descent possible.

Francesca's episode makes the difficulty of judgment particularly acute. The canto identifies the lustful as those who subordinate reason to appetite (*Inf.* V, 38–39) yet gives Francesca a voice capable of eliciting a powerful response. In the successive declarations "Love, which quickly takes hold of a gentle heart" and "Love, which allows no one who is loved to withhold love," love appears as the acting subject, while the lovers appear acted upon (*Inf.* V, 100, 103).[11] The grammatical pattern matters: her explanation presents the lovers' actions as effects of an irresistible power, diminishing their agency within the account she offers. Aquinas's account helps formulate the issue as the relation between an attractive good and the end toward which desire is ordered, rather than as a simple opposition between love and lovelessness.

The theological question must nevertheless preserve the episode's historical and emotional complexity. Barolini's work on Francesca, reconsidered in her recent methodological account (Barolini 2025), foregrounds her place within dynastic marriage and political violence. That perspective resists treating her merely as an example whose damnation cancels the need to understand her life. The present reading likewise cannot identify moral growth with the suppression of compassion. Francesca's murder is not made just by her location in Hell, and the pilgrim's collapse cannot be reduced without remainder to a correctable moral or psychological weakness. For the pilgrim, growth in charity requires learning to hold together compassion for Francesca's suffering and scrutiny of her account of desire and choice. His susceptibility to her narrative also reveals a difficulty especially acute for beginners: disordered desire can appeal through the beauty of the goods it invokes and the promise of immediate human happiness. Understanding the violence done to her does not require accepting her presentation of desire as a force that removes responsibility.

The comparison with the prose *Lancelot* sharpens this question of agency: Guinevere initiates the romance's first kiss, whereas Francesca describes her as kissed by *Lancelot*

and then presents Paolo as kissing her (Inf. V, 133–136). By aligning herself with the recipient of the kiss and identifying the book and its author as the intermediary (v. 137), her account places the sources of action outside herself. The pilgrim and reader are thus asked to distinguish the story's power to move them from the explanation it offers of the lovers' responsibility. The priority of resisting what opposes charity is therefore not accomplished simply by recognizing an official classification of sin. It requires learning to read a compelling account without either excusing the choices it recounts or becoming indifferent to the people who suffered through them. The later discussion of consent and freedom in *Purgatorio* XVIII will return to precisely the connection between the movement of love and responsibility for its direction.

Ulysses raises a related problem through the appeal of knowledge and the responsibility of one who leads others. The verbal echoes traced by Thompson (1974, pp. 63–64)—journey, experience, passage, and folly—make him both a counterpart and a challenge to Dante's own journey. Critical interpretation must distinguish his placement among the fraudulent counselors from the meaning of the final voyage he recounts. Virgil names the stratagems involving the horse, Achilles, and the Palladium when explaining why Ulysses and Diomedes share the flame (*Inf.* XXVI, 55–63). The ensuing voyage is therefore not simply introduced as a scholastic illustration of an illicit desire for knowledge. Barolini's commentary (Barolini 2018) stresses the coexistence of the deceptive figure inherited from the *Aeneid* and the seeker of knowledge praised by Cicero. The narrative's grandeur is part of the difficulty it poses to judgment.

> "O brothers," I said, "you who through a hundred thousand/dangers have reached the west, /to this brief vigil/of our senses that remains, /do not deny the experience, /following the sun, of the unpeopled world. /Consider your origin:/you were not made to live like beasts, /but to pursue virtue and knowledge." […] "And turning our stern toward the morning, /we made wings of our oars for the mad flight" (*Inf.* XXVI, 112–120, 124–125).[12]

The address to his companions as brothers summons a community, but the speech must also be read against the relationships Ulysses has already subordinated to his desire for experience: his son, his father, and Penelope (*Inf.* XXVI, 94–99). The judgment concerns how an acknowledged good reorganizes obligations to others. It is made sharper by his report that the brief speech rendered his companions so eager that he could hardly have restrained them (vv. 121–123). His words have formed a shared desire whose consequences all will bear. The Thomistic lens directs attention here to charity's ordering of goods: intellectual aspiration is not evil because it seeks knowledge but requires judgment about its end and about the persons implicated in its pursuit. This relational question cannot be answered merely by calling the voyage autonomous or its boundary providential.

The canto also turns scrutiny back upon the poet. Before the encounter, *Dante-auctor* recalls the need to restrain his intellect lest it run where virtue does not guide it (*Inf.* XXVI, 19–24). His own intellectual and rhetorical gifts are at stake. Ulysses's words remain capable of moving the reader even when their outcome is known; the poem does not remove their force by supplying a verdict. Charity helps specify the task of discernment: the capacity to persuade and the desire to know must be judged in relation to a good that exceeds the speaker's immediate project. For the viator, receiving guidance matters because it opens aspiration to correction and to the good of others. For the reader, the episode tests whether admiration for the language of virtue can coexist with examination of what that language makes people do. This is a substantive instance of the beginner's formative priority, rather than a claim to resolve every controversy concerning Ulysses's sin.

Francesca and Ulysses thus make recognition of sin an exercise in interpreting powerful forms of self-presentation. The pilgrim and reader confront narratives in which love and

aspiration can conceal the disorder of their direction without losing their human appeal. The studium of the *incipientes* identifies the practical stake of these encounters: learning to resist a disorder one may already find compelling. Such learning remains incomplete and depends upon the widening account of freedom, love, and responsibility developed later in the journey.

4.3. Purgatorio: Progressing in the Good Through the Virtues

Purgatorio shifts the dominant concern toward progress in the good. Its temporal and penitential structure gives practical form to *in bono proficere*: the removal of impediments accompanies the strengthening of dispositions through which the person can act differently. ten Klooster (2019) emphasizes how the souls remain on their way and how the Beatitudes mark their transformation. For Dante, the mountain is also a place where receiving assistance increasingly becomes participation in a shared good.

The doctrinal center of the canticle already explains moral order through love (*Purg.* XVII, 91–139). The distinction between natural love and love involving the mind makes error a question of object and measure: love may turn toward an evil object, pursue a secondary good excessively, or move too weakly toward the good. *Purgatorio* XVIII develops the problem of assent and responsibility (vv. 55–75). These passages qualify the readings of Francesca and Ulysses: the initial emergence of an attraction does not eliminate the need to judge and direct it. The degrees of charity add a developmental question to this explicit doctrine of love: how does the viator become able to enact the judgment he is learning? Purgatorial practices answer through dispositions formed in prayer, penitence, and relations with others, rather than through doctrinal explanation alone.

The gate of Purgatory brings penitential action and grace together. Dante approaches in humility, strikes his breast, and receives the seven P's that will be erased as he ascends. An earlier study treated this scene as an image of the penitential journey (Porcarelli 2025). In the context of Corbett's account (Corbett 2020), its practices should be read within the poem's penitential culture rather than assumed to derive from Aquinas's ordering of virtue. The *studia principalia* illuminate a different aspect: the pilgrim must now attend to the dispositions that make his choices recurrent, not merely identify particular sinful acts. Practice, exemplary memory, and grace gradually make progress in the good possible.

The structure of the terraces further reinforces this reading: vice is repeatedly set against examples of virtue, penitential practices, and the Beatitudes. ten Klooster (2019, pp. 124–27) has shown that the Beatitudes are not merely liturgical ornament but markers of a process of moral transformation: they resound once a particular form of vice has been confronted and open onto the positive disposition of the person who, transformed by grace, becomes capable of acting differently. This is theologically important because it prevents Purgatory from being understood as a merely subtractive process. The goal is not simply the removal of vice, but the gradual formation of a person capable of desiring and acting in a new way. Heavenly beatitude, as ten Klooster observes, already begins to take shape, however imperfectly, in those who submit to purification. This is precisely the dynamic meaning of the Thomistic *proficere*.

Intercession gives this progress a relational form. Already in *Purgatorio* III, Manfred asks Dante to inform his daughter of his salvation and explains how the prayers of the living can shorten his waiting (vv. 112–117, 136–145). *Purgatorio* VI subsequently clarifies how such prayer accords with divine justice (vv. 28–42). On the literal level, these requests concern the assistance that the living can offer the dead. Their moral and pedagogical significance also concerns those who pray; intercession directs their desires toward another's good and exercises their charity. Aquinas includes prayer for others among spiritual works of mercy (ST II-II, q. 32, a. 2), explaining that charity requires us to desire and ask for good things

for others as well as ourselves (q. 83, a. 7). Read alongside Pepper's account of prayer as participation in divine love (Pepper 2025), these encounters illuminate the formative priority of progressing in the good: the living person's growth takes practical expression in care for others, including those who have died.

The opening prayer of the proud makes that reciprocity explicit. Its collective voice asks for what human beings cannot attain from their own resources, then offers the final petition for those still exposed to temptation: "This last prayer, dear Lord, /is not made for us, for we have no need of it, /but for those who remained behind us" (*Purg.* XI, 22–24).[13] The penitents' concern reaches beyond their own purification. *Dante-auctor* immediately asks what the living can do for them in return (vv. 31–36), drawing the reader into the same relation. The studium of progress in the good is thus embodied in mutual aid, rather than confined to an individual's improved moral capacities. The persons who need assistance are also persons who give it.

Dante's bodily experience of the mountain gives this transformation a particularly vivid narrative form. As the P's are removed, the ascent itself becomes progressively easier. After the angel has erased another of the marks from his forehead, Dante marvels at the change:

> "And lighter than through the other openings/I went, so that without any effort/I followed upward the swift spirits" (*Purg.* XXII, 7–9).[14]

The increasing ease of the ascent is more than a physical detail. The mountain makes visible the transformation of desire: as the dispositions that resist the good are healed, movement toward the good becomes less burdensome and more spontaneous. Freedom grows as desire is rightly ordered. This is not freedom understood as indifference toward the good, but an increasingly integrated capacity to will it without being drawn in the opposite direction by vicious dispositions. The bodily lightness of the pilgrim thus becomes an image of freedom progressively released from the weight of disordered desire.

Suffering in this canticle belongs to a journey whose outcome is certain and desired. Hope makes purification intelligible as movement toward beatitude. The opening passage from the cruel sea toward better waters establishes this changed horizon:

> "To sail through better waters, my mind's little boat/now raises its sails, /leaving behind so cruel a sea" (*Purg.* I, 1–3).[15]

Virgil's declaration of the pilgrim's newly acquired freedom marks a culmination of this formation:

> "No longer wait for my word or my sign:/your will is free, upright, and sound, /and it would be wrong not to act as it directs;/therefore I crown and mitre you over yourself" (*Purg.* XXVII, 139–142).[16]

Virgil's words describe a will made capable of following the good, within a journey sustained by prayer, assistance, and grace. They also transform the relationship with the guide: Dante need no longer await each instruction before acting. This acquired freedom does not abolish his need to receive further truth about himself. Beatrice's subsequent judgment, his confession, and the passage through Lethe and Eunoë show that moral rectitude does not by itself complete the journey.

The transition from Virgil to Beatrice is therefore not adequately described as a simple substitution of theology for reason. The narrative changes both the content of instruction and the pilgrim's manner of receiving it: the freedom formed under Virgil must face personal accountability before Beatrice and become receptive to a further transformation of vision. Virgil's affirmation of Dante's free, upright, and sound will (*Purg.* XXVII, 139–142) is followed by Beatrice's rebuke and the pilgrim's confession (*Purg.* XXX–XXXI). This sequence

shows that acquired moral rectitude still requires a personal reckoning with the history of one's desires. Aquinas's overlapping *studia principalia* help articulate this continuity: growth in charity changes the principal concern without abolishing the activities associated with its other degrees (ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9, ad 2–3). The movement toward contemplative adherence thus preserves penitential discernment and the capacity for action, while bringing them under a new dominant concern. The maturation of freedom enables a deeper acceptance of responsibility and prepares the pilgrim for a transformed capacity to see.

4.4. Paradiso: Adhering to God and Learning to See All Things from God's Perspective

The concern of the *perfecti* is adherence to and enjoyment of God. *Paradiso* tests what such adherence means for a pilgrim whose earthly categories of vision and desire must still change. His encounter with the blessed gives access to a condition different from his own, while forming him to understand love from its ultimate end. The distinction between maturity *in via* and beatitude *in patria* is indispensable here (ST II-II, q. 24, a. 8): the viator's exceptional vision does not erase the distinction between his formation and the perfected condition of the souls he encounters.

From the opening canto, Dante names the transformation as going beyond the human (*trasumanar*), a process exceeding ordinary capacities and the resources of language:

> "Looking upon her, I became within/as Glaucus became on tasting the herb/that made him a companion of the other gods at sea. /To signify going beyond the human in words/would be impossible; let the example suffice/for those to whom grace reserves the experience. /Whether I was only that part of me which you/newly created, Love that governs heaven, /you know, who lifted me with your light" (*Par.* I, 67–75).[17]

The ascent through the heavens does not represent a literal spatial movement of the blessed toward God, since all the souls have their true dwelling in the Empyrean. Rather, the progressive arrangement of the heavens is adapted to the pilgrim's limited capacity for understanding. The pedagogy of Paradiso is therefore also a pedagogy of vision. Each heaven makes a particular form of beatitude—or, more precisely, a particular model of holiness—accessible to Dante, while at the same time correcting the still earthbound categories through which he interprets what he sees. Knowledge itself becomes transformative, gradually enabling the pilgrim to receive and comprehend an ever greater intensity of divine light.

A particularly revealing moment occurs in the Heaven of the Sun, when Beatrice invites Dante to give thanks to God for what he has been granted to contemplate. The pilgrim's response reveals a progressive concentration of desire and love upon God, to the point that every other attraction temporarily recedes from view:

> "Never was a mortal heart so ready/for devotion and for giving itself to God/with all its gratitude so swiftly, /as mine became at those words;/and all my love was so placed in Him/that Beatrice was eclipsed in oblivion" (*Par.* X, 55–60).[18]

Beatrice's eclipse poses a precise question for adherence to God: does concentration upon the divine end extinguish creaturely love? The narrative immediately refuses that inference. Beatrice smiles at Dante's absorption, and her smile redirects his unified attention toward the blessed around them (*Par.* X, 61–63). Her mediation succeeds in making him turn to God and then participate in the surrounding communion. Nasti's account of the Heaven of the Sun (Nasti 2007) interprets charity as the bond of the Church in this world and the next, joining knowledge of God with communal life. That account qualifies any exclusively inward reading of contemplation. Piccarda's explanation offers a complementary test of how such love orders desire:

> "Brother, the power of charity brings our will to rest, /making us desire only what we have/and leaving us no thirst for anything else. /If we desired to be higher, /our desires would be at odds/with the will of Him who assigns us here;/and you will see that this cannot occur in these circles, /if being in charity is necessary here, /and if you consider its nature rightly. /Indeed, it is essential to this blessed existence/to keep within the divine will, /through which our wills themselves become one;/so that, as we are from threshold to threshold/throughout this kingdom, all the kingdom is pleased, /as is the King who makes us will His will. /And in His will is our peace" (*Par.* III, 70–85).[19]

Dante's question assumes that difference in heavenly position might entail a frustrated desire for greater happiness (*Par.* III, 64–69). Piccarda corrects that assumption by making charity the cause of the will's rest. Aquinas's account of charity as friendship with God (ST II-II, q. 23, a. 1), together with its extension to the neighbor (q. 25, a. 1), helps illuminate the change in criterion: beatitude is not a possession secured against others, but a good enjoyed within adherence to the divine will. The passage moves from what "we" desire to what pleases the whole kingdom. The pilgrim must learn to understand differentiated participation without importing a competitive model of fulfillment. Charity is useful here because it explains both the unification of wills and the continuation of distinct persons in communion. The formative task is a correction of Dante's way of asking about happiness, not simply confirmation that the blessed are united with God.

The canticle's theological instruction belongs to this formation of vision. In *Convivio* (Dante Alighieri 2014, II, i, 6), Dante associates anagogy with the "higher things of eternal glory".[20] Ascoli (2010), Saly (1989), and Mastrorilli (2016) develop different approaches to this dimension; an earlier study examined the practical and anagogical function of *Paradiso*'s theology (Porcarelli 2025). Discussions of freedom, vows, justice, resurrection, and cosmic order teach the pilgrim to reconsider human affairs from their ultimate end. The gesture concluding Beatrice's first explanation gives that disposition poetic form: "Then she turned her face toward heaven" (*Par.* I, 142).[21]

The examination on charity in *Paradiso* XXVI brings this orientation into personal testimony. St. John first asks toward what Dante's soul is directed (vv. 7–9). Dante identifies God as the beginning and end of what love teaches him (vv. 16–18) and then explains how philosophical reasoning and scriptural authority direct love toward the supreme good (vv. 25–45). John's further question asks what other motives draw him toward God (vv. 49–51). A correct account of the object of charity is therefore insufficient: Dante must acknowledge the gifts and events through which his own love has been formed. The examination makes doctrinal understanding accountable to a lived history.

His response names the existence of the world and his own existence, Christ's death, and the hope shared by the faithful (*Par.* XXVI, 58–60). These motives, together with living understanding, have brought him from disordered love toward rightly directed love (vv. 61–63). The sequence gathers the earlier phases of formation into the mature subject's own account, rather than consigning them to completed stages. Nasti's analysis of the Passion (Nasti 2018) emphasizes its place within divine charity and salvation; her more recent work (Nasti 2024, Premessa) also places the ordering of love within Dante's biblical and exegetical culture. Read in that context, Christ's death is not a detachable doctrinal item in Dante's answer. It identifies divine self-giving as a source of the love with which he now responds. The specificity of charity lies in this relation to a received good, irreducible to admiration for a generic supreme being.

The answer culminates in the love of what belongs to God: "The leaves with which the whole garden/of the eternal Gardener is clothed, I love as much/as the good He bestows upon them" (*Par.* XXVI, 64–66).[22] The garden image carries theological force. Love directed

toward God becomes an ordered attention to the good He communicates; it does not end by excluding the other objects of love. Aquinas makes precisely this relation intelligible when he treats God as the reason for loving the neighbor (ST II-II, q. 25, a. 1). The point of comparison is the connection between the ultimate end and the extension of love, rather than a proof of textual borrowing. Against the narrowing of attention examined in Francesca and Ulysses, the mature pilgrim can state a love whose relation to God opens it toward others. The examination therefore supplies a particularly clear instance of what the charity framework reveals: contemplation reorders human relationships instead of replacing them.

The Empyrean carries this formation toward its culmination. Bernard's intercession for Dante in the final canto shows that the passage into vision remains mediated by another's prayer. Recalling Bonaventure's account of the passage through Christ into mystical rest (*Itinerarium* VII, 1–6), we may recognize a shared insistence that the limit of discursive capacity must be met by grace. The *Commedia* gives that dependence a communal and narrative form: the pilgrim's final fulfillment is requested for him before it is granted. His faculties are not discarded; desire and will are brought into harmony with the Love that moves the universe:

> "But already my desire and will were being turned, /like a wheel moved evenly,
> /by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (*Par.* XXXIII, 143–145).[23]

The wheel gives poetic form to an integrated movement of desire and will. For the reader still *in via*, its significance is not the claim that such consummation is already possessed, but the disclosure of the end toward which freedom is being formed. *Paradiso* connects that end with gratitude, differentiated communion, creaturely love, and intercession. These practices make adherence to God a substantive category of interpretation, while preserving the difference between the pilgrim's exceptional experience and the reader's earthly condition.

5. From Dante's Itinerary to the Reader's Itinerary

The analysis so far has focused primarily on the transformation of the *viator* within the narrative. The exemplary dimension of Dante's journey as an *Everyman* itinerary, however, extends this transformative process beyond Dante's own experience to encompass those who encounter it through the act of reading.

Montemaggi's *Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (Montemaggi 2016, Prologue; chs. 2–3) provides an important point of dialogue here. His account locates theological understanding in human encounters, including the encounter between poem and reader, and attends to the significance of vulnerability and failure. The episodes considered above give that relational perspective a particular developmental focus: the pilgrim receives assistance, struggles to judge what moves him, and becomes answerable for others' good. Aquinas's principal concerns help distinguish the tasks within this formation; Dante's narrative shows how the persons encountered make those tasks demanding and concrete.

5.1. A Narrative That Calls for Participation

The poem's exemplary scope extends the protagonist's formation toward the reader. Pertile (2019) emphasizes this double transformative aim and the role of the *auctor*'s interventions in bridging the distance between the narrated experience and those who read it. The opening "journey of our life" establishes a shared horizon; subsequent appeals demand an active exercise of interpretation rather than passive reception of a verdict.

Dante directly asks readers to consider what lies beneath the narrative's surface: "O you whose intellects are sound, /attend to the teaching hidden/beneath the veil of these

strange verses" (*Inf.* IX, 61–63).[24] The appeal in *Purgatorio* likewise calls for sharpened attention: "Here, reader, sharpen your eyes well toward the truth, /for the veil is now so very thin/that surely passing through it is easy" (*Purg.* VIII, 19–21).[25] Polysemy becomes a practice requiring the reader's judgment.

Franke (1996) understands the interpretive journey as an encounter in which meaning takes shape within the reader's lived experience. The episodes examined here give that claim a particular content. Francesca and Ulysses require readers to examine the relation between being moved by a narrative and judging the conduct it presents; purgatorial prayer addresses readers as persons able to assist; the examination on charity models an account of one's own received goods and resulting commitments. Reading can thus become an exercise in examining the orientation of desire and action.

Moser's account of virtuous friendship (Moser 2019) makes the participatory demand of the poem especially pertinent. The movement from receiving another's care to acting for another's good links the reader's engagement with the relational structure of charity. Dante's examination on the theological virtues also offers a model of personal accountability: he must express what he believes, hopes, and loves, not merely define those virtues. Such testimony gives religious self-interpretation a narrative form without implying that the reader can replicate the pilgrim's exceptional experience.

Symbolic participation preserves the distance between the journey through the afterlife and ordinary earthly life. It enables readers to recognize patterns of attention and action rather than equate themselves with Dante. The formative sequence is also not a measure of inevitable progress. A reader may recognize disordered aspiration while still requiring assistance, or experience contemplation while remaining answerable for relationships and choices. The overlapping *studia principalia* provide a vocabulary for these recurring tasks.

5.2. The Commedia as a Mythic-Religious Macro-Narrative

The *Commedia* can in this sense be understood as a mythic-religious macro-narrative: a symbolically dense form that joins inherited journey models within a Christian interpretation of existence. Katabasis, Exodus, pilgrimage, and *itinerarium mentis* acquire meaning through encounters in which moral and religious understanding must become personal. The poem's formal power lies in making that transformation available to participation through narrated experience.

Ulysses's voyage shows the importance of that reworking. The mythic figure is granted an aspiration and a rhetorical power capable of moving the reader, while being placed within a narrative that subjects both to judgment. The relation between that voyage and Dante's own becomes a means of examining the reader's attraction to knowledge and heroic purpose. Other inherited forms contribute different resources: Exodus gives shape to liberation, pilgrimage to dependence and movement toward an end, and eschatological vision to judgments that challenge the apparent finality of present concerns.

The navigation metaphor addresses the reader's participation directly: "O you who in a little boat, /eager to listen, have followed/behind my vessel as it sails singing" (*Par.* II, 1–3).[26] Following is both an invitation and a demanding activity, requiring attention to what the narrative reveals and to the reader's own capacity to receive it. The poem thus brings religious content into a relation with experience rather than merely transmitting a set of propositions.

This relation speaks to the Special Issue's interest in mythic-religious narrative and identity formation. A symbolic heritage contributes to religious consciousness through the practices of interpretation it makes possible. The reader can ask how a narrative moves desire, which goods are being pursued, what assistance has been received, and what responsibility follows toward others. The charity framework specifies these questions

through changing formative priorities, while the poem gives them concrete persons, voices, and situations. Identity formation is approached here as a possibility opened by such engagement, not as an empirically demonstrated effect of reading.

6. Conclusions

The reading developed here connects Dante's *itinerarium mentis in Deum* with Aquinas's distinction of the principal concerns characterizing growth in charity. Its contribution is not the identification of conversion, virtue, and union with God as themes of the *Commedia*, but an account of how changing formative priorities connect discernment, relationships, and contemplation. The close readings give that account a more specific content than the broad correspondence between three canticles and three degrees.

Francesca and Ulysses show that recognizing what opposes charity requires interpretation of desires and narratives that retain their power to attract. Compassion must become capable of judgment, and intellectual aspiration must become answerable for the goods and persons it draws into its project. Purgatorial intercession then makes another's progress a matter for one's own action: receiving care and giving assistance belong to the same life of grace. In *Paradiso*, Piccarda corrects a competitive understanding of fulfillment, while the examination on charity brings together rational judgment, scriptural instruction, gratitude for salvation, and love of what participates in God's goodness. These encounters clarify the relation between moral formation and contemplation without treating contemplative maturity as withdrawal from others.

Aquinas's formulation is useful because the *studia principalia* distinguish dominant concerns while preserving their overlap. The pilgrim's continuing need for judgment and assistance, even as his vision expands, can thereby be read as part of growth rather than as a failure of an inflexible sequence. The direct Augustinian source confirms the relation between adherence to Christ and service of others; Bonaventure illuminates the dependence of contemplation on affective transformation and grace. Corbett's account of penitential ethics, in turn, requires a historical distinction between this reading of the pilgrim's formation and the sources of the poem's ordering of vice. No claim of a Thomistic compositional code follows from the proposed correspondence.

The reader is drawn into these questions through the experience of interpreting. Encounters with compelling speech, requests for prayer, and the pilgrim's testimony make participation a matter of judgment and response. The degrees of charity provide a vocabulary for examining these activities, while the poem makes them memorable through persons and relationships. Their relevance to the reader rests on the capacity of narrative to open possibilities of self-interpretation within the ordinary condition of the *homo viator*.

The *Commedia*'s mythic-religious form thus contributes to the question of religious identity by joining symbolic inheritance with the examination of desire, gratitude, and responsibility. The reading through charity retains its hermeneutical scope: it neither exhausts the poem's meanings nor establishes the effects of reading on audiences. It identifies a line of coherence in which learning to judge, learning to assist, and learning to contemplate become connected aspects of spiritual formation, available to the reader through symbolic participation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 Inf. I, 1–3: «Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, /ché la diritta via era smarrita». All quotations from the Commedia follow Giorgio Petrocchi's critical text, La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata (Dante Alighieri [1966–1967] 1994); references identify canticle, canto, and lines. English translations of Dante and of the Latin theological passages are the author's, unless otherwise indicated. Original texts are supplied in these endnotes; translations prioritize the sense and argumentative relevance of the passages rather than reproduce their metre. Latin technical expressions retained in the article are italicized.

2 *ST I-II, q. 62, a. 1, c.: «principia naturalia hominis […] non sufficiunt ad ordinandum hominem in beatitudinem praedictam».*

3 *ST I-II, q. 68, a. 2, c.: «perfectiones quibus homo disponitur ad hoc quod bene sequatur instinctum divinum».*

4 *ST II-II, q. 23, a. 8, c.: «per caritatem ordinantur actus omnium aliarum virtutum ad ultimum finem».*

5 *"Primo enim incumbit homini studium principale ad recedendum a peccato et resistendum concupiscentiis eius, quae in contrarium caritatis movent; et hoc pertinet ad incipientes, in quibus caritas est nutrienda vel fovenda ne corrumpatur. Secundum autem studium succedit, ut homo principaliter intendat ad hoc quod in bono proficiat; et hoc studium pertinet ad proficientes, qui ad hoc principaliter intendunt ut in eis caritas per augmentum roboretur. Tertium autem studium est ut homo ad hoc principaliter intendat ut Deo inhaereat et eo fruatur; et hoc pertinet ad perfectos, qui cupiunt dissolvi et esse cum Christo" (ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9, c.).*

6 Inf. I, 10–12: «Io non so ben ridir com'i' v'intrai, /tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto/che la verace via abbandonai».

7 Inf. I, 91: «A te convien tenere altro vïaggio».

8 Inf. II, 124–125: «Tre donne benedette/curan di te ne la corte del cielo».

9 Inf. XXXIII, 1–3: «La bocca sollevò dal fiero pasto/quel peccator, forbendola a' capelli/del capo ch'elli avea di retro guasto».

10 Inf. III, 1–3, 9: «Per me si va ne la città dolente, /per me si va ne l'etterno dolore, /per me si va tra la perduta gente. […]/Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate».

11 Inf. V, 100, 103: «Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende»; «Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona». On Francesca's language and reading, see Lombardi (2012, ch. 4, "Love," pp. 132–74; ch. 6, "Reading," pp. 212–47; 2018, ch. 5, "Francesca and the Others," pp. 154–86, especially "How Does Francesca Read? The Lancelot, Courtly Poetry, Boethius, and the Tristan"). On the kiss and the presentation of agency, see Hatcher and Musa (1968) and Musa (1995).

12 Inf. XXVI, 112–120, 124–125: «"O frati," dissi, "che per cento milia/perigli siete giunti a l'occidente, /a questa tanto picciola vigilia/d'i nostri sensi ch'è del rimanente/non vogliate negar l'esperïenza, /di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente. /Considerate la vostra semenza:/fatti non foste a viver come bruti, /ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza." […] "e volta nostra poppa nel mattino, /de' remi facemmo ali al folle volo"».

13 Purg. XI, 22–24: «Quest'ultima preghiera, segnor caro, /già non si fa per noi, ché non bisogna, /ma per color che dietro a noi restaro».

14 Purg. XXII, 7–9: «E io più lieve che per l'altre foci/m'andava, sì che sanz'alcun labore/seguiva in sù li spiriti veloci».

15 Purg. I, 1–3: «Per correr miglior acque alza le vele/omai la navicella del mio ingegno, /che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele».

16 Purg. XXVII, 139–142: «Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno:/libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio, /e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:/per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio».

17 Par. I, 67–75: «Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei, /qual si fé Glauco nel gustar de l'erba/che 'l fé consorto in mar de li altri dèi. /Trasumanar significar per verba/non si poria; però l'essemplo basti/a cui esperienza grazia serba. /S'i' era sol di me quel che creasti/novellamente, amor che 'l ciel governi, /tu 'l sai, che col tuo lume mi levasti».

18 Par. X, 55–60: «Cor di mortal non fu mai sì digesto/a divozione e a rendersi a Dio/con tutto 'l suo gradir cotanto presto, /come a quelle parole mi fec' io;/e sì tutto 'l mio amore in lui si mise, /che Beatrice eclissò ne l'oblio».

19 Par. III, 70–85: «Frate, la nostra volontà quïeta/virtù di carità, che fa volerne/sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta. /Se disïassimo esser più superne, /foran discordi li nostri disiri/dal voler di colui che qui ne cerne;/che vedrai non capere in questi giri, /s'essere in carità è qui necesse, /e se la sua natura ben rimiri. /Anzi è formale ad esto beato esse/tenersi dentro a la divina voglia, /per ch'una fansi nostre voglie stesse;/sì che, come noi sem di soglia in soglia/per questo regno, a tutto il regno piace/com'a lo re che 'n suo voler ne 'nvoglia. /E 'n la sua volontade è nostra pace».

20 Convivio II, i, 6: «superne cose de l'etternal gloria».

21 Par. I, 142: «Quinci rivolse inver' lo cielo il viso».

22 Par. XXVI, 64–66: «Le fronde onde s'infronda tutto l'orto/de l'ortolano etterno, am' io cotanto/quanto da lui a lor di bene è porto».

23 Par. XXXIII, 143–145: «ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle, /sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa, /l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle».

24 Inf. IX, 61–63: «O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani, /mirate la dottrina che s'asconde/sotto 'l velame de li versi strani».

[25] Purg. VIII, 19–21: «Aguzza qui, lettor, ben li occhi al vero, /ché 'l velo è ora ben tanto sottile, /certo che 'l trapassar dentro è leggero».

[26] Par. II, 1–3: «O voi che siete in piccioletta barca, /desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti/dietro al mio legno che cantando varca».

References

Ascoli, Albert R. 2010. Dante and Allegory. In *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*. Edited by Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 128–35. [CrossRef]

Augustine of Hippo. 1967. *De Sermone Domini in Monte*. Edited by Almut Mutzenbecher. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 35. Turnhout: Brepols.

Augustine of Hippo. n.d. *In Epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos* Tractatus Decem. Tractate V, 4–5. Latin Text in S. Aurelii Augustini Opera Omnia, Patrologia Latina 35. Available online: https://www.augustinus.it/latino/commento_lsg/omelia_05_testo.htm (accessed on 9 October 2026).

Barolini, Teodolinda. 2018. *Inferno 26*. Commento Baroliniano, Digital Dante. New York: Columbia University Libraries. Available online: https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-26/ (accessed on 9 October 2026).

Barolini, Teodolinda. 2025. Possible Worlds and Reading Dante's *Commedia*: Suspension of Disbelief (Coleridge, Horace, Tolkien, Cecco d'Ascoli) and the Solvents of Narrative and History. In *A World of Possibilities: The Legacy of The Undivine Comedy*. Edited by Kristina M. Olson. Cultural Inquiry 37. Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, pp. 15–47. [CrossRef]

Bonaventure. 1891. *Itinerarium* mentis in Deum. In *Opera Omnia*. Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, vol. 5, pp. 295–316.

Corbett, George. 2020. *Dante's Christian Ethics: Purgatory and Its Moral Contexts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [CrossRef]

Corbett, George. 2021. Interpreting Dante's *Commedia*: Competing Approaches. *Bibliotheca Dantesca: Journal of Dante Studies* 4: 1–32.

Dante Alighieri. 1994. *La Commedia Secondo L'antica Vulgata*. 4 vols. Edited by Giorgio Petrocchi. Florence: Le Lettere. Milan: Mondadori. First published 1966–1967.

Dante Alighieri. 2014. *Opere, vol. 2: Convivio, Monarchia, Epistole, Egloghe*. Directed by Marco Santagata. Edited by Gianfranco Fioravanti, Claudio Giunta, Diego Quaglioni, Claudia Villa and Gabriella Albanese. Milan: Mondadori.

Franke, William. 1996. *Dante's Interpretive Journey*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Freccero, John. 1986. *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*. Edited by Rachel Jacoff. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hatcher, Anna, and Mark Musa. 1968. The Kiss: *Inferno* V and the Old French Prose *Lancelot*. *Comparative Literature* 20: 97–109. [CrossRef]

Lombardi, Elena. 2012. *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Lombardi, Elena. 2018. *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [CrossRef]

Mastrorilli, Chiara Alba. 2016. Quinci rivolse inver' lo cielo il viso. Beatrice come teologia anagogica. *Divus Thomas* 119: 234–64.

Montemaggi, Vittorio. 2016. *Reading Dante's Commedia as Theology: Divinity Realized in Human Encounter*. New York: Oxford University Press. [CrossRef]

Moser, Matthew Rothaus. 2019. Understanding Dante's Comedy as Virtuous Friendship. *Religions* 10: 219. [CrossRef]

Musa, Mark. 1995. Behold Francesca Who Speaks So Well (*Inferno* V). In *Dante's Inferno: The Indiana Critical Edition*. Edited and Translated by Mark Musa. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 310–24.

Nasti, Paola. 2007. Of This World and the Other: Caritas-Ecclesiology in Dante's *Paradiso*. *The Italianist* 27: 177–204. [CrossRef]

Nasti, Paola. 2018. Soteriologia e Passione nella *Commedia*. In *Theologus Dantes: Tematiche Teologiche nelle Opere e nei Primi Commenti*. Edited by Luca Lombardo, Diego Parisi and Anna Pegoretti. Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, pp. 103–38.

Nasti, Paola. 2024. *I Morsi della Carità: Dante e la «Bibbia»*. Ravenna: Giorgio Pozzi Editore.

Pepper, Stephen C. 2025. Prayer, Participation, and Perfection in Dante's *Commedia*. *Modern Theology* 41: 515–38. [CrossRef]

Pertile, Lino. 2019. Narrative Structure. In *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's Commedia*. Edited by Zygmunt G. Barański and Simon Gilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 4–27. [CrossRef]

Porcarelli, Andrea. 2022. Dante educatore: La Commedia come itinerario di formazione spirituale. *Nuova Secondaria* 40: 105–26.

Porcarelli, Andrea. 2025. «A te convien tenere altro viaggio». Verso una lettura pedagogica della Commedia di Dante come Itinerarium mentis in Deum. *Itineraria* 24: 49–78.

Ryan, Christopher. 2013. *Dante and Aquinas: A Study of Nature and Grace in the Comedy*. Revised with an Introduction by John Took. London: Ubiquity Press.

Saly, John. 1989. *Dante's Paradiso: The Flowering of the Self: An Interpretation of the Anagogical Meaning*. New York: Pace University Press.

Singleton, Charles S. 1958. *Journey to Beatrice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

ten Klooster, Anton. 2019. Dante and the Beatitudes: Moral Transformation in *Purgatorio*. *Incontri. Rivista Europea di Studi Italiani* 34: 122–27. [CrossRef]

Thomas Aquinas. 2000. *Opera Omnia*. Edited by Enrique Alarcón. Summa Theologiae Latin Text Based on the Leonine Edition. Pamplona: Corpus Thomisticum, University of Navarra. Available online: https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html (accessed on 23 August 2026).
Thompson, David. 1974. *Dante's Epic Journeys*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Took, John. 2020. *Dante*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.