

Reading Dante: An Exploration of the Interpretation and Misinterpretation of Allegory

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Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand in fulfilment of the Degree of
Master of Arts in English by Research

Johannesburg, 2025

ABSTRACT

Throughout the course of its seven-hundred-year history, the *Commedia* has been encountered in a variety of contexts notably distinct from its medieval, Italian origins. This has resulted in various ways in which the *Commedia* has been read. This enquiry will explore the role of misinterpretation in the reading of the poem by examining the tensions which exist between the urge to read the *Commedia* in its original context and the desire to render it anew in the ongoing pursuit of interpretation. I will focus primarily on these scholars as readers, such as in twentieth-century American criticism, dominated by Charles Singleton's theories of the allegory of theologians, and how they signified a break from the hermeneutic continuity emphasised by the early Medieval commentators. Additionally, it is necessary to consider the way the Anglosphere reads Dante in translation and how this, in turn, influences the interpretation of Dante's allegory. While these approaches to reading Dante may appear to be incommensurable and contradictory, it is nevertheless this tension which maintains the expansive interpretability of the text centuries after the death of its author.

Keywords

Dante; *Commedia*; Allegory; Exegesis; Interpretation; Misinterpretation; Fundamentalism; Textualism; Disputatio;

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in English by Research at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Kyla Lötter', written over a horizontal line.

Kyla Lötter

27th day of March in the year 2025

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation could not have been completed without the tireless work and dedication from my supervisor, Dr. Sonia Fanuchhi. Her guidance and assistance through this process has been both enlightening and compassionate. I am immensely grateful to the Merit Scholarship and the Tothill Scholarship for assistance in funding my studies. I would also like to thank Anita Virga and other members of the Dantessa society for their helpful insights and conversations about Dante's great poetry. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their words of encouragement and faith in me. Thank you.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Con, *Convivio*

DVE, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*

ECG, *The Epistle to Can Grande*

VN, *Vita Nuova*

Inf, *Inferno*

Purg, *Purgatorio*

Par, *Paradiso*

PREFACE

My physical copy of John Ciardi's translation of *Inferno* was bought second-hand and has been heavily annotated by its previous owner in black and red ink. This mysterious, unknown reader had diligently circled the names of the three beasts in *Inferno I* and then wrote beneath the She-Wolf the words 'incontinence, Rome Papacy, villain of peace'. It is possible that this reader is basing their interpretation on the introduction to the canto. In bold, commanding, and capitalised words, Ciardi states that 'the Three Beasts of Worldliness' consist of "...THE LEOPARD OF MALICE AND FRAUD, THE LION OF VIOLENCE AND AMBITION, and THE SHE-WOLF OF INCONTINENCE" (Ciardi 27). This contradicts the footnotes where Ciardi corrects himself by stating that:

These three beasts undoubtedly are taken from *Jeremiah* v, 6.¹ Many additional and incidental interpretations have been advanced for them, but the central interpretation must remain as noted. They foreshadow the three divisions of Hell (incontinence, violence and fraud) which Virgil explains at length in Canto XI, 16–111. I am not at all sure but what the She-Wolf is better interpreted as Fraud and the Leopard as Incontinence. Good arguments can be offered either way (Ciardi 32).

In contrast to the bold, decisive words of the introduction of the canto, the smaller font in the footnotes acknowledge the doubt that exists in the interpretation of the allegory of the three beasts. It acknowledges the existence of a multiplicity of meaning in the text that has spawned varied interpretations throughout the last seven centuries. The reader, writing in black ballpoint pen, does not acknowledge the footnotes in their tiny, scrawled writing. Maybe they were the kind of reader that skips over footnotes which is a common enough practice. Maybe the capitalisation of Ciardi's interpretations in the introduction over the smaller print in the footnotes had a greater influence on which interpretation they chose to write on the pages of the book than any theory that

¹ "Therefore, a lion from the forest shall strike them down; a wolf from the desert shall devastate them. A leopard is watching their cities; everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces, because their transgressions are many, their apostasies are great." (Jeremiah 5:6, ESV).

might have accompanied it. This unknown reader scrawled the words 'incontinence, Rome papacy, villain of peace'. The phrase 'villain of peace' is not used in any other translation or interpretation that I have in print and therefore seems to be an interpretation born from the reader's own imagination. The handwriting is difficult to make out and there is every chance that I have mis-read it.

It is worth considering the layers at work here in this act of reading of this singular symbolic element of the she-wolf. There is my habit of buying any translation that I can see under a certain price, my failure to return my friend's copy of Esolen's translation before he moved, and the limitations of funds or access to a variety of translations. There is the foundational aspect of the various translations that I, as an individual, have already encountered – which ones I found first and which ones I found later. There is the disparity between the capitalisation in the canto's introduction versus the smaller print of the footnotes that leads to contradiction, to favouring one over the other for what are essentially arbitrary reasons. Finally, there is the messily handwritten annotations of an unknown, previous owner of this singular, physical second-hand copy of Ciardi's translation. All these work in conjunction to create an echoing series of possible influences upon a singular symbolic element that was already designed, seven hundred years ago by the author, to be ambiguous. Reading and interpreting the *Commedia* is like looking at a star whose light has travelled lightyears to reach us. We must accept that what we are seeing has been distorted by time. We must accept that the origins of what we are looking at has been dead for centuries. When we read the *Commedia*, we start as Dante does, in a dark wood of error, and must explore the forest of interpretation if we hope to find our way out of it. What follows in this enquiry is such an exploration of the various influences that change the landscape of reading the *Commedia* and the role that misinterpretation plays in it.

CHAPTER 1: THE ROLE OF MISINTERPRETATION

*“When we read how the smile of the beloved
Was kissed by such a celebrated lover,
This one, from whom I never will be severed,
Kissed me upon the mouth, trembling all over.
That book’s a pander, and the man who wrote it:
And on that day we read in it no further.”
While the one spirit said all this to me,
The other wept, and my disquietude
Brought on a fainting fit. I seemed to die,
And fell down as a body does when dead.
Inf 5.127–142*

*“Quando leggemmo il disiato riso
esser baciato da cotanto amante,
questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,
la bocca mi baciò tutto tremante.
Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse:
quell giorno più non vi leggemmo avante.”
Mentre che l’uno spirto questo disse,
l’altro piangea, sì che di pietade
io venni men così com’io morisse –
e caddi come corpo morto cade.
Inf 5.133–142*

For seven centuries, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*² has been read and interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. Readers, encountering Dante in different contexts, have read the *Commedia* in ways that are at times incompatible and contradictory. Throughout the three canticles of the *Commedia* – *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* – Dante considers the dynamic between author and reader, or between creator and creature. In doing so, he facilitates a readerly relationship that not only maintains the sanctity and necessity of interpretation but also allows for the possibility of misinterpretation. It is notable that Dante makes space to explore the role of misinterpretation in the *Commedia* because this is not something that he allowed in his other writings, particularly in those written before his exile from Florence in 1302. Both the *Convivio* and the *Vita Nuova* are constructed in such a way that he delivers his *canzoni*³ and then repeatedly dissects and explains them in the accompanying prose. There is no room for discussion or space for misinterpretation in his earlier works. As the author, Dante stipulates precisely what the allegory in these *canzoni* means. This practice is noticeably absent from the *Commedia*, where the allegorical poetry is left to stand on its own, without a direct explanation of it to the reader.⁴ Therefore, this is a significant departure in Dante's *modus operandi*. In this enquiry, I will explore Dante's allegory and the role of misinterpretation within the act of reading the *Commedia*. In this way, I shall be exploring the immense variability of Dante's allegory, how its interpretation has shifted from the medieval to the modern eras, as well as the readerly relationship with the text within a set of distinct social, historical and philosophical contexts. I will draw various comparisons between the medieval and modern approaches towards reading, interpreting, and translating the *Commedia* and its allegory. Using the narrative and allegorical arc between *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V* as an initial blueprint, I will examine

² Hereafter referred to by its original Italian name – the *Commedia*. Giovanni Boccaccio was the first to add the 'divine' adjective to the title. The first edition of the text to be published with that title was in 1555.

³ Translation: song(s)

⁴ The reader is at time directly invited into the text to interpret it. For instance, in *Inferno XVI*, Dante encounters the monster Geryon, who is so strange and made from so many disparate parts, that Dante states "But here I can't be silent. By the verse / Of this comedy, I, Reader, swear – / That through that murky atmosphere I saw / A shape swim towards us – and a shape strike the most self-confident with awe!" (Inf 16.128–132). Dante directly addresses the reader, invites them to interpret, and beseeches them to believe him in this ostensibly fictional narrative.

the tension between the interpretation and misinterpretation of allegory as well as the tension between the translation and mistranslation of language, as it is presented in the *Commedia*.

In the fifth canto of *Inferno*, Dante as the pilgrim encounters Paolo and Francesca⁵ in the second circle of Hell. In this circle of Hell, “Those who subject their reason to desire” (*che la ragion sommettono al talent*; Inf 5.39) are punished by being flung about in harsh winds with no hope of escape or rest. Dante depicts Paolo and Francesca as doomed to cling to one another as their helpless bodies are thrown about in the storm winds. Paolo is silent, but Francesca speaks to Dante. Francesca, and what she says to Dante, plays a significant role at this early stage in the construction of Dante’s allegory in the *Commedia*. *Inferno V* therefore has a notable influence on the narrative structure and allegorical construction of all three canticles. In the context of this enquiry, Francesca exemplifies the space that Dante creates within his allegory for the potential of misinterpretation. In her conversation with Dante, she narrates the story of how she came to be damned. This conversation is highly ambiguous at key stages, as Francesca makes use of manipulative, emotional language. Francesca’s relationship with reading, as well as the intricacies of her interpretation and misinterpretation, is a significant indication of the manner in which Dante constructed his allegory. This is because, according to Francesca, it was reading a book about the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere that ultimately led her to commit the sin of adultery with Paolo. It is notable that the book that Paolo and Francesca read was “... a text designed expressly to keep potential adulterers out of hell” (Noakes 44) and it is therefore the misinterpretation of this text that leads to her damnation. The narrative arc between *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V*, in conjunction, reveals how Dante creates space for both interpretation and misinterpretation within his allegory. The allegorical and

⁵ Dante speaks directly with Francesca da Rimini who was married to Gianciotto Malatesta but had an affair with his younger brother, Paolo. They were murdered by Francesca’s husband when they were discovered together. This was a contemporary scandal during Dante’s lifetime and, notably, Francesca da Rimini is therefore a historical individual and not a mythological or literary reference. This is a necessary distinction because Dante makes equal use of fictional and historical figures throughout the three canticles. This shapes the truth value of *the Commedia*’s allegory as all things real and imaginary are equally valid in the narrative of the text.

narrative arc between *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V* encapsulates Dante's understanding of reading, and conversely of both interpretation and misinterpretation, thereby acting as an initial guide on how to read the entirety of the *Commedia*.

Although Francesca is in the second circle of Hell amongst the Lustful, her conversation with Dante is the first, full-length dialogue with a soul in the afterlife in the *Commedia*. In contrast, the conversation that Dante has with the great poets of antiquity in *Inferno IV* is not related to the reader. It is only suggested, summarised, but not fully represented in the text:

When they had talked a little while together
They turned to me and made a sign of welcome,
At which my master smiled in simple pleasure.
An even higher honour came my way,
For they invited me to join their circle:
I was the sixth, with such great minds as they.
So we continued till we reached the light,
Speaking of things of which I must be silent,
Just as to talk about them then was right.

Inf 4.97–105

Da ch'ebber ragionato insieme alquanto,
volseri a me con salutevol cenno;
e 'l mio maestro sorrise di tanto.
E più d'onore ancora assai mi fenno,
ch'è sì mi fecer della loro schiera,

sì ch'io fui sesto tra contanto senno.

Così andammo in fino alla lumera,

parlando cose che 'l tacere è bello,

sì com'era 'l parlar colà dov'era.

Inf 4.97–105.

Dante encounters many legendary figures from antiquity in Limbo, the first circle of the *Inferno*. Although these figures led virtuous lives, they were born before the Incarnation of Christ and were therefore unbaptised. It is only for this reason that they are condemned to Hell. The great poets of antiquity – Horace, Ovid, Lucan, Homer, and Virgil – invite Dante into their midst, naming him as the sixth master of the highest style of poetry. This moment can be interpreted as one of great arrogance on Dante's part. At this point, early in the *Commedia*, Dante has not proven himself as a poet to the reader or to the world. He does not have the benefit of seven hundred years of scholarship that name him a great poet. Contextually, he is an exile from Florence and only has one other completed work of poetry, the *Vita Nuova*, and many other mostly unfinished philosophical treatises.⁶ If this episode were to be interpreted in isolation, then it is a moment where Dante's mode of self-insert writing becomes self-indulgent and arrogant, soothing the shattered ego of an exile as he imagines himself to be accepted into a group of people that he admires. However, if this episode were to be read and interpreted in conjunction with *Inferno V*, then it is possible to discern the higher point that Dante is making regarding the role of reading, the method of interpretation and misinterpretation in the narrative and allegorical arc between *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V*.

The allegorical movement from *Inferno IV* to *Inferno V* reads as a 'pride before the fall' narrative which establishes the dynamics of interpretation and misinterpretation within the text. Dante exits Limbo, where the virtuous pagans are punished by languishing in their unfulfilled desire for incomplete rational understanding and then

⁶ These include *De Monarchia*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, and the *Convivio*. Out of these three, Dante only finished *De Monarchia*.

enters the second circle wherein people who gave into their irrational desires are punished. Virgil, who also occupies the first circle of the *Inferno*, describes it in the following way:

“...They lived too early to be Christian,
And failed to worship God as people should.
Among such spirits I myself am one.
It is for such defect, not sin, we’re here
Among the lost, and punished but in this:
That without hope we languish in desire.”

Inf 4. 37–42

“...E se furon dinanzi al cristianesimo,
non adorar debitamente a Dio:
e di questi cotai son io medesimo.
Per tai difetti, non per altro rio,
semo perduti, e sol di tanto offesi,
che senza speme vivemo in disio.”

Inf 4.37–42

The desire, the unfulfilled hope, that those in Limbo possess is in counterpoint, as in *contrapasso*, to the desire that overshadows reason in the subsequent circle. Through this allegorical and narrative movement from the first to the second circle of the *Inferno*, Dante transitions from an expression of reason as unfulfilled desire to an expression of desire as unfulfilled reason. In this way, the first and second circles of Hell reflect one another on a narrative and allegorical level. Limbo is portrayed as a symposium where virtuous intellectuals from antiquity can maintain their philosophical

pursuits but are never granted their true desire for complete understanding, a kind of certainty that Dante believes and later reveals only to be possible when one is unified with God in *Paradiso*. In Limbo, there is a stillness that comes with the virtuous pagan's inability to use their pursuit of knowledge to possess complete understanding and ultimate integration with Dante's conception of God. The virtuous pagans are still, trapped, and perfectly preserved in the state of existence that they had in life, unable to truly access the certainty that they desire. In contrast, the second circle depicts the souls as inevitably overcome and swept away by the howling winds. The *contrapasso*⁷ reflects the way the souls were overcome and swept away by their emotions in life. In the second circle of the Lustful, there is constant movement as the souls are flung about in the winds and are unable to rest or lie still. In Francesca's own admission of how she read the text, she is taken by the kiss that Lancelot and Guinevere share and then reenacts it with Paolo without considering the allegorical or moral import of the text as a warning against adultery, subjecting herself to desire without reason. By not reading any further, Francesca and Paolo prevent any further interpretation and therefore preserve the text in its state of misinterpretation. In *Inferno IV*, Dante's refusal to write what is discussed between him and the other poets is an act of preservation that prohibits potential misinterpretation. Therefore, when *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V* are read in conjunction, they reveal the tension between interpretation and misinterpretation that Dante makes space for within the construction of his allegory. I will now expand upon the nature of this tension that I have identified, how it functions and the influences upon it, as well as the manner in which the allegorical and narrative arc between *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V* exemplifies this tension.

In the process of reading the *Commedia*, or arguably any kind of text, there is a tension between the urge to read the text in its original context, striving to re-capture authorial intent and medieval meaning and the desire to expand upon the original with the

⁷ 'Contrapasso' is a term which means, in the original Italian, 'to suffer the opposite'. It refers to the way that souls in *Inferno* are often punished in such a way that either juxtaposes or aligns with the sin they committed while alive on Earth. According to John Kleiner, "It is from the *Ethics* [from Aristotle] that Dante borrows the term *contrapasso*; the categories *frode*, *incontinenza*, and *violenza*; and the basic idea of arranging crimes and punishment hierarchically. Indeed, at times, Dante seems to encourage us to view Hell as a direct projection of Aristotle's text, as if God had the *Ethics* before him (Kleiner 19).

renewal of contemporary ideas, adapting and translating the text for the use of distinct audiences. Dante does not relate the conversation that he has with great poets of antiquity that he encounters in Limbo to the reader. He claims that “Just as to talk about them then was right” (*sì com’era ‘l parlar colà dov’era*; Inf 4.105). It remains in its original context and cannot be interpreted or misinterpreted by anyone who might encounter the words spoken outside of the moment in which they originally occurred. There is a temporal aspect to this unwillingness to represent what is said. Dante is aware that if the words are taken out of the moment in which they are originally spoken, if they are brought into the present through re-representation and re-interpretation, they are vulnerable to misinterpretation. Limbo itself acts out this perseveration by maintaining the souls that languish within it, allowing them to continue their virtuous existence in their unfulfilled desire to connect with God. The souls in Limbo are free from the corruption present in lower levels of Hell and so Dante does not relate their words to the reader where it might be further corrupted by misinterpretation. However, once Dante moves from this sphere of perseveration and into the lower levels of Hell, he begins to relate the conversations that he has with the souls that he encounters there. In doing so, he exposes these conversations to potential interpretation and misinterpretation. This is seen most explicitly in his conversation with Francesca and the role that reading played in her damnation. *Inferno* V therefore reflects the desire to expand on the original, a need for interpretation and the dangers of potential misinterpretation, as her dialogue with Dante is represented and open to different interpretations in a way that the conversation with the great poets of antiquity is not. Arguably, Dante faints at the end of the canto because he recognises the role that reading played in Francesca’s damnation and that he might even be complicit in such an act because “...he realises that such works despite the intentions of their authors can be misread even in a sense that changes the meaning the authors intended into its opposite” (Noakes 47). Francesca specifically names the book as the arbitrator of her misdeeds rather than herself. She blames the words, she blames the characters in the story, and she blames the writer all before blaming herself. Dante’s refusal to recount what is discussed between him and the great poets of antiquity exemplifies the urge to preserve authorial intent, preserving it from the

potential misinterpretation that may occur once it is taken out of its original temporal context. However, this renders it silent and inaccessible. In contrast, Francesca's deliberate manipulation tactics and misunderstanding of the text that, according to her own testimony, led her to sin exemplifies a desire to render a text anew despite the potential for misinterpretation. However, this leads to a potential for a misinterpretation of a text so severe that it leads the reader to damnation. The transition from *Inferno IV* to *Inferno V* goes from one extreme to another to showcase this tension that, in several distinct and necessary ways, governs the act of reading.

I will now discuss the theoretical framework that underpins this current enquiry as well as defining some useful terms. By defining these terms, I will be able to discuss several key differences and similarities that occur, across the modern and medieval world, in approaches to interpreting and reading the *Commedia*. I will be using Susan Noakes's *Timely Reading: Between Exegesis and Interpretation* and Mary J. Carruthers's *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* to create this theoretical framework. I will conclude with a discussion regarding St. Thomas Aquinas's conception of *disputatio*. It is through the theories of Noakes and Carruthers that I will discuss the tension between interpretation and misinterpretation while it is through Aquinas's spirit of *disputatio* that I will showcase the manner in which this tension is overcome.

Susan Noakes's *Timely Reading: Between Exegesis and Interpretation* (1988)

In her book, Noakes examines the temporal characteristics of reading. She argues that the way that people read is not static and is subject to contextual, cultural and historical changes. As seen in the title of her book, Noakes expands on the concepts of 'exegesis' and 'interpretation'. Exegesis is a form of reading that attempts to reconstruct the original authorial intent of the text and place it in its proper context, maintaining its original shape as closely as possible. The term 'exegesis' is often used in reference to biblical analysis and commentary. However, in Noakes's formulation of it, exegesis is not defined by its connection to Holy Scripture. Instead, exegesis is used to define a relationship with the text that seeks to sanctify it in its original form. In this

formulation of exegesis, the author is considered to be God-like in their relationship with the text in much the same way that God is considered to be the true author of Scripture, omnipresent in the context of their own text and responsible for any interpretations for it. Therefore, this formulation of exegesis refers to the urge to preserve the text in its original context. Her reason behind using this term, in addition to the term 'interpretation', is that she is "...taking this terminological distinction from theological hermeneutics to respond to a need within literary hermeneutics" (Noakes 11). She defines both exegesis and interpretation in terms of their temporal relation to the reader. In this way, exegesis is "...a form of reading that emphasizes the words' temporal distance from the reader" (Noakes 12). In exegesis, the distance from the original author and their context is acknowledged to the extent that it is assumed that true meaning has been lost in the process of historical change. It is the practice of exegete to remove the historical change that obscure true, immutable meaning.

In contrast to exegesis, Noakes's conception of interpretation emphasises the words' temporal closeness to the reader with the original text, looking for ways to apply it to their own context and subjective, personal experiences. In the kind of reading that values interpretation over exegesis, there is an assumption that there is a 'timelessness' to reading. This essential 'human essence' allows for interpretation regardless of differences in the writer's and reader's temporal, geographical, political, or cultural contexts. Noakes questions the idea that there is an essential human characteristic that remains constant and immutable. Noakes describes Dante as one of the "...paradigmatic figure[s] who develop models of reading that integrates exegesis and interpretation without seeing the two as mutually competitive" (Noakes xiii). Dante's ability to travel between and transcend the two poles of exegesis and interpretation as drawn up by Noakes is seen in the narrative and allegorical movement between *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V*. If one were to conceive of the narrative and allegorical arc between the two cantos in this manner, then *Inferno IV* would represent exegesis, the urge to read the text in its original context, and *Inferno V* would represent interpretation, the desire to expand and transform the original. It is through this lens that I will examine both modern and medieval approaches to reading the *Commedia* as not necessarily being in conflict and therefore incommensurable but rather as a

different kind of reading that is reflected by the context in which it arises. In this way, Dante's text makes space for the role of misinterpretation while still acknowledging the paramount importance of objective interpretation. Regarding Francesca, Noakes states the following:

Dante here shows that literal reading, reading on the surface where the mere letters are, is not a spatial but a temporal error. What's more, in his view no reader can avoid such temporal error; it is a necessary condition of all reading, a kind of inescapable, original sin characteristic of all readers (Noakes 41).

Noakes acknowledges Dante's belief that, at a certain level, misinterpretation is a necessary condition of all reading because it is a natural consequence of an insufficient and changeable language as well as the inherent humanness of all readers. According to Noakes, the passage of time has an inevitable and unavoidable impact upon reading that is an inherent part of its representational quality. She states that "The passage of time is taken to increase (whereas in some other settings it might be thought to decrease) the value or force of words; time is taken to change the significance of words" (Noakes 8). To preserve a sign from misinterpretation would be to seal it in the moment in which it is first uttered, as Dante does in Limbo with the great poets of antiquity when he does not relate what is discussed between them. The dialogue between Dante and the other poets is pure and preserved in the moment in which it was discussed but it is nevertheless utterly inaccessible to the reader. In contrast, the discussion that Dante has with Francesca is open to interpretation, rife with the manipulation of emotion and the repetitiveness that encourages misinterpretation. *Inferno V* encourages interpretation and allows for misinterpretation while *Inferno IV* forbids any kind of interpretation to take place. This is relevant to my central argument regarding the way in which the *Commedia* is read, because what is accessible and is inaccessible (what is translatable or interpretable and what is not) has a significant influence on the relationship that one might have with the text.

In this growing dynamic in the *Commedia* between what is accessible and what is not, it is notable that the first voice the reader encounters in the *Commedia* is feminine and that it is rife with potential ambiguity and possible misinterpretation. The text was

written in the vernacular – in Dante’s mother’s tongue. Dante wrote in the language of women, of mothers, initially spoken to their children in the home and he therefore “...associates the vernacular with a ‘feminine’ and childish innocence and fecundity – it is the language of ‘mulieres et parvuli’ (women and little ones) and of ‘nutricem’ (wet-nurse) – as against the ‘maleness’ of Latin” (Ascoli 2008, 140).⁸ By writing in the vernacular, Dante is placing emphasis and value upon the language, claiming that it could convey grand the poetry and philosophical concepts that were previously only held in Latin. Writing the *Commedia* in the vernacular makes it accessible in a way that it would not have been if Dante had written it in Latin, as would have been the conventional thing to do at the time. However, Dante is aware of the unreliability of his reader and his choice in language, writing in the vernacular, is evidence of this. Noakes acknowledges “... the feminine unreliability of readers who distort stable male-dominated authority and authorship...” (Noakes x) and this is reflected in the transition between *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V*. The conversation between the male poets is preserved in time, unspoken and therefore uninterpretable. Limbo is a space that is male-dominated and stable. Francesca’s feminine voice is in the vernacular, detached from its original context, and purposefully morally and linguistically ambiguous. Additionally, it is spoken in a space that is unstable as the shades there are flung about in the continuous, unceasing winds. Dante’s conversation with Francesca is fully represented in the vernacular. The reader is invited and encouraged to interpret, and by extension to misinterpret, the words of Francesca. The closing dialogue of *Inferno V* is therefore subject to the processes of interpretation and misinterpretation, highlighting the unreliability of readers, by using a feminine voice speaking in the vernacular. When reading the two cantos in conjunction, it is possible to discern the full scope of Dante’s approach to reading and interpretation, as it moves from the masculine stasis of exegesis to the feminine fluidity of interpretation. It is necessary to note the gender disparity in this context because masculinity denotes the exclusivity of Latin while femininity denotes inclusivity of the vernacular. Despite its perceived

⁸ Ascoli references other scholars in making this statement, most notably Robert Hollander’s 1975 essay ‘Babytalk in Dante’s *Commedia*’.

unreliability when compared to Latin, Dante still chose to write in the vernacular and it is a choice that he defends in the opening cantos of the first canticle, and continues to defend throughout the *Commedia*, by traversing the poles of exegesis and interpretation in the masculine, inaccessible *Inferno IV* to feminine, interpretable *Inferno V*. Dante is patient with his reader and wants them to engage with the text, even if this allows for a measure of misinterpretation. It is perhaps a lesson that he learnt during his exile – that the price one pays for inclusion into a community is the potential of being misunderstood.

Mary Carruthers's *The Book of Memory: A Study in Medieval Culture* (2008)

In *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Carruthers writes about the difference in emphasis, perceived value, and usefulness of memory from the medieval period to modern times. Carruthers's main argument is that "...medieval culture was fundamentally memorial, to the same profound degree that modern culture in the West is documentary" (Carruthers 9). The importance of memory was integral to an interplay of moral and intellectual conventions:

Memoria was also an integral part of the virtue of prudence, that which makes moral judgment possible. Training the memory was much more than a matter of providing oneself with the means to compose and converse intelligently when books were not readily to hand, for it was in trained memory that one built character, judgment, citizenship, and piety (Carruthers 11).

The role that *memoria* played in the medieval era was essential to the creation and facilitation of good character and citizenry, allowing an individual to gain the full understanding of their moral faculties. Additionally, *memoria* played a significant role in pedagogy because it "...meant, at that time, trained memory, educated and disciplined according to a well-developed pedagogy that was part of the elementary language arts – grammar, logic, and rhetoric" (Carruthers 8). It is necessary to acknowledge that "*Memoria* also signifies the process by which a work of literature becomes institutionalized – internalized within the language and pedagogy of a group" (Carruthers 11). In this way memory also played a significant role in the process of

reading and the way in which texts became embedded in the social fabric of a culture. Carruthers describes this role of memory in reading in the following way:

A work is not truly read until one has made it part of oneself – that process constitutes a necessary stage of its textualization. Merely running one's eyes over the written pages is not reading at all, for the writing must be transferred into memory, from graphemes on parchment or papyrus or paper to images written in one's brain by emotion and sense (Carruthers 11).

Therefore, the role of memory in reading is that it is used to facilitate a true understanding of the text, making the words a part of the reader. The significance of memorisation in the process of reading and writing can be seen in the fact that "The ability to write is not always the same thing as the ability to compose and comprehend in a fully textual way, for indeed one who write (a scribe) may simply be a skilled practitioner, employed in a capacity akin to that of a professional typist today" (Carruthers 11–12). This shows that simply the ability to write something down is not the same as being a writer, a poet, in the way that, for instance, Dante is. The same is true for the process of reading. Merely moving your eyes across the page is not truly reading. One must take the words into oneself through the process of memorisation. In this way, Carruthers highlights the role of memory in the process of interpretation. It is through the practice of memorisation that a text becomes an embedded part of the reader and, by extension, an embedded part of the social fabric of a culture. This can be seen in *Inferno V* because Francesca misremembers the text that eventually led her to the sin of adultery. If one were to consider *Inferno V* to be a critique of a purely literal reading, as Noakes does, then it is notable that Francesca has difficulty remembering the text, and by extension the event itself, when she states that "...There is no greater wretchedness / Than calling back to mind a happy time / In misery..." (*Nessum maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / nella miseria...*; Inf 5.121–122). By her own admission, Francesca struggles to engage in the process of *memoria*, struggles to interpret and remember the original text and then relay the events of her sin to Dante. Francesca, as a character, exemplifies the use and misuse of memory in the process of reading and interpretation. In the context of this current enquiry, the

focus will be on *memoria*'s role in the act of interpretation and how it allows for a text to exist outside the confines of a book to become embedded in the collective cultural experience.

In this vein, Carruthers presents the two theories of fundamentalism and textualism. These concepts run in parallel and are reflected by Susan Noakes's conceptions of exegesis and interpretation. Carruthers states that "For the sake of definition, I will distinguish here between fundamentalism and textualism as representing two polar views of what literature is and how it functions in society" (Carruthers 13). While Noakes's focus is on the temporal relationship between reader and text, Carruthers's focus is on the relationship between society and text. In her book, Carruthers describes fundamentalism:

Fundamentalism regards a work of literature as essentially not requiring interpretation. It emphasizes its literal form as independent of circumstance, audience, author – of all those factors that are summed up in rhetorical analyses by the word 'occasion' (Carruthers 13).

In Carruthers's formulation of fundamentalism, the original intention of the words is therefore contained in the words themselves and requires no further extrapolation or interpretation to be understood. Carruthers's relates this to religious fundamentalism, which argues for a strict adherence to a religious text. This is because "True fundamentalism understands words not as signs or clues but takes them as things in themselves" (Carruthers 13). The true meaning of the words is embedded in the words themselves and not in the cultural or historical context from which they arise. Additionally, this requires that words be considered mainly as independent objects, separate from any institution, conditions, or contexts which might influence them. Fundamentalist readings accept the basic tenet that words mean what they say, and do not insinuate, suggest, or conceal any additional meaning. This encourages a literal reading of the text that assumes that the meaning of the text can be discovered within the text itself and not the surrounding context from which it was produced. True meaning might be obscured by the historical processes of time or a change in cultural contexts, but it is ultimately discoverable within the text itself. A skilled reader would

be able to recreate the original circumstances, whether they are historical or linguistic, in which the text was written and, in so doing, 'correctly' interpret the text. In this way, fundamentalism devalues the act of interpretation:

Fundamentalism denies legitimacy to interpretation. Instead of interpreting, a reader is engaged at most only in rephrasing the meaning of the written document, a meaning which is really transparent, simple, and complete – but which the detritus of history and linguistic change have temporarily concealed (Carruthers 13).

In the fundamentalist view, the true meaning of the text is discoverable when the change of social or historical context is removed. In contrast, textualism emphasizes the role of interpretation in a text as well as its role in a community because "Literary works become institutions as they weave a community together by providing it with shared experience and a certain kind of language, the language of stories that can be experienced over and over again through time and as occasion suggests" (Carruthers 14). In textualism, the true meaning of a text is "...implicit, hidden, polysemous, and complex, requiring continuing interpretation and adaptation" (Carruthers 14), subject to change in various contexts, and is constantly up for debate or individual determination. However, it must be acknowledged that "Taken to an extreme, of course, textualism can bury the original work altogether in purely solipsistic interpretations" (Carruthers 14). The layering of meaning can obscure the original intent and context of the text. It also has the potential to allow for the misplacement of objectivity, in which every possible reading might be considered valid no matter how much of a departure there is from the actual text.

Textualism considers the influence that a society or culture might have on a text as well as how a text might influence a culture or society which invokes the way that "Textus also means 'texture', the layers of meaning that attach as a text is woven into and through the historical and institutional fabric of a society (Carruthers 14). Carruthers states that textualism is "Where literature is valued for its social functions, works (especially certain ones, of course) provide the sources of a group's memory" (Carruthers 13–14). In the case of the *Commedia*, this is particularly relevant due to its

foundational effect on the formation of the Italian language as well as its exalted position in even modern Italian culture. In Italy, it is comparable to William Shakespeare in England. On a purely textual level, the *Commedia* has become embedded in the popular imagination and has therefore become a 'source of a group's memory'.⁹ In contrast to fundamentalism, textualism considers literature to exist unconfined to a document or book. Textualism considers literature to be intricately embedded in a group's collective memory and is therefore not necessarily associated with the physicality of a book as an object or entity. Textualism can therefore lead to additional material being added, in layers, to the original narrative using glosses, illustrations, commentary, dictionaries and so on. Adaptations, translations, and other interpretations become a part of the text and create additional meaning which show that "In the process of textualizing, the original work acquires commentary and gloss; this activity is not regarded as something other than the text, but is the mark of textualization itself (Carruthers 14). In textualism, a text gathers additional material associated with the text which then contributes to the reading and interpretation. Materials such as illustrations, glosses, commentary etc., by different writers and readers become a part of the original text which shows a communal effort to interpret the text across time and in various contexts. These additional materials are then associated with the text itself, often as an indistinguishable part of it, regardless of whether they are written by the original author of the text or not. Therefore, in terms of textualism, the meaning of the text is held in the collective memory of a culture rather than in the text itself. It is through this process of *memoria* that a text becomes embedded in a culture's collective memory.

Saint Thomas Aquinas's *Disputatio*

Both Noakes and Carruthers present their theories in such a way that they exist as a dichotomy that is subsequently broken down and allows for the movement between two points. It is neither Noakes nor Carruthers's claim that a text can either be one or the other, and not both. In the case of Noakes, she states that it is impossible to isolate exegesis from interpretation, or interpretation from exegesis. This is because "At both

⁹ This can be seen in the various adaptations of, in particular, Dante's conception of Hell in other media.

exegetical and interpretive poles, then, the reader's stance with regard to history is unsteady, serving to impel a restless movement, a kind of oscillation between the two" (Noakes 12). In order for an exegete to recreate the historical conditions in which the text originated, they must first interpret their place in history, and in order for an interpreter to apply their own context to the text, they must choose a version of the text that they consider to be the immutable and intentional words of the author.

Noakes names Dante as an author who can transcend this dichotomy between exegesis and interpretation. While he does this throughout the *Commedia* in different ways, it is explicit in the early cantos of *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V*. She argues that interpretation and exegesis might appear to be contradictory, but are nevertheless dependent on one another and not mutually exclusive:

Ultimately, the interpreter who does not also read as an exegete has no text. Similarly, the exegete, who must first of all establish or choose the edition of a text to work from, cannot have a text without first making a judgment about that text's meaning which is necessarily interpretive (Noakes 13).

Rather than being mutually exclusive, it is the case that "Exegesis and interpretation, then, are two distinct kinds of reading that cannot be kept separate, for one mirrors and depends upon the other" (Noakes 13). Carruthers achieves a similar breakdown of her dichotomy between fundamentalism and textualism. She maintains that "These two extremes are always in tension with one another; one can analyze many changes in literary theory as efforts to redress an imbalance of one over the other" (Carruthers 13). She shows that there have been periods of literary history in which one might be favoured over the other. For instance, Carruthers describes "...some Biblical scholars of the thirteenth century stressed the literal 'intention' of the text in order to redress what they saw as an excess of interpretative commentary on the part of earlier exegetes..." (Carruthers 13). Therefore, while one pole might be emphasised over the other at certain periods, they remain locked together in a response to one another. The terms presented in Noakes's and Carruthers's theories are useful for this current enquiry that considers the role of interpretation and misinterpretation of Dante's allegory. This is because the terms reveal different approaches to the act of reading

while also revealing how emphasising one can create the assumption that the other is a misinterpretation of the text. For instance, an exegetical reader, who approaches the text in a fundamentalist manner, will potentially consider an approach that values the role of Noakes's idea of interpretation and focuses on the text's textualism as constituting a misinterpretation of the text. The inverse would also be the case.

Nevertheless, the two poles of these theories as presented by Noakes and Carruthers are interconnected in the way that one cannot ultimately exist without the other. If so, there is a role that misinterpretation plays in the literary landscape and within the *Commedia*. These terms can be applied to the manner in which Dante's allegory is read and subsequently interpreted or misinterpreted. This is because, in revealing which pole of Noakes's and Carruthers's distinction is favoured over the other, it is possible to discern the underlying influences that influence a certain kind of reading or misreading of the *Commedia*.

It is therefore necessary to determine how to navigate these two poles of influences on interpretation and misinterpretation without favouring one over the other. In this, I will make use of Thomas Aquinas's procedure of *disputatio*. In John Pieper's Guide to Thomas Aquinas, he details this procedure:

...Thomas succeeds not only in presenting the opponent's divergent or flatly opposed opinion, together with the underlying line of reasoning, but also, many times, in presenting it better, more clearly, and more convincingly than the opponent himself might be able to do. In this procedure there emerges an element profoundly characteristic of St. Thomas' intellectual style: the spirit of the *disputatio*, of disciplined opposition; the spirit of genuine discussion which remains a dialogue even while it is a dispute. This spirit governs the inner structure of all St. Thomas's works. And I feel that in this generosity of spirit, too, the exemplary, the paradigmatic character of the doctor communis¹⁰ of Christendom is displayed (Pieper 77–78).

¹⁰ A title given to St. Thomas Aquinas as the most prominent theologian in the Catholic church. It can be translated from Latin to 'universal doctor'.

As stated in the quotation above, *disputatio* is a form of argumentation wherein both sides of the argument are presented in their entirety even as they exist in conflict with one another. St. Thomas Aquinas would present the opposing side of his argument with the same care and consideration that he would present his own argument. He maintained that one must fully understand any opposing argument in its entirety in order adequately to argue for one's own stance. A dialogue would then take place until both sides were in consensus. Pieper states that "Such conversation has as its aim not only communication, but also the clarifying of ideas, the finding and illuminating of truth – for both parties to the conversation, of course, do not hold the same opinions from the start" (Pieper 78). It is from this conflict that truth appears because "...if one wishes to find the truth one must first consider the opinions of those who judge differently" (Pieper 78). In this conception, truth would have been attained through this communal and communicative form of dialogue where contrasting and potentially conflicting opinions would have been presented in equal measure until an accord had been reached. Aquinas considered this form of dialogue between conflicting points to be the only viable method of achieving the truth. This method of 'arriving at the truth' acknowledges the following:

Anyone who considers dialogue, disputation, debate, to be a fundamental method for arriving at truth must already have concluded and stated that arriving at truth is an affair that calls for more power than the autarchic individual possesses. He must feel that common effort, perhaps the effort of everybody, is necessary. No one is sufficient unto himself and no one is completely superfluous; each person needs the other... (Pieper 82).

Therefore, there is an underlying assumption that truth can only be achieved through a communal, communicative shared effort. In this conception, 'truth' is not the pursuit of single individuals, disconnected from cultural or historical influences. This enquiry will therefore adopt the process of *disputatio* when considering differing and contrasting approaches towards the reading and interpretation of Dante Alighieri's the *Commedia*. It is through this process that an understanding of the way Dante's poem is read can be reached. *Disputatio* will therefore form the governing principle of this enquiry's

exploration into interpretation and misinterpretation of the *Commedia*. It is not my aim to dismiss these readings as fundamentally incorrect or correct, but rather to discover through the spirit of *disputatio* why certain readings of the *Commedia* occur and why certain readers consider these interpretations to be either valid or invalid readings.

This approach of *disputatio* that allows for the collapse of these kinds of binary opposition is in direct contrast with what Julian Baggini states is "... the *modus operandi* of Western philosophy as an attempt to remove from the world as many breaches of the Law of Excluded Middles as possible, leaving us with a clear distinction between propositions that are true and others that are false" (Baggini 58). The Law of the Excluded Middle refers to a rule in logic in which a proposition is either true or false, but never both. When applied to Carruthers's and Noakes's theories of reading, it would stipulate that a text can either be read in the mode of interpretation or exegesis, or fundamentalism or textualism, but never both. Additionally, the Law of the Excluded Middle might suggest that a reading of the *Commedia* is either an interpretation or a misinterpretation, but never both. However, Noakes and Carruthers state the exact opposite during their presentation of their theories, claiming that without both poles of influence on the act of interpretation, reading is not only stifled but ultimately impossible. Conversely, even a misinterpretation of the *Commedia* is, ultimately, an interpretation of it, displaying a certain way in which the text is read. In this way, this enquiry will not operate in the *modus operandi* of the Law of Excluded Middle, determining which kind of readings are true or false. I will be exploring the way the *Commedia* is read, an exploration that must include different possible interpretations and misinterpretations of the text. The landscape of Dantean scholarship is populated by scholarship that aims to provide a way of understanding the *Commedia*. Scholars such as Charles Singleton and Erich Auerbach deliver theories, contrasting or otherwise, on how the *Commedia* ought to be read. Their work is often prescriptive in nature, detailing how the *Commedia* should be read. Such works are rarely descriptive, aiming to show the way that the *Commedia* is read. While both Susan Noakes and Mary Carruthers mention Dante to a certain extent within their texts, neither of them focuses entirely on the role of interpretation and misinterpretation of the *Commedia*. Noakes states that there have been few enquiries

into the process of reading itself. There is the assumption that the way we read is static, unchangeable, and therefore the action of reading ostensibly has not changed from Giovanni Boccaccio to Charles Singleton. However, these two writers, as Dantean critics, produce two readings of the *Commedia* that are completely different and, in essence, are mutually exclusive and ultimately incommensurable. Instead of arguing whether Singleton's or Boccaccio's differing interpretations of the texts are ultimately misinterpretation, I will be examining them as readers, exploring the act of reading and interpretation, to transcend the Law of the Excluded through the spirit of *disputatio*. Therefore, if it is the case that "... readers as a group change over time, and each reader changes over small periods of time, from day to day, hour to hour" (Noakes ix) then an enquiry into the way the *Commedia* has been and continues to be read is necessary.

There are two main areas of research that I will be examining in this enquiry – allegory and translation. It is necessary to consider allegory because the way a reader conceives of allegory will have a seminal influence on the way that they understand the text to be constructed. Additionally, translation functions on the level of language, filling a pragmatic need of the reading Dante in the Anglosphere, and determines the shape that the *Commedia* takes for people who encounter it outside of its native Italy. In conjunction, allegory and translation influence the way the *Commedia* is read and interpreted or misinterpreted. I will first establish that "...[Dante's] works are also subtle investigations into the processes of reading" (Barański 58). I will show that, starting in the *Vita Nuova* and expanding into the *Commedia*, Dante engages with the process of reading through both interpretation and misinterpretation by creating an allegorical and mythical reinvention of his own biographical details. It is through this reinvention that Dante reads allegory into the biographical details of his own life, in particular the details surrounding his love for Beatrice, and this grants him the authority to speak of both divine and mundane matters that would previously only be the domain of the great Latin authors, such as Virgil. In this way, I will be looking at Dante as a reader, and the way he reads allegory into his own life.

It will then become necessary to discuss how the understanding of allegory shapes one's understanding of the *Commedia*. I will be comparing various modern understandings of allegory before delving into Dante's understanding of allegory as stipulated in his other texts, primarily the *Convivio* and the *Epistle to Can Grande*. The *Epistle* has become an increasingly controversial text in the landscape of contemporary Dantean scholarship, particularly in modern American twentieth-century scholarship, as its authenticity has come into doubt in the last century. It is on this point of the *Epistle* that I will transition into discussing Charles Singleton. I will argue that Singleton, prioritising what is stated in the *Epistle* over that which is stated in the *Convivio*, broke away from the hermeneutic continuity set by the early medieval commentators. In so doing, he created and subsequently dominated the American school of Dantean interpretation which, in essence, is a novel way of reading the poem. Some scholars have argued that this novel way of reading Dante, as distinct from their medieval, European predecessors, constitutes a misinterpretation of the text but is nevertheless the major driving force of contemporary Dantean commentary. I will therefore be focusing on the modern, twentieth-century American school of Dantean scholarship, in its comparison with the hermeneutic continuity set by the early medieval, Italian commentaries on the poem. My reason for focusing on the American school is that it presents a singular, distinct way of reading the poem that could, potentially, constitute as a misinterpretation if one were to consider the viewpoint of the medieval, European scholars which the American school broke away from. The modern, twentieth-century American school of Dantean interpretation thereby presents itself as a significant exemplar for the role that both interpretation and misinterpretation play in Dante's allegory.

Modern, American twentieth-century Dantean commentary differs from medieval commentary most distinctly in the way that it emphasises the literal sense of Dantean allegory over the figurative sense. I will then argue that modern American Dantean scholarship's emphasis on the literal sense influences the way that Dante's language is translated into English and, conversely, the manner in which the *Commedia* is read in the Anglosphere. For this discussion, I will consider the way Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the first American to translate the *Commedia*, engaged with the text.

Throughout this exploration into how the *Commedia* is read, I will be considering a variety of scholars and critics' relationship with the text. These include, but are not limited to, Dante himself, Giovanni Boccaccio, Charles Singleton and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. I will be examining them primarily as readers of the *Commedia*, rather than commentators. I will therefore argue that the way they interpret or potentially misinterpret the *Commedia* is contingent on the way they read Dante's allegory. Through the spirit of *disputatio*, I will break down the models of readings as described by Noakes and Carruthers to showcase the various ways in which Dante's allegory is read and interpreted, even in ways that initially appear to be contradictory or mutually exclusive.

The major question that this current enquiry seeks to answer is how Dante's allegory has been read and subsequently interpreted or misinterpreted. I will be questioning how Dante understands allegory by exploring how he writes allegory into the biographical details of his own life through the figure of Beatrice. Additionally, I will be exploring the different ways that the modern twentieth-century American school of Dantean interpretation conceptualizes allegory and how this differs from the way that Dante, in his medieval Italian context, conceptualized it. There is a difference in the manner in which Dante conceptualizes allegory in the *Convivio* and the *Epistle to Can Grande*. Therefore, I will investigate how this influences modern, twentieth-century American scholarship, particularly in reference to Charles Singleton. I will investigate Singleton through the question of how the prioritization of one of Dante's secondary texts over another influences the way that Dante's allegory is read and interpreted. Lastly, I will answer the question of how translation affects the way that Dante's allegory is read, both in his use of the vernacular and in the Anglosphere's pragmatic need to read this medieval Italian text in English. It is on this point of translation that a major limitation of this enquiry presents itself.

One of the major limitations of this enquiry is its reliance upon the translations of the *Commedia*. This is both a limitation of my enquiry and a limitation that influences the way the *Commedia* is read and interpreted in contexts that differ from its medieval, Italian origins. The study of the *Commedia* outside of its original context is always, in

essence, an act of translation. The choice and availability of certain translations is therefore a limitation that frames this current enquiry. In this enquiry, I will compare the ways that various translators have approached the language of the *Commedia* and how these approaches affect the interpretation of its allegory. There have been many translations of the *Commedia*, and it is therefore not possible to survey them all comprehensively. There are certain prominent translations that are not present in this current enquiry. This is largely for the sake of brevity because, as stated previously, there have been many translations of the *Commedia*. For instance, I have excluded Robert and Jean Hollander's translation. This is because I have instead chosen to focus on Singleton's translation since he was Hollander's mentor, and I only plan to discuss Hollander in conjunction with Singleton.¹¹ Each translation that has been chosen for this enquiry has its strengths and weaknesses as well as its own unique approach to reading the poem. I have focused on the most common translations encountered in the Anglosphere but have also endeavoured to consider a few relatively recent translations in order to showcase the current landscape of Dantean interpretation. The translators that will be examined in this enquiry will include Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Anthony Esolen, John Ciardi, Ciaran Carson, Robin Kirkpatrick, Dorothy Sayers, Charles Singleton, Allen Mandelbaum and J.G. Nichols. As for Dante's secondary texts, the *Vita Nuova's* translation is from Anthony Mortimer, the *Convivio* was translated by A.S. Kline and *De Vulgari Eloquentia* was translated by Marianne Shapiro. In this enquiry, the translation from J.G. Nichols will be the default translation of the *Commedia*.

Unless otherwise stipulated, the translations used in this enquiry will be from the Nichols translation. I will also include the original Italian alongside the translations that I use presented in this enquiry. Nichols states that his translation is based on the original Italian edition by Natalino Sapegno. Additionally, Nichols is the translator for Giovanni Boccaccio's *Trattatello in Laude di Dante* which I will also make use of in this enquiry. Nichols's translation was selected because it is a relatively recent translation and has been completed or revised within the last decade. Nichols's translation of *Inferno* was initially published in 2005, but then revised and republished in 2010, after

¹¹ I also have not chosen to discuss Mark Musa and Robert Pinsky's translation. While I am aware of these translations, I have chosen not to foreground them.

which Nichols's translation of *Purgatorio* was published in 2011 and *Paradiso* in 2012. The editions of all three canticles that I possess includes additional glossaries, biographies, and illustrations and it was released in 2020. An additional reason for this choice of translation is because it does not attempt, as other translations do, to recreate the *terza rima* that runs throughout the original Italian. Some translations, like Dorothy Sayers' and Ciaran Carson's, attempt to recreate this rhyming scheme in English. Because there is no simple one-to-one ratio among words in any given language and since words that rhyme in Italian do not necessarily rhyme in English, the translation of the rhyming scheme requires a sacrifice of some other element. Often, this is either the allegorical meaning inherent in the text or the grammatical structure of the English language. Since the Nichols's translation does not attempt to recreate the *terza rima*, there is no such sacrifice which is why it works well as a default translation for this enquiry. Additionally, the Nichols's translation does not attempt to use archaic English words to appear more aligned with a perceived medieval context of the original medieval text. By this I am referring to the use of words that are associated with a specific era, such that it sounds archaic, such as 'thou' or 'thy'. In other words, I aim to avoid translators who attempt to translate Dante's original medieval Italian into an associated English medieval equivalent. J.G. Nichols's translation makes use of simple, modern language while still maintaining the text's original poetry rather than attempting to reach for a bastardised form of medieval English or attempting to rescue the *terza rima* during translation. For these reasons, Nichols's translation will be the default translation of this enquiry.

I will conclude this introductory chapter with a quick sketch of the structure of this enquiry. This dissertation has been divided into six chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. This introductory first chapter has established the conceptual groundwork for the subsequent chapters by exploring Noakes's theories of exegesis and interpretation as well as Carruthers's theories of fundamentalism and textualism. It also examined St. Thomas Aquinas concept of *disputatio* and how it can be used to create concord between discordant lines of argumentation. I will expand on this conceptual groundwork in chapter two by examining Dante as a reader, focusing on the biographical approach of his writing. This chapter will therefore focus primarily on the

treatment of love in the *Vita Nuova*. I will be comparing and contrasting the memorial approach of Giovanni Boccaccio to Ciaran Carson's more documentary understanding of Dante's mythical reinvention of his own biography. In chapter three, I will explore allegory by examining various modern examples of defining it before examining Dante's own understanding of allegory as it is presented in the *Convivio* and the *Epistle to Can Grande*. As I progress into chapter four, I will examine how the emphasis on either the *Convivio* or the *Epistle* influences the subsequent interpretation of Dante's allegory. This will be achieved primarily through a survey of Charles S. Singleton's theories of the allegory of theologians and the way that his emphasis on the *Epistle*, rather than the *Convivio*, breaks away from the hermeneutic tradition of Dantean criticism. Additionally, I will examine Singleton's theories in conjunction, and at times in conflict, with the theories of figural fulfilment established by Erich Auerbach. In chapter five, I will consider the issue of translation as this is ultimately an Anglophone approach to Dante studies. I will examine the way in which Dante's subversive use of the vernacular is, in itself, an act of translation. In an extension of the previous chapter studies on the American school's emphasis on the literal sense, I will show the way that this emphasis has affected the English translation of the *Commedia* since the first American translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Finally, I will conclude in chapter six, with an examination of heresy as the sin of misinterpretation. This thesis will encounter various categories of either fixed or closed interpretations of the *Commedia* including exegesis and interpretation, fundamentalism and textualism, documentary and memorial, modern and medieval, sacred and secular, the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians, the *Epistle* and the *Convivio*, Latin and the vernacular, as well as the feminine and the masculine. It is through the principle of *disputatio* that I aim not to create dichotomous binaries but rather expansive understandings of the role that misinterpretation plays in the interpretation of the *Commedia*.

CHAPTER 2: READING DANTE

“An educated Tuscan of Dante’s generation would have gathered together, from his reading and from conversation, a body of information about the world and his relation to it that formed a remarkably coherent whole and, if he were a poet, one that allowed him to express it in terms of his own experience of love”

- William Anderson, ‘Dante the Maker’

The above quote comes from William Anderson’s *Dante the Maker*.¹² This quotation emphasises the coherent whole of the medieval conception of the universe as well as the manner in which a poet of that era would have expressed this coherence through their own personal experience of love. This quotation is relevant to the current aims of this chapter as it illustrates the different context and conception of the universe from which the *Commedia* originated. It is from an understanding of Dante’s context and conception of the universe that an understanding of his mythic and allegorical reinvention of the literary portrayal of his biography can be derived. I will draw on the *Vita Nuova* and the conventions of the *dolce stil novo* style, as well as additional materials, glosses and glossaries such as those that accompany Anthoy Mortimer’s translation of the *Vita Nuova* and Ciaran Carson’s translation of *Inferno*. Additional materials such as these have become mainstays in the translations that I will make use of. I will also make use of the first of Dante’s biographers, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Trattatello in Laude di Dante*.¹³ The reason for focusing on these texts is to reveal the way they shape or re-shape the potential interpretation and understanding of the biographical and autobiographical details of Dante’s life and, subsequently, of the *Commedia*. It is through these additional materials, glosses, illustrations, and glossaries that Noakes’s conception of textualism is made manifest in the ongoing interpretation of the *Commedia*. It is through this textualism that ‘new life’ is continuously granted to

¹² The quotation occurs at the start of chapter eight – ‘Convergent Worlds: The Scientific and Symbolic Modes of Thought Available to Dante and his Contemporaries’.

¹³ Translated into English as ‘Life of Dante’ or ‘Treatise in Praise of Dante’.

the *Commedia* and its surrounding texts. The major focus of this current chapter will be the *Vita Nuova*. I will be exploring the various ways in which a reader's context affects the literary portrayal of Dante's life and how the poet's own mythic and allegorical reinvention might be understood.

There are three major claims that I will make in this chapter. Firstly, there are distinct modern and medieval conceptions of the universe which must be acknowledged in any sound interpretation of the *Commedia*. Secondly, Dante is able to comprehend both his own life and his existence in his conception of the universe through the allegory and figure of Beatrice. Thirdly, additional material like maps, illustrations, or glossaries in new translations can influence interpretation. These three claims are not disconnected. In conjunction with one another, they work to create Dante's mythic and allegorical reinvention of the literary portrayal of his biography. This begins with an exegetical acceptance of Dante's temporal distance from a modern reader and the necessity of a fundamentalist rendering of Dante in his own context. There is then an acknowledgement of the vital role that the figure of Beatrice plays in Dante's understanding of his life and his own medieval understanding of the universe. Finally, it must be noted that additional materials, often added centuries after the *Commedia's* initial conception, can further alter the perception and understanding of the text. This serves to create a textualist, interpretative framework through which the *Commedia* can be understood. It is not my aim in this current chapter to remove this textual layering, thereby claiming that there exists a true, immutable reading of the *Commedia* that is accessible once the historical, cultural, and linguistic debris is removed. Rather, it is the case that I seek to acknowledge the existence of these additional materials and examine their influence on way that the *Commedia* is read. For this reason, this chapter will make use of Noakes's formulation of interpretation and exegesis as well as Carruthers's formulation of fundamentalism and textualism. This is because these formulations aid in the exploration in how Dante's mythic and allegorical portrayal of his life is, firstly, written by him in a literary portrayal and, secondly, how subsequent readers interpreted this literary portrayal. It is necessary to consider the differences between the modern and medieval conceptions of the universe and the place in which

Dante occupies in them as this will form the foundation for the ongoing comparison between modern and medieval approaches to reading the *Commedia*.

In the quotation in the epigraph of this chapter, Anderson acknowledges that poetry might have had a role in expressing an understanding of the world in terms of the experience of love. This is notable because Dante imbues the biographical details of his own life with allegory. Additionally, this allegory is centred around Dante's experience of love. In the case of Dante, this is achieved through his creation of the image of Beatrice, a woman whom he reportedly loved deeply and around whom he crafted a great deal of his allegory. In Dante's allegorical construction of his autobiographical writings, Beatrice is of paramount importance. According to Charles Williams in the *Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*, Dante constructs the allegory of his life and the philosophies of his writings through the image of Beatrice:

There were, in [Dante's] mind, many other shapes – of people and places, of philosophies and poets. All these had their own identities and were each autonomous. But in his poetry Dante determined to relate them all to the Beatrician figure, and he brought that figure as near as he could express it, of Almighty God. It is, we¹⁴ all agree, one of the marks of his poetic genius. But it is something else also. It is the greatest expression in European literature of the way of approach of the soul to its ordained end through the affirmation of the validity of all those images, beginning with the image of a girl (Williams 8–9).

Therefore, Dante is relating the entire scope of his poetry to the figure of Beatrice and, in so doing, is also relating it to God. Dante reaches for the inexplicable through 'the image of a girl' that he first met as a child and later saw on the streets of Florence as a young adult. It is through this ordinary image of a girl that Dante reaches for the inexplicable image of God. This is because "Beatrice was, in her degree, an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and in some sense of Almighty God himself" (Williams 8). According to Williams, Dante does this without sacrificing the objective, literal Beatrice because "...she also remained Beatrice right to the end; her derivation

¹⁴ By 'we', Williams is likely referring to the continuation of Dantean scholarship as it exists in Europe and, more specifically, in English commentary.

was not to obscure her identity and more than her identity should hide her derivation” (Williams 8). While Beatrice is present in most of Dante’s writings, either explicitly or implicitly, this chapter will focus on the *Vita Nuova*, in which she is the main subject.

Beatrice is an expression of Dante’s understanding of love and, ultimately, the entirety of the Christian conception of the universe. Anderson goes on to describe what he would imagine a person, in general, would have believed if they existed in the same universe of thought as Dante had. He delivers the following hypothetical situation in which he imagines and empathises what it would be like to experience the world as someone who lived in the medieval era:

From the Tuscan hills at night, he would gaze up from an earth that he knew to be stationary into the night sky which he knew to be darkened by the cone of the earth’s shadow travelling around the earth as the sun whirled about it every twenty-four hours. He would pick out the planets, aware of their contrary motions, and distinguish them from the fixed stars against whose zodiacal band the planets moved. The conjunctions of planets and zodiacal signs would be deciding the characters and fates of those being born at that moment and also working the changes of history, raising up and casting down the fortunes of men. Everything above him was in motion, hurtled round by the incredibly fast impetus of the invisible Primum Mobile, the outermost sphere whose motion was caused by its love for God in the stillness of the Empyrean, a love so great that with every part of its being it longed to touch the Godhead. Everything above him was the work of intelligences and of angels; the brightness of the stars would convince him that they were alive and make him reflect on the intuitively of the stars to the point that his own experience of love welled up in him, and he saw his own character, the stars, his lady, and the sapiential wisdom of the angels forming a connected pattern that explained the expansion of his emotion and understanding under the power of love (Anderson 103).

This reveals that Dante had a different understanding of the universe, the way it functioned and the way it moved, that was distinct from the modern, scientific conception of the universe. Arguably, the quotation is Anderson’s attempt to translate

the medieval conception of the universe in such a way that a modern audience will be able to understand it. In *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, C.S. Lewis discusses the Ptolemaic conception of the universe¹⁵ and how this compares to the contemporary understanding of the universe:

...because the medieval universe is finite, it has a shape, the perfect spherical shape, containing within itself an ordered variety. Hence to look out on the night sky with modern eyes is like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist, or looking about one in a trackless forest – trees forever and no horizon. To look up at the towering medieval universe is much more like looking at a great building. The ‘space’ of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie; the spheres of the old present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony. That is the sense in which our universe is romantic, and theirs was classical (Lewis 99).

In Lewis’s comparison, the medieval understanding of the universe is finite and harmonious while the modern understanding of the universe is infinite and chaotic. It is necessary to acknowledge that Dante’s understanding differs from the modern understanding of the universe. This is because, in the *Commedia*, he walks from one end of his universe to the other, with Beatrice as the guide to his final destination¹⁶, the ultimate representation of the image of God that holds the entirety of the universe in a finite, harmonious shape. It is within this Ptolemaic conception of the universe that Dante translates his own autobiographical details into allegory. In Dante’s conception of the universe, it is love, and not gravity, that “...moves the sun and all the stars” (*l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle*; Par 33.145). In order to fully comprehend how Anderson, as both a reader and a writer, approaches this differing conception of the universe, it is necessary to consider him through Noakes’s and Carruthers’s

¹⁵ The Ptolemaic conception of the universe refers to the mathematical model derived by Ptolemy in about 150 CE. It is geocentric, with a stationary Earth at the centre and the other ‘heavenly bodies’ moved in perfect harmony. It was replaced by the Copernican system in the 16th and 17th centuries.

¹⁶ While it is the case the Saint Bernard of Clairvaux is Dante’s final guide, it is Beatrice who is Dante’s guide for the majority of *Paradiso*.

formulations of exegesis and interpretation as well as textualism and fundamentalism respectively. Anderson is attempting to re-create the context in which the *Commedia* was originally written. It displays Carruthers's conception of the fundamentalist urge to place Dante back into his original context. Additionally, it displays Noakes's exegetical understanding of the temporal distance between the modern reader and Dante's conception of the universe. The quotation attempts to bridge the temporal distance by placing the reader back into the mindset of a contemporary of Dante thereby bestowing Dante's understanding of the universe onto the reader. However, the quotation additionally aligns with Carruthers's conception of textualism as it uses a hypothetical situation to empathise and then interpret the way someone living at that time would have experienced their universe through their own understanding of it. Anderson attempts to recreate a sense of *memoria* for the modern reader rather than objectively documenting the beliefs of that age. He imagines what an unknown individual at the time would have seen, believed, and known to be true of his universe as he looked up at the sky. This is necessary for the following reason:

...[Dante's] understanding of reality is so foreign to our own. To present Dante's ideas about cosmos, God, salvation, history, or poetry within the unquestioned context of widely diffused post-Enlightenment presupposition (as is usually done) can be self-defeating: those ideas will emerge distorted or diminished, deprived of their force, of the penetrating understanding that formed them (Moevs 3).

Therefore, any attempt to interpret Dante's conception of the universe, which is notably different from the modern conception, is an exercise in empathy that simultaneously preserves and re-interprets the text. Anderson's attempts to reconstruct the worldview of the poet in order to grant a greater understanding of the poetry. This is necessary because of all the myriad ways that a reader's context might influence the interpretation of Dante's literary portrayal of his own life. To understand Dante's own mythic and allegorical reinvention of his biography, one is required to consider it through the lens of a world in which this mythic and allegory reinvention of the objective facts of one's own life was not only possible but natural. For this reason, I

will now discuss the *dolce stil novo* movement, in which Dante first introduced himself as a poet in the writing of the *Vita Nuova*.

***Dolce Stil Novo* and the Authority to Speak of Oneself**

In this section, I will explore the *dolce stil novo* movement and the manner in which it affected Dante's mythic and allegorical reinvention of the literary portrayal of his own life. I will examine the major themes, conventions, and aspects associated with *dolce stil novo*. I will then discuss how Dante uses *dolce stil novo* to create a sense of authority in his own poetry allowing him to write like "...God, the absolute and transcendent Author of authors" (Ascoli 2007, 48). I will show that Dante created a symbolic and symbiotic relationship between himself and Beatrice, and between himself and his writings. In so doing, he is able to ensure his own authority as an author of the *Vita Nuova* and, ultimately, as the poet of the *Commedia*. This is necessary due to his presence in the text, which might have otherwise undermined his authority to speak of such exalted matters. Ultimately, I aim to show that the figure of Beatrice is crucial to Dante's development as a poet throughout his life and into maturity with the *Commedia*.

Charles Williams describes the *Vita Nuova* as "... as a conventional book; that is, it is written according to the literary habits of his time" (Williams 17). The convention, the literary habit of the time, that Williams is referring to here is the *dolce stil novo* style, a literary movement in 13th and 14th century Italy that Dante identifies himself with in *Purgatorio*. *Dolce stil novo* can be translated from its original Italian to mean 'sweet new style'. It is a movement in which Dante and his friend, Guido Cavalcanti, participated. The conventions of the *dolce stil novo* are largely concerned with the representation of a feminine form as a way to access a greater understanding of divine love. The major themes of the *dolce stil novo* included "...the pains of unrequited passion, the transcendent power of love, [and] the semi-angelic status of the lady..." (Mortimer 207). It is characterised by an adoration and exaltation of the feminine love and beauty to the point of bestowing a measure of godhood upon the subject of their poetry. The *dolce stil nuovo* is seen most explicitly in Dante's *canzoni* as well as in the *Vita Nuova*. It is most evident in Dante's image of Beatrice and the exalted place that

she holds in his heart and in the universe. These themes and conventions are not isolated to Dante nor to the *dolce stil novo*. Anthony Mortimer, in his translation of the *Vita Nuova*, acknowledges that they were found in other places and at other times. He states that similar themes were present “...in the poetry of Guittone [d’Arezzo] and Bonaguinta [Orbicciani]” (Mortimer 207). Mortimer identifies two ways in which the *dolce stil novo* is distinct from the poetry that came before it: “On the one hand, a fresh and intense interest in the psychology and ontology of love in terms of Aristotelian and scholastic philosophy; on the other a mystical strain deriving from Franciscan spirituality” (Mortimer 207). Dante was writing in “...the conventions inherited from the troubadours and their Sicilian and Italian imitators” (Reynolds) and, by the time that Beatrice died, Dante had gained a reputation as a leading poet in Florence, among the others who shared his style and had gathered around Cavalcanti. It is therefore the case that “...the *Vita Nuova* is concerned primarily with defining, and then redefining, Dante’s place within the emergent tradition of vernacular love poetry” (Ascoli 2007, 50). The *Vita Nuova* was therefore written in this style and shares many of the stock situations that were common in other *dolce stil novo* works:

The stock situation were: the torment of unrequited love, the obligation to keep secret the name of the beloved, the device of a ‘screen-love’ to deceive the inquisitive, the personification of Death as a pitiless destroyer of youth, misunderstandings with the beloved, intolerable ecstasy in her presence and anguished mortification at her mockery. A new ingredient had recently been added by a poet of Bologna, Guido Guinizelli, who created the concept of the *cor gentile* (‘gentle, or noble heart’), a quality of mind and soul which alone made it possible to experience the elevating effect of love (Reynolds).

These situations are overwhelmingly present in the *Vita Nuova*. Dante has an unrequited love for Beatrice and hides his affection for her using multiple ‘screen-ladies’. He experiences ‘intolerable ecstasy’ at her simple greetings and experiences ‘anguished mortification’ when she withholds it from him. Additionally, both Love and Death are personified in the *Vita Nuova*, and the text ultimately ends with her untimely death at the age of twenty-four.

Dante also makes use of the concept of *cor gentile* to the extent that he claims that only those who share this 'quality of mind and soul' will be able to fully experience and interpret his writing. In this pursuit of the *dolce stil novo* and all that it entailed, Beatrice is Dante's exemplar. She is conceived by Dante as one who manifests the conception of *cor gentile* and Dante, in writing about her, is able to access it. This can be acknowledged in the following:

Love not only reveals the qualities and the soul of the beloved to the lover. It can also launch the beginnings of self-discovery. It did this at the most precocious age in Dante, exalting and changing his perceptions and making to his eyes, as it did to one of his friends and contemporaries when in love, the ramparts of Florence seem of gold and the river Arno flow with balsam (Anderson 75).

Dante's love for Beatrice, and the subsequent writings about her, is what launches the beginning of his self-discovery. He can write about himself, create a mythic and allegorical reinvention of the literary portrayal of his life, because he is also writing about Beatrice. Arguably, it is for this reason that Dante frames the concept of *cor gentile* as being one of Love's servants in both the *Vita Nuova* and in the *Commedia*. In the *Vita Nuova*, he connects a subservience and understanding of Love to the process of interpretation when he states the following:

There is no way that this can be explained to those who are not likewise counted among Love's faithful servants; but to Love's faithful the meaning is quite clear. And therefore there is no point in offering an explanation, because anything I might say would be either useless or superfluous (VN 53).

This passage occurs at the end of *Vita Nuova XIV* where an unnamed friend has brought Dante to a wedding and Dante encounters Beatrice there. His body reacts physically before he sees her which shows that she has an immense impact on his spirit. The ladies that surround Beatrice ridicule Dante's condition and he is forced to flee. This episode shows Dante's increasing inability to behave appropriately in the public sphere and singles him out from those around him as one who understands and listens to Love's actions. The *canzone* in this chapter attempts to explain his strange

behaviour. While Dante goes into detail about the way he structured his poem, he ultimately accepts that those who are not 'servants of Love' in the way he is will not fully comprehend his meaning or be able to understand his strange social behaviour. There is a truth within the text that is only accessible if the reader is a certain kind of individual, mainly in this case, one of Love's faithful. Otherwise, the true interpretation of the text is inaccessible.

In the *Commedia*, Dante further develops this conception of the *cor gentile* as being one of Love's faithful servants in the spirit of *dolce stil novo*. Dante references this style by name in *Purgatorio XXIV* when he meets Bonaguinta da Lucca who references Dante's *canzone* 'Ladies who have intelligence of love'. In the original Italian, the phrase is *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore* and "...refers to an instinctive or innate receptivity in matters of love, possessed by certain ladies and by male lovers, including [...] the poet himself" (Heiney 173). This is a *canzone* that originally appears in the *Vita Nuova XIX*. Arguably, Dante's response to Bonaguinta's praise of his poetry encapsulates the style's main themes of Divine Love, Beauty, and religious revelation:

And I replied: "I'm simply one who, when
Love breathes, takes notes of it, and in Love's fashion
Articulates what he dictates within"
Purg 24.52–54

'E io a lui: "I' mi son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quell modo
ch'e ditta dentro vo significando."
Purg 24.52–54

It is from this part of *Purgatorio* that the *dolce stil novo* movement gets its name. It describes the almost symbiotic, poetic relationship between Dante and his subject. His subject, in this case, is Beatrice and the love that he experiences for her. The way in

which he conceives of Beatrice, as a figure and image of love that is close to godlike, allows Dante, in turn, to conceive of himself as not merely a poet but as one of Love's servants. Dante suggests that those without a conception of the *cor gentile* and who are therefore not servants of love will not be able to access a true understanding of the poem. However, in this tercet from the *Commedia*, Dante acts as Love's servant in such a way as to document and then translate Love's breathing and articulation into poetry. He is listening to Love's words and then representing them or translating them to the reader. This encapsulates Dante's poetic development from the *Vita Nuova* to the *Commedia*, where, instead of restricting access, the *cor gentile* allows him to grant access to the reader.

In tandem, this subservient relationship that Dante creates between himself and Love in both the *Commedia* and in the *Vita Nuova* is what allows him to take note of Love's articulations and thus create poetry. This symbolic and symbiotic relationship is necessary because, unlike Beatrice and unlike God, Dante acknowledges that he cannot create something out of nothing and requires this symbiosis to facilitate and articulate his own poetry in the spirit of the conception of the *cor gentile*. He does this because his "...personal presence compromises credibility" (Ascoli 2007, 52) as is noted in *Book I* of the *Convivio*. Dante discusses the dangers of speaking of oneself in the second chapter and concludes that it is necessary for him to do because "Fear of discredit moves me, and a desire moves me to give that instruction which others truly cannot give" (Con 9). It is the symbolic relationship between himself and Beatrice, in the way that he allegorically aligns her with God, that gives him the authority as a poet who is allowed to write of such things. Dante uses "...a first-person singular writing to counter the negative effect of personal presence" (Ascoli 2007, 52). This grants him the authority to write about himself as well as the authority to conceive of a woman as being close to divinity. It is through his mythical and allegorical representation of Beatrice, and the way that she made him into a poet, that he is granted the authority to write of himself. This is because every time he is writing about himself, or his own experiences, he is really writing about Beatrice. Additionally, whenever he is writing about Beatrice, he is really writing about God.

In summation, the *dolce stil novo* was a style of poetry that Dante participated in during his youth. It was in the *dolce stil novo* movement that he initially introduced himself as a poet. It was at this point that he wrote the *Vita Nuova*. This text shared many conventions with the *dolce stil novo* style and is Dante's attempt to find his place within that tradition. As was often the case in *dolce stil novo* poetry, Dante created a figure of a woman who had access to 'the intelligence of love'. By writing about this figure of a woman, who is close to divinity, Dante is subsequently granted the authority to write about himself and, in so doing, mythically and allegorically reinvent the literary portrayal of his life. Therefore, the *dolce stil novo* inspired Dante's mythic rewriting of his own life. This is most evident in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*.

Memoria and Temporality in the *Vita Nuova*.

According to the *Vita Nuova*, and subsequent writings from Dante, his meeting with Beatrice had an unparalleled impact on Dante and the facilitation of his creative processes. Beatrice became a symbol of the pinnacle of philosophical and religious perfection in Dante's writings. She has been identified with Bice Portinari and died, likely in childbirth, at the age of twenty-four. Dante first met Beatrice in childhood, when he was nine years old. This meeting is described in *the Vita Nuova*:

Nine times since my birth had the heaven of light revolved in its orbit, returning to the same place, when before my eyes there first appeared the glorious lady of my mind, called Beatrice by many who did not even know what her name was. She had been in this life for the time it took the heaven of fixed stars to move one twelfth of a degree towards the east, so that she appeared to me towards the beginning of her ninth year and I saw her towards the end of my own ninth year (VN 5).

Dante places Beatrice in the context of his life by mapping out the exact placement of the stars at the moment that they met. It is the case that "To modern readers all this may seem an unnecessarily complex way of indicating that Dante was almost nine and Beatrice eight years and four months at the time of their first meeting in May 1274..." (Mortimer 172) but this perfectly emphasises Dante's ongoing concerns with temporality and *memoria*. He situates his meeting with Beatrice within the context of

the entirety of his conception of the universe, detailing the moment down to the movement of the planets, thereby satisfying the condition of temporality. By writing the *Vita Nuova*, which is self-described as “...the book of my memory...” (Mortimer 3), Dante is able to satisfy the condition of *memoria* by immortalising Beatrice in both the text and in his memory. Beatrice’s position in the allegorical and mathematical scheme of the universe is only fully comprehended after her death. It is therefore only in *Vita Nuova* XXIX where the full significance of the number nine and its connection to Beatrice is revealed. Dante explains when precisely she died according to various calendars, including Arabian, Syriac and Roman. Using these three calendars, Dante shows that “...the number nine is revealed as present in all three elements (day, month, year) of the relevant date...” (Mortimer 185). Dante explains the significance of the number nine in relation to Beatrice, her life and her death:

Why this number nine was so closely associated with her might be explained as follows. According to both Ptolemy and Christian truth, there are nine moving heavens; and, according to common astrological opinion, these heavens influence the earth below according to their reciprocal relations; therefore, the number nine was associated with her to show that, at her conception, all the nine moving heavens were in perfect conjunction with each other. That is one reason; but if one thinks more deeply on the matter in the light of infallible truth, then this number means Beatrice herself (VN 123).

Dante associates the number nine with Beatrice completely and, in so doing, places her within the context of a conception of a universe operating in a precise allegorical pattern. By doing this, Dante aims to recontextualise Beatrice’s death. Her death might have appeared to be chaotic and arbitrary in its suddenness. Dante’s focus on the number nine and placing her in the grander concept of a universe that is laden with meaning and significance, that works with mathematical certainty, can be read as an attempt to imbue her death with a significance that it otherwise appeared not have had. By interpreting her life through this allegorical construction of the number nine, Dante ensures that she becomes mythical and immortal. The dates of Beatrice’s birth and death signify something deeper, extend beyond themselves, and ensure that these

events are imbued with a certainty of true meaning and are not merely a consequence of chaos. As she was only a young woman, about the age of twenty-four, it would have likely been a sudden, inexplicable death. It is notable that she likely died in childbirth, which would have been one of the most common causes of death for women in the medieval era. Her death would have been sudden, meaningless, and common for a woman at that time. Therefore, Dante recontextualises Beatrice's death as an expression of a harmonious and finite universe, something that was inevitable as it was pre-ordained by God, rather than have it remain inexplicable, chaotic, and meaningless. Anthony Mortimer, translator of *the Vita Nuova*, emphasises that "This excursion upon the number nine confirms that Dante is more concerned to stress the ultimate significance of Beatrice than to exploit the pathos of her death" (Mortimer 185). Dante's documentary exposition of the number nine and its significance is ultimately highly subjective and emotional as it transforms what could have been a tragedy into a miracle. This grants Beatrice's life and existence a greater sense of meaning and significance which could not be overshadowed by her sudden, inexplicable death. Dante ends *Vita Nuova XXIX* by stating that "Perhaps some deeper mind might see a yet deeper reason behind all this; but this is the reason that I see that pleases me the most" (VN 123). In this statement, Dante is arguably inviting the reader into his own interpretation of the events, inviting them to attempt to make sense of his own grief through an allegorical depiction of the mathematical and astrological understanding of the universe. He is also appealing to a higher power, arguably God, to imbue Beatrice's life and death with even further meaning that Dante cannot see. Nevertheless, Dante acknowledges that this is the explanation, for Beatrice's life and death, that pleases him the most.

The way that Dante imbues Beatrice's life and subsequent death with allegorical meaning by using the number nine is an example of his re-occurring practice of writing biographical details in a textualist, interpretative manner that is memorial rather than documentary. The *Vita Nuova* focuses less on the actual biographical details of Dante's life. Rather, it is the case that any actual biographical details are overshadowed by Dante's recording of his thoughts and feelings of his memory of events. This can be seen in the opening lines of *Vita Nuova IX* when Dante states that "A few days after the

death of this lady¹⁷, something happened that obliged me to leave the city and go towards the place where the gentle lady who had been my defence was then living, though my destination was not quite so far off" (VN 29). This passage occurs after the death of another lady in the city, while Dante is still using his 'screen ladies' to hide his true devotion to Beatrice. On his travels to an unknown destination, Dante is visited by a personification of Love who bids him to write another poem. Mortimer acknowledges that there have been attempts to uncover where precisely Dante went on this journey away from the city after the death of this lady:

A naïve understanding of the autobiographical nature of the *Vita Nuova* has led to much futile speculation about where exactly Dante was going. The only action that matters is interior as the poet is instructed by Love to find a new screen lady. Love appears as a dejected traveller, almost a mirror image of the poet (Mortimer 175).

What this signifies is that Dante's biography is memorial, rather than documentary, and is created within the conceptual parameters of the medieval era in which he lived. It is therefore irrelevant where Dante went while he was on his journey. The destination is irrelevant because the narrative is disconnected from the real world. It instead focuses on Dante's interiority. This was acknowledged by Giuseppe Mazzotta when he stated that "The narrative of the *Vita Nuova* plunges the reader into the depths of the lover's inwardness and of the nearly destructive excesses of a self-consciousness largely unanchored from the external world" (Mazzotta 1993, 16). The significance of the journey lies not in the physical world but in the narrative fact that Dante encountered a personified Love as a traveller who asked him to write a poem. The significance does not lie in the destination of the journey. The journey and the description of it is merely the literal frame that holds the deeper, more significant allegorical meaning.

This construction of a literal frame that holds within itself a deeper allegorical meaning is further seen in Dante's poetic relationship with Beatrice. She is ostensibly a real woman who Dante met in childhood, but she is re-interpreted to hold significantly

¹⁷ 'This lady' does not refer to Beatrice, but rather to one of her friends who had died. This further emphasises the mortality rate of young women living in the Middle Ages.

more poetic and allegorical meaning to him. Dante draws parallels between Beatrice and Christ, granting her godlike powers because he writes of how "...she awakens Love; and not only how she awakens Love where he is sleeping, but how she works miraculously to produce him even where he does not exist in potentiality" (VN 81). It is Beatrice's ability to create something from nothing that makes her God-like. It is notable that Dante does not ascribe such godlike abilities to himself in his own writing, as the *Commedia* is a collection of characters, philosophies, and events that draw inspiration from historical, mythological, and biblical sources. Therefore, Dante created the text through the combination of existing people, philosophies, and events and does not claim to have miraculously produced it out of nothing. Yet, by loving Beatrice, he is also capable of an act of creation. J.G. Nichols, in the extra material provided in his translation of *Inferno*, states that "To say that [Dante] immediately fell and always remained in love with her is a feeble way of describing what was a lifelong obsession, often in the foreground and always in the background of his writings" (Nichols 2014, 365). Therefore, the influence on Dante of Beatrice, of their meeting and her death, was immeasurable.

The death of Beatrice propelled Dante into a different stage of his life that was decidedly less poetic and more political. At the end of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante writes the following:

... I saw things that made me resolve to write no more about this blessed lady until I could do so in a more worthy manner. And to this end I devote my best effort, as in truth she knows. Thus, if it please Him by whom all things live that my life should last some years longer, I shall write of her what has never been written of any woman (VN 169).

This foreshadows Dante's writing of the *Commedia* in which Beatrice reappears to guide Dante through Paradise. In the context of the *Commedia*, Beatrice is an agent that drives and initiates the plot by descending into Hell to fetch Virgil who then acts as Dante's initial guide through the first two canticles of the *Commedia*. This shows the immense influence that Beatrice has on Dante's writings, on the level of plot, philosophy and allegory. Her death also marked a significant shift of focus for Dante

who afterwards drifted away from poetry towards politics. While Dante was immersed in real-world politics, he had to turn away from the image of Beatrice he had constructed to sustain his poetic inner self. This can be acknowledged when he states in the *Convivio* that “Yet because love is not born, and does not grow or achieve perfection, in an instant, but needs time and nourishment in the mind, especially where opposing thought impede it, before this new love could become perfect much strife was needful between the thought that nourished it and the thought that opposed it, which still held the citadel of my mind of behalf of that glorious Beatrice” (Con 39). In this manner, Dante reads and translates Beatrice into every facet of his life, even the parts of his life where he turned away from her. He turns away from Beatrice to create a ‘citadel of his mind’, acknowledging that to fully represent her with any accuracy, he must ‘nourish his mind’. Dante therefore “...directed [his] voice to that sphere from which emerged victorious new thought, which was as powerful as celestial virtue...” (Con 39). When Dante encounters the image of Beatrice again in the Garden of Earthly Paradise towards the end of *Purgatorio*, she admonishes him for turning away from her. It is at this point where Dante is finally named, explicitly, by her in *Purgatorio* XXX. It is notable that Dante is named by Beatrice in a canto that is numbered with a three, further identifying Beatrice with the Holy Trinity and the number nine. In this way, Dante’s autobiographical writing and the creation of the self in his writing is intimately connected to his conception and allegory of Beatrice. Her existence and presence within his writings frame the narrative of Dante’s autobiography in a specific allegorical way. It is their initial meeting that fosters his poetic talent, and it is her death that turns him away from poetry and towards politics. It is his exile from Florence that causes him to return to the image of Beatrice in the *Commedia*. Throughout his writings, Dante uses this image of Beatrice to understand these biographical events of his life, granting them a greater poetic significance than they might otherwise have had.

Interpreting Dreams and Death: Dante's Mother and the Rediscovery of his Bones

In this section, I will compare and contrast the manner in which writers and readers, such as Giovanni Boccaccio and Ciaran Carson, have written about events within and beyond Dante's life or biography. This will amount to an analysis of the differing medieval and modern approaches towards Dante's mythical and allegorical portrayal of his biography by subsequent readers. I will conclude with a further analysis of additional materials, particularly the maps that are often included in the opening pages of contemporary editions and translations of the *Commedia*. These extra materials invoke the theories of textualism as put forth by Noakes. As the ultimate goal of this current enquiry is to consider the manner in which the *Commedia* is read, the aim of this section is to consider the manner in which these additional materials influence the way that the text is interpreted or misinterpreted. Therefore, I will begin with Boccaccio's description of the dream that Dante's mother had shortly before his birth and then move on to Ciaran Carson's description of the re-discovery of Dante's bone in 1865. I will then discuss the ways in which the additional material of illustrative maps of the *Commedia* have influenced the reading of the text in both a modern and medieval sense. I will discuss the validity, veracity, and the necessity of 'infernal cartography'. It is necessary to start with the circumstances, both literal and figurative, both real and imagined, surrounding Dante's birth.

It is generally accepted that Dante was born in 1265. This year comes from the narrative fact that the *Commedia* is set in 1300, although it was written afterwards. Dante composed the *Commedia* between 1308 and 1320, finishing the poem shortly before his death at approximately fifty-six years old. Considering that the opening line of the *Commedia* is "Halfway along our journey to life's end" (*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*; Inf 1.1) and it was thought that the *Bible* allocated seventy years to the life of man, it would mean that Dante is thirty-five years old in the *Commedia*. This would put his year of birth as 1265. He was likely born in May, as Dante refers to his

astrological sign being Gemini in *Paradisio XXII*.¹⁸ In *Trattatello in Laude di Dante*, Boccaccio describes a dream that Dante's mother supposedly had just before giving birth to him:

It seemed to the noble lady in her dream that she was under a lofty laurel tree in a green meadow, near a clear spring, and here she felt herself give birth to a son, who, in a brief space of time, feeding only upon the berries which fell from the laurel tree, and drinking the waters of the clear spring, seemed to her to become a shepherd, and to strive with all his might to lay hold of the leaves of the laurel tree whose fruit had fed him. And in striving for this, he seemed to her to fall, and on rising, to have become no longer a man but a peacock. At this she was so astonished that she awoke, and soon the time came for her labour, and she gave birth to a son, to whom she and his father agreed to give the name of Dante (Boccaccio 11).

This is an early example of the type of mysticism that is often interpolated into the details of Dante's biographical life by subsequent authors of both modern and medieval origin. This prophetic dream that comes to Dante's mother just before his birth contains allegorical details that foreshadow the known contents of Dante's life and add a sense of predestination to his writing of the *Commedia*. The dream dissolves the boundaries between author and text. After Dante's fall, which signifies his death, Dante is re-imagined as rising in the form of a peacock and, consequently, as the *Commedia* itself, as it is the case that "... his transformation into a peacock foretold the influence of the *Commedia* after his death (Anderson 68). The various parts of the peacock create the allegory of Dante as the text:

The peacock's flesh according to the bestiaries was sweet-smelling and incorruptible, meaning the immortal matter of the poem; its feathers were beautifully various, indicating how the expression of each part of the poet fitted exactly its subject matter; its feet were ugly, meaning that it was written in the

¹⁸ When Dante is in the sphere of fixed stars, under the zodiacal sign of Gemini, he states: "O glorious stars, crammed to capacity / With might power, to which I am indebted / For all my talents, such as they may be" (Par 22.112–114). It is notable that those who were born under Gemini were through to be predisposed to the study of letters.

vernacular; and its voice was hard, befitting the violent condemnation of crime and malpractice the poem contains (Anderson 68).

In this manner, Boccaccio renders Dante as an allegorical hybrid made of different parts within his mother's prophetic dream. In the prophetic dream, he is allegorised as a hybrid form, falling only to rise immortal as any distinction between him and the text falls away. He becomes the text entirely and must therefore be read in the same way, as an allegory. In this way, the peacock is an example of an allegorical form that is "...not meaningless but meaning-laden" (Bildhauer and Mills 2, *Italics in the original*). In this way, the peacock becomes an allegorical representation of the way that Dante merges the self with the text as well as the collapse between reader and author. It is the case that disparate parts that were once kept separate are now formed into a coherent whole, in the case of the literary portrayal of Dante's allegorical and mythic reinvention of the self through his writings and through the figure of Beatrice.

The truth of this dream as described by Boccaccio, and by extension the validity of any interpretation of it, remains in doubt. There is little known about Dante's mother. It is known from biographical details provided by Dante in his writing that she died when he was still a child. In *Inferno VIII*, Virgil makes explicit reference to Dante's mother, after Dante has pushed the wrathful and sullen souls in the fifth circle back into the River Styx:

My lord then threw his arms around my neck,
Kissed me and said: "Indignant soul, how blessed
The womb that bore, the paps that gave you suck!"
Inf 8.43–45

Lo collo poi con le braccia mi cinse,
baciommi il volto e disse: "Alma sdegnosa,
benedetta colei che in te s'incinse!"

Dante never mentions his father, although more is known about him historically. By the time Dante was sixteen, he had lost both his parents. At that age, he was considered an adult in the medieval world and therefore took over the family affairs. Anderson states that “[Dante’s mother] was called Bella, and it has been suggested that she was connected with the Abati family and was the daughter of Durante di Scolaro degli Abati” (Anderson 53–54). Regardless of the veracity of Boccaccio’s description of the dream that Dante’s mother had before his birth, this dream remains an example of the type of mythologising that was incorporated into Dante’s life by Boccaccio and other scholars and writers like him. Anderson states that “Premonitory dreams are frequently ascribed to the mothers of saints and heroes in biographies and narratives of the Middle Ages; a somewhat similar story is told of Virgil’s mother in early lives of the poet, and so Boccaccio may have introduced this story as a delight and apposite invention” (Anderson 68).¹⁹ However, Anderson also suggests that it is possible that this story was told to Dante as a child, either because it did in fact happen or to comfort a child with “...the continuing existence of his parent in the realm of the dead” (Anderson 68–69). This further develops the hybridisation that exists in the dream and in its representation of the peacock by collapsing the binary between the living and the dead. Dreams of a prophetic and allegorical nature continued to be important throughout Dante’s writings. This is particularly true in the *Vita Nuova* as well as the *Commedia*. It is therefore not implausible of Anderson to suggest that Dante might have integrated this prophetic dream into his own autobiography:

Probably many children do this and then forget through their education how to go on with it. It is to a poet a more reasonable and fruitful method of reflection

¹⁹ It is further necessary to acknowledge the existence of Medieval dream theory which constitutes a pre-Freudian understanding of the nature of dreams. In *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, Steven F. Kruger states that “The confinement of dreaming to a psychological or physiological realm is, of course, relatively recent. For most of its long history, the dream has been treated not merely as an internally-motivated phenomenon (although as we shall see, such explanations of dreaming have their own ancient roots), but as an experience strongly linked to the realm of divinity: dreams were often thought to foretell the future because they allowed the human soul access to a transcendent, spiritual reality” (Kruger 2). Nightmares, in medieval dream theory, were often considered to be merely induced by anxiety and therefore not useful for telling the future, but the dreams people in a state of half-sleep were considered to be glimpses into a prophetic, divine truth. Further information on Medieval dream theory and the role of the imagination can be gained from reading *The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought* by Murray Wright Bundy and *Medieval Dream-Poetry* by A.C. Spearing.

and it was, perhaps, because of the shock of his mother's death, of the effect of the report of this dream upon him, and of the strain of adjusting to a new stepmother, that the young Dante first started to develop his unequalled powers in living the private life common to every child (Anderson 69).

The presence of the dream is more important than the veracity of it. Regardless of whether it truly happened or if Dante or Boccaccio created it as fiction, its presence signifies a practice of ensuring a lost loved one's continued presence after death. This is a practice which Dante went on to repeat with the figure of Beatrice. According to Anderson, in the above quotation, the death of these two foundational women in Dante's life and his continuing efforts to create allegory out of that tragedy facilitated the growth of Dante's powers as a poet. A modern reader may be distracted with determining the veracity of the prophetic dream, but a medieval reader would have shared a worldview with the poet that depends on and delights in the incomprehensibility of dreams and visions. The portrayal of this dream, whether true or not, imbues the narrative of Dante's life and the narrative of the stories that he wrote with additional symbolism and meaning. This in turn influences the allegorical landscape of the *Commedia*.

In contrast to Boccaccio's allegorical description of Dante's mother's prophetic dream and the hybridisation of the peacock therein, this is a quotation from the introduction to Ciaran Carson's translation of the *Commedia*. In it he explains the story of the re-discovery of Dante's bones:

On further examination the bones proved to those of a robust adult male. They were darkish in colour, approaching black. A good few of them were missing, including most of the finger bones and, most regrettably, the jawbone, since this was considered to be one of Dante's most identifiable features. The skull was finely modelled; the occipital region was prominently marked, and the frontal was also amply and broadly expanded. The periphery of the head measured 52cm 5mm. The capacity of the interior was ascertained by filling the skull with rice, which was found to weigh 1420 grammes, or 3.13321lb avoirdupois. When, at 8 a.m on 7 June 1865, the tomb of Dante was opened, it

was found to be empty, with the exception of some dust, a few withered laurel leaves, and the phalanges of an abnormally long and delicate finger, which were certified by the presiding surgeon as belonging undoubtedly to the newly-discovered skeleton. Moreover, some fragments of marble, of the same material as the sarcophagus, were found within. These had come from a hole, patched up with bricks and mortar, which had been knocked through the sarcophagus at a point accessible only from the adjoining Franciscan monastery. Evidently the monks had removed the precious relics to forestall their translation to Florence in 1519. Having thus been verified, Dante's skeleton was put together, laid on white velvet in a glass sarcophagus, and displayed on 24, 25, and 26 June in the Braccioforte Chapel (Carson xv – xvi).

Carson lists, in precise medical and scientific detail, the circumstances of the re-discovery of Dante's skeleton in the nineteenth century. There is a stark contrast between the way that Boccaccio wrote about Dante's birth and the way that Carson writes about the re-discovery of Dante's skeleton. On one hand, Boccaccio's approach is more subjective, with an appeal to predestination which gives it a theological undertone. Boccaccio's description of Dante's birth and his mother's dream is poetic, allegorical, and figurative to the point where a modern audience will assume Boccaccio is exaggerating or indulging in fictiveness. On the other hand, Carson writes about the rediscovery of Dante's bones in precise and scientific detail, paying close attention to the years and places associated with the event. The difference in what kind of information is considered relevant is stark. Carson gives his reader the exact measurements of Dante's skull (52cm 5mm) while Boccaccio does not even supply Dante's mother's name. There is a potential parallel to maintain in the way that Dante writes of Beatrice's death in a precise mathematical and astrological format and the measurements that Carson provides of Dante's bones in the introduction to his translation. In this sense, both are documentary accounts of an inexplicable event – the first being the tragedy of Beatrice's early death and the second being the coincidental rediscovery of Dante's bones. However, Dante's method of measuring the universe is different from Carson's and, subsequently, our own modern method of measuring or understanding the universe. Dante's universe is finite and harmonious, while Carson's

universe is infinite and chaotic. Carson's documentary practice is there to ensure that order in the chaos can be found and that there is enough detail for the rediscovery of Dante's bones to be believed regardless of how inexplicable it might appear. In contrast, Beatrice's early death from childbirth is an all-too-common tragedy for a woman of her era and yet it is imbued with great allegorical significance by being placed within the context of Dante's finite and harmonious universe through the repeated use of the number nine. Carson's documentary exposition serves to undermine what could have been considered a miracle, the highly co-incidental re-discovery of Dante's bones, and turns it into an objective formulation of facts. In contrast, Beatrice's all too common death from childbirth is imbued with significant allegorical meaning which places her within the context of a finite and harmonious universe in which her death was not merely a dull tragedy, but a pre-ordained and therefore inevitable act of God.

The differences between these two authors, Boccaccio and Carson, and the way that they both write about Dante is made clear through the acknowledgement of the difference in context that they occupy. They differ on a temporal and geographical level. Boccaccio was an Italian man living in the 14th century while Carson is writing from a modern, twenty-first century perspective that is coloured by his own Irish heritage. In his introduction, Carson makes several explicit references to the Troubles²⁰, which had ended only shortly before he had begun his work on translation. He compares North Belfast's "...no-go zones and tattered flags, the blackened side-streets, cul-de-sacs and bits of wasteland stitched together by dividing walls and fences" (Carson xi-xii) with a medieval Florence. This allows him to relate his own familiar context with Dante's alien world. There is an element of Noakes's conception of interpretation and exegesis in the way that Carson relates his own experience of the political turmoil of the Troubles with Dante's own political turmoil between the Guelfs and Ghibellines. This is because Carson is interpreting his own experiences into a

²⁰ The Troubles was a conflict in Northern Ireland that was ended with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, approximately four years before Carson wrote his translation. It mirrors, in several ways, the conflict between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines that occurred in Florence during Dante's lifetime. Both conflicts were religious in nature, originating from a core disagreement of Christianity, while simultaneously being a reflection and extension of the Empire which ruled over them. In Dante's world, that empire was the Holy Roman Empire while, in Carson's world, that was the British Empire. Carson draws on many of these parallels in his translation.

foreign text, bringing it into his own context rather than merely attempting to preserve the text's original context. Carson deliberately draws upon the similarities between these two events, which occur in vastly different periods of history and in different places, when he writes the introduction to his translation. He is therefore emphasising an affinity between the two situations, separated in time, by relating the work back to his own personal experiences in his translation. Carson takes an approach similar to Noakes's theory of interpretation in his translation of *Inferno* when he deliberately draws historical parallels that cross the boundaries between the modern and medieval world. He employs a kind of exegesis in Noakes's sense of the term when he presents the details of the re-discovery of Dante's bones in precise medical and scientific detail without further extrapolating it into any further mythic or allegorical significance.

On the other hand, Boccaccio's description is memorial in the sense that he is writing about events he had only heard about from either Dante himself in his own autobiographical writings or from Dante's relatives. It therefore aligns more with Carruthers's ideas surrounding *memoria*. Boccaccio is depending on the memory of others, or the memories recorded by others, as he was only a child when Dante died in 1321. In contrast, Carson's description of the re-discovery of Dante's skeleton is documentary, precise in its details down to the measurements, the weight and volume, of Dante's bones. There is a notable difference in the interpretative approaches to the biographical details of Dante's life. Boccaccio's approach is memorial and textual, embedding Dante and the details of his life into the culture of the time in which he and Boccaccio lived.²¹ He is creating a narrative of Dante's life that mythologises and mystifies the poet to the exalted position that he believes that Dante ought to occupy. Carruthers made this contrast between memorial and documentary cultures, stating that the medieval world was intimately connected to *memoria* in much the same way that the modern, Western world is a documentary culture. This can be seen in the contrast between Boccaccio's allegorical description of Dante's mother's prophetic

²¹ Although it must be noted that Boccaccio is in the generation after Dante, and was only eight years old when Dante died in 1321.

dream and the precise medical and scientific documentary approach to the measurements of Dante's bones delivered by the modern translator, Ciaran Carson.

Beyond the additional materials provided by readers and writers such as Carson and Boccaccio, there exists a textualist element in the way that a contemporary edition of the *Commedia* is likely to include extra material, especially in terms of the illustrations of maps which lay out the entirety of the journey in the opening pages. It is textualist in the way that it adds additional material, from beyond the original author's creation, but becomes increasingly fundamentalist when the addition of these materials begins to pre-empt interpretation. These contemporary editions also, most commonly, include some kind of illustration, commonly Gustave Dore's wood-engravings. In the extra material associated with J.G. Nichols's translation of *Inferno*, he states that "We know far more about Dante the man than we do about Shakespeare, even though Shakespeare is three hundred years closer to us" (Nichols 2014, 363). This is largely due to Dante's biographical way of writing which differentiates Dante from Shakespeare because "...Dante is himself part of his drama..." (Nichols 2014, 364). Despite any difference in context, Dante is familiar to the reader because he remains an inextricable part of the text. The reader will feel as though they know him in a way that they might not know other writers of similar calibre. This close relationship that Dante has with his reader contributes to the need to place Dante in his context, to know the biographical details of his life, as these are details that are often thought to be necessary to acknowledge if sufficient interpretation and understanding is to take place. However, placing Dante in a particular context or rendering him within the parameters of certain information in the glosses, biographies or even illustrations have the potential to foster a misleading interpretation. For instance, most recent translations of the *Commedia* that are published will likely include, in the opening pages, some kind of illustrated map drawn to depict the three regions of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise that foreshadow the entirety of Dante's journey. There is an argument to be made that it was never Dante's intention for the map of the afterlife to be set out so plainly (Scarbrough 6:16–7:00).²² These maps are made in hindsight, with

²² This argument was also made by medievalist scholar and podcaster, Mark Scarbrough.

a knowledge of the text that is only possible to gain once it has already been read. As modern publishing convention stands, a new reader, encountering the *Commedia* for the first time, will likely see these maps before they even read the opening tercet of the poem. The illustrated maps are placed in the beginning pages of the text thereby changing the order through which the different circles, realms, terraces and spheres are encountered. The entire journey is laid out before it has even begun.

In his article, 'Mismapping the Underworld', John Kleiner discusses this practice of displaying the cartography of the *Inferno*, both medieval and modern:

The diagrams of Hell that so often accompany new editions of the *Inferno* are a good example of how seriously modern critics take Dante's fiction. Each neat picture of carefully layered concentric circles implies that Hell can and should be visualized; each picture reflects a widely-held conviction that Hell is an extremely orderly place designed by an extremely exacting poet (Kleiner 1).

This shows that, by placing these highly ordered maps in the beginning of a new translation, these modern editions prepare the reader for what they are about to encounter and, in so doing, contribute towards the understanding of Dante's Hell as a highly structured, well-ordered system of perfect morality and justice. However, Kleiner continues to argue that there exists a certain level of error within this kind of mapping and that Dante's representation of Hell is not so perfect as to be unquestionable. He traces the history of criticism that dealt with infernal cartography from "...its glorious heights in the Renaissance to its recent fall into disfavour" (Kleiner 1).²³ He shows that the cultural importance that the Renaissance and the medieval period placed on ratio, proportion, and geometry meant that readers favoured an exact and mathematical mapping of the *Inferno*. Kleiner names Galileo Galilei as an infernal cartographer who was "Invited to speak before the Florentine Academy in 1588 [where he] delivered two long lectures analyzing the rival calculations of Dante's cartographers" (Kleiner 2–3). There is an argument to be made that Dante makes a journey from the obscurity of the

²³ Kleiner's article was published in 1989 and therefore writing, all things being relative, about the current state of modern Dantean scholarship as it exists in the second half of the twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty-first.

selva oscura, an unknowable and indeterminable landscape, to the certainty of precise mathematical measurements in the lower three circles of Hell. This can be seen when comparing the narrative fact that the location of the *selva oscura* is ambiguous, difficult for Dante to describe, and that “There are in the final six cantos no fewer than eight numerical measurements describing the terrain and its prominent landmarks (Kleiner 5). It is largely from these measurements that infernal cartographers attempted to precisely map out the dimension, distances, and shape of Hell. It appears that, the further Dante descends into Hell, the further Dante descends into a deterministic and harmonious system that can be accurately and definitively mapped out. Despite its popularity in the medieval and Renaissance eras, “Dantean cartography remains today a thoroughly discredited discipline” (Kleiner 11). Nevertheless, it remains a convention to place maps in the opening pages of any new translation of the *Commedia*. These maps are usually simplistic and do not present the measurements that appear in the closing six cantos of the poem with any amount of cartographical accuracy. Rather, in modern Dantean criticism, it is the case that “Almost without exception modern critics have argued that the purpose of the measurements is entirely stylistic, a function of the *Inferno*’s realism” (Kleiner 12). In the modern interpretation, the measurements solely exist to create the illusion that Hell is a real place that can be measured if it needs to be but that it is, ultimately, unnecessary to do so in order to understand the true meaning of the poem. Kleiner concludes that both the medieval and Renaissance’s obsessive and precise mathematical rendering of Dante’s cartography as well as the modern dismissal of the measurements as a stylistic choice result in both approaches overlooking a crucial detail – Dante’s math is wrong:

When Dante’s measurements of the final circles are analysed objectively, they reveal a terrain *disordered* by number and measure. Satan is too tall for the space allotted him, Nimrod’s head is too big for his body, the bridges of the Malebolge are too long and the deep pit at the center of the Malebolge is too shallow. We do not notice this, of course, if we ignore the measurements as commentators advise us, and that, clearly, is the point of their advice. It is easier to dismiss the calculation as a naïve response to Dante’s text than to

confront the contradictions that careful mathematical analysis bring to light (Kleiner 16).

The reason that Kleiner gives for each group of readers, both medieval and modern, making the same mistake is that “Neither group of readers is willing to take seriously the consistent inconsistencies of the terrain, for neither group is comfortable with the possibility that Dante, the great systematizer, might err” (Kleiner 16). The myth of Dante, the manner in which he presented himself and the manner in which readers have interpreted that presentation, has therefore eclipsed a potential reading or misreading of the poem. In putting the maps in the opening pages of new translations, a modern reader has the entirety of the *Commedia* laid out for them on the first page of text. In contrast, Dante only supplies a full description of the layout of Hell in *Inferno* XI. Till this point, the reader was on the journey with Dante, unaware of the full layout of Hell and exploring the text as it was written. However, this exploration of the text is rendered obsolete if there is a map in the front of the text that perfectly lays out where the journey is going before it even begins. These textual additions to Dante’s original narrative, including the maps, illustrations and glosses, therefore contain advantages and disadvantages in understanding and interpreting the *Commedia*. One of the disadvantages to putting maps in the opening pages of new translations is that it creates the false perception of an exploration that is already complete, that the reader ought to follow on after Dante rather than along with Dante. It fosters and encourages the idea of Dante, and by extension the *Commedia*, as completed in a state of immovable perfection. In acknowledging Dante’s errors, there remains the potential for interpretation and re-interpretation, as Kleiner acknowledges when he concludes with the following:

The spirit of mis-measurement is, I think, ultimately playful rather than pious or presumptuous. And the same is true, I would argue, for Dante’s other errors. Error is less a solution to a poetic problem than an imaginative exploration of the problems that Dante invents for himself. This is, of all my claims, the most speculative; at those points where I sense urbane irony, another reader might well hear traces of anxiety, piety, or didacticism. The question of tone is not, for

that reason, any less important; I am interested in error precisely because I believe that it challenges our vision of Dante as a poet of unrelenting seriousness (Kleiner 21).

This image of Dante as a poet of unrelenting seriousness is simultaneously a direct consequence and in direct contradiction to his own mythic and allegorical reinvention of his own life. The extent of this can be seen in an exploration of modern and medieval contributions to Dante's mythic and allegorical reinvention of his life. There has been a tendency in the medieval period to conceptualise Dante as a 'serious poet' who is capable of flawlessly synthesizing the entirety of the Christian conception of the universe. While it certainly the case that Dante did achieve a great feat of poetry, especially as a reader of his own life, it is notable that the moments in which his fingerprints on the *Commedia* are most clear are in its occasional instances of misinterpretation. As stated in the quotation, it is these moments which 'challenges our vision of Dante as a poet of unrelenting seriousness'. It is in these instances of error and misinterpretation, and the way in which the reader attempts to make sense of them, that reveal the crucial differences in reading the *Commedia*. The medieval and Renaissance preoccupation with ratio, proportion, and geometry is revealed in their attempts to accurately portray infernal cartography to its fullest capacity from the limited mathematical descriptions that Dante provides in the closing cantos of *Inferno*. The modern appeal to the realism of the infernal region, claiming the mathematical descriptions as a stylistic choice to give Hell the appearance of a real, coherent place that could be visited, reveals its tendency to strip away the allegorical dimension of the text and prioritise the literal thereby reading the text as a 'true' narrative in certain respects. Both these approaches ultimately disregard the moments in which Dante errs. Whether these errors were intentional or not, conscious or not, they remain as instances in which Dante escapes the literary portrayal of the allegorical and mythic reinvention of his own biography, both the ones he created for himself and the ones that others created for him. It is these moments of misinterpretation in which we, as the reader, can perhaps know him better as a person than a poet.

In summation, this chapter has examined the literary portrayal of Dante's mythic and allegorical reinvention of his biography. This mythic and allegorical reinvention is largely centred around the image of Beatrice, a woman whom Dante loved and constructed most of his writings around, either implicitly or explicitly. In its most explicit case, the *Vita Nuova* reveals Beatrice's role in fashioning Dante into the poet that could write the *Commedia* with an authority which transcended the boundaries of his contemporary context. It is Dante's construction of the image of Beatrice, and the exalted place that she occupies in the context of his conception of the universe, that allows Dante to recontextualize the details of his biography as mythic and allegorical poetry. Dante had re-created a presumably historical woman who died tragically young as a personification of poetry and philosophy that exists in parallel with Dante's conception of God and, consequently, his idea and reverence of Love. Conversely, a reader's context can influence their interpretation of the literary portrayal of Dante's life. This was acknowledged in the comparison between Boccaccio's description of Dante's prophetic dream and the excerpt from Carson's introduction to his translation of the *Inferno* that details the re-discovery of Dante's bones. Boccaccio's description of Dante's mother's prophetic dream is permeated with a medieval predilection towards allegory. It associates Dante entirely with his own text, collapsing the distinction between author and creation and thereby collapsing any distinction between objective narrative or biographical facts and a poetic re-imagining of Dante's role as the author. In contrast, Carson's description of the re-discovery of Dante's bones is documentary, providing a series of precise medical and scientific facts. There is, therefore, a notable distinction between the biographical details offered of Dante's life as they originate from either the modern or the medieval world. This can be further seen in the differences between modern and medieval approaches in Dantean scholarship, towards which this enquiry will now turn.

CHAPTER THREE: EXPLORING ALLEGORY

No single issue in the Divine Comedy has been more divisive and more persistently debated by Dante scholarship than that of allegory. This is hardly surprising, one might add, for allegory is not merely a distinct, isolated theme which can be exhaustively treated by following its incidentally textual movement. What is largely at stake in the recurrent critical debate is nothing less than the fundamental decision of how to read the poem, how to identify, that is to say, the interpretative laws which govern the poem and come to grips with the poet's authorial claims, his sense of the nature of figurative language, its relation to a moral truth and even the place, if any, that truth occupies in the economy of poetic fiction.

- Giuseppe Mazzotta, *'Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy.'*

This quote originates from Giuseppe Mazzotta's book – *Dante, Poet of the Desert* (1979). It illustrates the manner in which the question of allegory, how to deal with it and how to comprehend or conceptualise it, is crucial to the understanding and subsequent interpretation of the *Commedia*. It shows the extent and the significance of the debate surrounding allegory and how its consequences can influence potential interpretations and misinterpretations of the poem. The way in which the allegory is assumed to be constructed is connected to the way in which a reader will interpret the meaning of the poem. In this chapter, I will therefore be focusing on the way both medieval and modern scholars approached this debate regarding the nature of Dante's allegory. The terms 'modern' and 'medieval' encompass broad categories. To narrow my focus, in this current enquiry, the term 'modern' will refer mainly to the twentieth century, particularly the scholars of the American school of Dantean criticism following the inception of the theories of Charles Singleton. The term 'medieval' will refer to Dante's own conception of allegory as it appears in his secondary texts, the *Convivio*

and the *Epistle to Can Grande*, as well as the scholars and writers working directly after Dante's death, particularly Giovanni Boccaccio.²⁴

There has been a notable change in the way that allegory has been perceived, the value that has been accorded to it, as well as the way it is thought to be constructed within a narrative. It is because the perception of allegory has changed that the way in which the *Commedia* is read has likewise changed which can be acknowledged by juxtaposing the medieval and modern approaches to reading Dante's allegory. I intend to compare modern readings of allegory with the medieval variety, particularly with what Dante states in the *Epistle of Can Grande* and the *Convivio*. This will involve a full exploration of the manner in which the medieval world conceptualised allegory as an inherent part of their epistemological landscape as well as a way to access the divine as it was considered to be 'God's way of writing'. In contrast, the modern approach to allegory tends to be secular and therefore disconnected from the manner in which the world is viewed empirically.

To fully acknowledge these differing approaches to allegory, it is necessary to examine various ways in which allegory is defined, understood, and conceptualised. This will be achieved, in relation to what was stated in the introductory chapter of this enquiry, in the spirit of *disputatio*. I will examine the manner in which three scholars and writers have defined allegory in the modern world. This includes a dictionary definition of allegory, accessible to initial students of allegory, as well as the more comprehensive and scholarly approach taken by Angus Fletcher in his book *Allegory: A Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Fletcher conceptualises allegory as a symbolic mode and considers its nature in general, applying his method to a variety of texts that is not isolated to Dante. However, T.S. Eliot focuses entirely on Dante and his understanding of allegory is seen through a modernist lens that has a particular conception of the medieval era which

²⁴ I acknowledge that there are significant problems in drawing such sharp temporal distinctions in the use of the terms 'modern' and 'medieval'. One can convincingly claim a wide range of time for either the modern or the medieval eras. Therefore, the use of this vocabulary is somewhat clumsily defined. This is because there simply are no clear distinctions between the late medieval period and the early modern period. I will stipulate that this terminology is used in such a manner as to compare the different ways of reading the *Commedia* in the current day versus when it was initially created. As with most of the binary oppositions put forth in this dissertation, the aim is not to pin them into place but rather to show the ambiguity of their construction and thereby dismantle them.

subsequently influences his interpretation. In the spirit of *disputatio*, I will discuss the strengths and valuable aspects of the definitions before expanding on its potential problems. After I have laid the foundations of the modern approach to allegory, I will explore the manner in which Dante understands allegory, as stated in his secondary texts, the *Epistle to Can Grande*, the *Vita Nuova*, and the *Convivio*.

Defining Allegory: An Exploration of Three Modern Conceptions

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* aims to give precise and short definitions of various literary terms, and it defines allegory as:

... a story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning. The principal technique of allegory is personification, whereby abstract qualities are given human shape – as in public statues of Liberty or Justice. An allegory may be conceived as a metaphor that is extended into a structured system. In written narrative, allegory involves a continuous parallel between two (or more) levels of meaning in a story, so that its persons and events correspond to their equivalents in a system of ideas or chain of events external to the tale... (Baldick 5).

This is an attempt to define allegory in a simple manner that would fit among other definitions of literary terms in this dictionary. There are three distinct assumptions of the nature of allegory that can be derived from this definition. Firstly, it is the case that there exists a parallel structure of two distinct meanings. Secondly, allegory is an extension and elaboration of metaphor in so far that it is a direct comparison. Thirdly, the main technique of allegory is personification, wherein abstract ideas are given human form. The strength of this definition lies in its preciseness and conciseness. It gives an adequate surface level understanding of allegory that is suitable for beginners without being obscured by centuries of potentially conflicting scholarship regarding the nature and construction of allegory. This definition of allegory is therefore a modern understanding of allegory and can appeal to contemporary audiences by making use of modern examples, such as George Orwell, but does not negate the medieval context of certain allegories such as Dante's. It also considers allegory in multiple settings beyond literature, such as sculpture, thereby facilitating a broader understanding.

However, there are two significant problems that arise with this definition. The first problem is the sharp distinction that the dictionary definition draws between secular and religious allegories, associating them strongly with the modern and medieval world respectively. The definition has the implicit assumption that any modern allegory is always secular, satirical, and political for which George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is given as an example. In terms of these modern, secular allegorists, the definition states that "Some later allegorists like [John] Dryden and [George] Orwell used allegory as a method of satire; their hidden meanings are political rather than religious" (Baldick 5). The definition therefore assigns allegory to the past, the medieval world, while satire, a sub-type of allegory, is considered a progression and therefore associated with the modern world. It holds the equivalent assumption that medieval allegory is, in contrast, ostensibly religious. This can be noted when the definition states that "In the medieval discipline of biblical exegesis, allegory became an important method of interpretation, a habit of seeking correspondences between different realms of meaning (e.g. physical and spiritual) or between the Old Testament and the New (Baldick 5). This creates a strict binary opposition between modern, secular allegories and medieval, religious allegories.

This distinction collapses under competing criticism such as Erich Auerbach, who claims Dante's ostensibly religious allegory for the secular world. Auerbach was a highly influential scholar for the American school of Dantean criticism. Despite being born in Germany²⁵, his theories of figural fulfilment are considered to be in alignment, to a certain degree, with the American-born theorist Charles Singleton's theories of the allegory of theologians.²⁶ According to Auerbach, the world that Dante created allows for a representation of the individual that is fully actualised through the process of figural fulfilment. Auerbach uses Farinata and Cavalcanti as examples to showcase the

²⁵ Erich Auerbach was born in Berlin, Germany, and spent some time in exile at Istanbul, Turkey to escape Nazi Germany. After the war, he lived the rest of his life in the United States of America. Despite being born German, his ideas had a seminal effect on the American school of Dantean interpretation for its emphasis on the historical sense of Dante's allegory. He is therefore often spoken of in tandem with Charles Singleton. For this reason, he is categorised primarily with the American school, despite being born in Europe (Said, *Mimesis*, 2003).

²⁶ Charles Singleton's theories of the allegory of theologians will be fully explored in the subsequent chapter. At this stage, it is necessary to note that the allegory of theologians refers the exegetical allegory in which the historical sense is true, and then further imbued with poetic meaning.

manner in which the souls in *Inferno* mimetically represent their highest form of the self, having completed their divine destiny and are therefore fully realised within the text. This allows Auerbach to ultimately divide the Christian underpinnings of the *Commedia* from the representations of the individuals within it to claim that Dante is a 'poet of the secular world'. It is therefore the case that "With his theory of *figura*, Auerbach seeks to reduce Dante's eschatology to little more than a literary form which contains, like a frame, a content about man's earthly life" (Corbett 6). In this way, Auerbach argued for the secularised reading of the *Commedia*. This presents a problem in the current definition of allegory that is under examination, as it shows that it is not always the case that the *Commedia* is read in a purely religious or theological mode. Therefore, the assumption that the definition is making regarding the state of allegory in the medieval period is not as absolute as it is presented. Additionally, the definition assumes that allegory works in two senses, the figurative and the literal. While this is sufficient for a surface level definition, it must be noted that Dante, and other medieval writers like him, thought of allegory as working on four senses of meaning: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. This was particularly the case in scriptural exegesis. In the above definition from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Langland and Dante are grouped together as medieval writers when it states that "Allegorical thinking permeated the Christian literature of the Middle Ages, flourishing in the morality plays and in the dream visions of Dante and Langland" (Baldick 5). The author mentions Dante as an example and groups him with other allegorists such as John Bunyan²⁷ and William Langland²⁸, emphasizing their shared religious dimensions and contrasting them with modern, secular allegorists who rely more on satire such as George Orwell. It must be noted, however, that the conceptual barriers between what ought to be considered religious and what ought to be considered political would have been drawn differently in other historical and political contexts. The divide between what is religious and what is political is not so easily drawn in the context of the divine right of kings or the Holy Roman Empire. What might be considered a purely religious

²⁷ John Bunyan was an English writer in the 17th century and is therefore an example of an early modern poet. His most famous work is the Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

²⁸ William Langland is a 14th century English writer most known for his poem *Pier Plowman* which makes use of personification allegory to discuss a variety of religious ideals.

allegory from the modern perspective might have strong political undertones in a medieval context because theology's permeation of political and everyday life. This is therefore a significant weakness of this dictionary definition, which aims for conciseness at the expense of context. In summation, the first significant problem with this definition is that it flattens the concept of allegory as it existed in the medieval period into two senses of meaning, rather than four, while simultaneously underestimating the manner in which medieval allegories have been interpreted as secular narratives, as is the case with Erich Auerbach.

The second problem with this definition is its focus on personification as the primary allegorical mode. By doing this, the author does what Robert Worth Frank warns against in his article *The Art of Reading Medieval Personification-Allegory* when he writes "First, [the reader] must not confuse one kind of allegory with another" (Frank 237). According to Frank, associating allegory completely with a personification mode can lead to some confusion because there are certain allegorical texts, such as the *Commedia*, that do not fit easily into this category of allegory:

[The Reader] will read the *Divine Comedy*, in which characters and significant details are concrete and have a second meaning, that is, are *symbols*; and he will be told this is an allegory. Then he will read *Piers Plowman*, in which characters and significant details are abstractions and only have one meaning, that is, are *personifications*; and he will be told that this, too, is an allegory (Frank 237, Italics in the original).

In the dictionary definition of allegory, Langland and Dante are compared, grouped together as medieval, religious allegories. However, in this quotation from Frank, they are contrasted, revealing two different modes of allegory – one which relies on symbols and the other that relies on personification. Frank states, with this comparison, that "If they are both allegories, they are different kinds of allegory" (Frank 238). If this is the case, then the dictionary definition has made an error in grouping them together as the same type of allegory. Frank then goes on to describe the changes in the taxonomy

of different types of allegory, discussing the manner in which Georg Wilhelm Hegel²⁹ formulated Dante's kind of allegory as 'symbolism' and Langland's allegory as 'personification allegory'. However, these terms are unsatisfactory because "One critic³⁰ has observed that, in addition to violating medieval usage, the term 'symbolism' is too inclusive for a narrative using personifications, for such a narrative is merely one kind of allegory (Frank 238). This shows the difficulties in naming the different forms of allegory and the various manners in which allegory has been conceptualised and understood in a scholarly manner. While it is easy to compare Langland and Dante then state that their allegories differ in some significant respects, it remains the case that allegory itself is not as easily dissectible. The changes in the taxonomy of allegory that Frank refers to happened centuries after Dante's death and is out of context of the medieval period. It is necessary to acknowledge that "Although the reader can distinguish between the two forms, the medieval writer often complicates matters slightly by employing both forms in the same piece of writing" (Frank 238). Therefore, the dictionary definition fails to take into context the medieval understanding of allegory particularly in associating allegory with the personification mode. It is important to acknowledge the context in which an allegorical text was written and that changes in the understanding and perception of allegory would result in changes to interpretation of it which may prove to be a misinterpretation. This is because the medieval allegorist:

[The medieval writer] had little sense of these literary forms as *forms*. To him both were methods of expressing the truth. The medieval Church constantly stimulated his imagination with both symbols and abstractions. In giving allegorical interpretation to the Scriptures and to beasts, flowers, jewels, etc., the Church created a mode of thought which encouraged symbol-allegory. In raising to supreme importance the soul of the true believer and in picturing the world as a place where vices and virtues struggled for that soul, the Church

²⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel discusses Dante in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. In particular, he writes about how Dante was able to symbolize universal truths in his moral system of metaphysical and theological ideals.

³⁰ Frank is here referencing Leo Leonard Camp and his unpublished doctoral dissertation *Studies in the Rationale of Medieval Allegory*.

gave abstractions a dramatic significance which encouraged personification-allegory. Medieval preaching for one, employed both forms and helped give them currency. Late medieval writers of personification-allegory saw nothing incongruous about introducing symbols to their work (Frank 238–239, *Italics in the original*).

This dictionary definition of allegory serves well as a surface level understanding of allegory. Its strengths and weaknesses lie in that fact that it is a dictionary definition, aiming for surface level, general understanding of allegory but it does not maintain its integrity in light of additional research and further analysis. It pursues a modern understanding of allegory, while dismissing medieval allegory as purely religious without acknowledging the full context of what that would mean. It neglects two out of the four senses that are associated with medieval allegory. It fails to consider different types of allegory or how the understanding of allegory is subjected to historical or cultural change and is therefore applying modern sensibilities to medieval texts. An analysis of this dictionary definition of allegory establishes the ways in which a precise and determinable definition of allegory can be limiting and reveals that this associated with modern understandings of allegory. This modern understanding of allegory is often in contradiction to the epistemological and ecclesiastical landscape of the medieval era which was imbued with a sense of symbolism and allegory in the natural world because of the overarching presence of the Catholic church. However, it is the case that “Such denaturalization of the natural world sooner or later had to become intolerable; it is simply impossible to live a healthy and human life in a world populated exclusively by symbols” (Pieper 47). It is therefore necessary to consider further definitions of allegory that seek to maintain a systematic approach but with a broader contextual scope. This will be achieved through an analysis of Angus Fletcher’s systematic understanding of allegory.

By analysing this precise and concise dictionary definition of allegory, it is possible to see why it is the case that “... no narrowly exclusive stipulated definition will be useful, however desirable it might seem, while formal precision may at present even be misleading to the student of the subject” (Fletcher 1). It is a predilection of the modern

world to attempt to explain varied concepts in its most atomistic and reductive terms, but this strategy sometimes fails, as was seen in the attempt to offer a dictionary definition that encompasses both modern and medieval allegory. In his book, *Allegory: A Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Angus Fletcher describes allegory as “...a protean device, omnipresent in Western literature from the earliest times to the modern era” (Fletcher 1). This emphasises the endless and ever-changing nature of allegory. Fletcher therefore claims that a true historical account of the changes of allegory is impossible and that a definition as narrow as the one presented in the Oxford dictionary will always fail under further scrutiny. Due to allegory’s vast and nebulous nature, it is difficult to succinctly define with any measure of certainty. For this reason, it is necessary to consider Angus Fletcher’s understanding of allegory as a symbolic mode. In his book, *Allegory: A Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Angus Fletcher offers the following definition of allegory.

In the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another. It destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words ‘mean what they say.’ When we predicate quality x of person Y , Y really is what our predication says he is (or we assume so); but allegory would turn Y in something other (*allos*) than what the open and direct statement tells the reader. Pushed to an extreme, this ironic usage would subvert language itself, turning everything into an Orwellian newspeak.³¹ In this sense we see how allegory is properly considered a mode: it is a fundamental process of encoding our speech. For the very reason that it is a radical linguistic procedure, it can appear in all sorts of different works, many of which fall far short of the confusing doubleness that made Orwell’s newspeak such an effective brainwashing device (Fletcher 2–3).

This explanation of allegory is more expansive than the previous dictionary definition. It emphasizes how allegory would work as a linguistic and symbolic mode and how

³¹ This is a reference to George Orwell’s *1984* in which a totalitarian government has restricted language in such a way that limits critical thinking, the development of abstract concepts and identity through an overuse of contractions to make it simpler. Examples include ‘*ingsoc*’ for English Socialism and ‘*Minitrue*’ for Ministry of Truth. Real world examples can be found in ‘*gestapo*’ which means *Geheime Staatspolizei*

allegory converts and subverts meaning. It emphasizes the way that allegory is a manner of encoding meaning and can be both used and misused in this respect. It does not rely too heavily on personification as the primary mode of allegory and therefore allows for forms of allegory that do not present fully as personification allegory to be incorporated into the structure of the definition. As a symbolic mode, it is possible for allegory to appear in many different works and in different ways. Therefore, in Fletcher's conception, allegory is not a genre of literature but, instead, a way in which language is used. It is notable that this definition makes use of the fundamentalist claim, as stated by Carruthers, that words are complete units in and of themselves and therefore 'mean what they say'. Fletcher suggests that allegory subverts this fundamentalist claim by allowing language to point towards something beyond, something other and different, than what it otherwise might contain in a singular unit of meaning because the meaning of the word is not necessarily inherent in the word itself. In other words, Fletcher's definition of allegory makes use of the textualist claim that the meaning of the word is not embedded in the words themselves but is instead found in the surrounding historical, literary and social context. This definition's strength lies in the fact that it is not a definition at all but rather a description and explanation of a particular kind of symbolic mode of encoding meaning into language. It is more complex and expansive as the manner in which Fletcher has constructed it allows its application to a wide selection of texts, including the *Commedia*.

However, it does rely on the relationship between the variable x and Y which does invoke allegory "...as a dead system of symbols, for which one must apply some kind of standard decoder" (Esolen 414). This systematic approach to allegory lends itself to personification allegory. This is a kind of allegory in which characters or other narrative entities stand in for abstract concepts such as Love, Justice, or Revelation. In other words, it is a form of allegory in which *this* stands for *that*. This follows Fletcher's formulation in which the variable x invokes a predicate of Y . Conceptualising allegory in this manner, as a dead system of symbols, potentially caused "Critics since the eighteenth century [to decry] allegory for tediousness, lack of interest and vagueness" (Bloom 163). This flat idea of what allegory was and what it could do arguably lead to "...the great allegorists Dickens and Tolkien to deny that they wrote allegory at all"

(Esolen 414). This suggests that dismantling the allegorical elements of a text, due to the perceived tediousness and obscurity, can have the consequence of stripping the text of an essential dimension of meaning. What these examples show is the nature of the decline in perceived value of allegory because these narratives have allegorical elements and could potentially be interpreted through an allegorical lens, but their authors and readers showed a marked distaste for calling the works allegorical. This can be seen in the fact that “The word *allegory* acquires a set of fixed epithets – *medieval, old, tedious, etc...*” (Brljak 711, Italics in the original). Therefore, the major weakness of this explanation of allegory lies in the way it views allegory as a system, interchangeable through a series of inputs and outputs, which may have contributed to a perception of allegory as obscure. It also allows for a conception of allegory that prioritises and legitimizes only the personification mode of allegory and, in so doing, reduces allegory to a single part rather than a holistic whole. Once allegory has been reduced to a single part, a variable to be exchanged, it can likewise be removed entirely without much perceived loss of narrative cohesion. This was seen, according to Vladimir Brljak, in the nineteenth century tendency of scholars to claim that “...even manifestly allegorical works can still be enjoyed if their allegorical dimension is ignored” (Brljak 704). These allegorical texts that were subsequently stripped of their allegorical dimension include Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and, arguably, the *Commedia* itself when the literal sense of its allegory is emphasised at the expense of its allegorical and figurative dimensions. However, it can be acknowledged that there has, indeed, been some crucial loss of meaning when the allegorical dimension of the text is ignored.

It is notable that the personification mode of allegory is often the only one seriously considered by certain critics. This can be seen explicitly by “...the German critics and scholars of the nineteenth century, who seem to have regarded allegory with a special aversion” (Thompson 2). Of these nineteenth century German scholars, I am especially noting Kurt Vossler, who was Erich Auerbach’s mentor. According to David Thompson, the only type of allegory that Vossler (and other scholars like him) considered was personification allegory. In Kurt Vossler’s book, *Medieval Culture: An Introduction to*

Dante and His Times, he dismisses the interpretation of the *Commedia* through the lens of personification allegory:

But this much I know, that Dante the poet would have found a place in his Hell for those modern commentators who even to this day break up his glorious poem according to antiquated Thomistic and Dantesque prescriptions, and for those schoolmasters who in all seriousness, in the face of the blooming youth in the schools of Italy, destroy his beloved Virgil and his divine Beatrice into scientific types. He would have placed them, if I am not mistaken, among the *accidiosi*³², the ill-tempered and spiritually indolent, who, plunged in the mud, can only gurgle..." (Vossler 134–135).

This shows the extent to which Vossler rejected personification allegory and, because it was the only type of allegory that he considered, he therefore rejects the premise that the *Commedia* is an allegorical text. Additionally, he consigns those who interpret the *Commedia* in such a way to the pits of Hell. He argues that by interpreting these characters as a personification would be flattening them into 'scientific types'. By placing those who practise 'antiquated Thomistic and Dantesque prescriptions' in hell, he is rejecting the entirety of the medieval theory of art. He states that "It is high time that everyone who devotes himself to Dante should come to realize that the medieval theory of art does no justice to the essence of art, whether, starting from Plotinus, it makes the poet a prophet and theologian, or with Plato, stigmatizes him as a liar" (Vossler 135). Vossler's formulation of the essence of art is influenced by his German Idealism, a philosophical movement that was closely connected to the Enlightenment and Romanticism. It valued the individual's concrete, empirical experience of reality, maintaining that there was where truth could be accessed, rather than upon abstractions. This is why Vossler would have dismissed the poetic, abstract dimensions of characters, especially historical characters, such as Farinata, Francesca, and Ugolino. Vossler argues for their historical significance and disengages them from their potential allegorical abstraction. His emphasis of these characters's historicity is in line with his German idealist views as well as his Enlightenment context. This criticism is not only

³² Translation: The wrathful

directed towards a certain kind of reading of the *Commedia*, but rather against the entirety of the medieval theory of art. Vossler takes this further when he extrapolates his own, modern theory of art which is entrenched with his Enlightenment ideals:

A work of art is not created when an individual intuition is didactically superimposed on a universal concept (allegory), nor when the mind becomes absorbed in a mystical idea beyond the realm of intuition (vision and ecstasy), but when our individual spirit by its own effort sets clearly and intuitively before itself the particular impressions and experiences which move it from without and from within. Beauty is found neither in scientific concepts nor in mystical ideas, but in the spiritual originality of our own intuitions. A concept can only be adjudged true or false; a mystical idea only credible or incredible, sacred or profane. Value like beautiful and ugly, form and formlessness, shapely and shapeless, have reference solely to the moulding and forming power of our own spirit, and apply the work of art. An aesthetic inquiry that measures art by the standards of truth and holiness, or by those of usefulness and morality, denies the validity of aesthetic values as such, itself becomes meaningless, and cannot serve as a foundation for art-criticism (Vossler 135).

Vossler maintains that medieval theories of art are fundamentally incapable of fully understanding the true meaning of art. This is an opinion that Auerbach inherited, as seen when he stated that “Even in its purest forms Neo-Platonism took a complex and unproductive attitude towards empirical world, its reality, and the possibility of representing it in art” (Auerbach 1961, 15–16). While Auerbach and Vossler differed on several key points, such as their differing focuses on materialism and idealism, they aligned on the idea that the medieval theory of art was fundamentally incapable of properly interpreting the *Commedia* or poetry and art in general. Additionally, Auerbach suggests that it is incapable of generating true mimetic reality. It was incapable of representing or meaningfully engaging with the empirical world because it simply was not created in a world that saw that world empirically but rather indulged in a state of fictiveness and symbolic meaning. For this reason, it is necessary to acknowledge that scholars such as Vossler and Auerbach considered allegory as

symptomatic of a kind a barbarism and degeneracy of thought associated with the 'dark ages' which the more empirically inclined Enlightenment period eradicated. Therefore, it is the case that "...allegory's decline is due not merely to random or cyclical turns of literary taste but is symptomatic of a more profound teleological pattern – of literary progress rather than literary change, which is itself an aspect of the general progress of human civilisation" (Brljak 703).

Fletcher's definition of allegory relies on a system of moving parts that can be easily disassembled and reassembled to work in a systematic, symbolic and linguistic manner. This is the strength of the definition, but also its weakness when it is considered through a reductive logical framework that seeks to align itself with the Law of the Excluded Middle. In this appeal to the subversion of language, it ultimately allows for allegory to be removed from the text rather than being inherent to the text. This can result in the reduction of meaning, stripping the allegorical parts in favour of a more historical and literal reading. To a certain extent, this complete association of allegory with the personification mode has also affected the theories of seminal Dantean scholars such as Vossler and Auerbach, who inherited their understanding of allegory from German idealism. The complete association of allegory with the personification mode has led these scholars to claim that the *Commedia* is not allegory at all and that, ultimately, the entire medieval theory of art is incapable of generating true understanding of the texts. This is because the *Commedia* is clearly not a personification allegory as its allegory does not work in the same way that Langland's allegory works, which is clearly a personification allegory. The *Commedia* is, at least, not merely a personification allegory. David Thompson notes that "...the *Commedia* simply does not make sense if one translates 'Reason' every time Virgil is mentioned, or 'Revelation' whenever Beatrice opens her mouth" (Thompson 2). This is true, even though many editions of the *Commedia* will still add in their accompanying footnotes and study guides that Beatrice represents 'Revelation' or Virgil represents 'Reason'. This causes Thompson to write that "...Vossler might feel a pang of despair if he could view the current state of affairs, for the personification theory which he tried to lay to rest has been well embalmed in the very texts through which many students first encounter the poem" (Thompson 2). If a systematic approach to allegory causes

allegory to be thought of as 'a dead system of symbols' then it is necessary to consider an understanding of allegory that is not as narrow as the dictionary definition nor as systematic as Fletcher's definition. For this reason, I will now examine the way T.S. Eliot conceptualises allegory in a less systematic manner by using Dante as a direct exemplar.

T.S. Eliot was famously obsessed with Dante, viewing him as the foundational author of the Western canon. In his book, simply titled *Dante*, Eliot provided a psycho-analytical interpretation of Dante's allegory:

We have to consider the type of mind which by nature and *practice* tended to express itself in allegory: and for a competent poet, allegory means *clear visual images*. And clear visual images are given more intensity by having a meaning – we do not need to know what that meaning is, but in our awareness of the image we must be aware that the meaning is there too. (Eliot, italics in the original).

Eliot defines allegory through the consideration of a kind of mind that is capable of producing 'clear visual images'. These 'clear visual images' are given more intensity when they are imbued with some kind of meaning. He emphasizes these 'clear visual images' as a cognitive practice of which allegory would be the outcome. Eliot associates this kind of mind with the medieval era. In contrast to the previous two definitions, Eliot does not conceptualise allegory as a simple and narrow dictionary definition nor as a symbolic mode, but rather as a practice and a way of thinking. In so doing, it circumvents the rigidity of the previous two definitions. Unlike the dictionary definition, it considers the medieval context from which Dante's allegory would have originated. Additionally, it allows for a multiplicity of meanings that is free from Fletcher's formulaic depiction of allegory as a subversion of the way language works. In contrast to these other definitions, Eliot conceives of allegory as a visual medium, tied closely to the inherent abstractions of dreams. This can be seen in the way that Eliot expresses this kind of cognitive practice as distant from a modern context or, in this particular case, a distinctly modernist worldview:

Dante's is a *visual* imagination. It is a visual imagination in a different sense from that of a modern painter of still life: it is visual in the sense that he lived in an age in which men still saw visions. It was a psychological habit, the trick of which we have forgotten, but as good as any of our own. We have nothing but dreams, and we have forgotten that seeing visions – a practice now relegated to the aberrant and uneducated – was once a more significant, interesting, and disciplined kind of dreaming. We take it for granted that our dreams spring from below: possibly the quality of our dreams suffers in consequence (Eliot, *Italics in original*).

In this quotation, Eliot is emphasizing the role of visual symbolism in medieval culture as previously seen in Frank Jr's acknowledgement of the symbolic integration of the natural world into everyday life through preachings of Scripture in the Catholic church. Eliot's understanding of allegory appeals to Carruthers's theories of textualism as it relies on context, rather than something that is inherent in the meaning of the words or originating from the text itself. Additionally, there is an element of her theory of *memoria* in the way that Eliot has conceptualised the psychological habit of interpreting and writing allegory as something that has been forgotten but was once integrated into a particular epoch and its way of conceptualising the world. However, Eliot's description of the interpretation of allegory as a 'psychological habit' or a 'trick' appeals to the concept of the 'medieval mind' and creates the impression that it is a relic of a bygone era, inaccessible unless it is translated, it is suggested, for more sophisticated modern sensibilities.

Therefore, there are some disadvantages to the way that Eliot approaches this idea of allegory as a cognitive practice and the way that he equates this with the medieval period. There has been a tendency, which Eliot shows, to identify allegory wholly with the medieval period and a subsequent conceptualisation of the 'medieval mind'. Eliot is alluding to this concept of the 'medieval mind', a concept which originated in the nineteenth century with authors such as Jacob Burckhardt and John Addington Symonds. It is an idea that has since been debunked. There was the sense that "The spirit of the epoch inclined to Allegory and Vision" (Symonds 64). Symonds describes

“...the medieval mind...” (Symonds 365) as one preoccupied with the future destiny of man in the Christian afterlife, the empirical world serving only to prefigure the true world of the afterlife, and as such was reliant on allegorical visions to make sense of their pre-modern existence. In this way, the concept of the ‘medieval mind’ which is uniquely prefigured to interpret allegory and the myth of the medieval ages as the ‘age of allegory’ became increasingly intertwined. It is a combination that is seen in Eliot, who describes the interpretation of allegory as a ‘psychological habit’ or a ‘trick’ that belongs to a past epoch and has been subsequently lost in a more ‘enlightened’ era.

In the ‘Age of Allegory’, Vladimir Brljak details “...the historiographical topos or myth, as it is perhaps best described, according to which the Middle Ages were *the* age of allegory” (Brljak 697, *Italics in the original*). Some scholars, such as seen previously with Kurt Vossler, have deemed that the medieval theory of art is incompatible with modern ideals of art. In this way, the medieval period became the ‘age of allegory’ and thus the process of interpreting allegory became increasingly associated with a certain kind of medieval way of thinking, which can be seen in references to ‘the medieval mind’ in Eliot’s understanding of allegory. However, Brljak writes the following to dispute this:

What should no longer be controversial is that the myth of the Middle Ages as the Age of Allegory is indeed a myth, long overdue to join the Flat Earth, the Chastity Belt, the Angels Dancing on the Head of a Pin, and other denizens of that strange limbo of exploded superstitions about the period. The state of modern allegory studies simply no longer allows one to single out this epoch as somehow essentially allegorical in character as opposed to those which preceded and followed it (Brljak 698).

As the scholarship stands now, it is no longer popular nor conventional to claim that the Middle Ages was defined as an age of allegory, or that allegory defined the age in a way that might notably distinguish it from other periods of history. Eliot’s conception of allegory relies on Dante’s ‘visual imagination’ and an idea of the medieval world as being essentially an age in which ‘men still saw visions’. Eliot presents the interpretation of allegory as a psychological habit that now only exists among the

‘aberrant and uneducated’. In this way, he is granting this kind of allegorical interpretation a sense of fundamental difference, which is abnormal, and must be translated or re-interpreted for the ‘modern’ mind which is unused to seeing the world in this way. Allegory, conceived of in such a manner, is a product of its own metaphysical cosmology, notably that of the medieval era wherein the universe is conceptualised as finite and harmonious, rather than a product of an infinite, chaotic universe. The interpretation of allegory requires a semi-supernatural ability to tap into a universal way of knowing things that somehow transcends both time and space. Although Eliot claims to be writing in defence of allegory, he is still presenting it as fundamentally different from other modes of writing and interpretation. In a further defence of allegory, Eliot states that

All I ask of the reader, at this point, is to clear his mind, if he can, of every prejudice against allegory, and to admit at least that it was not a device to enable the uninspired to write verses, but really a mental habit, which when raised to the point of genius can make a great poet as well as a great mystic or saint (Eliot).

Eliot is acknowledging the decline in the perception of allegory and is asking his reader to look past this. He emphasizes allegory as a mental habit, a psychological trick, and, likewise, as a product of the ‘medieval mind’. In so doing, he is engaging in the type of fallacy that regulates allegory to a purely medieval way of thinking which Brljak argues is simply not the case. Therefore, while Eliot’s way of thinking of allegory has some significant benefits, it nevertheless fails to conceptualise of allegory beyond the concept of the medieval period as the Age of Allegory and is dependent on a fallacious conception of the medieval mind.

In summation, these three definitions and understandings of allegory present themselves with various strengths and weaknesses. They are all in accordance with the modern ideal of allegory and contain the benefits and disadvantages that accompany the post-Enlightenment way of thinking. The dictionary definition of allegory allows for a sufficient surface level understanding of allegory but ultimately fails under more rigorous academic procedure because it does not consider different kinds of allegory or

different historical contexts. It fails to fully encapsulate the full holistic truth of allegory because it operates within an atomistic and reductive logical framework. Fletcher's conception of allegory as a symbolic mode is more adaptable to many different forms of allegory but renders allegory as a 'dead system of symbols' and relies too heavily on the personification mode, allowing for the allegorical dimensions of texts to be removed without the perception of any loss of actual meaning. Eliot's understanding of allegory as a cognitive practice embraces context and is applicable to various forms but ultimately relies on a fallacious depiction of the 'medieval mind'.

From this exploration into various forms of definitions and understandings of allegory, it is possible to discern several key assumptions, especially in regard to the modern understanding of allegory. First, it is unnecessary and unproductive to operate under a narrow understanding of allegory through the use of a precise definition. Second, it is possible to range from a strict, formulaic understanding of allegory as a symbolic mode to an abstracted idea of allegory existing as a cognitive practice which places value on the ability to see 'clear, visual images' and relies on a particular conception of the 'Medieval Mind'. This is illuminated by the theories of Carruthers and Noakes.

Fletcher's formulaic formulation of allegory relies on the fundamentalist idea that 'words mean what they say' while Eliot relies on a textualist, memorial sense of the Middle Ages as the 'age of allegory'. In this way, both Fletcher's and Eliot's understanding of allegory ultimately falls into the same theoretical traps that textualism and fundamentalism do. Eliot's textual conception of allegory relies on the fiction of the 'Medieval Mind'. Fletcher's formulaic and fundamentalist approach is ultimately calcified and made into a 'dead system of symbols'. It is therefore the case that, in order to understand allegory, it is necessary to examine the manner in which allegory is read. To begin with, it is useful to consider the manner in which Dante describes the way that his allegory works in the *Commedia*. Dante refers to the four senses of meaning in the *Epistle to Can Grande*. He states the following in the *Epistle*:

... you must know that the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes

from the letter, the second is that of that which is signified by the letter. And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical (ECG).

This quotation forms a significant basis for the medieval understanding of Dante's allegory and has been used to substantiate readings of the *Commedia* in various ways. It is now necessary to examine the manner in which Dante conceptualised his own allegory in the *Convivio*, the *Epistle*, and, to a certain extent, the *Vita Nuova*.

Dante's Conception of the Allegory of Poets and the Allegory of Theologians

This section will examine the manner in which Dante approaches allegory in his other writings. I will focus on the *Epistle to Can Grande* and the *Convivio*. This will also entail some exploration into the medieval scholarship regarding Dante in general, and thus the manner in which the *Commedia* would have been read at its initial conception. Medieval scholarship, as it exists for the *Commedia* and in general, is vast and diverse. Over the course of its seven-hundred-year history, much has been lost, discarded, gained and created with regards to the *Commedia*. Therefore, I acknowledge the error in conflating the *Commedia's* early commentary into a single category and calling it 'medieval'. In general, the term 'medieval' is loosely defined and subject to change. Depending on the source, what is known as the medieval era might lose or gain a century or more as there are no precise borders for when it begins or ends. The term 'medieval' can encompass a great deal of time and meaning. The term 'medieval' denotes the period after the end of the Roman Empire and before the beginning of the Renaissance and often reveals more about the importance that is accorded to these two epochs than it does about the medieval period itself. The medieval era is therefore a loose collection of ideas placed between two eras of history that are considered more influential and important. Rome fell in 476 CE and the Renaissance is considered to start in the 14th Century (Onion). The *Commedia* is set in 1300, the year Dante was elected to the office of prior, and he died in 1321. This places him just at the end of the medieval period and right at the beginning of the Renaissance. I will therefore be examining Dante's views on allegory as they existed at this point in time, as well as acknowledging the manner in which his earliest commentators, of which Giovanni

Boccaccio is my prime example, followed what was stated in the *Convivio* regarding the allegory of poets. As such, I will begin with an expansion on the *Convivio* before moving on to explore what is stated regarding Dante's allegorical mode of signification in the *Epistle*. This is necessary because there is a contrast between modern and medieval scholarship that can be drawn between which secondary text, the *Epistle* or the *Convivio*, that tends to be emphasised in the interpretation of Dante's allegorical mode.

The *Convivio*, often translated as 'the Banquet' in English, is Dante's unfinished philosophical treatise that deals with a wide variety of topics, including philosophy, politics, and linguistics. In the *Convivio*, Dante's defence of the vernacular occurs in the first book. The second and third book of the *Convivio* discusses the death of Beatrice and Dante's new love for 'Lady Philosophy'. It is in the second book that Dante discusses allegory and makes the distinction between the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians. The second book of the *Convivio* deals with Dante's defence of his use of the vernacular as well as Dante's expansion of the four kinds of meaning. Therefore, I will focus on this second book of the *Convivio* in this current enquiry. This section will focus on what Dante states regarding his understanding of allegory as well as his use of the vernacular language and how this is later applied, by either himself or by his commentators, to the *Commedia* itself. It is necessary to examine the manner in which Dante's view of the vernacular's capability of expressing profound philosophical thought shifted throughout his life, from the *Vita Nuova* to the *Convivio*.

While Dante did write in the vernacular before his exile, most notably in *Vita Nuova*, there is a notable shift in thinking about the potential and limitations of the vernacular in the *Convivio*. The *Convivio* argues for the vernacular's capability to express complex philosophical and political ideas to a wide audience while *Vita Nuova* only acknowledges the vernacular's suitability for poetry. In *Vita Nuova* XXV, Dante questions whether personification should be used by writers of verse in the vernacular:

At this point a question might be raised by someone whose every question should be treated with respect; and what he might question is the fact that I speak of Love as if it were a thing in itself, and not only an intelligent substance

but a corporeal substance, which is clearly untrue; for Love is not in itself a substance, but an accident of substance (VN 107).

The person whose every question should be treated with respect that Dante is referring to is likely Cavalcanti because, according to Anthony Mortimer, “Dante’s insistence on the difference between poetic usage and philosophical truth may be a response to Cavalcanti’s highly philosophical and much commented poem” (Mortimer 183).³³ Dante’s defence of his use of personification in this manner rests on the fact that those who write verse in the vernacular “...should be granted the same license as those who wrote in Latin and Greek, and he asserts their right to be called poets” (Mortimer 182). This can be seen in the following:

We see that the ancient poets addressed inanimate things as if they had sense and reason, and made them speak to each other; and this they did not only with things that are real but also with things that do not exist, giving speech to these non-existence things and making accidents speak as if they were substances and men. If this is the case, then the vernacular poet has a right to do the same, though not without some purpose that can be later explained in prose (VN 109).

This quotation contains Dante’s defence of the poetic use of personification and thereby giving physical form to poetic constructs. It is notable that Dante’s ontological conception of being, of things that exists, is seen through the lens of Aristotelian philosophy and logic. According to A.C. Grayling, Aristotle conceives of a ‘substance’ as a category that “...tells us what thing it is” (Grayling 86) and is therefore an immutable property of its being. In contrast, an ‘accident’ is “...a characteristic that something happens to have but which it could just as likely not have – which it has accidentally, so to speak...” (Grayling 87). In other words, there are some properties of a thing that may be contingent, and thus are subject to change, while there are other properties that are inherent and therefore necessary for a thing to exist. Therefore, the property of ‘love’ is an accident that may or may not exist as a property of a thing. One might

³³ This refers to Guido Cavalcanti’s philosophical poem, *Donna me prega*.

possess the quality of love, of Dante's conception of the *cor gentile*, but one might just as easily not possess this quality. However, if love is personified, as it is in the *Vita Nuova*, then this accident becomes an immutable part of its substance. A representation such as this challenges the way in which Dante logically perceives the universe through an Aristotelian lens. The reality of what he is claiming about the nature of love must be defended. Dante makes repeated statements that maintain the importance that there exists a true, immutable meaning behind any poetic statement:

And lest any cultivated person should feel encouraged by what I have said, I insist that the Latin poets do not speak this way without a purpose, and neither should vernacular rhyming poets do so without a reason; for it would be truly shameful for a poet to cloak things with figures of speech and rhetorical ornament if then, on being asked, he proved unable to remove the cloak and reveal the true meaning (VN 110–111).

Accordingly, the true meaning to be preserved beyond this veil of allegory and other figures of speech such as personification. The writer must know this, even if the reader fails to interpret the true meaning. This is ostensibly the reason why Dante goes into such detail into the structure and meaning of his *canzoni* in both the *Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio*. He separates his *canzoni* into various parts and deliberately explains what each one means. By doing this, he is justifying his use of not only the vernacular but also of allegory. However, this practice is notably absent from the *Commedia* which allows for potential misinterpretation. Dante, as a poet, is relinquishing control and inviting the reader into text with their potential to interpret and misinterpret. There is therefore a notable shift in thinking about the potential and limitations of the vernacular from the *Vita Nuova* to the *Convivio*. The *Convivio* argues for the vernacular's capability to express complex philosophical and political ideas, allowing for more people to join the 'banquet' of knowledge that Dante has offered, while the *Vita Nuova* only acknowledges the vernacular's suitability for poetry. This shows an evolution in Dante's thinking regarding the vernacular and his use of poetic allegory. His thinking regarding the vernacular changes from the suitability of the vernacular confined to poetry in *Vita Nuova*, to the defence of vernacular in the *Convivio* for its

potential to convey profound philosophical ideas within the treatise, to finally the *Commedia* in which Dante combines the philosophical and the poetic within his use of the vernacular. In the *Commedia*, there are even episodes in which Dante places the vernacular above the Latin.

Like the *Commedia* and the *Vita Nuova*, the *Convivio* is written in the vernacular. This connection shows that “The decision to write a poem expounding the most profound truth of both philosophy and theology in the vernacular was a radical choice that was made possible by Dante’s impassioned defence of his mother tongue in the *Convivio*” (Scott 31). In *Convivio I*, Dante writes a defence of his use of the vernacular by claiming he wishes to reach the widest range of people possible, not just the learned elite. He does this through the metaphor of the banquet, drawing a distinction between those who eat at the table and those who must be satisfied by its scraps. He writes “Oh, blessed are the few the few who sit at the table where the bread of angels is eaten! And wretched are those who must graze along the sheep!” (Con 6). Dante acknowledges the hierarchal cultural norms but also states that “...every man is by nature a friend towards every other” (Con 6). His defence of his use of vernacular further deconstructs this hierarchy:

So I who do not sit at the table of the blessed, I who have fled the common pasture, and merely gather a part of what falls at the feet of those who do sit there, and know the wretched life of those I have left behind by the sweetness I taste in what I gather piecemeal, and am moved by compassion for all, including myself, I then have reserved for the wretched those poems which I set before their eyes a while ago to stimulate their desire (Con 7)

This quotation must be analysed with consideration of the time that it was written. Since “It was in the first years of his exile, in the period 1303–1307, that Dante set out to disprove such linguistic and cultural prejudices [of the Latin being superior to the vernacular]” (Scott 32), it can be noted that Dante’s use of the vernacular is connected in a particular way to his condition of exile. It is the vernacular that “...will thus allow Dante to carry out a unique task: to bring useful knowledge to a host of good men and women who have been deprived of essential nourishment” (Scott 33). In his state of

exile, Dante writes in the vernacular so that he does not exile those people who do not read Latin from his text. This sentiment is further when he invites the reader into the text in the *Commedia* in order to interpret or misinterpret its allegory.

In the second book of the *Convivio*, Dante goes into further detail in how he believes allegory should be read and interpreted. This is an evolution and an expansion on his views regarding allegory from the *Vita Nuova*. It is in the *Convivio* that Dante writes about the concepts of the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians. These concepts have played significant roles in Dantean scholarship. It is from these two concepts that the major distinction between medieval European criticism and modern American criticism originates. It is therefore necessary to stipulate clearly and precisely where these concepts are located within Dante's body of work as well as in the evolution of his thinking towards the *Commedia*. I will relate the manner in which these concepts appear in the second book of the *Convivio*. It is necessary to detail the four senses of meaning as Dante gives them in the *Convivio* as the two concepts of the allegory of theologians and the allegory of poets is connected to the manner in which Dante conceptualises the four senses of meaning.

In the *Convivio*, Dante states that "... it is needful to know that writing can be understood and should be expounded in four main ways" (Con 37). Dante groups the first two meanings together and then describes the third and fourth meaning separately. The first kind of meaning is 'the literal' and is "...the meaning that, in poetic fables for instance, does not delve beneath the surface of the words" (Con 37). Dante uses an example from Ovid wherein Orpheus's music tamed wild animals and called for the trees and rocks to come towards him. If the reading were to stay at the literal sense, then this is all that the passage from Ovid would mean: Orpheus's music soothed wild beasts and called to nature. However, as Dante further expounds, there is a further allegorical meaning that "...is concealed beneath the cloak of the fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a lovely fiction" (Con 37). The term 'lovely fiction' has been translated from *bella menzogna*. It is around the *bella menzogna* that a great deal of the understanding of the manner in which Dante constructs his allegory is centred, particularly in reference to the allegory of poets. The understanding of the *bella*

menzogna is variable. Some scholars³⁴ have interpreted and approached it as less of a 'lovely fiction' and more as an outright lie therefore claiming that the true meaning of the poem cannot be located in the *bella menzogna*. For the *Commedia's* earliest commentators, however, the *bella menzogna* is considered to be the veil under which the true poetic value of the allegory can be accessed. Dante uses the same example of Ovid and analyses the story through the lens of allegory by stating that "So Ovid says that with his lyre Orpheus tamed wild beasts, and made the trees and rocks come to him at his call, which is to say that the wise man with the instrument of his voice makes harsh hearts tender and humble, and moves at will those who do not devote their lives to knowledge and art; and that those who have no rational life at all are almost like stones" (Con 37). It is notable that the example that Dante uses to explain his allegory in the *Convivio* is from poetry and not, for instance, from Scripture. Dante further states that "Why this kind of concealment was devised by the wise will be shown in the penultimate book" (Con 37). However, the *Convivio* is unfinished, and this penultimate book was never written. Therefore, one can only speculate what reason Dante would have written for why the wise men devised such concealment. The third sense "... is the moral one, and this is the meaning that teachers should seek to uncover throughout the Scriptures, for their own and their pupil's benefit..." (Con 37). The fourth sense is "...termed anagogical, that is to say beyond the sense; and is revealed when writings are expounded in a spiritual sense which, although they are true in the literal sense also, signifies by means of symbols an aspect of the divine glory of eternal things" (Con 37). Mazzotta states that the anagogical sense "... signifies the supernatural things of the eternal glory" (Mazzotta 1979, 235). The third and fourth sense of meaning are also given examples to justify them but, as Singleton stated, "... in illustration of these no example from 'the poets' is given" (Singleton 1950, 78). Both examples are taken from Holy Scripture. For the moral sense Dante offers the example of Christ only taking three Apostles to climb the Mount of Transfiguration which has the moral message that matters of secrecy should only be shared with a few. The example given for the fourth sense of meaning, anagogical, is from the Psalm of the Prophet which describes

³⁴ For instance, scholars such as Kurt Vossler and Erich Auerbach dismissed this dimension of Dante's allegory and saw it as little more than a shadowy abstraction. Other scholars, such as Benedetto Croce emphasize the reality of Dante's historical sense and claim that there is little of poetic value in the *Commedia*.

“...when the children of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was rendered whole and free” (Con 27) which, according to Dante, has the anagogical sense that the soul is liberated and complete when it departs from sin. Dante does not go into the same depth with the third and fourth sense of meaning as he does with the first and second. This makes it clear that his focus is on the literal and the allegorical dimensions which is acknowledged by Singleton when he states that “It is, however, evident from the closing words of the chapter that in the exposition of the poems of the *Convivio*, the third and fourth senses will have only an incidental interest and that the poet is to concern himself mainly with the first two” (Singleton 2019, 85). Therefore, in the *Convivio* at least, the first and second sense of meaning remains Dante’s focus, and it is here that Dante expands on the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians.

According to Dante in the *Convivio*, an emphasis on the figurative and poetic dimension of the text does not diminish the importance or the necessity of the literal sense. This can be seen when Dante states the following:

...the literal should always be treated first, as being the meaning in which the others are enclosed, and without which it would be impossible and illogical to treat the other meanings, especially the allegorical. It would be impossible because with regard to all that has an outside and an inside, it is impossible to arrive at the inside without first arriving at the outside: thus, given that, in what is written, the outside is always the literal meaning, it is impossible to arrive at the other meanings, especially the allegorical, without first arriving at the literal (Con 38).

This quotation shows the manner in which Dante understood the relationship between the literal and allegorical sense of meaning. He argues that it is impossible for one to exist without the other, or for the reader to reach the true meaning beyond the veil of allegory, without first encountering the literal sense. Therefore, the literal sense is little more than a literary framing device, containing the true meaning of the allegorical within it. This is the *bella menzogna*, where the truth lies within the figurative sense, beyond the literal sense that is, essentially, a fiction. The literal sense is the “...foundation for the others, especially the allegorical, it is impossible to understand

the other meanings without first understanding the literal meaning" (Con 38). It is for this reason that Dante states that he will first discuss the literal sense of his *canzoni* before delving into the other senses. In the *Convivio*, Dante groups the first and second sense of meaning together by discussing them first. He explains the literal and allegorical sense before moving onto the anagogical and moral sense. It is in the middle of his explanation of the four different senses of meaning that he declares his intention to write in the allegory of poets. He states that "Indeed theologians treat this meaning differently to the poets; but since it is my intention to follow the methods of poets here, I shall treat the allegorical meaning in the manner of the poets" (Con 37). For the early medieval commentators, this was taken to mean that Dante was declaring his intention to write in a manner according to the allegory of poets rather than the allegory of theologians not only in the *Convivio* but also in the *Commedia*.

In defining the allegory of poets, Giuseppe Mazzotta states that "The proponents of the allegory of poets see the *Divine Comedy* essentially as a *fabula*, a poetic construct in which theology, figuralism and Dante's prophetic vocation, which manifestly are the props of the poem, are part and parcel of the fictional strategy, the literal sense of which is pure fiction" (Mazzotta 1979, 230–231). If one were to read the *Commedia* strictly through the lens of the allegory of poets, then Dante's tale of descending into the Christian afterlife is merely the literary and narrative device that holds his poetic claims in place. Everything from the *selva oscura*, the Garden of Earthly Paradise to the final image of God is ostensibly false while the true meaning of the poem is embedded within its allegory, laying beyond the *bella menzogna*. Dante did not literally go to Hell, or the other realms of the Christian afterlife. However, this is not where the truth of the narrative lies and there is nevertheless profound truth to be discovered in his allegorical representation of the universe, how he portrays his conception of God, and the things he claims about the true nature of love and sin. Dante presents an encyclopaedic volume of poetic truth by traversing from one end of the universe to the other and, if one were to read it as the allegory of the poets, then this truth lies in the allegorical sense, and not in its literal sense, which is merely a framing device designed to contain that profound truth. In this sense, 'poetics' refers to the meaning derived from the words, imagery and symbolism that goes beyond its initial layer of literal

signification. In other words, this would refer to the second kind of meaning addressed in the *Convivio*, the allegorical sense which comes after and beyond the first, initial literal sense of meaning. The early medieval commentators, such as will be shown to be the case with Boccaccio, interpreted the *Commedia* along the lines of the allegory of poets. These proponents of the allegory of the poets in the *Commedia* formed the bulk of its early commentary and thus formed the hermeneutic continuity of the poem. There have, however, been scholars who have, in relatively recent times, moved away from the allegory of poets and its way of reading the *Commedia*. For instance, Bruno Nardi claimed that the early commentators “...deliberately misinterpreted Dante’s poem according to the allegory of the poets (i.e. the truth under the veil of the ‘bella menzogna’) in order to protect the poet from charges of heresy” (Corbett 3).

Therefore, it is the case that the allegory of poets refers to a narrative that operates on a literal and figurative level with the latter holding the true significance of the poem in its poetic, moral, political, or religious meaning. In contrast, the allegory of theologians is a didactic form of writing which prioritises the literal level as akin to a divine truth which may have further symbolic and religious meaning as it pertains to ‘god’s way of writing’. The phrase ‘god’s way of writing’ refers to the idea, presented by St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*, that “Much as in Holy Scripture, God signifies his meaning by both words and things” (Mazzotta 1979, 240). The idea of the allegory of theologians, and subsequently of God’s way of writing, as a mode of signification that encompasses both historical events and poetic meaning in its conception of truth comes from Article 10 of the *Summa Theologica* which attempts to answer the question “Whether in Holy Scripture a Word May Have Several Senses?” (Aquinas 1.10) This is a response to the argument that “...in Holy Writ a word cannot have several senses, historical or literal, allegorical, tropological or moral, and anagogical” (Aquinas 1.10). This is the idea that the Holy Writ must not have space for fallacious intent or a multiplicity of propositions because its author is an omnipresent and omnipotent conception of God, an author that does not make mistakes. St. Thomas Aquinas’ answer to this is as follows:

The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it. (Aquinas 1.10)

This shows that, according to the allegory of theologians, the power and truth of words is held within and by the words themselves. God, unlike a mortal poet, has the power to incorporate meaning not only in words but into historical events themselves, thereby creating a truth in the literal sense. This contrasts with poetic allegory or what Dante refers to as the concept of the *bella menzogna*, which is ostensibly a lie, because God has the omnipresent and omnipotent ability to create historical events that have allegorical meaning. This can be seen, arguably, in the incarnation of Christ, who was a representation of God, who was then symbolically sacrificed to save His people from sin. The incarnation of Christ is therefore a historical event, according to Christianity, that also contains allegorical meaning. In this way, words ‘mean what they say’ and do not point to further meaning beyond themselves nor should they be required to because truth is contained both in the historical event and the words that are used to described them.

Aquinas argues that the Holy Writ therefore can have multiple senses of meaning and to claim otherwise would be a diminishing of God’s omnipresence. This can be further acknowledged when Aquinas states that “Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Writ is God, Who by one act comprehends all things by His intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses” (Aquinas 1.10). It is therefore necessary to acknowledge God as the author of the Biblical text and, considering the infallibility of God, this would require the text to be, as an extension,

also infallible. This can be placed into context of Carruthers's dichotomy between fundamentalism and textualism:

It is reasonable, from a fundamentalist attitude, that God must be the direct author of the Bible. This belief holds true as well among secular fundamentalists writing about literature, who postulate a God-like author who plans, directs, and controls the meaning of his work (Carruthers 14).

This aligns with the approach to reading the *Commedia* that relies on the allegory of theologians. It positions Dante as a God-like creator of text who is imitating God's way of writing and is therefore responsible for any meaning in the text and can then account for any derivation of meaning that the text might manifest. In a reading that incorporates the allegory of theologians, it would be the case that "...the role of scholarship is solely to identify the accumulations interpretative debris and to polish up the origin, simple meaning" (Carruthers 14). At this stage, however, it is necessary to examine the way that the early medieval commentators followed what Dante stated in the *Convivio* regarding his intention to write in the allegory of poets, rather than the allegory of theologians. This can be seen in the manner in which Giovanni Boccaccio engages with the allegory of poets in his subsequent writings on Dante and the *Commedia*.

In the *Convivio* itself, there is little to indicate that Dante intended to write, or did in fact write, in the allegory of the theologians. Instead, it is the case that he outright states that he plans to write in the allegory of poets. It is in line with the hermeneutic continuity that began with these early commentators to claim that Dante wrote the *Commedia* in the allegory of poets. This can be seen in the commentary on the *Commedia* done by Giovanni Boccaccio who, as one of the first Dantisti, laid a foundation for the ongoing commentary on the poem. In a lecture that Boccaccio gave on the *Commedia* from 1373 to 1374 "...for which he was paid by the Commune of Florence" (Hollander 1986, 278), he showed a tendency to emphasize the allegorical sense over the literal sense by opening this lecture with an appeal for help from God "... to explain the artful text, the many narratives, the sublime meanings hidden under the poetic veil of the *Comedy* of our Dante" (Brandeis 1961, 1). The meaning that exists

beneath the veil of allegory is the true meaning of the text and Boccaccio requires divine aid to ascertain. It is notable that Boccaccio beseeches God for aid in uncovering the veil of Dante's allegory as this is not something that modern scholars, who trend towards more secular readings, would have done. Additionally, Boccaccio's pleas to God to uncover the poetic veil show that he was following what was stated in the *Convivio* regarding the allegory of poets. He makes the implicit assumption that Dante was writing the allegory of poets and that the truth of the text could only be discovered by going beyond the *bella menzogna*. He therefore does not consider the literal sense of the allegory to be true and, in order to find the truth, he must interpret Dante's allegory. For this, Boccaccio requires God's assistance. Therefore, Boccaccio is emphasizing the figurative, allegorical sense of meaning in line with the allegory of poets.

Another instance of Boccaccio emphasizing the figurative sense occurs in his book, *the Trattatello in laude di Dante*. In this biographical text of Dante's life, Boccaccio writes the following:

It happened one day at Verona – when the fame of his works was already widely spread, and especially of that part of his *Comedy* which he calls the *Inferno*, and when he was known by many, both men and women – that, passing before a door where many women were sitting, one of them said softly to the others (but not so softly that she was not clearly heard by him and by his companion), 'Do you see the man who goes to hell, and returns when he pleases, and brings back news of those who are below?' To this one of the others responded naively, 'Indeed, you must be speaking the truth. Don't you see how his beard is crisped and his complexion browned by the heat and smoke that is below?' Hearing these words said behind him, and knowing that they came from the women's simple belief, he was pleased, and passed on, smiling a little, as if content that they thought this (Boccaccio 40–41)

This vignette reveals several things, and it reveals much more about Boccaccio and his interpretation of the *Commedia* than it does about the biographical details of Dante's life or his intentions while writing the poem. Primarily, it reveals that Boccaccio viewed

that belief in the literal sense of (at least) the *Inferno* as intrinsically 'naïve' and 'simple'. This is also connected to a construction of gender roles, wherein belief in the literal sense of the *Commedia* is a flaw of foolish, naïve and unlearned women, speaking in the vernacular, and not the serious commentary made, likely in Latin, by men. However, by stating that Dante was pleased that the women believed that he had gone to Hell, Boccaccio is still placing a measure of significance upon the literal sense. Continuously, the divide between the literal sense and the figurative sense is described as a kind of veil which the learned and the intellectual can peer through to gain further information and fully access the profound truth that the poetry is attempting to communicate. Therefore, the literal sense is the beginning, but not the end of the meaning that is inherent in the text. This shows that Boccaccio believed that Dante followed the allegory of poets. In other words, Boccaccio did not believe in the literal sense of Dante's narrative, unlike the women he describes in the passage. He did not take the literal sense to be historically true nor did he consider it to hold the same kind of profound truth that could be contained in its poetics. Additionally, Ginzburg states that "Dante's ideas about language, women and their relationship did not coincide with Boccaccio's" (Ginzburg 215). The manner in which they diverge on these ideas is showcased in Boccaccio's reading of the *Commedia*.

According to Boccaccio who followed the allegory of poets, if there was truth in the *Commedia*, then it was found in its allegorical sense, not in its objective narrative structures or its relation of ostensibly historical events. The literal sense is therefore purely fiction, designed to contain the further poetic truths discoverable in its allegory. To read Dante's historical, literal sense as true is the interpretation of the unlearned woman, who likely cannot read Latin and were not 'capable' of reading the deeper meaning of the allegory. The 'true meaning' of the *Commedia* is therefore accessed by deciphering its allegory. Because Boccaccio was one of the initial commentators on the *Commedia*, I have used him and his writing to illustrate the foundational readings and interpretations of medieval commentary. While there were variations thereof, Boccaccio's readings of Dante's allegorical structure exemplify the hermeneutic continuity that began with Dante's initial commentators and from which scholars such as Charles Singleton subsequently broke away. Scholars, such as Singleton, who broke

away from the hermeneutic continuity of the early medieval commentators prioritised what is stated in the *Epistle to Can Grande* over what is stated in the *Convivio* in order to argue for the allegory of theologians rather than the allegory of poets.

The *Epistle to Can Grande* and Surrounding Controversy

The *Epistle to Can Grande* is a letter, written supposedly by Dante in Latin³⁵, to Lord Can Grande della Scala. There exists a controversy surrounding the true authorship of the *Epistle*. In contemporary scholarship, there is a measure of doubt about whether Dante wrote the *Epistle*. Carlo Ginzburg, an Italian historian, stated that “The debate over the authenticity, whether total or partial, of the *Epistle to Cangrande* traditionally ascribed to Dante has been going on for over a century” (Ginzburg 195). It is therefore a mark of modern scholarship, emerging in the last century, to doubt the veracity of the *Epistle*. However, it is a mark of early medieval scholarship to make little use of the *Epistle*. It is the case that “Tradition has assigned the earliest explicit reference to the *Epistle* approximately to 1400, or over eighty years after Dante is thought to have composed the text, in a passage from Fillippo Villani’s incomplete commentary on the *Commedia*” (Ginzburg 196–197). There are no explicit references to the *Epistle* in the earliest commentaries of the *Commedia*. This includes the writings of Guido da Pisa, Pietro di Dante, and Jacopo della Lana. It is therefore notable that the *Epistle* was not a focus in early medieval commentary, to the point where modern and contemporary scholarship have used this as proof that the *Epistle* is a forgery. Additionally, it is notable that the *Epistle* has been foregrounded and emphasized in the last century of Dantean scholarship, becoming a foundational piece of scholarship for American twentieth-century scholarship that follows the Singletonian school. It is therefore necessary to examine the content of the *Epistle*, especially regarding how it describes allegory and the four senses of meaning and the manner in which it diverges from what is stated in the *Convivio*.

In the *Epistle*, Dante states the following in reference to the four senses of meaning in allegory:

³⁵ “All Dante’s letters are in Latin; the *Epistle to Cangrande* is no exception” (Ginzburg 195)

For me to be able to present what I am going to say, you must know that the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of that which is signified by the letter. And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical. (ECG)

While this largely follows what is stated regarding the construction of allegory in the four senses of meaning in the *Convivio*, the manner in which he divides the four senses of meaning is different. In the *Convivio*, Dante expands upon the first and second sense of meaning before explaining the third and fourth. He groups the first and second sense together, using an example from poetry, before moving on to briefly cover the third and fourth sense. In the *Epistle*, Dante isolates the literal, first sense of meaning and then groups the allegorical, moral, and anagogical together. This is notable because the veil of allegory, in the *Convivio*, is drawn between the literal and the allegorical. It is in this divide, between the literal sense and the allegorical sense, that the *bella menzogna* lies. However, in the *Epistle*, the way that the division is drawn emphasizes the literal as distinct from the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses. This subtle difference in division has led scholars, such as Singleton, to conclude that Dante is emphasizing the literal sense of the *Commedia's* allegory to be distinct, singular, and therefore true in a way that the other senses are not necessarily.

Another notable difference in the manner in which the *Convivio* and the *Epistle* discuss the four senses of meaning is in their choice of example. As noted previously, the *Convivio* makes use of an example that originates from poetry, more specifically from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. However, in the *Epistle*, Dante uses an example from Holy Scripture. It is also notable that, in the *Convivio*, Dante only makes use of examples from Holy Scripture for expanding upon the moral and anagogical senses, but not the literal and allegorical sense. This further reinforces that the manner in which Dante divides the four senses of meaning in the *Epistle* is distinct from the *Convivio*. In the *Convivio*, Dante uses examples from poetry to explain the first and second sense of meaning, describing the literal and allegorical meaning of the story of Orpheus, but then uses biblical examples for the moral and anagogical senses which are, arguably,

the more theological senses of meaning. This highlights his intention, in the *Convivio*, to write in the allegory of poets and not in the allegory of theologians. However, in the *Epistle*, Dante uses a single example from Holy Scripture, the story of Exodus, to describe all four senses of meaning. He quotes his example from the Book of Exodus, stating “When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a barbarous people, Judea was made his sanctuary, Israel his dominion” (ECG). He further expands his use of this example by applying the four senses of meaning to fully interpret it:

If we look at it from the letter alone it means to us the exit of the Children of Israel from Egypt at the time of Moses; if from allegory, it means for us our redemption done by Christ; if from the moral sense, it means to us the conversion of the soul from the struggle and misery of sin to the status of grace; if from the anagogical, it means the leave taking of the blessed soul from slavery of this corruption to the freedom of eternal glory. And though these mystical senses are called by various names, in general all can be called allegorical, because they are different from the literal and the historical. Now, allegory comes from the Greek *alleon* which means *other* or *different* (ECG, Italics in the original)

This shows that Dante took his example from Holy Scripture which, scholars like Singleton have claimed, suggests that, in the *Commedia*, he intends to write in the allegory of theologians. Dante further describes the subject of the *Commedia* as twofold:

Now that we have seen this, it is obvious that the subject around which the two senses turn must be twofold. And therefore it is to be determined about the subject of this work when it is taken literally, then about the subject when it is understood allegorically. The subject of the whole work, taken only from a literal standpoint, is simply the status of the soul after death, taken simply. The movement of whole works turns from it and around it. If the work is taken allegorically, however, the subject is man either gaining or losing merit through his freedom of will, subject to the justice of being rewarded or punished (ECG).

This quotation further emphasises the literal sense of the *Commedia's* allegory by claiming that the whole movement of the poem revolves around it. This could be taken to mean something similar to what Dante states in the *Convivio*, in which the literal sense is shown to be a literary frame designed to contain the inner allegorical truth. However, it could also be taken to mean that Dante is suggesting that the focus, the place in which he situates truth, is in the *Commedia's* literal sense. If the literal sense is true, then it is the case that Dante is writing in the allegory of theologians and not the allegory of poets. Additionally, if he is writing in the allegory of theologians, then he is mimicking God's way of writing by having true, historical events contain a deeper allegorical sense of meaning.

From the content of the *Epistle*, there is a suggestion that Dante is advocating for a reading of *Commedia* that is attempting to mimic 'God's way of writing' because the literal, historical sense is true and contains further allegorical meaning. This is Charles Singleton's argument, which relies heavily on the authenticity of the *Epistle*. However, there have been sufficient arguments that the *Epistle* is either a partial or outright forgery. Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg argues that "...the text of the *Epistle* to Cangrande which is available to us includes sections that are not by Dante; therefore we may consider it a partial forgery" (Ginzburg 198) and ultimately concludes that these sections that were not written in Dante's hand were, in fact, written by Giovanni Boccaccio. It is important that the *Epistle* is in Dante's own words because it then acts as the author's guide to his intentions for his own work. It lends it a sense of authority that it might otherwise not have if it were merely an isolated piece of criticism written after Dante's death by someone else. If it is not, in fact, in Dante's own words, then the inherent authority of the *Epistle* and what it claims regarding how the *Commedia* ought to be read collapses. Therefore, much is dependent upon the authenticity of the *Epistle's* authorship, especially to a scholar such as Singleton who uses it to argue for the allegory of theologians. However, this depends on the assumption that a text ought to be read with precedence given to what the author intended. This argument for the inherent value of the *Epistle* as being in Dante's own words and therefore exhibiting a 'correct' reading of the *Commedia* relies on an interplay of Carruthers's theories of fundamentalism and textualism. This can be seen in the way that the argument relies

on the idea that there is, fundamentally, an immutable and ultimately correct way to read the text and that, textually, this true meaning is discoverable beyond the scope of the original text in its additional material. This collapse between the dichotomy between Carruthers's theories of fundamentalism and textualism is notable because it reveals the tenuous and singular place that the *Epistle* occupies within Dantean criticism. It explains how the *Epistle* can simultaneously be relied upon and so adamantly dismissed as forgery. It is therefore necessary to briefly examine the root cause of this controversy and the manner in which it has influenced the landscape of Dantean scholarship as well as the subsequent readings of the *Commedia*.

The root of the controversy surrounding the true paternity of the *Epistle* originates from the fact that there are no existing copies that are written in Dante's hand. The same is true of the *Commedia*, but there is doubt to the authenticity of the *Epistle* because there is a stylistic shift between the first and second parts of the *Epistle*. Additionally, there are sections of the *Epistle* that do not match the style of Dante's other writings. This suggests there are, at least, two authors at work. Peter Dronke claimed that the first four paragraphs of the *Epistle* follow Dante's style, but the rest of the text does not. Ginzburg, indebted to Dronke, expands on this to argue that it is only these first four paragraphs that belong to Dante. The lack of references to the *Epistle* in the earliest commentaries³⁶ have led scholars in the last century to question its authenticity, especially considering that "...some passages from those commentaries are identical to passages from the *Epistle* to Cangrande" (Ginzburg 197). Many scholars such as Z.G Barański and Bruno Nardi "...point out numerous places in the composition where the logical sequence is ambiguous, rusty, or even incoherent within itself or with other writings by Dante" and "...have noticed that there is a deep dissimilarity between the dedicatory and the exegetical section of the letter, in its themes, style and rhythm" (Corbara). Bruno Nardi famously, or infamously, declared that the historical sense of the *Commedia* was a true mystical vision and therefore "... argued against Dante's paternity of the doctrinal portion of the *Epistle* to Cangrande because he thought that

³⁶ These include the commentaries of Pietro di Dante, Jacopo della Lana, and Guido da Pisa. They wrote the initial commentaries on the *Commedia*, some occurring shortly after Dante's death. Ginzburg notes that, while some passages are identical to the *Epistle*, they do not reference the *Epistle* directly.

it treats the poem's literal sense as mere *fictio*" (Barolini). Therefore, scholars who claim that the *Epistle* is not Dante's (or at least not solely Dante's) point to these logical and stylistic differences between the first and second paragraphs of the *Epistle* as well as the dissimilarities between the *Epistle* and Dante's other writings.

For instance, Ginzburg focuses on the stylistic differences between the first and second part of the *Epistle* to argue that Giovanni Boccaccio is at least in part responsible for writing the *Epistle* and therefore it is, at least, a partial forgery. He claims that the parts of the *Epistle* that appear to be inconsistent with the rest, or incompatible with Dante's other works, were in fact written by Giovanni Boccaccio who "...made up the second, and longer part of the *Epistle* from a number of different of different sources" (Ginzburg 215). The major evidence that points towards the *Epistle* being a forgery, partially or wholly, is that, firstly, there are no direct references to the *Epistle* in the earliest commentaries but several passages in the earliest commentaries are identical to the *Epistle* and, secondly, there is an incongruity of style in the prose between the first and second parts. This evidence has been presented to varying success but has nevertheless cast doubt over the true authorship of the *Commedia* beginning within the last century. The controversy surrounding the true authorship has manifested and been addressed in various ways. For the purposes of this enquiry, I will focus on the manner in which Singleton responds to the controversy as his reading of the *Commedia* relies on the authenticity of the *Epistle*.

In the appendix of his text, *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure*, Charles Singleton argues that the doubt in the authorship of the *Epistle* is due to the unquestioned assumption that Dante wrote in the allegory of poets, as is stated in the *Convivio*. Singleton argues for an approach towards reading the *Commedia* that prioritises what is stated in the *Epistle* over what is stated in the *Convivio*. In doing so, he argues that Dante wrote in the allegory of theologians and not, as is stated in the *Convivio*, in the allegory of poets. Because Singleton argues that the *Epistle* points towards a reading that follows the allegory of theologians, he attributes the doubt in the authenticity of the *Epistle*, that it does not fit into the overall themes and way of writing as the

Commedia, to the conventional critical approach that values the *Convivio* over the *Epistle* in its approach to the *Commedia*:

Indeed, with some Dante scholars, so strong has the persuasion been that such a view of the allegory [of poets] of the *Divine Comedy* is the correct one that it has brought them to question the authorship of the famous letter to *Can Grande*. This, in all consistency, was bound to occur. For the Letter, in pointing out the allegory of the *Commedia*, speaks in its turn of the usual four senses. But the example of allegory which it gives is not taken from Ovid nor indeed from the work of any poet (Singleton 2019, 86).

In this quotation, Singleton is referring to the fact that, in the *Epistle*, the example that Dante uses is not from poetry, as it is in the *Convivio*. He argues that the reason why the *Epistle's* authenticity has been questioned is because of the allegiance to the allegory of poets, which has been the main approach to the poem for most of its history. By emphasising what is said in the *Epistle*, rather than the *Convivio*, Singleton circumvents the persuasion of the allegory of poets to instead argue for the allegory of theologians. Singleton's reliance upon the *Epistle of Can Grande* is established in his first sentence of his primary text when he states that "In his *Letter to Can Grande*, where he explains his poem is 'polysemous' and that its subject is twofold, Dante does not point to the allegory of a journey in the *Comedy*" (Singleton 2019, 1). Therefore, Singleton's argument for the allegory of theologians relies on the veracity of the *Epistle to Can Grande*. It relies on the *Epistle* being "...the only analysis we have received from Dante Alighieri about his own masterpiece" (Corbara). With consideration to the *Epistle to Can Grande*, an assumption can be made that Dante's allegory was written in the style of the allegory of the theologians that imbues historical, literal reality with allegorical meaning. Dante's allegory is therefore both referential and allegorical. This is the assumption that Singleton also makes when he states the following:

But the kind of allegory to which the example of Scriptures given in the Letter to Can Grande points is not to an allegory of 'this for that' but an allegory of 'this and that,' of this sense plus that sense (Singleton 2019, 89).

This quotation shows that Singleton depended on the *Epistle* to generate his theory surrounding Dante's mode of signification. In this way, the emphasis of what is said in the *Epistle* over that which is said in the *Convivio* is one of the many ways that Singleton, and by extension American criticism, which was heavily influenced by him, can distinguish itself from its European, medieval origins. However, it has become increasingly apparent that the *Epistle* appears to create significant issues for certain modern forms of criticism. Because Singleton's argument relies on the veracity of the *Epistle*, it is therefore vulnerable to collapse if the authorship is definitively proven, as some scholars such as Bruno Nardi have argued, not to be Dante at all.

This over-reliance upon the *Epistle of Can Grande* has been noted by contemporary scholars such as Teodolinda Barolini. There is, in the current state of American scholarship, a sentiment that "...Americans tenaciously cling to Dante's authorship of the *Epistle* despite overwhelming [...] evidence to the contrary, and, as a result, march out of step with many, if not most, of their British and Italian counterparts" (Barolini 1990, 140). Barolini argues that the questions regarding the true authorship of the *Epistle* are, ultimately, irrelevant and that "...the answers that I seek regarding the poem are to be found in the poem itself" (Barolini 1990, 143). Therefore, she is making a fundamentalist argument when she claims that the true meaning of the poem is inherent in the poem itself. She therefore dismisses the necessity for the *Epistle* as additional material that should influence the true meaning of the original text:

Because the *Epistle* to Cangrande was used by Singleton as a cornerstone in his argument that the *Commedia* employs the four-fold mode of signifying ascribed by Biblical exegetes to God's word as manifested in the Scriptures, the paternity of the *Epistle* has been for some time a political football in Dante studies. It is a talismanic topic, and by revealing one's position with regard to the paternity of the *Epistle*, one potentially reveals a host of other vested interests and beliefs; in other words, if we were to be simplistic, we could suppose that if one accepts Dante's paternity of the *Epistle*, one agrees with Singleton, and vice versa (Barolini 1990, 140).

Barolini's arguments regarding the irrelevance of the *Epistle* and concerns regarding its authorship could be read as an attempt to address this vulnerability in American criticism. This can be acknowledged when Barolini states that "My point is that the *Epistle's* authorship, were the matter one day to be definitively decided against Dante, need not in any way impinge on our reading of the *Commedia*" (Barolini 1992). Ultimately, Barolini describes it as "...the red herring issues of the *Epistle* to Cangrande's paternity" (Barolini 1992). She states that the *Epistle* has caused a "critical disarray" (Barolini 1992) in the Anglophone tradition because of the following:

The linking of the *Epistle* to the issue of the *Commedia's* mode of signifying has had the unfortunate effect of allowing the question of the *Epistle's* authorship to seem decisive for our reading of the poem. This skewing of the critical discourse is implicit in Singleton's contribution, which gives the impression of being most vulnerable in its reliance on the *Epistle*, and is explicit in Nardi (Barolini 1992).

Barolini claims that, regardless of whether the *Epistle* is authentic or not, it should not be allowed to take precedence over what is stated in the *Commedia*. She maintains that the other texts should not be allowed to eclipse what is stated in the original text, showcasing the tension between Carruthers's ideas of textualism and fundamentalism.

Dante's earlier works, such as the *Convivio* and *the Epistle to Can Grande*, can provide insights into the interpretative process required for reading the *Commedia*. These earlier works can potentially illuminate Dante's original intentions concerning important aspects of the *Commedia's* political, historical, and philosophical perspective. However, it must be noted that many of these earlier works are unfinished, and that Dante's perspectives, approaches and ideas change from these earlier texts to his later texts. This is particularly true following his exile from Florence in 1302. Dante's change in perspective is important to note because relying on Dante's earlier works to substantiate readings of the *Commedia* is potentially an act based on false premises because what is stated in his earlier texts is not always in line with what is stated in the *Commedia*. Nevertheless, Dante's earlier works remain interesting additions to any reading of the *Commedia* as they contribute to different

interpretations of the poem as well as potentially producing misinterpretations. This distinction is of paramount importance when considering the general arc of Dantean criticism. The early medieval commentators, such as Giovanni Boccaccio, emphasised what is stated in the *Convivio* and therefore followed the allegory of poets. The historical, literal sense was, consequentially, considered to be little more than a *bella menzogna*, a lovely fiction or a beautiful lie, which contained the true value and meaning of the poem within it. However, it is the case that modern criticism has seen “...a rejection of the hermeneutic approach of the early commentators (and, specifically, of interpretations according to the allegory of poets)” (Corbett 3). Therefore, it has been the hermeneutic continuity for the last seven centuries to assume that Dante was writing in the allegory of poets, and it is from this continuity that the modern, American scholars broke away. The *Epistle* has been taken to refer to a reading that values the allegory of theologians which conversely values the literal sense over the allegorical sense. While the reading that values the allegory of poets follows the hermeneutic continuity that began with the *Commedia*’s earliest commentaries, it is the case that the reading that values the allegory of theologians represents a severance from the medieval, European way of approaching the text. It can therefore be considered as either a schism or an evolution, and thus either a new interpretation or a potential misinterpretation. It was driven largely by the theories of Charles Singleton, with additions made by Erich Auerbach. I will now examine the twentieth-century school of Dantean interpretation and the manner in which it is dominated by Singleton’s theories of the allegory of theologians.

CHAPTER 4: SURVEYING SCHOLARSHIP

"The fiction of the Divine Comedy is that it is not fiction."

- Charles Singleton, *'Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure*

This quotation originates from Charles Singleton's *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* and has come to define the modern, twentieth-century approach to Dante's allegory. It exemplifies the emphasis that the modern American school of Dantean interpretation places on the truth of the literal sense in Dante's allegory. In this chapter, I will be focusing on the American school of Dantean scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly the works of Charles Singleton. I will also be examining the way his theories work in tandem with, or in opposition to, the theories of Erich Auerbach, as both scholars are considered to have had a seminal influence on the contemporary state of modern, twentieth-century Dantean scholarship in the Anglosphere. I aim to show that emphasizing different secondary Dantean texts, and thereby emphasizing different parts of Dante's philosophy and his allegory, can lead to different readings of the *Commedia*.

It is in their treatment of allegory that medieval and modern American criticism most noticeably diverge. The treatment of allegory, the perception and understanding of it, has influenced the reading of the *Commedia*. This has resulted in allegory being one of the main points of debate in the interpretation of the text. Arguably, the modern and medieval approaches towards Dantean interpretation exist in conflict and in contradiction with one another. If one were to follow the Law of the Excluded Middle, then it would be the case that either the medieval interpretation or the modern interpretation of Dante's allegory is true, but not both. This is because medieval interpretations of the *Commedia* tend to emphasise its allegorical aspects and trend towards theological readings while modern interpretations of the *Commedia* tend to emphasise its literal sense, applying realism models to its interpretations, and exhibiting a drive towards secularism that can be juxtaposed against medieval reading's

inclination towards religious interpretation. These approaches appear to be incommensurable, paradoxical, and mutually exclusive as they emphasise different aspects of the text that may contradict each other. This can be seen in the way that “...the central difference between Italian and American varieties of Dante scholarship lay in the different value each of them attaches to the literal sense and, beyond that, to philology and the materiality of referents” (Mazzotta 2000, 327). While it is the case that scholarship can never be so neatly placed into two distinct groups and that there will always be some overlap and circular interaction between the past and present or varying geographical spaces, it is useful for the purposes of this survey to acknowledge that the American school of Dantean scholarship places an emphasis on the literal sense of the *Commedia*’s allegory in a way that is noticeably distinct from the Italian school’s Dantesque and medieval writing on the subject. This chapter will focus on the way that medieval and modern American approaches to the *Commedia* and its allegory in the twentieth century contribute towards different ways in which the text is read and interpreted.

As an example of this distinction between the modern, twentieth-century emphasis on the literal sense and the medieval emphasis on the poetic sense, I will use the reception and interpretation of the she-wolf from *Inferno I*. In several ways, the manner in which the she-wolf is interpreted as either a literal wolf, a real danger to Dante, or an allegorical element that signifies something abstract beyond itself is dependent on whether one prioritises either a Pre-Reformation or Post-Reformation reading of the *Commedia*. In other words, either a Catholic or Protestant reading of the *Commedia* and the biblical exegetical approach to allegory can influence one’s interpretation of the text. Singleton’s emphasis on the literal sense is largely connected to his individual context of American Protestantism.

There are several possible figurative interpretations of the she-wolf when it is read in such a way that emphasizes its allegorical dimensions rather than its literal sense. For instance, Nichols states that the she-wolf “...embodies the sin of avarice, commonly associated with old age” (Nichols 9). Anthony Esolen acknowledges the variety in the interpretation of the she-wolf and the other beasts. He notes the different

interpretations, stating that scholars suggest that “...the beasts represent the three dispositions of the soul that Heaven abhors: incontinence (leopard), bestiality (lion), and malice (wolf)” (Esolen 416). This reading of the three beasts originates from the description of Hell that Virgil describes in *Inferno XI* which infers that the three beasts signify the different sins and associated areas in Hell. These varying interpretations of the she-wolf and other beasts consider the allegorical dimension and consider the poetic implications of the she-wolf. The she-wolf therefore becomes representative of something other than itself when it is interpreted as an allegorical element.

However, if one were to emphasise the literal sense, the she-wolf would represent simply a legitimate danger to Dante that prevents him from climbing the mountain. This reading would focus on the boundaries of civilisation and nature, emphasising the way that Dante’s exile has stripped him of the safety offered by community in the city of Florence. It would point out the legitimate threat of warlords in medieval Italy as well as the way that nature proved a much larger threat at that time than it does now. This kind of literal reading would focus on the she-wolf’s animalistic nature, the inherent threat it poses, and consider the additional allegorical elements as potentially distracting from the concrete reality of its intrinsic form. Therefore, when I consider the twentieth-century emphasis on the literal sense, it is this second type of reading, as applied to the she-wolf here, that is then extrapolated and applied to the entirety of the *Commedia*.

This chapter will deal primarily with the theories of Singleton that have come to dominate the landscape of modern Dantean criticism in the United States of America, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. Critics engage with Singleton, expressing either concord or disagreement with his views. Firstly, I will explain and expand on Singleton’s theories of the allegory of theologians, focusing primarily on how they appear in his book, *Dante’s Commedia: Elements of Structure*. Secondly, I will discuss some of the flaws in Singleton’s theories as they have been identified by subsequent scholars such as David Thompson, George Corbett, and Z.G. Barański. Thirdly, I will discuss how Singleton’s theories came to characterise and then dominate the American school of Dantean criticism. Lastly, I will investigate the manner in which

Erich Auerbach's theories of figural fulfilment is used in conjunction with Singleton's theories of the allegory of theologians. In the Anglosphere, Singleton and Auerbach are often considered to form the paradigm of modern Dantean interpretation and are therefore considered either interchangeable or diametrically opposed. However, I will be focusing primarily on Singleton and how he broke away from the hermeneutic continuity of the early commentators and their allegiance to the allegory of poets. This focus is necessary due to this enquiry's larger goal of exploring the way that the *Commedia* is read and interpreted. This can be acknowledged in the following:

Despite Singleton's ability to build support for his cause, there can be no escaping the dogmatism of his positions; and the irritation of so many other critics, when faced with such inflexible attitudes, is more than understandable. [...] Nor, in studying literature, are we dealing with matters of such scientific precision that everyone must necessarily accept our proposals. Room must always be left for other interpretations; and we must never forget that our reach is only a small part of a much larger whole, and that it this whole which is ultimately most important. Any reading which denies these basic propositions has ultimately nowhere to go and no way of renew itself. [...] The end of Singleton's power is to be sought in its own beginnings (Barański 75).

Barański argues that Singleton's theory contained the origins of its own demise because it is a fundamentalist reading of the *Commedia*, with an assumption made for an immutable, true reading of the *Commedia*. This section will therefore focus on the manner in which Singleton presents this ultimately fundamentalist reading and how this subsequently came to dominate the American school of Dantean interpretation. Arguably, Barański is calling for a more textualist reading of the *Commedia* that allows for a greater range of interpretation than Singleton's reading. It is this tension between fundamentalism and textualism that will subsequently ground the discussion and exploration of this current enquiry into Singleton's framework of interpreting the *Commedia* through the allegory of theologians. It is necessary to examine the two ways in which Singleton uses the allegory of theologians to break away from the

hermeneutic continuity of medieval Dantean scholarship before delving into the full scope of his theories.

In his article, 'Interpreting Dante's *Commedia*: Competing Approaches', George Corbett identifies two major ways in which modern Dantean scholarship, particularly in the American school, is distinct from its medieval, European counterparts. His article aims to show "...how literalist approaches underpin key twentieth-century discussions of Dante's theology, contribute to broader secularizing trends in Dante Studies, and represent a rupture with the seven-hundred-year-long commentary tradition on the poem as a whole" (Corbett 1). This shows that the two main ways in which modern American scholarship distinguishes itself from its medieval, European counterparts is in its emphasis on the literal sense and in its general trend towards secularism.

Singleton's theories, along with the theories of Erich Auerbach, have broken away from the hermeneutic continuity of the allegory of poets and, by doing so, have created a new way of reading the *Commedia* that constituted a new American school of Dantean criticism. This can be acknowledged in the following:

Without belittling the valuable work of many other scholars, we can fairly say that Erich Auerbach and Charles Singleton have affected a revolution in our understanding of the *Commedia*. Each brought to his reading of Dante a profound knowledge of Scriptural exegesis, which has opened important new perspectives toward a more satisfactory interpretation of the poem; and their various studies have rightly achieved something like canonical status in the field of Dante criticism (Thompson 1).

Therefore, the current state of Dantean criticism, in the Anglosphere, is often defined by the writings of Auerbach and Singleton as their theories are expansive and, at times, domineering. I will be examining Charles Singleton, first and foremost, as a reader of the *Commedia* and discussing the various influences upon his subsequent reading. Therefore, I will examine the context in which their readings originated which is, primarily, the American and Anglophone school of Dantean criticism. It is in this context that this original reading of Dante's *Commedia* occurred, and it is therefore

necessary to examine the influences on Singleton's theories as well as his subsequent dominance upon the American school of Dantean criticism.

Charles Singleton (1909–1985) was an American critic who wrote several seminal works of criticism regarding the *Commedia*. His main works include *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* and *An Essay on the Vita Nuova* and a collection of translations of all three canticles of the *Commedia*. While all three works constitute what is considered to be the Singletonian framework of interpreting the *Commedia*, Zygmunt G. Barański notes that "It is first of all important to recognize that Singleton's three books on Dante, for all their points of contact, do not, in effect, constitute a coherent and monolithic body of work" (Barański 70). It is for this reason that I will be examining Singleton as primarily a reader of the *Commedia*, because his criticism is not necessarily a completed and coherent whole which is a fact that "... has been almost universally forgotten both by his supporters and by his detractors; and, forgetting this, their appreciation of Singleton's contribution as a Dantist has – in my view – been inevitably distorted" (Barański 70). Therefore, Singleton's works do not showcase a consistent body of criticism regarding the interpretation of the *Commedia*. Instead, they reveal the manner in which he approached the *Commedia* as a reader. This is revealed in his shifting opinions as he engages with the text.

I will be focusing mainly on *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* as it is Singleton's most important work. This is the primary text where he argued for an interpretation of the *Commedia* through the allegory of theologians rather than the more traditional and conventional allegory of poets. He emphasised the literal sense of the *Commedia* in his theories over that of the figurative sense. He had several direct disciples, including Irma Brandeis and Robert Hollander, and had a massive influence upon American criticism. Dante Della Terza describes Charles Singleton's influence upon the American school as "...the fruitful militancy of his Dante criticism" (Terza 18) which highlights the at times fertile and at time calcifying nature his theories. Singleton's theory of the allegory of theologians allowed for new readings of the *Commedia* but nevertheless became increasingly dogmatic as American criticism became increasingly synonymous with the Singletonian framework. However, relatively recently, scholars

such as Teodolinda Barolini have begun to move away from Singleton's ideas, recognizing the over-dependence of American criticism on it. Therefore, to understand the current state of American criticism and the way that it diverges from conventional scholarship, it is necessary to examine Singleton's theories.

Charles Singleton: A Journey Through the Allegory of the Theologians

Some of Dante's statements in the *Convivio* suggest that he saw himself as writing in the allegory of poets. Scholars like Charles Singleton and those that follow him doubt this proclamation, instead following what is written in the *Epistle* about the allegory of theologians. Singleton argues that, even if the *Commedia* were a 'lie', it would need to be treated as if it were true for the allegory to generate meaning in the same way that scriptural exegesis generates meaning by imbuing true, historical events with allegorical meaning. It is from this that Singleton's famous axiom "The fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not fiction" (Singleton 2019, 62) originates. This is an axiom that I will repeatedly return to in my discussion on Singleton since a significant portion of American scholarship has been generated based on this single line. It is emblematic of modern scholarship's atomistic and reductive logic that so much of it can be understood through this single line. This axiom reveals that, according to Singleton, the literal sense ought to be taken as if it were true which then generates further poetic and figurative meaning when one reads it as if it were true. It is therefore the case that "...Dante wrote a poem that is unique in being both representational *and* allegorical" (Thompson 6) and that "For significant reading of the poem we need, according to Singleton, not only an allegorical intelligence of the event, but also an awareness of the iconic substantiality of the letter" (Terza 15). This theory suggests that if truth is to be found, it will be found first in the literal sense which will then reveal the true, immutable meaning of the poem through the same process as scriptural exegesis. Another aspect of Singleton's theories that is important to note is its focus on the idea of the pilgrim, and the manner in which the journey towards God is emphasized.

In his book, *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure*, Singleton compares the immaterial, confused state of the *selva oscura*, where Dante's journey initially begins, with the ultimate certainty and perfection that Dante witnesses as the representation

of God at the end of *Paradiso*. He emphasises Dante's role as the pilgrim, as a traveller, between these two points and the influence that this journey through the three canticles of the *Commedia*, and by extension, the three realms of the Christian afterlife, has on Dante as a poet – a poet that, Singleton claims, is writing in the allegory of theologians and is thus imitating 'God's way of writing'. This can be seen in the following:

The whole journey beyond exceeds metaphor. It is irreducible to the kind of allegory in which it has its origin. As this figure of a living man, this whole person soul and body, moves through the doorway to Hell, the poem quits the recognizable and familiar double vision in which it began, to come into single and most singular vision, that is, into single journey; to embodied vision, having a substance and a persuasion that could not have been expected from this beginning. There unfolds the line of a literal journey given as real, and it is the body beyond, the flesh brought into these realms of spirit here, that like a catalyst precipitates everywhere the fleshed, the embodied, and incarnate (Singleton 2019, 12).

This shows the extent to which Singleton emphasises the literal sense of Dante's allegory as the journey beyond the *selva oscura* and beyond the Gates of Hell 'exceeds metaphor'. He writes that "In a sense it might be regretted that somehow a curtain does not fall at the end of Canto II *Inferno* to mark off the first two cantos of the poem for the prologue which they are" (Singleton 2019, 9) which underlines how he interprets these two cantos as a prologue that prefigures the entirety of the poem. However, he later states that "And yet, no sooner have we imagined a curtain at this point than we could wish it away" (Singleton 2019, 9). This is because Singleton is ultimately focused on the allegory as a journey, one which moves from the immaterial chaos of the *selva oscura* to the certainty of God. Therefore, he claims that "[Dante's] problem is to manage to leave this scene, which is not space-occupying, and to attain that scene which is; to remove a wayfarer from this scene, where he functions in a mode open to a plural 'we,' on to a scene and a journey where role is a most singular one" (Singleton 2019, 10). This refers to the fact that the *selva oscura* appears to be

ambiguous and abstracted in a way that the rest of the *Commedia* is not. Additionally, it is referring to the use of a plural pronoun '*nostra*' in the opening line of the poem and that, through his journey, Dante becomes a singular individual who is distinct and not an abstract representative of a particular type. The *selva oscura* is not given a name and is therefore not a particular forest in the landscape of medieval Italy. Instead, it is the case that the *selva oscura* is the emotional state inspired by any dark, dangerous forest. It is the case that "Sinfulness, error, errancy, alienation from God – these are the allegorical associations of Dante's *selva oscura*, or dark forest" (Harrison 82) and it is from this state that the *selva oscura* represents that Dante must extricate himself from during his journey. The *selva oscura* represents a disconnection from civilisation and, therefore, a disconnection from reality. It is in this immaterial chaos that Dante encounters his guide, Virgil, and begins a journey that is, according to Singleton, "A literal and very real journey of a living man, a man in a body of flesh and bone, is to be launched forth from a place that does not occupy space" (Singleton 2019 10).

In this vein, it can be assumed that if there is any errant abstraction to be found in the *Commedia*, it is found in the *selva oscura*. According to Singleton, to move beyond the *selva oscura* is to move beyond metaphor or allegory and into irreducible reality of genuine mimesis through the framework of the allegory of theologians. However, even in the *selva oscura*, Singleton imbues Dante's allegory with a strong sense of literalism. Even in the *selva oscura*, Dante's physical body is real. It is given flesh, requires rest, and limps as it attempts to climb the mountain:

The particular, the individual, the concrete, the fleshed, the incarnate, is everywhere with the strength of reality and the irreducibility of reality itself. Here is vision truly made flesh (Singleton 2019, 13).

This quotation portrays the absolute reality, the emphasis on the literal sense, that is evident in Singleton's theories of the allegory of theologians. Even in the *selva oscura*, Singleton claims, there is an irreducible sense of reality imbued in the poem. The *selva oscura* might be nameless, but it nevertheless remains an actual place that is not

reducible to the things it might otherwise represent. By claiming an allegory of theologians, Singleton can bring a much higher degree of literality to the text suggesting that it borders upon true reality. The *Commedia* is therefore not a dream or a vision. It is not a *bella menzogna*. It is a description of real, historical events or, at least, events that ought to be read as if they occurred in reality. This can be acknowledged when Singleton states that

Nowhere in the work is this vision of things beyond presented as a vision or a dream. These things happened, and the poet who went that way in the flesh and experienced them is, now that he has returned, a scribe who sets them as down as they occurred (Singleton 2019, 62)

Dante must move through the *selva oscura*, the Gates of Hell, and finally through the three realms of the Christian afterlife to achieve the perfection found in the representation of God. Arguably, the closer Dante gets to the image of God, the closer he gets, as poet and as an individual, to achieving the allegory of theologians and thereby mimicking with greater and greater accuracy God's way of writing. Singleton therefore emphasizes the role of the journey, the movement through the three realms of the Christian afterlife. This is an aspect of Singleton's theories that Dante Della Terza highlights when he states the following:

[Singleton] is, in other words, making a particular effort to localize the space of action of an individual, the reader, in whom our destiny is mirrored and who is constantly addressed by the wayfarer at the most crucial moments of his journey, in order to achieve solidarity. But in the mind of the poet who is the supreme shaper of the allegory of his *Commedia*, solidarity means also clairvoyance and a firm awareness that the wayfarer's journey toward the discovery of otherworldliness implies the reader's journey in *this* worldliness, 'nel cammin di nostra vita' (Terza 12–13).

In this way, Dante's journey through the three realms of the Christian afterlife prefigures and subsequently allegorizes the reader's journey through this physical and material world. It is notable that this journey is not necessarily isolated to Dante as the pilgrim. It is also applied to the reader of the *Commedia* and therefore prefigures the

overall journey of humanity against the horizon of history. Singleton creates, and Terza subsequently reinforces, a dynamic relationship that moves from the plural 'our' or, in the original Italian, '*nostra*' with the singular 'I'. According to Z.G. Barański, it is in Singleton's pursuit of Dante's narrative construction and hermeneutics that Singleton discovered that, in the imitation of God's way of writing, Dante deals with questions regarding salvation and, particularly, the salvation of humanity as a whole. It is the case that the religiosity of Dante's works has "...a direct effect upon their narrative and ideological organization, which, like the things of God, is essentially 'circular' and 'self-reflective'" (Barański 69). In this conception, influenced by the Aristotle's idea of the first and original cause that prevents the logical fallacy of infinite regress, God is the only Being that is not contingent but is instead infinite, encapsulating all other things within it. God is therefore conceived as immutable and as the original cause of all existence. For Singleton, this self-reflexive relationship that the *Commedia* has with God and, subsequently with scriptural exegesis, entails reading the poem through the allegory of theologians. It is therefore the case that "...Singleton also explained that its specific links with the Bible imply that its account of the pilgrim's journey through the afterlife needs to be read as if it were 'true'" (Barański 69). Much in the same way that Dante, according to Singleton, imitates God's way of writing, the reader must allow themselves to be wholly convinced by this imitation to interpret the poem.

Therefore, while the historical events relayed in the poem might not actually be true, the reader must interpret them as if they are, in fact, true. Singleton's argument is that Dante is writing in the allegory of theologians, in which he constructs the literal historical sense as though it were true. He does this in imitation of God's way of writing and does so in such a way where the reader must first pass through the allegorical sense of meaning, in the *selva oscura*, and then beyond in a journey that is, in the narrative, ordained by God and is therefore true. According to Singleton, this type of circularity between God and reality, between the self and the collective, a reinforcing and contained method of both creating and sustaining meaning, is made manifest in the allegory of theologians. Dante is therefore imitating God's way of writing. However, the poet is not God, and therefore the following is the case:

A poet has not God's power and may not presume to write as He can. But he may imitate God's way of writing (Singleton 2019, 15).

It is important to note that, in writing in the allegory of theologians, Dante is imitating God's way of writing. Additionally, Singleton claims that, by writing in the allegory of theologians, Dante's manner of imitating God's way of writing is unique as Singleton makes the grand claim that "There is no literary allegory to compare with [the *Commedia*]" (Singleton 2019, 13) and that Dante has no literary precedents or equivalents. However, even if Dante did not have any literary precedents, he nevertheless had an example for the allegory of theologians, which is Holy Scripture. This can be acknowledged in the following:

...if Dante had no literary precedents, he nevertheless did have an example for this sort of allegory. In Scripture – according to the 'allegory of theologians' – events are not merely fictions devised to convey spiritual truths: they are real, historical events *and* they have allegorical significance (Thompson 6, Italics in original).

This quotation shows that Dante has this precedence in which real, historical events have allegorical significance in the form of the allegory of theologians written in Scripture. It is at this stage where other scholars have begun to note the flaws in Singleton's framework for the interpretation of Dante's *Commedia*. David Thompson criticises Singleton's assertion that no other allegory compares to the allegory of the *Commedia*. He claims that this is objectively untrue and that that "... other works are allegorical without being a parade of fleshless emblems and personifications" (Thompson 7). He especially dismisses the assertion that the only comparable allegory to the *Commedia* is Scripture. He shows that "making due allowances for their differences in style, we may say that the *Aeneid* and the *Commedia* have the same sort of literal level" (Thompson 7) in the way that they are presented as true and then yield allegorical meaning. In terms of their allegorical levels, it ought to be acknowledged that while modern critics might read the *Aeneid* as symbolic, medieval critics (including Dante himself in the *Convivio*) read Virgil's works through the lens of Christian allegory. This was particularly true of the Fourth Eclogue which describes an Earthly Paradise,

foretelling the birth of a boy. It is for this reason that “...it is small wonder that Christians regarded this Eclogue as a forecast of Christ” (Giamatti 1966, 24). It makes just as much sense for Dante to mimic the kind of writing present in the *Aeneid* as it does for Dante to mimic the kind of writing present in Holy Scripture, especially considering the role that Virgil plays in the *Commedia*. Therefore, David Thompson argues against Singleton’s central claim that there exist no other allegories, besides Scripture, that compare to Dante’s allegory. It is now necessary to examine what other scholars have identified as flaws in Singleton’s theories. These other scholars include George Corbett and Z.G Barański.

Some Criticisms of Singleton’s Allegory of Theologians

Despite the fecundity of Singleton’s original theories, and his subsequent dominance in the American school of Dantean criticism, scholars such as Z.G Barański and David Thompson have found some aspects to criticise in Singleton’s theories. In his article ‘Reflecting on Dante in America: 1949–1990’, Zygmunt G. Barański states the following:

It seems to me that, more than most critical systems, Singletonian exegesis contains the mechanisms of its own demise. It is ultimately too reductive as a reading and too circular and solipsistic as a method; although, paradoxically, much of its power to persuade stems precisely from these ‘weaknesses’ (Barański 65).

He argues that much of the persuasive abilities of Singleton’s theories originate in the very weaknesses that eventually undermine it. I will be looking at three aspects of Singleton’s theory which might constitute its weaknesses. This includes the way that the emphasis on the literal sense leads to attributing god-like powers to the poet, how Singleton’s exegetical mode is based on a misunderstanding of medieval allegory and, finally, the manner in which Singleton’s certainty in his own theories and ‘re-discovery’ of Dante’s intentions prohibits further interpretation that might not align with this original intention. It is the last of these three aspects that will lead into the subsequent discussion regarding Singleton’s dominance over the American school of Dantean criticism.

The first flaw in Singleton's theoretical framework is that the emphasis on the literal sense establishes the reality of the narrative, effectively saving it from pure abstraction, but eventually leads to granting God-like powers to the poet. In his article, 'Figure and Allegory in the *Commedia*,' David Thompson states that "...the elaborate theoretical structure on which [Singleton's] insights ostensibly rest is not really necessary; and besides, it is wrong, and wrong in such a way as to lead to extravagant pronouncements about the poem and its author" (Thompson 6). He acknowledges the influence of Singleton's theories but argues that the theoretical structure of the allegory of theologians is unnecessary and wrong in a way that leads to giving Dante as a poet almost God-like powers of interpretation. Thompson continues to re-iterate this point, with no room for ambiguity, when he states this:

The *Commedia* is of course an extraordinary creation – a unique work of genius, if you will. But let us emphasize the obvious: it is a poem, not a candidate for scriptural inclusion (Thompson 6–7).

This shows that, while one of the strengths of Singleton's argument is its use of scriptural exegesis and the way in which it saves Dante from pure abstraction by emphasizing the reality of the literal sense, this ultimately leads to extravagant claims regarding the *Commedia*. Singleton claims that Dante is *imitating* God's way of writing but, pushed to the extreme, this claim becomes a call to place Dante on the same level as Scripture, thereby stripping him of his function as a poet and relegating him entirely to the role of a prophet. This is done implicitly in Singleton's case, but explicitly in the case of Bruno Nardi. It is the case that "For Nardi, Dante speaks as a divinely inspired prophet and the literal sense of the poem records Dante's mystical vision" (Corbett 11). Additionally, it is the case that Nardi "... explicitly sought to dismantle the hermeneutic approach of the early commentators to Dante's *Commedia*" (Corbett 3). Corbett describes him as "The ex-priest and anti-clerical Nardi – who had already strongly rejected Thomism – found in Dante his true teacher, and in the *Commedia* his own personal truth, and particular synthesis of Christian wisdom" (Corbett 4). Nardi emphasised the literal sense of Dante's allegory to the extent that he claimed that any attempts to read Dante in an allegorical manner by the early commentators was due to

their desire to protect Dante from accusations of heresy. Nardi collapses the allegory completely. What is literal is also true and what is true is what is literal. This is because Nardi thought that "...Dante spoke as a divinely inspired prophet and considered his poem not a literary fiction but the report of a true mystical vision" (Corbett 4). However, in general it is the case that scholars, such as Corbett and Thompson, tend to push back against the idea of claiming Dante as a divinely inspired prophet, either by Nardi or, in this case, by Singleton. Corbett does this in the following manner:

No right-minded person, whether Christian or not, and whether medieval or modern, would accept that the *Commedia's* depiction of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise were shown to Dante in a mystical vision as they truly are in reality (let alone a newly invented region like Ante-Purgatory); and yet, Nardi claims that Dante did indeed believe this. No right-minded person would believe that the literal sense of the Dante's poem is truth; and yet, on Singleton's view, Dante is asking us to assent to the poem's literal sense (which is clearly not literally true), *as if it were literally true* (which is, at the least, rather unreasonable)" (Corbett 31, Italics in the original).

It is notable that scholars who argue for Dante as a divinely inspired prophet and scholars who argue that Dante is *not* a divinely inspired prophet both claim that it is obvious, that it is clear, and no right-minded person could claim otherwise, or could ignore the realities of the poem as they exist. This is seen in Thompson, who aims to 'state the obvious' that the *Commedia* could not possibly be a candidate for scriptural inclusion. This is seen in Corbett who argues that 'no right-minded person' would think that the *Commedia* was literally true. The opposite is seen in Nardi, who claims that the *Commedia* is, in fact, literally true and the image of the three realms of the Christian afterlife appeared to him in a mystic vision as they do in fact exist. It is also evident in Singleton, whose argument assumes that he has discovered the true, immutable intentions for Dante to write in the allegory of theologians. It must be acknowledged that all these scholar's arguments rely on premises that they assume to be obviously true, that no sane person would argue against, but they are nevertheless presenting two opposing conclusions that are mutually exclusive and cannot co-exist.

This is ultimately how Singleton's strength in emphasizing the literal sense of the *Commedia's* allegory becomes a weakness when it encounters a scholar who is unsympathetic to his foundational premise of the reality of the *Commedia*.

The second flaw of Singleton's theoretical framework originates in an apparently fundamental misunderstanding of medieval allegory. Singleton's theoretical framework has allowed for many interesting readings of *Commedia*, effectively spawning the American school of Dantean criticism. His exegetical mode has inspired his scholarly descendants, such as Robert Hollander, to apply his ideas to their readings of the text. However, other scholars have pointed out that Singleton's exegetical mode is based on a misunderstanding of medieval allegory. Thompson points out that Singleton's conclusion does not follow naturally from his premises in such a way as to make them unquestionably valid:

The *Commedia* is therefore figural not in its ontology and level of representation, but in its structure. Does this mean that Dante wrote an 'allegory of theologians'? Yes and no. There is an important distinction to be made here between spiritual interpretation and allegory as a way of writing. Yes, Dante interpreted his life theologically: viewing it retrospectively (just as he had done in the *Vita Nuova*), he saw it *sub figura Exodi*.³⁷ At the end of the journey, Dante could look back upon it, discern a pattern, and structure his narrative accordingly. But presumably it was God who wrote the *events* of Dante's life, the events which when interpreted also figure other events (Thompson 9–10, Italics in the original).

In Singleton's exegetical mode, Dante all but replaces the role of God in writing the events of Dante's life when he claims that Dante intended to imitate of God's way of writing. However, in this quotation, Thompson points out that even if Dante's allegory is both representational *and* allegorical, it does not necessary follow that Dante intended to write in the allegory of theologians. Thompson situates Dante in his medieval context and claims that Dante was not imitating God's way of writing, just

³⁷ Translation: Through the figure of Exodus

merely relating the events as they were written on the horizon of history by God . This is not to say that the historical or literal sense of allegory is true in the way that Singleton claims, but rather than Dante is interpreting the events of his life, the events written by God, mainly his exile from Florence, and creating a figurative, fictional narrative around it. It has become increasingly apparent in contemporary scholarship that the manner in which allegory is at times conceptualised in relation to the medieval period tends to underestimate the manner in which it was integrated in the way that poets like Dante saw the world. This is acknowledged in the following:

And yet, for all their erudition, it is difficult to deny that such readings are ultimately unnecessarily reductive as regards both Dante and his world. In the Middle Ages, allegorical exegesis underpinned a whole way of seeing and understanding reality and its 'books' [...]. Medieval allegorical exegesis was thus far from being – as some of today's critics would have it – simply a key with which to unlock localized textual problems. What is normally lost in such narrowly defined ideological analyses is a sense both of the *Commedia's* range and of its poetry. And, given the nature of Dante's art, these are no small omissions (Barański 70).

Therefore, this shows that "The weakness in Singleton's discussion of allegory arises from one central problem: his 'misreading' of what the Middle Ages understood by the 'allegory of the theologians'" (Barański 73). Barański goes on to explain that Singleton's misunderstanding of allegory "...bear his clear individual imprint" (Barański 71) and has roots in the distinction drawn between symbolism and allegory that originated with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and other Romantics in the nineteenth century. The manner in which Singleton individually defines allegory is therefore rooted in the way that the Romantics defined allegory, and not necessarily in the manner in which the medieval period would have defined allegory. He is creating distinctions between symbolism, allegory, and analogy that would not have necessarily existed in the medieval period and he does this while, simultaneously, applying the medieval idea of scriptural exegesis and the four senses of meaning to Dante's allegory:

The Middle Ages did not distinguish between God's two 'books' in that sharp clearcut fashion which Singleton claims to have been the case. Both works of creation were interpreted according to the same fourfold canons of the 'allegory of theologians.' It is, in fact, difficult to imagine how, in practice, Singleton might have separated the 'symbolic' from the 'allegorical' during the course of the sort of theologizing 'moral' interpretation of the *Commedia* which he so strenuously championed. There is no doubt in my mind that Singleton employed both terms idiosyncratically and even anachronistically. His idea of 'allegory' is extremely partial and can only be associated with medieval usage in a tangential manner (Barański 73).

This relates back to my discussion in the previous chapter regarding how a certain understanding of allegory can influence the way that a reader will interpret Dante's allegory. Singleton has a particular understanding, an understanding that Barański argues constitutes a *misunderstanding*, that is based on distinctions drawn by the Romantics and this affects how he claims that Dante wrote in the allegory of theologians. Barański describes the result of Singleton's own perception and understanding and that "What emerges quite unambiguously from *An Essay on the 'Vita Nuova'* is Singleton's sense of unease, even disquiet, with the concept of 'allegory'. He does everything to distance it from Dante's *prosimetrum*..." (Barański 71). Barański further acknowledges that this perception and unease in Singleton's understanding of allegory is why, in his analysis of the four senses of meaning in Dante's allegory, Singleton is primarily concerned with the moral dimension which viewed "...simply in theological terms, thereby taking a perspective on the poem which, in fact, went against the wide-ranging practices of medieval 'ethical' exegesis (Barański 72). Therefore, while Singleton's exegetical mode is a strength of his school, it nevertheless presents a false understanding of medieval allegory which is what ultimately turns that strength into a weakness.

Third, it has been shown, in the scope of this enquiry into Singleton, that he has repeatedly argued his claim that he has discovered Dante's true intentions regarding the allegory of theologians. Singleton is certain and confident in this fact in his writings.

Barański argues that it is this confidence and certainty that leads to the persuasive power of Singleton's theories and his subsequent dominance over the American school of Dantean criticism. This can be seen in the way that "...the manner in which Singleton presented his discovery leaves no doubt that he firmly believed that Dante, too, saw this scheme as the very essence of his poem..." (Barański 74). However, as has been shown to often be the case, the weakness of Singleton's argument is often rooted in its strengths. Barański noted the manner in which Singleton's certainty in his own argument ultimately lead to its own demise when he stated that "...even the merest trace of post-structuralist ideology, with its emphasis on the permanent instability of language and, by extension, of interpretation, cannot but call into question a method, such as Singleton's, which is so totally convinced of the 'correctness' of its own reading" (Barański 66). Ultimately, Singleton's fundamentalist reading of the *Commedia*, one which asserts the dominance of the poet's intention and claims to have rediscovered its true and immutable meaning, leads to his subsequent dominance over the American school of Dantean criticism. In this way, "Singleton creates 'a closed world' in which the great poet and the great scholar commune" (Barański 75) while other scholars must adhere to this strict theoretical framework. In this way, Singleton facilitates a fundamentalist reading of the poem, and it is therefore no wonder that his followers became increasingly dogmatic and the Singletonian paradigm became increasingly canonised as the 'correct' reading of the poem in the American school. As Carruthers noted, fundamentalist readings effectively dismiss any and all interpretation as meaningless debris that obscure a true, immutable meaning that is, indeed, discoverable. Once this meaning has been discovered, as Singleton claims to have done, there is nothing more for a critic to interpret and all they must do is discover more evidence to support the original, immutable structure of meaning. Barański singles this aspect of Singleton's theories as its main flaw, foregrounding it against all others, when he states the following:

...the least appealing part of Singleton's criticism: its denial of other critical voices. This attitude becomes emblematic in the way in which, in his two books on the *Commedia*, Singleton makes almost no reference to other Dante scholars. Since, unlike himself, these scholars had failed (or continued to fail) to

appreciate the poem's 'truth,' Singleton seems to have felt that debate with them was unnecessary. There was thus no need for him (and for his school) to take note of the important work which Dantists in America were doing either in the same areas as they were or in more distant fields as stylistics, textual criticism, rhetoric, literary and philosophical source studies, biography, and history (Barański 75–76).

However, Barański disagrees with the construction of such a doctrinal structure, by stating that "Its emphasis on doctrinal and structural matters reduces the poet's oeuvre to a unidimensionality which is the very antithesis of Dante's 'plurilingual' and 'encyclopaedic' ambitions" (Barański 75). At the beginning of his article, Barański states that it is his central belief that "...to interpret Dante, one needs to keep to the forefront of one's attention the implications of the poet's own deep concern with universalism and exegesis" (Barański 61) and his criticism of Singleton in this manner is therefore influenced by this grounding belief in the multiplicity of Dantean interpretation. Barański is viewing Singleton through his own ideas of Dante as an encyclopaedic poet, aiming to unify and synthesize medieval epistemology and philosophy. It is possible to acknowledge that there are two threads of argumentation here regarding the manner in which criticism ought to function – whether it should be doctrinal and structural or communicative and interpretative. Barański states that "It is in the fluid, honest, and creative interchange between national and international perspectives that scholarship's best future lies" (Barański 81) and therefore argues against the dominance of a univocal Singletonian paradigm in American criticism. These distinctive lines of argument parallel the distinctions that Carruthers draws between fundamentalism and textualism, as well as the way that Noakes's theories of exegesis and interpretation. It echoes the way that both these scholars considered to be the forces that hold the shape of literary criticism in place. It can therefore be acknowledged that, rather than declaring one right and the other wrong, both Barański and Singleton exhibit facets of the manner in which literary criticism functions and without either of these facets, the entirety of literary criticism would make little sense or would, as is often argued to be the case with Singleton's dominance over the American school, become calcified and rigid, unadaptable to change or new ideas. It is

now necessary to consider the manner in which Singleton dominates the American school of Dantean criticism.

Singleton's Dominance over American Criticism

This certainty in the re-discovery of the true, immutable meaning of the *Commedia* is the driving force behind Singleton's dominance over the American school. As previously stated, one of the most famous and most quoted lines from Charles Singleton's *Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure* is "The fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not fiction" (Singleton 2019, 62). This line is often quoted in Dantean literature to the point that it became an axiom defining the direction of the ideological framework of American scholarship. Some examples of this axiom being quoted in other scholarship include Teodolinda Barolini's the *Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* and Robert Hollander's essay 'Dante Theologus-Poeta'. By comparing these two quotes that make use of Singleton's famous axiom, it is possible to trace the changing attitudes towards Singleton's theories on American criticism as well as the underlying logical frameworks that underpin them. Both Barolini and Hollander can be acknowledged as scholarly descendants of Singleton. It is the case that, as a direct scholarly descent of Singleton, Hollander "... sought to develop Singleton's application of allegory (beyond the moral-theological sense) and, by drawing also on Auerbach's work on figuralism, to open a wider discussion about the exegetical strategies invited by Dante's text" (Corbett 9). Chronologically, the trajectory of American criticism would start with Singleton, then Hollander who follows closely in his theoretical footsteps and then Barolini who, while still following Singleton does begin to acknowledge American criticism's over-reliance on him and thus begins to distance her ideas from his, mainly by incorporating Bruno Nardi theories into her own work. In Hollander's article, he uses Singleton's formula in the following manner:

Perhaps no single sentence of critical prose written in the past twenty years has better focused the debate about the literalness of Dante's poem than Charles Singleton's 'the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not a fiction.' That single sentence is, in my opinion, worth a very great deal (Hollander 1976, 104).

This quotation shows how aligned Hollander was with Singleton's theories. He praises this single sentence as that which exemplifies the debate surrounding the literal sense of Dante's allegory that defines the American school of Dantean criticism. He is using reductive, atomistic logic by claiming that a single line, separable and contained, can encapsulate the entirety of American criticism. Hollander wrote this article in 1976 and so, when he writes of the past twenty years, he is referring to a period starting in the 1950s which was when Singleton was writing his theories. This conflation between Singleton's theories and American criticism can be explicitly seen in the quotation from Hollander. In Hollander's quotation, there exists a laudatory acknowledgement of the axiom's importance in encapsulating the debate around the literalness, the question of truth in the *Commedia*, and, by extension its importance to American criticism.

However, according to Barolini, Hollander's statement has since been proven false. She argues that "...there is no consensus – merely, in North America, an undiscussed and acritical assumption of allegiance to Charles Singleton's teachings" (Barolini 1992). Barolini, writing about twenty years after Hollander in 1992, begins to acknowledge the tacit bias that has occurred in American criticism because of its over-reliance on Singleton's theories. While Barolini does not reject Singleton's famous formula outright in her book, she does state the following:

... my approval for Singleton's famous formula that 'the fiction of the Divine Comedy is that it is not a fiction' [...] does not extend to the suggestion that Dante himself thought his poem a fiction in any simple sense. In my opinion, Dante self-consciously used the means of fiction – poetic and narrative strategies –in the service of a vision he believed to be true, thus creating a hybrid he defined a 'truth that has the face of a lie' [...] (Barolini 1992).

Barolini is writing this in 1992, twenty years after Hollander. In this quotation from Barolini, she is hinting towards something that has begun to be further acknowledged by American criticism. This is an increasing and, according to Barolini, acritical dependence upon Singleton's theories which overshadows the theories of other scholars. This unquestioned and acritical allegiance has calcified meaningful discussion of Dante's allegory. In this quotation, Barolini argues that Singleton's famous formula

should not be used as explanation for Dante's true intent. Barolini successfully synthesizes two differing ideas surrounding the paradox at the heart of the *Commedia* – the fact that this is an ostensibly fictional narrative that makes elaborate and explicit truth claims. Rather than its being an outright lie and fiction or an outright truth, Barolini acknowledges that the idea of truth is used in the *Commedia* as a hybrid narrative and poetic strategy. Barolini posits the question that she claims is fundamental to all readers of the *Commedia*: “Did Dante himself believe in the literal truth of those things for which he claims literal truth?” (Barolini 1992). She continues to state that there is an overdependence on Singleton and his interpretation of the *Epistle* which has resulted in the fact that “In the United States we have tended to vex the issue of allegory as a mode, genre, or method, evolving a critical discourse regarding the allegory of the *Commedia* that barely refers to the text” (Barolini 1992). She traces this back to Singleton's influence and this shows that, at this point in the early 1990s, American criticism was beginning to move away from Singleton's influence. Barański, writing at about the same time, states the following:

As I noted earlier the situation within American Dante studies has now changed. Neither Singleton nor anyone else holds sway. Variety is the new watchword. Yet this is a credo which is only slowly discovering a degree of self-confidence. Scholars are still all too prone nervously to cast their eyes over their shoulders. The shadow of Charles Singleton continues to loom large (Barański 62–63).

This shows that, while the situation surrounding Singleton's dominance had changed, Singleton's influence lingered. The question then becomes whether, in the more than thirty years since Barański and Barolini noted the fading influence of Singleton, the spell of Singleton's theories has broken entirely. George Corbett, in his article published for the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante's death in 2021, compares various theoretical structures in Dantean commentary, including those of Singleton and Auerbach. In his introductory passage, he states that “...I suggest that we should continue to reappraise and question the methodological assumptions underpinning our approaches to interpreting the *Commedia*, mindful that progress from one point of

view may represent a regression, or even aberration, from another” (Corbett 2). He ultimately argues that Singleton’s theoretical model of the allegory of theologians represents, in significant ways, a regression and an aberration by breaking away from the hermeneutic continuity of the allegory of poets, regardless of the way in which it rescues Dante from pure abstraction and solipsistic interpretation. Singleton’s theories are therefore, in Corbett’s estimation, a misinterpretation of the text. This suggests that the dominance of Singleton has faded in the more thirty years since Barolini wrote about it. However, the fact that Corbett still dedicates at least a third of his discussion regarding the state of contemporary commentary on the *Commedia* to Singleton indicates “...the ways in which Singleton remains an obligatory reference-point even for the most diehard of his opponents” (Barański 67). Singleton’s dominance therefore still lingers, despite criticisms against it, which if nothing else shows the glacially slow speed of literary commentary. Therefore, it is worth it to consider the reasons for Singleton’s dominance over the American school of Dantean criticism.

Arguably, it is the case that a major factor that drives Singleton’s dominance over the American school of Dantean interpretation is the fact that he diverged from the hermeneutic continuity of the allegory of poets and thereby created a distinct way of reading the *Commedia* that tapped into American cultural perspectives. One of the ways in which Singleton broke away from the hermeneutic continuity of the early medieval commentators was in prioritising what is stated in the *Epistle to Can Grande* regarding the allegory of theologians rather than what is stated in the *Convivio* regarding the allegory of poets. Therefore, Singleton’s main evidence for his claims comes from in the *Epistle to Can Grande* which he argues, in the appendix of his text, “... distinguishes an allegory of poets from an allegory of theologians” (Singleton 2019, 86). He acknowledges the hermeneutic continuity of the allegory of poets:

Now poets create and theologians only interpret. And, if we must choose between Dante as theologian and Dante as poet, then, I suppose, we take the poet. For the *Divine Comedy*, all are agreed, is the work of a poet, it is a poem. Why, then, would its allegory not be allegory as the poets understood it – that is, as Dante, in the *Convivio*, says the poets understood it? Surely the allegory of

the *Comedy* is the allegory of poets in which the first and literal sense is a fiction and the second or allegorical sense is the true one (Singleton 2019, 86).

He breaks from this hermeneutic continuity and, in so doing, his argument relies on an interpretation of the *Epistle* that claims that it is indicating the allegory of theologians. It must therefore be acknowledged that "...it is precisely against the canons and codifications of the exegetical tradition that Singleton claims to be able to find the original sense of the Divinia *Commedia*" (Mazzotta and Pellegrine 32). It is in the *Convivio* that Dante references the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians. Dante makes no mention of the distinction in the *Epistle* and, therefore, in this way, Singleton is reading these two secondary Dantean texts in conjunction, borrowing the concepts of the allegory of the theologians and the allegory of the poets from the *Convivio* and using the *Epistle* as evidence that Dante intended to write in the allegory of theologians. While it is notable that these concepts did not originate with Dante, Singleton is still reading these two texts in a way that breaks from the hermeneutic continuity of Dantean criticism. In this way, Singleton is ostensibly reading the *Commedia* in a way that it has, apparently, never been read in before. This is important to note, as Singleton's apparent originality is often directly tied to the way his theories subsequently began to dominate the American school of Dantean criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In Singleton's reading of the conjunction of these two texts, it is what is stated in the *Epistle* that takes precedence over what is stated within the *Convivio*:

An allegory of poets and an allegory of theologians: the Letter to Can Grande does not make the distinction. The Letter is speaking of the way in which a poem is to be understood. And in choosing its example of allegory from Holy Scripture, the letter is clearly looking to the kind of allegory which is the allegory of theologians, and is thus pointing to a poem in which the first and literal sense is to be taken as the first and literal sense of Holy Scripture is taken, namely as an historical sense (Singleton 2019, 89).

Singleton claims that the *Epistle* is clearly referring to the allegory of theologians because it uses an example from Holy Scripture and not from poetry, as Dante does in

the *Convivio*. The fact that the example is from Scripture, and not poetry, is central to Singleton's argument. Singleton is adamant in his argument that the fact that this is an example from Scripture means that Dante intended his work to be read in the allegory of theologians, because he is writing in the *Epistle* of the manner in which the four senses of meaning should be applied to the *Commedia's* allegory. It is notable that Singleton claims to have discovered Dante's true intentions regarding the *Commedia* and its allegory. This reveals that "It seems evident that for Singleton the fate of criticism hangs on the knot of intention" (Mazzotta and Pellegrine 30). Singleton is claiming to have discovered true intention and, secondly, he is emphasizing the role of the author's true intention when it comes to criticism of their work, even hundreds of years after the author has died. Therefore, Singleton views his theories as being in line with what Dante himself would have thought regarding his own poem. This is, ultimately, a reading of the poem that invokes Carruthers's definition of fundamentalism. This is because, firstly, Singleton is claiming that there is true and immutable meaning to the poem that is discoverable by clearing away the historical debris that is the allegiance to the allegory of poets and, secondly, that this true and immutable meaning relies on the conception of a God-like author who retains authority over any and all subsequent interpretations of their text. Therefore, in a significant way, it is Singleton's dominance over the American school of Dantean criticism that, in fact, defines it as a unique school of scholarly interpretation, distinct from the criticism of its medieval and European counterparts. This can be seen in the following:

Although, as far as I know, no other Dantist in North America has spread such thick a fog of silence over the studies of his peers as Singleton did, a tendency not to take the work of others into adequate consideration has probably been the one negative feature to unite a majority of American Dante scholars (Barański 76).

Barański acknowledges Singleton's dominance as a feature that defines and unites American scholars. Their focus on Singleton and their failure to consider works from other scholars is a uniting feature that defines the school, albeit in a negative way.

Arguably, Corbett's consideration of French Dominican scholars, Pierre Mandonnet and Joachim Berthier, represents a push towards the consideration of other, alternative forms of contemporary criticism. Nevertheless, even Corbett has Singleton as an ever-present reference point. This is because, whether or not other scholars tend to agree or disagree with him, Singleton defines the American school of Dantean criticism by presenting a distinctly American perspective on the *Commedia*. I will examine the way that Singleton's "... 'otherness' could conveniently be explained in the light of his American roots" (Barański 62).

While the *Commedia* is seven centuries old, American criticism only emerged as a field of study distinct from its European predecessors in the last century or two. Britain and Italy can be considered as jointly European. The relationship between the United States and its colonial predecessor, Britain, must be acknowledged fully to articulate the nuanced dynamic which exists between the two spheres of scholarly and imperial influence within the Anglosphere. This is a dynamic that does not necessarily exist between the United States and Italy, or between Britain and Italy. It is because of this historical dynamic which exists between the United States of America and Britain that I will deal with both European and American scholarship but will not wholly combine the two into a single category of Western scholarship. This is because of the following reason:

As the former widespread perception of a monolithic and hegemonic 'allegorizing' *dantismo americano* has begun to fade, so American Dante studies have visibly [...] emerged in all their long-standing complexity and variety. Instead of one dominant 'school', we are now faced with a healthy jockeying for critical position in a recognizably pluralistic field. (Barański 60).

It would be an error to conflate the American and European (mainly Italian and British) schools of Dantean interpretation. This can be seen in the interplay between the 'Old World' and the 'New World' and the manner in which "... since the nineteenth century, American interest in Dante, with its attendant scholarly endeavour, can confidently stand comparison with the poet's reception in any other part of the world" (Barański 60). This is because it is a notable aspect of American Dantean scholarship that it aims

to distinguish itself from its European origins and predecessors. It is the case that, as A. Bartlett Giametti noted, "...the key feature of American history and American Dante scholarship, [is] its age-old effort to render Dante (and history) anew" (Mazzotta 2000, 326). This suggests that the reason behind American criticism's distinction from its European, medieval origins is not solely due to a teleological evolution of literary understanding but rather because of social and historical pressures that form new and contrasting views. American culture seeks to distinguish itself from its colonial, imperial predecessor, Britain, and situate itself as a superpower and an empire in its own right. It is for this reason that, as America became distinct and independent from the colonial systems that propagated it, so did the field of American Dante studies become increasingly distinct from its medieval, European origins.

Singleton's theories of the allegory of the theologians focuses on the journey of the pilgrim and his use of the *Epistle's* example of Exodus is foundational to the formulation of this. This can be seen in the way that "The pilgrim's progress from *selva oscura* to a vision of God recapitulates, step by step, the various stages of the Israelites' passage from Egypt to the Promised Land, Dante's individual experience reflects a universal pattern; or, to use a biological analogue, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" (Thompson 9). Parallels have been drawn between the biblical story of Exodus and the subsequent historical event of the founding and colonisation of America. Singleton is arguably aligning himself with the narrative of the Puritan pilgrim and then linking it back to Dante in a Protestant, rather than a Catholic, manner:

America was born from the exodus of the Puritan pilgrims towards the promised land where they would have a way to redeem the past, reclaim the innocence of Adam, and found again the history not only of Europe, but also of all men. These are the central themes on which are articulated Singleton's exegetical practice in his *Journey to Beatrice*. But it is not simply a matter of thematic correspondence between a certain idea of Dante and a mythic American archaeology. The search of the Pilgrims, in effect, expresses itself in the biblical modality of a genuine religious vocation. The Christian and medieval

vision of the *homo viator*³⁸ is no longer an abstract metaphor of the human condition, but it is the lived reality of the elect. It almost seems that, as if by extraordinary prodigy, America were already inscribed in the providentiality of God and the spiritual adventure of the Exodus were the prefiguration of an historical destiny, still uncompleted, which is called America (Mazzotta and Pellegrine 34–45).

Therefore, one of the reasons why Singleton was able to dominate American criticism was because he “...managed to tap into a recognizably indigenous vein” (Barański 77) by reading the *Commedia* from the perspective of American national myths of colonization. His theories favour a reading of Dante that was unfavourable in Europe and thus give the American school a way of reading the *Commedia* that is distinctly their own. This can be seen in the popularity of Benedetto Croce’s and Karl Vossler’s overall dismissals of allegory while, in contrast, Singleton argues for a reading of the poem which depends on the poem being both allegorical and referential in the allegory of theologians. Therefore, Singleton’s theories allowed for American Dantism to codify its own voice as distinct from European scholarship. This is achieved by invoking their own national narratives and mythos of their origins of Puritan pilgrims. In this way, the ‘discovery’ of the American continent reflects a re-discovery of the Edenic landscape and therefore it is the case that “To read Singleton, was to hear the echoes of America” (Barański 78). Additionally, this allowed the rest of the world to acknowledge Singleton’s theories, and subsequent theoretical framework, as distinctly American. It is therefore necessary to “...place Singleton in the perspective of America, recalling that if every geographic limitation inevitably carries with it the signs of a mental narrowness, in this case ‘America,’ more than the disposition of a place, is itself a viewpoint, a perspective and a certain way of seeing the vicissitudes of texts and times” (Mazzotta and Pellegrine 28). If it is the case the Singleton provided a distinctly American voice for Dantean criticism by tapping into American myths regarding the Puritan pilgrims then continuing dominance therefore makes sense because any criticism that exists outside of this framework becomes increasingly ‘less American’. It

³⁸ A concept from Latin that envision human life as a journey or equates human existence to that of a pilgrimage.

may not even be American criticism if it does not, in some way, invoke the voice of Singleton, even if it has geographically American origins:

... it was less a case of 'non-Singletonian' 'voices' not being 'heard,' but more a case of their connections with America being 'marginalized.' To put it simply, they were not seen as contributing to a specifically American brand of Dante studies (Barasnski 65).

Therefore, Singleton's dominance over the American school is not caused purely by the persuasiveness of his theories. Singleton's dominance over the American school is at least partly due to the way that he effectively defines it as a distinct school by offering a uniquely American perspective on the text. In this way, Singleton's reading of the *Commedia* is unique insofar as it is an interpretation influenced by the particular context in which it arose, specifically, the United States of America deliberately distinguishing itself from its colonial predecessor, Britain. Any scholarship that fell outside the Singleton paradigm was not considered to be American scholarship in the way that made it uniquely distinct from European scholarship.

In summation, Singleton's theories regarding the allegory of theologians dominated American criticism to the point where it became synonymous with it. His theories were markedly different from the traditional scope of Dantean scholarship that began with Dante's own secondary writings and medieval scholars such as Boccaccio. These medieval scholars interpreted Dante's allegory through the lens of the allegory of poets, emphasizing the figurative sense. However, Singleton emphasized the truth of the literal sense as an allegory of theologians. Since the inception of his theories, the allegory of theologians has become as pervasive as Singleton once claimed the allegory of poets to be. Scholars such as Hollander extended and enhanced his theories while scholars like Barolini, influenced by the theories of Nardi, began to move away from Singleton's theories of the allegory of theologians. Therefore, contemporary criticism has seen a tentative dismantling of Singleton's hegemony over American criticism. There remains, however, a strong reliance on Singleton's theories in the American school precisely because it is the case that his theories used American mythos to give

American criticism its own unique voice that distinguished it from other European schools of Dantean criticism.

The Singleton-Auerbach Paradigm

It is important to note, at this stage, that Singleton's theories of the allegory of theologians are often combined with Auerbach's theories of figural fulfilment. There are often attempts made to either synthesize the theories of the two scholars, or to contrast them against one another. It is therefore necessary to, firstly, expand on the nature of Auerbach's theories of figural fulfilment and, secondly to discuss the ways in which his theories have been used in conjunction with Singleton's. To conclude, I will expand on the manner in which their shared negative perception of allegory is the driving force behind their own particular readings of poem, showcasing the manner in which a reader's understanding of allegory constitutes their understanding of the poem in general.

Erich Auerbach is ultimately making the argument that Dante is "...the father of all modern literature" (Auerbach 1961, 174) and thus heralded a shift in the way that western literature represented the self. When Auerbach states that "Modern mimesis found man in his individual destiny; it raised him out of the two-dimensional unreality of a remote dreamland or philosophical abstraction, and moved historical area in which he really lives" (Auerbach 1961, 178), he is dismissing the allegorical sense in favour of the individualistic and literal. Auerbach's emphasis on the individual is concentrated on his theory of *figura* which Giuseppe Mazzotta summarises in the following way:

Figura is both a theory of interpretation of history and mode of writing in which signs and their significations are historically true, and which – just as in the Bible, where the reader is never pampered into the safety of esthetic illusion – demands the reader's radical commitment (Mazzotta 1979, 231).

Like Singleton, in Auerbach's ideas of figural fulfilment, the reality of the historical sense is emphasised, especially in how he interprets Dante's historical characters such as Paolo and Francesca, Farinata, and Pier Della Vigna. Auerbach claims that these characters are solidified as their true selves in *Inferno* because they have, in achieving

their ultimate destiny, achieved the fullest scope of their identity. It is the case that “For Auerbach, Dante transposes the ‘earthly world’ on his eschatology, and the literal sense of the poem is but the fulfilment of an earthly life which, in relation to this fulfilment, is merely the figure” (Corbett 11). A distinguishing feature of the American school of Dantean interpretation is its general drive towards secularisation. The secularisation process is prominent in Erich Auerbach’s book entitled *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* in which he argues for a reading of the *Commedia* which “...seeks to reduce Dante’s eschatology to little more than a literary form which contains, like a frame, a content about man’s earthly life...” (Corbett 6). This can be seen in the following quotation from Auerbach’s book:

The perception of history and immanent reality arrived at in the *Comedy* through an eschatological vision, flowed back into real history, filling it with the blood of authentic truth, for an awareness had been born that a man’s concrete earthly life is encompassed in his ultimate fate and that the even in its authentic, concrete uniqueness is important from the part it plays in God’s judgment. From the centre man’s earthly, historical reality derived new life and value, and even the *Comedy* where, not without difficulty, the turbulent new forces were confined within an eschatological frame, gives us an intimation of how quickly and violently they would break loose” (Auerbach 1961, 178).

In this quotation, and throughout his works, Auerbach places Dante and the *Commedia* in his theory of history which he views as a long journey towards secularisation. He views Dante’s theology as a necessary literary tool to capture mimetic reality, but the theology is ultimately discarded in the process of achieving mimetic reality. This shows that “Auerbach’s polemical interpretation of Dante thus forms part of his overarching philosophy of history, according to which Christianity was but one stage in the progressive march towards secularisation” (Corbett 6). Auerbach’s ideas surrounding historiography influences his reading of the *Commedia*. Auerbach’s secular reading of the *Commedia* and, subsequently of history, is showcased in the following:

...Auerbach’s reading of Dante as a ‘poet of the earthly world,’ and his limited application of allegory to the figure and fulfilment of earthly lives, might seem a

continuation of late nineteenth century Romantic readings and as an accommodation to twentieth-century secular reappropriations of Dante, rather than as a progressive development in our understanding of the *Commedia* (Corbett 24).

Much like Singleton, Auerbach inherited his view of allegory from the Romantics and then applied this to his interpretation of medieval allegory. It is perhaps for this reason that, in many instances, the ideas of Auerbach and Singleton have been seen as compatible with critics such as Dante Della Terza who “...even declared that Singleton’s reading of the poem is a rigorous application of Auerbach’s figural method” (Thompson 1).

There are areas of their scholarship in which they seem to overlap or fill in the missing pieces from one another. For instance, it is the case that “Moral interpretations were always anathema to Auerbach, whereas it is the moral sense, the *quid agas*, upon which Singleton focuses his attention” (Thompson 9). Additionally, both scholars share similar views in the way in which they emphasise the literal sense of Dante’s allegory. This can be seen in the way that “Singleton would grant Auerbach’s claim that Virgil is Virgil, not an allegorical personification” (Thompson 8). Because they shared similar views in their approach to Dante’s allegory, it appears that they overlap in such a way as to complete one another’s theories. Thompson establishes the manner in which these two scholars tend to overlap in the following:

Auerbach says almost nothing about Dante’s journey: his attention is devoted mainly to what Singleton might encompass by the term ‘Symbolism.’ Thus there is a radical difference between Auerbach’s figural reading and Singleton’s allegorical interpretation: the one emphasizes poetic texture, the other poetic structure. Auerbach studies Dante’s realized vision, his representation of reality *sub specie aeternitatis*, while Singleton stresses the dynamic journey, the series of events, the process in time. Auerbach is concerned with what Dante sees, what the souls *are*; Singleton, with what Dante himself *becomes* (Thompson 8–9, Italics in the original)

It therefore appears that Singleton's and Auerbach's theories are compatible, to a certain degree, even as they are contrasted with one another. Terza had been tasked with writing a survey of the study of Italian Literature in the United States in which he drew direct parallels between Singleton and Auerbach. However, in a later article entitled 'Charles S. Singleton: An Appraisal' Terza states:

Only years later, however, I learned that my article had displeased Singleton. I had incautiously and with undue energy underscored, indeed, the close relationship existing in my mind, between Singleton's allegorical reading of the poem and Auerbach's figural interpretation. Eventually, I came to owe to a lucid review that [John] Freccero did of Auerbach's collected essays, *Studi su Dante*, a serene, well-balanced clarification of the problem I had tried to confront many years earlier (Terza 22).

This quotation shows that Singleton himself did not acknowledge the compatibility between his and Auerbach's theories nor did Dante Della Terza maintain his position of the commensurability of these theories. The academic consensus has therefore gravitated towards an acknowledgement that "...there is a radical difference between Auerbach's theory of figural realism and Singleton's allegory of theologians" (Thompson 1). The most notable of the scholars who attempted to synthesize Auerbach and Singleton's theories was Robert Hollander. Despite the difference inherent in both Singleton's and Auerbach's theories, what they shared was "...a rejection of the hermeneutic approach of the early commentators" (Corbett 3) and this is particularly true in their rejection of the allegory of poets or the assumption that Dante wrote a *bella menzogna*. Therefore, the area in which Singleton and Auerbach overlap is disagreeing with the early commentaries on where Dante placed his conception of truth. This is because, although they did it in different ways, both Singleton and Auerbach argue for the truth of the literal sense of Dante's allegory. It is therefore the case that allegory, and their subsequent understanding of it, is the area in which both these scholars converge.

While both scholars emphasised the literal sense, it is the case that Auerbach drove the trend towards reading the *Commedia* from a secular perspective. This can be acknowledged in the following:

As Tertullian had reacted against attempts to allegorize Scripture into a series of moral abstractions, Auerbach reacted to similar assaults on Dante's text. No critic has shown a better feel for Dante's representation of reality, and his essay on Farinata and Cavalcante stands as one of the finest close analyses of the *Commedia's* poetic texture (Thompson 3).

In this way, Singleton and Auerbach come to exemplify the two main dimensions of the modern trend towards secularisation and the emphasis on the literal sense. In both these cases, exemplified by Singleton and Auerbach, it is the case that it is their treatment and perception of allegory that defines the manner in which they read the poem. Auerbach wrote of allegory as though he were "...bedevilled by a host of shadowy personifications..." (Thompson 2). As previously shown, Singleton showcases an underlining Protestant approach to allegory, interpreting it through the lens of American mythos regarding the Puritan pilgrims. It is therefore the assumptions regarding the nature of allegory and how to define it that ultimately underline both their approaches to reading the *Commedia*. In his book, *Dante: Poet of the Desert*, Mazzotta writes that "[...] the question of whether Dante's allegory belongs to a theological or fictional mode cannot be simply solved, as critics would have it, by some *a priori* decision about the fictiveness or reality of the literal sense" (Mazzotta 1979, 233). For both Singleton and Auerbach, it is an underlying assumption about the truth of the literal sense that influences their theories, and this assumption is made in conjunction to their own respective contextual matrixes. Mazzotta shows that there exists a choice between the literal and the figurative, the allegory of poets and the allegory theologians, and acknowledges that at the heart of all these *a priori* decisions is an underlining assumption of the manner in which the poem ought to be read. It is a decision that is not made in a vacuum but instead governed by the surrounding cultural and historical contexts. Mazzotta argues for a complete collapse of the binaries set forth between the literal and the figurative, the allegory of theologians and the

allegory of poets, by centralising the role of the reader in the text when he states that “The distinction between poetic allegory and theological allegory depends not on an intrinsic separation of truth and lies in the literal sense, but on an act of interpretation...” (Mazzotta 1979, 233). Mazzotta highlights reading as an active act of contemplation and subsequent interpretation. This is seen in the following:

Dante’s reader is constantly reminded, in effect, that the practice of reading deals precisely with how that decision can be made, that reading is an imaginary operation in which truth and fiction, far from being mutually exclusive categories, are simultaneously engendered by the ambiguous structure of metaphoric language (Mazzotta 1979, 233).

Mazzotta foregrounds the act of reading in the interpretation of the *Commedia*. There is, however, one last major barrier that exists in the act of reading the *Commedia* that still needs to be addressed in this current enquiry. It is now necessary to examine the manner in which translation and mistranslation shapes the reading of the *Commedia*.

CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETING TRANSLATION

"In that connexion" he said "I recall one superb pun anyway:

'qui vive la pietà è quando ben morta...'"

She said nothing.

"Is it not a great phrase?" he gushed.

She said nothing.

"Now" he said like a fool "I wonder how you could translate that?"

"Do you think" She murmured "it is absolutely necessary to translate it?"

- Samuel Beckett, *'Dante and the Lobster'*

In this chapter, I will conduct an exploration into Dante's creative re-working of language and the consequences of the attempts to translate his work. First, I will be examining the manner in which Dante wrote in translation by choosing to write in the vernacular rather than in Latin. Dante is consolidating the various dialects of the Italian language into one unified Italian voice while not giving strict predominance to his native Tuscan dialect. Second, I will be acknowledging that there is a pragmatic need for translation when the *Commedia* is read in the English-speaking world. This pragmatic need for translation ultimately ensures that there is a consistent element in the interpretation of Dante's language which will establish a variance in meaning. I will be examining the manner in which the American school's emphasis on the literal sense of the *Commedia* influenced their translation and subsequent interpretation of the text. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the first American to translate the *Commedia* in the nineteenth century and it is therefore his translation that I will focus on. First, it is necessary to examine the manner in which the act of translation can be constituted as an act of transgression, that ultimately subverts the original language.

The quotation in the beginning of this chapter originates from Samuel Beckett's short story 'Dante and the Lobster'. Beckett's Belacqua has Italian lessons, where he quotes the following tercet:

Qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta:

Che è più scellerato che colui

Che al giudizio divin passion porta?

Inf 20.27–30.

Beckett's short story quotes from *Inferno XX*, in which Dante encounters the magic users, the false fortune tellers, in the fourth ditch of the Eighth circle of Hell. They are punished by having their heads turned right around and must walk backwards to see where they are going. This is an example of Dante's *contrapasso* because, in life, these shades attempted to look falsely into the future, and, in death, they are punished for this deception by being unable to see where they are going unless they walk backwards. They are silent, in direct contrast to the certainty they declared when they were alive. It is notable that this is the passage that Beckett quotes in his short story because it draws a connection between translation and the kind of false prophecy that is being punished in this circle of Hell. When this canto is interpreted through the lens of translation, translation is conceived as an attempt to look forward and to divine meaning by misappropriating allegorical elements that results instead in the body of the work being twisted, becoming at once a ludicrous and pitiful imitation of its former self, until those who spoke with such certainty are rendered silent. In Beckett's short story, Belacqua's attempts at translation are described as foolish, because even as he delights in the pun of the phrase, it cannot be rendered into a new language without being twisted into a facsimile and, consequently, a *contrapasso* of itself. It is notable that it is precisely the things that Belacqua loves about the phrase, its humour and its play on words, that will be lost once it is translated as these are the aspects that cannot often find true equivalents outside of the original vernacular. Additionally, it is the metaphorical and allegorical underpinnings of the phrase, of the tercet and the entirety of the *Commedia*, that is lost when Belacqua insists on translation.

Nevertheless, this phase has been translated, many times over, if not by Samuel Beckett then by numerous scholars in the Anglosphere. J.G. Nichols, the default translator for this enquiry into the *Commedia* in English, translated it as follows:

Here pity lives when it is wholly dead:

What is more wicked than to deprecate

God's final judgement once it is declared?

Inf 20.27–30.

Beckett's use of this tercet, as well as the way it has been continuously translated, illustrates the dynamic between the original medieval Italian and the pragmatic need for translation in the Anglosphere. This is, in effect, another manner in which there is a tension which exists between the urge to preserve the meaning of the original text in its own language and the desire to render the text anew in a different language. In the short story, Belacqua's Italian teacher asks if it is necessary to translate the tercet, and then neither Belacqua nor Beckett ultimately go on to translate it. However, it has been translated by many subsequent translators such as Charles Singleton, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, J.G. Nichols, Dorothy Sayers and so on. This seems to answer back that it is, in fact, necessary, without engaging with the potentiality of translation to undermine the original. J.G. Nichols's translation fails to fully encapsulate the pun in the original. It is also unable to fully preserve the *terza rima* rhyme scheme that appears in the original. Therefore, many aspects of the original medieval Italian are subsequently lost in the process of translation.

If this is true at the level of language, then it is also true at the level of allegory. The history of Dantean scholarship runs in parallel with the history of its translation. One can gauge the influence of the *Commedia* by examining the volume of translations which has been generated at a particular time in history. This is because "The growing number of translations of the *Divina Commedia* and of Dante's other works best indicates the slow but steady spread of his fame" (Friederich 45). Many commentators of the *Commedia* are also translators and, therefore, their approach to reading Dante's allegory is embedded in their translations. This is particularly true of the American

school of Dantean interpretation and translation because “Translation is the inner reality of American scholarship, the flip-side of any critical-allegory commentary” (Mazzotta 2000, 326).

It is for this reason that America, England and, by extension, the entire Anglosphere, has had a unique relationship with the *Commedia*. While not as closely connected to the foundations of the language and culture itself as the relationship between the *Commedia* and its native Italy, the relationship between the Anglosphere and the *Commedia* is significant, nevertheless, because of the way that the English-speaking world must meet Dante in translation in order to interpret the text. Arguably, among the schools of scholarship that must encounter the *Commedia* in translation, English has the longest, continuous history of commentary. W.P. Friederich writes that there were periods in Europe, notably in Italy, Spain, and France, where the Romance cultures drifted away or outwardly rejected the *Commedia* when its theology and philosophy outwardly contradicted their current Humanist, Jesuit, or neoclassicist ideals. He writes that “Generally speaking, we can state that, among foreign literatures England shows the best evidence of a more or less continuous knowledge and appreciation of Dante –as is proved by the names of Chaucer, Milton, and Shelley” (Friederich 45). This suggests a long-standing relationship between Dante in Italian and in English. However, it is the case that the issue of translation was embedded into the text from its initial conception, when Dante chose to write the *Commedia* in the vernacular, opposing the convention at the time to write of philosophical and poetic matters in Latin. I will now examine the manner in which Dante’s decision to write in the vernacular was a subversive act and how this shapes the translation of the *Commedia*.

The Subversive Use of the Vernacular

In the *Commedia*, Dante is engaging in the act of translation through the consolidation and cultivation of various Italian dialects in the pursuit of a central *parlar materno*.³⁹ By writing the *Commedia* in an Italian vernacular and not, for instance, in the individual

³⁹ Translation: Mother Tongue.

dialects Florentine or Tuscan, Dante was able to create a unified Italian voice. Dante wrote with the universality of this language in mind, the entirety of the Italian language, rather than emphasizing one dialect over the other in any manner of disparate parts. In several ways, Dante argued for universalism through the means of "... presentation of a unified body of knowledge in the vernacular of the *Convivio*; a *canzone*, 'Tre donne,' which called for a uniform and inspired form of justice, and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, which sketched a design for a linguistic monarchy by which the local and the fortuitous would be subsumed" (Shapiro 5). His attempts to justify and consolidate his use of the vernacular can be seen throughout his other texts, in both his poetic and his philosophical treatises, and it culminates in the *Commedia*. In the *Convivio*, Dante justifies his use of the vernacular in his *canzoni*:

Now the bread is cleared of its accidental impurities, it remains to excuse one of substance; that is, its being in the vernacular and not in Latin; speaking metaphorically, that it is made of oats and not of the finest wheat. Briefly it is excusable for three reasons, which led me to choose the one language rather than the other: the first arises from caution, in not creating an inappropriate relationship; the second from zealous generosity; and the third from natural love of the native tongue (Con 14).

In the first book of the *Convivio*, Dante opens the fifth chapter by giving three reasons for his use of the Vernacular and for giving it sovereignty over the Latin. The Latin is viewed by Dante, in consensus with general opinion at the time, to be "...everlasting and incorruptible, while the vernacular is unstable and corruptible" (Con 14). Additionally, it is the case that "Latin was regarded by most of Dante's contemporaries as the universal language of science and philosophy" (Scott 32). Latin's association with these 'higher arts', particularly in terms of religious worship, grants it a sense of perfection and immutability in contrast with the highly changeable vernacular. Additionally, it is the case that, because Latin is associated with religious texts and conversely with religious worship, the act of reading then becomes imbued with its own kind of divinity. In this way, reading becomes something akin to a miracle because

it is associated with the ability to comprehend divinity through the reading of biblical and other religious texts:

When the first language read is primarily associated with worship, the child's association with worship affect the attitude toward reading, and written language will continue to possess the special power or status associated with worship. The very difference between Latin and the vernacular enhanced this power by association [...] (Noakes 24).

Latin is therefore associated with religious worship and, subsequently, with the divine. It therefore reaches a level of perceived perfection that the vernacular, used for more colloquial matters, cannot match. Dante explicitly places the Latin above the vernacular in the *Convivio* by describing it in a master and servant relationship. He describes it as beautiful, because it is made of disparate parts that fit together and "Men call a thing beautiful when its parts correspond fittingly, since their harmony result in beauty" (Con 15). In contrast, the vernacular is made of disparate parts that are constantly changing and evolving as to no longer fit together in the sense that people from differing times or places cannot understand one another. He therefore refuses to use Latin to analyse his *canzoni* as he writes them in the vernacular because "...Latin would have been not subject but sovereign..." (Con 15). In this way, Dante places the Latin above the vernacular in the *Convivio*, even though he writes the actual text in the vernacular.

While Dante does place the Latin above the vernacular in the *Convivio*, this is not always the case in the *Commedia*. In *Purgatorio IX*, Dante writes the following:

I turned, attentive as once that sound began,
And seemed to hear the singing of 'Te Deum
Laudamus' to sweet music from within.
The impression made on me by what I heard
Was that precisely which we always get
When we hear singing, while an organ's played:

The words were sometimes clear, and sometimes not.

Purg 9.139–145.

Io mi rivolsi attento al primo tuono,

e *'Te deum laudamus' me pareva*

udire in voce mista al dolce suono.

Tale imagine a punto mi rendea

ciò ch'io udiva qual prender si sole

quando a cantar con organi si stea;

ch'or sì or no s'intendon le parole.

Purg 9.139–145

It is in this pivotal ninth canto of *Purgatorio*, bearing all the significance that Dante and medieval numerology had placed on the number nine, where Dante reaches the gates of Purgatory after finally making it through ante-Purgatory. It is at this point that the letter 'P', signifying the seven deadly sins, is drawn seven times on his forehead by an angel who tells him he must wash them off after the purgation of each sin. The angel then lets him into Purgatory proper, as the other angels sing *Te Deum Laudamus*. This is a Latin hymn which translates into 'Thee, God, we praise' and is sometimes known as the Ambrosian Hymn and is often sung to give thanks to God for a good event. In *Purgatorio*, the Latin is sometimes heard, and sometimes not. It is muffled by the other existing notes of music. Latin was the language of philosophy, of writing, and, most notably, of worship. It was distinct in this manner, because of its association with these higher arts, as compared to the vernacular. However, imbuing Latin with this kind of theological sentiment has the further effect of divorcing it from true meaning and understanding because it is meant, in all the ways in which it is associated with the divine, to be incomprehensible. Susan Noakes acknowledges how this sentiment

towards Latin and its association with worship and prayer ultimately shaped the way people learnt how to read Latin:

Throughout the Middle Ages there was thus a continuous tradition of education in letter and Latin memorization which did not, in many cases, lead to what would today be described as the ability to read. The tradition derived from the belief that there is in certain forms of language a power that transcends human reason [...]. It is an attitude toward language which goes far deeper than sectarian polemics; it sees language as valuable not merely through its priority to meaning, but even despite its complete lack of attainment of meaning (Noakes 24).

This shows the way that Latin, although associated with higher theological, political, or philosophical matters, becomes divorced from human reason or meaning and therefore becomes incomprehensible when Dante hears it sung by the angels in *Purgatorio*. However, in contrast, in *Paradiso XXIV*, the same hymn is repeated, but in the vernacular, which is then fully recalled and understood. There is much in *Paradiso* that is beyond Dante's ability to comprehend in the moment as well as beyond his ability to recapture in his memory in hindsight. However, when the angels sing in the vernacular, and when Dante translates their words into the vernacular, it elevates the singing to the purity of complete understanding. The words, in the vernacular, are clear and unobscured by the music as they were in the Latin. This occurs in the sphere of fixed stars where St. Peter asks Dante about the nature of faith and, in response to Dante's answers, the souls there sing *Te Deum Laudamus*. It is described in the following tercet:

This done, the high and holy chorus sang

'*Te Deum*', sounding through the spheres in such

A melody as only there is sung.

Par 24. 112–114

Finito questo, l'alta corte santa
risonò per le spere un 'Dio laudamo'
nella melode che là su sic anta

Par 24.112–114

Notably, the default translator for this enquiry, J.G. Nichols translates Dante's vernacular phrasing of the Latin *Dio Laudamo* back into the Latin when he renders it into English. This is not consistent across other translations. For instance, Robin Kirkpatrick maintains the Latin in *Purgatorio IX* but translates Dante's vernacular in *Paradiso XXIV* into English, not Latin. Arguably, Kirkpatrick's translation maintains the parallels of Dante's philosophy of language in a way that Nichols does not when he changes Dante's translation of the Latin *Te Deum Laudamus* into the vernacular *Dio Laudamo* back into its original Latin. By comparing these two instances across the canticles of *Paradiso* and *Purgatorio*, it is revealed that Dante usurps the master and servant relationship that he set up in the *Convivio*. In the *Commedia*, it is the vernacular that is clear, near perfection, as it is sung in a way that is only possible in Heavenly paradise while the Latin is not fully heard and, subsequently, not fully understood. It must therefore be acknowledged that "The Latin text is, as it were, supplemented and completed by the vernacular" (Brownlee 598).

This is not the only example of an evolution in Dante's thinking on language from his secondary writings to the *Commedia*. In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante writes of the universal language that existed before the building of the Tower of Babel.

...God created a certain form of speech together with and for the first soul. I say 'form' with reference to the words for things, and the constructions of these words, and their grammatical pronunciation; and certainly this form would be used by every speaking being if it had not been dispersed through human presumption, as I will demonstrate (DVE 52)

This first, universal speech was spoken "...by Adam and by all his descendants until the building of the Tower of Babel, which is translated as Tower of Confusion" (DVE 52).

Dante goes on to argue that this uncorrupted speech remained solely with the children of Heber and is therefore Hebrew. This was so that Christ, "...who was to be born from them according to His humanity, might benefit from a language not of confusion but of grace" (DVE 52). In contrast, the proliferation and changeability of the vernacular is a punishment for the Tower of Babel. This is an origin story that occurs in the Book of Genesis, and it is meant to explain the existence of multiple and incommensurable languages in the world as being symptomatic of humanity's Fall. The Tower of Babel was an attempt to build a structure to reach Heaven, but was cast down by God, scattering languages across the world in punishment. It was Nimrod who ordered his people to be built. Dante encounters Nimrod in *Inferno XXXI* in the ninth circle, in the well of giants, that punishes treachery. Nimrod utters the phrase "*Raphèl mai amècche zabì almi*" (Inf 31.67) which, Virgil explains, is nonsensical babble that has no meaning. Therefore, it is not often translated into anything resembling an English equivalent.⁴⁰ According to Dante, it is therefore the case that "Various different vernaculars subsequently developed from one and the same language as the punishment of confusion..." (DVE 53). In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, the story of the Tower of Babel forms the foundation of his understanding of language and "...Dante's subsequent discussion of grammar in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is that *gramatica* constitutes a sort of redemption of the linguistic 'Fall'" (Hollander 1975, 77). From *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante's conception of linguistics, translation, and language as well as his subsequent use of the vernacular in other texts is connected to his theology and therefore has an ethical and redemptive dimension that must be acknowledged. It is therefore notable, and ironic, that *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is written in Latin, and not in the vernacular.

The fact that *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is written in Latin, and not in the vernacular, may explain why Dante's statements in *Paradiso* diverge from what is stated in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. The *Commedia* shows a distinct evolution in Dante's approach to

⁴⁰ An exception can be made for Ciaran Carson who 'translates' Nimrod's meaningless nonsense into "*Yin twa maghogani gazpaighp boke!*" (Carson 220). Arguably, this may be an attempt to render the nonsense phrase even more nonsensical to English readers, who may look at Dante's rendering of the nonsense words and simply assume that it has not been translated. Carson, by constructing this nonsense phrase out of combinations of letters that do go together in English but nevertheless do not amount to anything resembling a meaningful word, is mirroring the way Dante did the same thing in the vernacular.

language and subsequently to the vernacular. In *Paradiso*, Dante speaks with Adam, the first man, who claims that the proliferation of language is a natural and inevitable part of all language which is distinct from the fall of the Tower of Babel. Language, as a fundamental function of humanity, is consistently and inevitably subject to change and decay. In *Paradiso XXVI*, Dante speaks with Adam who claims the following:

The language that I spoke was quite exhausted
Before the men of Nimrod undertook
That work which could not ever be completed.
For nothing that mere reason has produced,
Since all our human likings chop and change
According to the stars, could ever last.
It is a natural thing for man to speak;
But whether in this language or in that,
Nature leaves you to do whatever you like.
Before I went down into misery,
Jah was the name on earth of the great Goodness
Who with this gladness now envelops me.
Later He was called *El*: and that beseems,
Because men's customs are most like the leaves
On branches; when one goes another comes

Par 26. 124–138

La lingua ch'io parlai fu tutta spenta
innanzi che all'ovra inconsummabile

fosse la gente di Nembròt attenta;
ché nullo effetto mai razionabile,
per lo piacere uman che rinovella
seguendo il cielo, sempre fu durabile.
Opera naturale è ch'uom favella;
ma così, natura lascia
poi fare a voi secondo che v'abbella.
Pria ch'a' scendessi all'infernale ambascia,
'l' s'appellava in terra il sommo bene
onde vien la letiza che mi fascia;
e 'El' si chiamò poi: e ciò convene,
ché l'uso de' mortali è come fronda
in ramo, che sen va e altra vene
Par 26.124–138

In this quotation, it is revealed that human nature, as described by Adam, chases after the new. Accordingly, the vernacular changes and adapts to make itself anew. Adam is here referring to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, where 'the men of Nimrod' attempted to build a tower to heaven and were cast down for it. As part of the punishment for the Tower of Babel, language was shattered and people could no longer understand one another as they once had when they spoke a singular, perfect language. In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante also refers to this tale, and he claims that it is because of the Tower of Babel that the vernacular is unstable and prone to change. Therefore, this episode in *Paradiso XXVI* with Adam shows a change in his thinking and approach to the vernacular. It is here that he fully embraces the changeability of language as an aspect of humanity that is not the result of the Fall or of the Tower of Babel. It is not a punishment for Sin or an inherent failing. In his book, *Dante's Vision*

and the Circle of Knowledge, Guiseppe Mazzotta explores the evolving way that Dante depicts the Tower of Babel. Mazzotta describes the collapse of the Tower of Babel as “The event that erases the unity of language and collapses the myth of language’s transparency...” and that it “...marks the beginning of man’s diaspora in the wilderness of the world” (Mazzotta 1993, 20). In this way, it is the case that, while God’s existence is ‘beyond question’ in Dante’s conception of the Universe, the words that are used to describe it are nevertheless subject to the chaotic whims of the natural world and human nature. Mazzotta draws attention to Dante’s use of natural imagery in Adam’s speech when he compares men’s customs to leaves on a branch:

The image primarily conveys the idea of language’s ceaseless mobility as if it were a natural, living organism. Language is, in fact a work of nature, yet the determination of signs is *ad placitum*⁴¹ (Mazzotta 1993, 51).

It is necessary to state Dante’s conception of language as natural, and therefore subject to change, at this stage. It is through Dante’s ultimate acceptance of the multiplicity of language as natural in *Paradiso XXVI* that allows for several, parallel readings of the *Commedia* to occur across the modern and medieval world.

It is the case that “For Adam is the ultimate human authority on the origin and status of human language and is thus analogous to Saints Peter, James, and John who are the ultimate human authorities on the three theological virtues” (Brownlee 600).

Therefore, the narrative fact that it is Adam relating this facet of human nature and language to Dante imbues his words with a greater sense of authority and truth. This is acknowledged by Teodolinda Barolini when she states that “The new functions in the economy of the spiral as the forward thrust that overrides the backward pull, that breaks with the status quo, converting what is into what was, into the old, the no longer new, and thereby pushing the soul ahead...” (Barolini 1992). The changes in Dante’s thinking from the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and the *Convivio* reveal that the construction of the *Commedia*’s allegory pulls towards something new, the pursuit of perfection, while replacing the *status quo* instituted by Latin’s dominance in the arts

⁴¹ Translation: at pleasure

with an expression of love for the vernacular. Adam's description of human language therefore constitutes Dante's final deliberations on the nature of language because it is the case that "Adam's description of human linguistic behaviour provides the final justification for Dante's *new* illustrious vernacular as embodied on the three theological virtues" (Brownlee 600, *Italics in the original*). However, while Dante argued the case for universality, there were instances where he was accused of the betrayed of the particular. Although Dante writes in the *Convivio* that "He who knows something in general does not know it perfectly" (Con 16), there remained accusations that he placed his own Florentine dialect in an inferior position when pursuing the perfection of a unified Italian language. Dante is translating ideas that were usually confined to Latin and making them accessible for a larger audience to understand. In this way, Dante was engaging in an act of translation while writing the *Commedia*. However, the creation of this kind of conception of language was not without its controversy.

Dante's conception of language evolves from his previous texts, primarily *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and the *Convivio*, to his final consolidation of the vernacular over the Latin in *Paradiso*, accepting the proliferation of language as an innate part of being human and not a form of punishment from the Tower of Babel or the Fall. However, it is the case that Dante's conception of language in this manner, and consequently his pursuit of a unified Italian vernacular, was considered by others as a transgression against his native Florentine. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882), a New England scholar and translator of the *Commedia*, stated that "...[Dante] wrote in his native dialect; but it is conceded on all hands, and all his writing prove the fact, that he did not confine himself exclusively to any one dialect, but drew from all whatever they contained of force and beauty" (Longfellow 43). The *Commedia* therefore places poetics over politics to become "The creator of a philosophic language..." (Longfellow 44) that is irreducible to any one instance of dialect. In this manner, Dante wrote in a language which, technically, did not exist in any one region of Italy because "... [Dante's vernacular] exists everywhere in parts, but nowhere as a whole, save in the pages of the classic writer" (Longfellow 42). The completion of the *Commedia* corresponded with the consolidation of this language that exists physically nowhere else except enclosed within the poetic text. In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante makes the distinction

between the vernacular as it is written and as it is spoken, between prose and poetry. He justifies his use of the vernacular in his *canzone* by arguing that "... poets are accorded a greater licence⁴² than prose writers, and since those who rhyme are none other than vernacular poets, it is right and just that they should be allowed more licence than is extended to other vernacular writers [who write in prose]" (VN 109). According to Dante in *Vita Nuova*, the poetic use of the vernacular is justified because "... [vernacular poets'] metaphorical uses of words are not to be confined to metaphors of every-day speech" (Ewert 355). By placing the poetic use of the vernacular above the everyday use of the vernacular, Dante's conception of language is logocentric in the sense that it prioritizes literary pursuits and other forms of writing over the act of speech. While poetry was generally a spoken medium at that time, there is an acknowledgment that poetic speech and everyday speech are distinct. While everyday speech in the vernacular would be utilitarian, poetic speech would aim towards capturing the Sublime. The combination of the two in the *Commedia* results in what some scholars would argue is an exaltation of the language, while others would argue it to be a transgression or subversion of it. While Boccaccio and Petrarch would be examples of scholars who sees the use of the vernacular in this manner as a transgression, Erich Auerbach would be an example of a scholar who sees the use of the vernacular in this way as a kind of exaltation of language.

Erich Auerbach discusses Dante's simplicity of style, his use of the vulgate, to reach towards the Sublime. In his book, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Auerbach states that "There is no doubt that the stylistic intent in general is to achieve the sublime" (Auerbach 2003) and in this way accounts for Dante's use of the vernacular. The words that the characters speak often "...has the ring of spontaneous and unstylized speech, of everyday conversation among ordinary speakers" (Auerbach 2003). The exact example that Auerbach refers occurs in *Inferno* X, after Farinata rises from his tomb to interrupt the dialogue between Dante and Virgil. In response, Virgil exclaims "Volgiti! Che fai?" (*Turn around! What are you doing?*; Inf 10.31). Auerbach claims that this is an example of Dante who "...by no

⁴² *Maggior licenza* in the original Italian. Alternatively translated as 'freer use'.

means scorns colloquialisms” (Auerbach 2003). It is because of this use of everyday speech that Dante uses “... in describing with meticulous care and directness things which are humdrum, grotesque, or repulsive” (Auerbach 2003) that Dante was able to reach such levels of the sublime. This is even though, according to Auerbach in his survey on the representation of reality in Western literature, “The themes which the *Comedy* introduces represent a mixture of sublimity and triviality which, measured by the standards of antiquity, is monstrous” (Auerbach 2003). Therefore, according to Auerbach, Dante’s use of the vernacular, in particular unfiltered speech in the form of exclamations in contrast to his highly poetic style and otherwise theological themes, is a necessary contribution towards the sublimity of the overall text. For Auerbach, this sublime can also be secular, not necessarily sacred. This allows Auerbach to distinguish the way Dante represented reality as fundamentally different from the way the classical world, such as in the works of Homer, represented reality. It was stated in the previous chapter that Auerbach, along with Singleton, came to dominate the modern American school of Dantean interpretation in the latter half of the twentieth century. This is particularly true for Auerbach’s contribution towards the trend towards secular readings of the *Commedia*. Therefore, Auerbach’s emphasis on the ordinary, in contrast to the divinity of Dante’s more theological themes, can arguably be seen as a contribution to this trend of secular readings. An early commentator of the *Commedia* to defend Dante’s use of the vernacular was Giovanni Boccaccio. However, in contrast to Auerbach, it is the case that, for Boccaccio, “Dante’s use of the vernacular in a poem like the *Commedia*, which deals with sublime matters, was immediately perceived as a scandal: literary, religious, and political” (Ginzburg 207).

In the *Trattetello in laude di Dante*, Giovanni Boccaccio defends Dante’s use of the vernacular rather than Latin. He provides two reasons for Dante’s use of the vernacular. According to Boccaccio, the first reason why Dante wrote in the vernacular was “...for the sake of being more useful to his fellow-citizens and other Italians” (Boccaccio 67). Dante wrote in the vernacular for his work to be accessible even to those who were not particularly learned. As discussed previously, Boccaccio’s description of the women encountering Dante who, seeing his appearance, assume that he literally went to Hell, is connected to assumptions around gender as well as the manner in which language

and subsequent interpretation of allegory is divided. These women do not make the serious commentary made by man and, most notably, do not speak or read Latin. The vernacular is therefore gendered in the sense that it is the language that a mother speaks to their child and not the language that men use to communicate the 'higher arts' of philosophy and theology. Dante, by trying to be more 'useful' to his fellow Italians, is therefore implicitly including women and the lower classes who would not have access to Latin in the same manner as the learned men in upper society. The second reason that Boccaccio provides for Dante's use of the vernacular is that Dante "...saw that liberal studies had been neglected by all, and especially by princes and other great men to whom poetical works are customarily dedicated, and that therefore both the divine works of Virgil and those of other noted poets were not only held in slight esteem, but almost despised by the majority" (Boccaccio 67). A contrasting opinion was held by Petrarch. In a letter to Boccaccio (*Seniles V, ii*), Petrarch shows distaste of "...both of the vernacular and [...] of Dante's adherence to his motherspeech" (Hollander 1975, 74) but does concede that Dante's particular use of the language was profound. It is useful to consider both Petrarch and Boccaccio's complementary and contrasting views of Dante's use of the vernacular. This is because, regardless of their differing opinions, both Petrarch and Boccaccio, along with Dante, are considered as fathers of the modern Italian language. According to Longfellow, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio "...did not wholly create, but they advanced, and developed and rendered permanent" (Longfellow 41) the Italian language in the vernacular. Although they both wrote in the vernacular, Petrarch and Boccaccio do not view the vernacular as ever superseding the Latin. This is therefore a similar view to that which Dante held in the *Convivio* but is, as has been previously noted, not a view that Dante necessarily extended to his writing of the *Commedia*.

For Boccaccio, Dante's use of the vernacular remains a 'necessary evil' required for the communication of his philosophy, rather than a deliberate choice based on what Dante viewed as the innate poetry of the vernacular. Boccaccio closes his defence of Dante's use of the vernacular by stating that Dante started writing the *Commedia* in Latin but stopped because "...he thought it was useless to put crusts of bread into the mouth of those who were still sucking milk" (Boccaccio 68). Dante's poetics are therefore

considered sublime despite his use of the vernacular rather than because of it in the way that Auerbach argued. This reveals that “Despite their differing estimate of Dante’s worth, Petrarca and Boccaccio share a common and increasingly popular humanist attitude: in matters of literature use of the vernacular is a sort of ‘babytalk,’ while the use of Latin is the sign of the mature author” (Hollander 1975, 74). This further entrenches Boccaccio’s implicit assumption that the vernacular is feminine in the manner it is connected to the role of the mother and is therefore, according to Boccaccio, further diminished because of this implicit connection to femininity, changeability, and inability to convey complex philosophical truths in the same way that the immutable, masculine Latin language is able to. Boccaccio and Petrarch still wrote in the vernacular and, according to Longfellow, played a similar role to Dante in the cultivation of the Italian language and therefore did not outright dismiss the vernacular as inferior. Rather it was the case that the vernacular was viewed as the kind of speech that one uses to teach infants how to speak. In extension, the vernacular was viewed as the speech that could be used to teach the unlearned masses complex ideas that were previously held only in Latin. Dante expresses a similar view in the *Convivio* and in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* but, in the *Commedia*, there are episodes in which the vernacular replaces the Latin, superseding it until it becomes the language of angels.

In his article, ‘Dante, Machiavelli, and Rome’, Charles T. Davis discusses the *Dialogo* which is a text that contains a contrasting view on Dante’s use of the vernacular from the view presented in Boccaccio’s *Trattetello in laude di Dante*. ‘Dialogo’ is the Italian word for ‘dialogue’. While the authorship and dating of the *Dialogo* is in doubt, it was attributed to Niccolò Machiavelli by his son and was probably composed after 1524. The authorship and dating are not overly relevant in this instance because it is the opinion of Dante as well as his use of the vernacular and translation in the *Dialogo* that is of paramount importance in this enquiry. Davis describes the author’s opinion as follows:

The author of the work is very critical of Dante, pointing out that the poet attacked the speech of Florence but used it, instead of the sort of refined

vernacular praised in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, for the *Comedy*, and claimed that Dante even includes in the great poem some most unsuitable, indeed obscene, Florentine expressions. The author of the *Dialogo* accounts for this contradiction between theory and practice on the ground of Dante's hatred for Florence. He says that Dante attacked Florence on every level, including even the language that he himself used... (Davis 46).

According to Davis, the author of *the Dialogo* argues that Dante ultimately failed in the creation of the universal dialect that he describes in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. According to the *Dialogo*, there is a lack of cohesion between Dante's theory and Dante's practice – the language Dante used in the *Commedia* is not the same language that he describes in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. This undermines the actual Florentine dialect, an act of transgression against it that is attributed to Dante's hatred of the city that exiled him. This is echoed in an essay from Longfellow, who attributes the following quote to Machiavelli as well.

In everything he has brought infamy upon his country, and now even in her language he would tear from her that reputation, which he imagines his own writings have conferred upon her (Longfellow 42).⁴³

In conjunction, these two quotations show that, to consolidate the Italian vernacular in the way that he did, Dante had to first undermine Florence and, by extension, the Florentine dialect. The author of the *Dialogo* suggests that this was even an act of revenge, a *vendetta*, against the city of Florence which rejected and exiled him. There are many contrasting and contradictory episodes in the *Commedia* wherein Dante both praises and criticises the city of his birth, making it one of the more complicated

⁴³ Longfellow attributes this quote to Machiavelli in the *Dialogo*. However, it is difficult to pin this quote down because it is a translation. It appears to be a translation done by Longfellow himself, as he does not reference anyone else, and he appears to have summarised large sections of *Dialogo*. Therefore, I acknowledge there are significant problems in my use of the quote in this manner. While I acknowledge the issues in my current use of this quotation, I maintain my use of this quotation in this manner due to the fact that the palimpsest view of interpretation remains at the core of this dissertation. What remains consistent between Longfellow's quote and the original is the derisive tone taken towards Dante's use of the vernacular and his representation of Florence.

relationships in the text. The earliest example in the text is in *Inferno VI*, in the third circle of Hell where the gluttonous are punished. Ciacco describes the city of Florence:

And he replied: "While I lived in the sun,
That city, overflowing with its envy,
Which is your city still, was also mine.
Ciacco was what you citizens called me.
You see me here, a broken man in rain,
And ruined by the sin of gluttony.
And, sad soul that I am, I'm not alone,
Since all these suffer

Inf 6.49–57

Ed elli a me: "La tua città, ch'è piena
d'invidia sì che già trabocca il sacco,
seco mi tenne in la vita serena.
Voi cittadini mi chiamaste Ciacco:
per la dannosa colpa della gola,
come tu vedi, alla pioggia mi fiacco.
E io anima trista non son sola,
ché tutte queste a simil pena stanno
per simil colpa." E più non fe' parola.

Inf 6.49–57

This extract shows that Dante links, both implicitly and explicitly, the city of Florence to sin by using the figure of Ciaccio as an allegorical representation of the city's vices of gluttony and greed. Ciaccio maintains, in this circle that punishes gluttony, that those who are 'consumed' by the city are prone to sin. In this manner, Dante invokes the city of Florence in this circle of the gluttonous to emphasise what he views as the city's overall predilection to greed, consumption, and sin. However, Dante does not consistently nor inevitably condemn Florence throughout the three canticles of the *Commedia*. Like many other repeating motifs, themes, and points of philosophy, Dante's depiction of Florence shifts as he moves away from *Inferno* and into *Paradiso*. Although Dante does critique the city, he also writes about his ardent desire to return home. In *Paradiso XXV*, towards the end of the *Commedia*, he opens the canto with the following plea:

If it should happen that the sacred verse,
In which both heaven and earth have played their part,
And which has kept me haggard all these years,
Should overcome the hate which bars me out
Of my own fold, where I slept as a lamb,
An enemy to wolves that war on it,
Then with an altered voice, an altered fleece
I shall return, a poet, to receive
The laurels where my baptism took place –
Because into the faith which makes souls known
To God I entered there, and afterwards
For that faith Peter circled thus my crown.

Par 25.1–12

Se mai continga che 'l poema sacro
al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
sì che m'ha fatto per molti anni macro,
vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
del bello ovile ov'io dormi' agnello,
nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra,
con altra voce omai, con altro vello
ritornerò poeta, ed in sul fonte
del mio battesimo prenderò 'l cappello;
però che nella fede, che fa conte
l'anime a Dio, quivi intra' io, e poi
Pietro per lei sì mi girò la fronte.

Par 25.1–12.

By comparing these two quotations from *Inferno* and *Paradiso*, it is possible to see the complex ways that Dante depicts and feels about Florence. He criticises the city for its sinful nature, having Ciaccio accuse the city of causing his damnation much in the same way that Francesca blames the book she read for hers. Then Dante praises the city, as the place of his baptism, and hopes that his poetry will allow him to return to his beloved home. If any episode of Dante's depiction of Florence were to be taken in isolation, a limited and biased view of the city would form in either overt praise or outright condemnation. When these two episodes are taken in conjunction, however, a fuller and more expansive depiction of the city can then be accessed. Once again, Dante has taken a universal approach by depicting all sides and all experiences of the vast city of Florence. However, it is this same universal approach that has caused the accusations that Dante has transgressed against the individual while pursuing the perfection of the universal. This is further seen in the following:

The first, with Machiavelli and the host of the Florentine Academy at their head, have asserted the supremacy of the language of the city of Florence; and, actuated it would seem more by the zeal of local prejudice, than any generous feeling of national pride, have contended, that the classic language of that literature, in whose ample field the name of their whole country was already so proudly emblazoned, was the dialect of Florence, and should be called, not Italian, not even Tuscan, – but *Florentine* (Longfellow 42).

To say that Dante wrote in the vernacular purely in the pursuit of revenge would contradict his own writing in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* as well as the reasons given by Giovanni Boccaccio. Additionally, it would contradict Dante's own nuanced relationship with Florence as the place that rejected then exiled him and that he longs to return to. However, it is possible to note a distance between theory and practice because Dante's views on language changed throughout his lifetime. It is nevertheless the case that translation can be viewed as, in many respects, an act of transgression against the original language. It is a kind of subversion to take a language and change it to fit into a different language. While this certainly generates significant issues for Dante writing in the Italian vernacular, it also generates similar issues for any enquiry encountering the *Commedia* in English. At this point, the act of translation transcends the level of language to encompass the dimensions of history, culture, and socio-political context. In the *Commedia*, Dante negotiates the tensions between translation and mistranslation as well as with the tensions between interpretation and misinterpretation.

As shown in the first chapter, there are several instances in the *Commedia* where it is the souls' actions of reading, interpreting, and translating that have either doomed or saved them. The first, and perhaps most famous, example of this is in *Inferno V*.⁴⁴ In the

⁴⁴ *Inferno V* is one of the most common cantos in the *Commedia* to be commented upon in commentary. Elena Lombardi, alongside Nicolò Crisafi, wrote 'Lust and the Law: Reading and Witnessing in *Inferno V*'. Susan Noakes investigates Francesca's relationship with reading in *Timely Reading: Between Exegesis and Interpretation*. Mary Carruthers discusses Francesca's recollection of the memory of the event, through the lens of medieval reading in *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. John Freccero explores this historicity of the event in his article 'The Portrait of Francesca, *Inferno V*'.

second circle of the lustful, Francesca puts the blame of her damnation on the act of reading and states that “...And on that day we read in it no further” (Inf 5.138)⁴⁵ Francesca’s unwillingness to read further, to engage instead in adultery, prevents her from interpreting the text to the point that she would have been able to discern its full meaning. For this act of misinterpretation, she is damned. In the first chapter, I explored the tension between interpretation and misinterpretation with the narrative arc between *Inferno IV* and *Inferno V* by comparing the virtuous pagans in Limbo with Francesca in the second circle of the Lustful. While the virtuous pagans exemplify the fundamentalist urge to preserve meaning by not representing it for interpretation and subsequent misinterpretation, Francesca is effectively damned for her act of reading and subsequent misinterpretation. However, the arc of this narrative that deals with the tensions of interpretation and misinterpretation does not end here as Dante later writes of the role of translation and interpretation in saving Statius, which juxtaposes against the role of translation and interpretation in damning Francesca.

At the end of *Purgatorio XX*, there is an earthquake that signals that a soul has reached the summit of the mountain and has been saved. This earthquake signifies that this saved soul is about to ascend into Heaven. This soul, Statius, later accompanies Dante and Virgil into the Garden of Earthly Paradise. Before Statius is aware that Dante is accompanied by Virgil, he states the following:

Back there men call me Statius to this day;
I sang of Thebes, then of the great Achilles;
But under that last load fell by the way.
The seeds which kindled all my ardour were
Sparkles emitted from that holy flame
By which a thousand have been set on fire.

⁴⁵ Original Italian: “...quell giorno più non vi leggemmo avante.” (Inf 5.138)

I speak of the *Aeneid*; when I wrote
It was both midwife and wet nurse to me:
I would not else have weighed a pennyweight.
And I, to live there in that epoch when
Virgil was living would accept a further
Year's penance till the lifting of my ban."

Purg 21. 91–102

Stazio la gente ancor di là mi noma:
cantai di Tebe, e poi del grande Achille;
ma caddi in via con la seconda soma.
Al mio ardor fuor seme le faville,
che mi scaldar, della divina fiamma
onde sono allumati più di mille;
dell'*Eneida* dico, la qual mamma
fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando:
sanz'essa non fermai peso di dramma.
E per esser vivuto di là quando
visse Virgilio, assentirei un sole
più che non deggio al mio uscir di bando."

Purg 21.91–102

Like Dante in *Inferno I*, Statius considers Virgil to be the source of his poetic talents. In this quotation, Dante canonises a medieval idea that Virgil's pastoral poetry,

particularly the Fourth Eclogue, predicted the incarnation in the return of the Golden Age in the form of the birth of an infant boy, and it was this that allowed for Statius' redemption. However, this remains a misinterpretation on Statius' part because Virgil is amongst the damned in Limbo. While Dante canonises this misinterpretation, he implicitly implies that this was not Virgil's intention because, if it were, then surely Virgil would also have been saved. While Virgil is the source of both Dante's and Statius poetic talents, he remains effectively doomed, despite climbing the mountain of Purgatory. There follows an episode of great irony when Statius finds out that he is in the presence of the man whose poetry saved him.

He was already bending as he made
To clasp my teacher's feet, but Virgil: "Brother,
Do not: you're but a shade that sees a shade."
Statius rose and said: "Now you can guess
The depth of all the affection which I feel,
When I, oblivious to our nothingness,
Find myself treating shades as they were real."

Purg 21.130–136

Già s'inchinava ad abbracciar li piedi
al mio dottor, ma el li disse: "Frate,
non far, ché tu se' ombra, e ombra vedi."
Ed ei surgendo: "Or puoi la quantitate
comprender dell'amor ch'a te mi scalda,
quand'io dismento nostra vanitate,
trattando l'ombre come cosa salda."

This is one of several episodes that showcase the tragic irony of Virgil's presence in *Purgatorio*. While Dante and others make the journey up the mountain to purge themselves of their sins, this is not possible for Virgil who remains damned even after undertaking the same journey. As writer and reader, Virgil is not saved for writing the same words that saved Statius when he misinterpreted them. In contrast with Francesca, Statius is saved by an act of misinterpretation and throws himself at the feet of the poet who wrote those words. He supplicates himself to someone who, in the Dante's hierarchy after the afterlife, is beneath him. Virgil addresses Statius as an equal, as a brother, and beseeches him not to demean himself. Statius then claims it was love that 'solidifies' Virgil for him in his mind. Although Virgil remains a shadow, a shade, Dante places him in this position of an ironic saviour to emphasize that the act of reading, and by extension the act of misreading, can save those who would otherwise be damned. This parallel is extended to writing in the sense that writing the *Commedia* is, ostensibly, enough to save Dante as he completes the *Commedia* as a way to end his exile, writing in *Paradiso* that he hopes that his poetic achievements are enough to bring him back to Florence, but also by writing this journey to Heavenly Paradise which, for Christians, is considered to be their true home. Through the spirit of *disputatio*, it is possible to consider the often conflicting and contrasting ways that Dante writes about interpretation and misinterpretation. It is this tension that Dante grapples with through the *Commedia* and it is made manifest in the parallels between Francesca and Statius. With this dichotomy between interpretation and misinterpretation in place, I will now discuss the overarching problem of translation and mistranslation, particularly in the way that it manifests in the American school of Dantean criticism's emphasis on the literal sense of Dante's allegory.

The American School's Emphasis on the Literal Sense and its Impact on Translation

I will now discuss how English translations can impact the interpretation and misinterpretation of the *Commedia*. One of the definitive aspects of the Anglophone tradition of Dantean scholarship is the pragmatic need for translation. For the English-

speaking school, there is limited interpretation without translation and, therefore, it is necessary to examine the role that translation plays in the interpretation of Dante's allegory. This remains true regardless of whether scholars, whose mother tongue is English, later learn Italian to read the *Commedia*. Singleton and his translation are an example of this. Another defining feature of the Anglophone tradition of Dantean scholarship is its emphasis on the literal sense of Dante's allegory. In conjunction, the pragmatic need for translation and the emphasis on the literal sense of Dante's allegory defines the interpretation of the *Commedia* in the Anglosphere, particularly American criticism in the twentieth century. It has been present since the early beginnings of the American school of Dantean interpretation as it began to formalise in the nineteenth century. For this reason, I will be examining Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who was the first American to translate the *Commedia*. I have chosen to focus more on Longfellow than Singleton in this current chapter because, firstly, Singleton made up the bulk of my survey into twentieth-century Dantean criticism and, secondly, Longfellow is better known as a translator than a critic while Singleton is better known as a critic than a translator.

According to Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds in their book *Dante in English*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow responded to criticism of his translation by stating that "... 'while making it rhythmic, I have endeavoured to make it also as literal as a prose translation'" (Griffiths and Reynolds 203). This shows that Longfellow prioritised the literal reading of the allegory in his translation. It is the emphasis on the literal sense that distinguishes the American school from its European and medieval predecessors. Longfellow's first American translation therefore marks a distinct change from the *Commedia's* origins in medieval Europe. However, difference and distinction are a property of translation. To translate a text is inevitably to change it. This goes beyond merely switching the text from one language to encompass another. It is the translation of the text's accompanying poetics, philosophies, ideologies and other associated world views. Mazzotta argues that translations "...free the poem from the burden and petrification of literalism and make language appear detached from its historical source." (Mazzotta 2000, 326). There exists the sentiment that translating is not merely

the act of 'carrying across' meaning but is, in fact, the act of re-making the *Commedia*. It is rendering the *Commedia* anew.

This idea of rendering the *Commedia* anew through translation is seen in A. Bartlett Giamatti's *Dante in America: The First Two Centuries*:

[The efforts of Americans to render Dante anew] has been a constant theme – beneath the literary, cultural and philosophical commentary – this conversation between our speech and Dante: from Gray to Cary, through Longfellow, to Pound on Binyon, to Eliot, to Fitzgerald on the whole effort and art of translating. American culture has itself been an effort in translation; through its reactions to Dante we can see a culture grappling with a concern crucial to itself, as it was to Dante, the timeless and deeply human problem of fashioning the 'parlar materno' (Giamatti 1983, 7).

This quotation emphasises the deliberate effort of American scholars to distinguish themselves from their English counterparts through not only the emphasis on the literal sense and the general trend towards secularism, but through their inevitable need for translation. Giamatti argues that this effort of translation is not simply a distinguishing feature of Dantean scholarship but a fundamental part of American culture as a whole. Giamatti's phrase 'American culture has itself been an effort in translation' was remarked upon by Guiseppe Mazzotta who stated the following:

Giamatti's phrase echoes the medieval *topos* of culture as a *translatio studii*. The formula describes intellectual history as a process of systematic assimilation of alien voices, as a forging of a national identity by bending other languages into our languages. Eliot and Pound, say, 'translate' Dante into their poetry. Translation, *pace* the French theorists of the absolute self-referentiality of literary language, is a primary mode of encounter between Dante and the American teachers. It is the hallmark of American Dante allegorical scholarship. For through translations, one reads words that both one's own and yet are not one's own (Mazzotta 2000, 326).

*Translatio studii*⁴⁶, along with its twin concept, *translatio imperii*⁴⁷ is a historiographical concept which tracks the translation of knowledge, and the subsequent translation of the empire as it moves from place to place, or from city to city. The manner in which these two concepts are related encapsulates the way that knowledge, and the consolidation of that knowledge in a central location, ultimately facilitates the creation of the Empire. It is in this central location that all knowledge is accumulated. *Translatio studii* tracks a linear progression of knowledge from one time and place to another. In this context, the empire is the seat of power, the dominant culture that maintains its hegemony over others. Supposedly, this would account for the centre of the 'empire' moving from Jerusalem to Athens to Rome. It can be extrapolated into modern times to describe the movement of empire from Paris to London to New York. *Translatio studii* and *translatio imperii* are no longer popular concepts. Nevertheless, it is a concept that echoes coloniality, in which knowledge is considered to be consolidated in one central location, like the metropole or the colonial core, and then supposedly leaves the outer edges of the empire in ignorance and barbarity. Conceived of in this manner, *translation studii* in effective determines which language will be given priority in any effort of translation. It determines which language is the language of empire and, therefore, which languages will be translated, and which language will be considered as the 'voice' of default truth in the hegemony of knowledge.

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said does not make direct use of the concept of *translatio studii* but he does examine the power differentials between the colonial core and its outer edges. He describes the Orient as "...not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (Said 1). He argues that "...European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 2003, 3). This illustrates the manner in which *translatio studii* relies on the translation and consolidation of knowledge and language outside of its own context,

⁴⁶ Translation of learning or studies

⁴⁷ Translation of empire.

beyond the colonial core, in order to manifest itself as the single point. Said's theories are not merely incidentally connected to Dante. Said deliberately mentions Dante in his text and he explicitly aligns Dante, not with the metropole, the colonial centre, but with the idea of Orientalism, and not the Occident. In the foundational assumption that there exists a distinction between the East and the West, he acknowledges that "*This Orientalism can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx*" (Said 2003, 3). Because of the nature of the *Commedia*, and its origins in medieval Italy, it is placed within the same ideological framework as the Other. This is seen most explicitly in the manner in which Dante is translated, the need for it, but also the subsequent translation of the medieval Italian into English. In a preface added to the text in 2003, Said writes about the manner in which Auerbach attempted to navigate this form of trespassing into the text of the Other, in this case Dante:

Positive knowledge of languages and history was necessary, but it was never enough, any more than the mechanical gathering of facts would constitute an adequate method of grasping what an author like Dante, for example, was all about. The main requirement for the kind of philological understanding Auerbach and his predecessors were talking about and tried to practice was one that sympathetically and subjectively entered into the life of a written text as seen in the perspective of its time and its author (*eingefühling*⁴⁸). Rather than alienation and hostility to another time and different culture, philology as applied to *Weltliteratur*⁴⁹ involved a profound humanistic spirit deployed with generosity and, if I may use the word, hospitality. Thus the interpreter's mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign Other. And this creative making of a place for works that are otherwise alien and distant is most important facet of the interpreter's philological mission (Said xix)

It is debatable, considering Auerbach's own application of modern, realist and secular theoretical models to the *Commedia* as well as the subsequent rise of Nazi Germany that disrupted these intentions, how successful this effort to avoid trespassing into an

⁴⁸ Translation from German: Empathy

⁴⁹ Translation from German: World Literature

'alien and distant' text was. Said admits as much when he states that "Reflection, debate, rational argument, moral principle based on a secular notion that human beings must create their own history, have been replaced by abstract ideas that celebrate American or Western exceptionalism, denigrate the relevance of context, and regard other cultures with derisive contempt" (Said xix). It therefore remains the case that, when *translatio studii* is viewed from this outside perspective, the 'process of systematic assimilation of alien voices' becomes a description for the violence of colonialism. It is from this perspective that one can account for the transgression of translation. Mazzotta states that "Translations are allegories of the poem" (Mazzotta 2000, 326) but this neglects the problems that arise at the level of language, of grammar and linguistics when conforming one language into the shape of another. It becomes a convenient phrase to circumvent the impossibilities of translating the *Commedia* on the most basic level of language. This is in connection with the idea that Dante, in writing in the vernacular in the particular way that he did, undermined his native Florentine in his pursuit of a unified Italian vernacular. It is now necessary to examine the problems that may arise when interpreting the allegory of *the Commedia* through the lens of translation which is understood as an act of transgression and trespassing against the original language.

The first, and most basic, of the difficulties regarding translation tend to arise at the level of language wherein "Problems such as what to do with different systems of grammatical gendering, how to negotiate the exigencies of rhyme or other formality, whether to explicate semantic knots, face any alert translator of any complex writing" (Griffiths and Reynolds 24). There has been a tendency in English translations of the poem to convert the historicity of the original medieval Italian into an apparent English equivalent. The result is that some translations of the *Commedia* translate the original medieval Italian into an imitation of medieval English. It is a type of English that is not necessarily truly associated with a real period of history, but nevertheless has the appearance of belonging to another, older era. Although he was a Renaissance writer, the type of English that it used to translate the *Commedia* is noticeably influenced by William Shakespeare. It is therefore a type of English that is associated with an elevated type of writing, mimicking the historicity of Shakespeare rather than of Dante

or merely translating it into a modern equivalent. This was particularly true of 19th century American translators. For instance, the following is a translation from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

And I began: "Poet, who guidest me,
Regard my manhood, if it be sufficient.
Ere to the arduous pass thou dost confide me.

Inf 2. 10–12 (DigitalDante)

Io cominciai: <Poeta che mi guidi,
Guarda la mia virtù s'ell è possente,
prima ch'a l'alto pass tu fidi.

Inf 2.10–12

Longfellow's use of 'guidest', 'ere' 'thou' and 'dost' show the tendency of 19th century translators to attribute "...to the poem itself qualities which they lent it because of the angle from which they saw and heard it" (Griffiths and Reynolds 22). A reason for this may be that the translators are "...confusing their own historicity with that of the work, as if only the *Commedia* and not only they themselves too were dated" (Griffiths and Reynolds 22). This manner of translating the *Commedia* not into modern English but instead into an imitation of medieval English invokes Noakes's ideas concerning exegesis, in which the historicity of the text is simultaneously emphasized and avoided:

An exegete is concerned with the text's historical character and position but not with her or his own. Thus, an exegete, although perhaps labelled a 'historicist,' will in fact try to evade history in the most fundamental way. At moments when the exegete realizes that the total historical reconstruction of a text is impossible, she or he becomes an interpreter (Noakes 12).

This shows the way that, when the exegete reaches the limit of their attempt to preserve the text's original historical context, they are forced to interpret the text

instead. In effect, what translators like Longfellow have achieved is a re-interpretation of the text as if it had been written by Shakespeare in Renaissance England. This use and imitation of 'medieval sounding' words, heavily influenced by Shakespearean verse, imbued their translations with a level of archaizing that did not exist in Dante's original clear-cut lines. In this way, English translation can be criticised because "As far as discretion is concerned, Dante has not always been well served by his English translators, because the greed for sensuous concretion, which is a marked feature of English verse, at least since the time of Shakespeare, has often led them to plump and flesh out what [Dante] so delicately etched" (Griffiths and Reynolds 57). Dante 'delicately etched' out his words in the vernacular and the use of medieval sounding English, that invokes a particular period in English literary history, does not imitate these lines. According to the author of the *Dialogo*, there are phrases in the *Commedia* that border on obscene and, according to Auerbach, there are instances on the level of style and language where the ordinary is elevated to the divine and thereby generates the sublime. Through this use of unnecessary archaizing, these translators emphasize Dante's historicity over his use of the vernacular. They are not translating the Italian vernacular into an equivalent of English vernacular. They are translating the idea of a language as it was spoken in the past.

This is a common bias that occurs when looking back at something through the long lens of history. However, I would add that the use of this kind of archaic English also plays out the same kind of dynamic that exists in the idea that the vernacular is unsuitable to convey complex philosophical ideas that should rather be conveyed in the purity of the Latin language. It can be argued that when translators use this heightened and historical form of English, they are ultimately aligning themselves with this view. This proxy Shakespearean English is the kind of English that is reserved for poetry or philosophical thought and consequently the kind of ideas that Dante imparts in the *Commedia*. The kind of English associated with Shakespeare is 'High' English which is reserved for high art and complex philosophical ideals. For this reason, it would appear to be 'inappropriate' for them to translate Dante's poetry into a lower, more colloquial form of English. On the level of colloquialism and vernacular, translation is essentially impossible. After all, this is what it means to speak your mother tongue – *parlar*

materno – which is the language that one is born listening to. No such equivalent truly exists. Understanding might be achievable, but true equivalence is impossible.

Therefore, Dante's use of the vernacular is translated not into English's equivalent but into a high-brow, archaic form of language that mimics Shakespeare's poetry, because there is no true equivalent to Dante's use of the vernacular. On the level of language, it is the case that "One can say that translations are inevitably hazardous ventures" because "They dramatize the lack of an exact correspondence between Italian and English" (Mazzotta 2000, 326). There is no easy equivalent between English and Italian, or between any other combination of languages. It is an unavoidable fact of translation that languages simply do not fit into one another perfectly. In this way, translation will always be an act of transgression as well as way in which one language trespasses against another. The decision of which language will capitulate to the other depends largely on the concept of *translatio studii* and therefore on which language is perceived to be the language of high art and, correspondingly, the language of empire.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Translation of 'Virtù'

Beyond the incompatibility of grammar and the errors of historicizing, another danger of translation is that differing socio-political and historical contexts will influence the interpretation of meaning. It was shown in the previous chapter how Singleton's dominance over the American school of Dantean criticism ultimately originates from his consolidation of a uniquely American voice by tapping into the national myths of the Puritan pilgrim. He emphasises the role of Dante as a pilgrim, thereby showcasing a particular understanding of allegory that is rooted in his modern, twentieth-century American context. Arguably, Singleton offers a Protestant reading of Dante's Catholic poem. This can be acknowledged in the way that Singleton has "...a typically Protestant understanding of the literal sense of Scripture, and an apparent awareness of the crucial distinction in medieval Biblical hermeneutics between direct and indirect signification (Corbett 24–25). Singleton emphasises the truth of the literal sense over that of the allegorical sense. Protestantism has a history of iconoclasm, originating in the Reformation period, and Singleton's theory of the allegory of theologians arguably extends this by stripping, for example, Beatrice of her allegorical meaning and instead

emphasising her historicity. In other words, Singleton removes Beatrice's role as a religious image in favour of her existence as a woman in history. He argues that any allegorical iconography distracts from the truth of the literal sense, in the same way that Protestants argue that religious iconography distracts from the truth of Holy Scripture. In this same way, Longfellow's translation of Dante has been filtered through his own socio-political context which was nineteenth century New England. W.P. Friederich questions why the largely Protestant population of Boston in the nineteenth century were so interested in Dante and concludes that "It must have been because, across the barriers of language, time, space, and religion, these Bostonians saw in Dante a portion of themselves: the disciplined Puritan, the austere scholar, the very incarnation of Christian civilisation" (Friederich 54). Therefore, despite their differing contexts, nineteenth century Bostonians, such as Longfellow, saw themselves reflected in Dante. Despite their differing denominations of Christianity, they considered Dante to share their values and philosophies regarding the incarnation of civilisation. K.P. van Anglen writes that the New England elite "...begged to differ with those who optimistically viewed the ancient historical concept of the translation of empire and the arts *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii*) as predicting a long and glorious future for the United States, one in which 'the rising glory of America' would soon culminate in what Thomas Jefferson called 'an empire for liberty'" (van Anglen 182). Longfellow therefore lived in a context which was unoptimistic about the translation of empire in post-revolutionary America, and this would have certainly affected the way in which he translated Dante. Dante represented several things for Longfellow and his fellow New England elites including the loss of empire, because it could be argued that the concepts of *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii* describe not only the way that empires rise but also the way in which they fall. It was the case that "...Longfellow's local predecessors took an almost apocalyptic view of the young republic's prospects, arguing that democracy, ignorance, and egalitarianism threatened to undermine the virtue necessary for greatness in politics and the arts, thereby short-circuiting the cycle of *translatio* and plunging the United States back into its earlier primitive state before it had a chance to reach its high destiny" (van Anglen 182). Longfellow belonged to a cultural order that felt increasingly isolated and disagreed with the direction that post-

revolutionary America was taking. Therefore, Dante also represented "... how a member of a literary elite like their own could promote the proper values and influence a culture for a good while resisting the forces that would all too soon result in national decline" (van Anglen 182). However, there is still a way in which Dante functions as an Other for the nineteenth century Bostonian readers. This is because Dante also represented "... the paradox of repulsion and fascination that upper-class New Englanders felt toward Catholicism, both culturally and theologically – something that was at least in part a manifestation of the New England elite's feelings of marginalization" (van Anglen 182–183).

While this is the context in which Longfellow translated the *Commedia*, it does not necessarily disclose his views as an individual. It is the case that "... Longfellow breaks with his predecessors in significant ways" (van Anglen 184). Longfellow admired Dante as an individual and held a reverence for Dante that manifested in his own poetry. While others in his socio-political context used Dante as a figure in the success or failure of the American pursuit of *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii*, Longfellow instead "...invokes no politically loaded historical concept like the translation of empire" (van Anglen 184). While Longfellow did, at times, align himself with the more conventional idea of Dante in his socio-political and cultural context, his overall divergence might have been because "...he was a practicing poet and translator, which none of the Unitarian Dantists [were]" (van Anglen 186). Longfellow therefore did not read Dante as only a representative of a time and place or ideological anxieties in post-revolutionary New England, but rather as a way to connect America to European influence. It could be argued that Longfellow's translation exemplifies the kind of tension which exists between America and its colonial predecessor but rather than aiming to distinguish the two, he aimed to align them. This is because Longfellow's "...reception of the poet was part of his attempt, throughout his career, to open America to the influence of European culture and literature [...]" (van Anglen 186). This can be further described as Longfellow's "... self-appointed task of serving as a mediator between European and American culture..." (Friederich 53). It is in this way that Longfellow's context and Longfellow's opinions as an individual affected the way

he chose to translate the *Commedia* to showcase European influences on post-revolutionary America.

An example of Longfellow's context affecting the way he translated the *Commedia* occurs in *Inferno II* which was quoted above to showcase the way Longfellow used 'medieval sounding words' in his translation. I will now be examining the single line "Guarda la mia virtù s'ell è possente" (Inf 2.11) which Longfellow translates as "Regard my manhood, if it be sufficient" (Digital Dante). In *Inferno II*, Dante expresses his doubts about undertaking such a journey and Virgil tells him how Beatrice descended from Paradise into Limbo to enlist Virgil's help in guiding Dante through Hell and Purgatory. This canto arguably contains as much, if not more, exposition as *Inferno I*. It is an intimately emotional canto wherein Dante expresses his fears that he might not be worthy of the task that has been bestowed upon him. This is especially when he compares himself to other figures, both mythological and biblical, who went to the afterlife while they were themselves still living. By translating the tercet wherein Dante first begins to express these fears with the phrase 'Regard my manhood', Longfellow has taken the self-doubt Dante feels and irretrievably linked it to his masculinity. It is now not the case that Dante doubts himself, instead he doubts his manhood. This translation can therefore be interpreted as one man (Dante) asking another man (Virgil) to validate his manhood by comparing himself unfavourably to two other men (Paul and Aeneas). When Virgil responds, Longfellow has him accuse Dante of cowardice. While this line on its own may not be as significant, when it is paired with Dante's request for Longfellow to 'Regard his manhood', Virgil accusing Dante of cowardice becomes emasculating. This has an ongoing influence in the allegorical meaning of the poem. The reference to manhood in conjunction with the function of the canto as exposition as to how and why Dante was tasked with this journey arguably changes the reasons for undertaking it. Rather than to absolve himself after he has lost the straight path, it becomes a quest to prove his manhood which Virgil had regarded and deemed insufficient by calling him a coward.

Longfellow's use of gendered language is not consistent, if one were to consider the original medieval Italian, as well as compare it to other translations. While it is true

that the Italian language and its grammar is inherently gendered in a way that English is not, Longfellow's use of 'manhood' appears to be unnecessarily phallic. This line, in the original Italian, reads as 'Guarda la mia virtù s'ell è possente' and the exact word under investigation here is 'virtù'. If one were to consult a modern Italian-English dictionary⁵⁰, the word 'virtù' is a feminine noun meaning, in the ethical-moral sense, 'virtue', and in extension refers to 'a good moral quality' or a 'goodness of character'. The word 'virtue' is gendered in the English language in the sense that 'goodness of character' for women is linked to chastity and sexual purity while for men it would be linked more to their ability to act morally. Additionally, it is notable that 'vir' comes from the Proto-Indo-European root of 'wir' meaning 'man'. Although this form of the word has gone out of favour, it is still present in 'werewolf' which then reads as 'man-wolf'. Virtue for men is therefore active in the sense that they are deemed virtuous when they act with virtue while for women, virtue would be passive, as in they would be considered virtuous if they do not engage in certain – particularly sexual – acts. In this way, feminine virtue is inherent, something they are born with and then lose, while masculine virtue must be proven, something they are born without and must gain. However, this meaning of virtue as chastity and purity occurs, mainly in English, from the 1590s which is almost three centuries after Dante died. Additionally, virtue in the active, masculine sense of moral action also seems incongruent with the subject of this canto. This canto occurs early in the *Commedia's* narrative before Dante has even seen the Gates of Hell. Dante, as he exists at this stage in the text, has not yet done enough for evaluation of his virtuous actions. It is therefore not obvious that Dante is using *virtù* in this particularly gendered sense. This is the case in the English language with the word 'virtue'. It is necessary to consider the original Italian.

Virtù comes from the Latin *virtutem* (nominative *virtus*) which means 'moral strength, high character, goodness; manliness; valour, bravery, courage (in war); excellence, worth' (Harper). This shows that there is an aspect of *virtù* that is associated with masculinity. Additionally, many of the qualities associated with *virtù* are likewise

⁵⁰ The online Cambridge dictionary.

associated with masculinity and the meaning is the same for Dante's Italian. This can be seen in the following:

The classical republics prized manliness as their cardinal virtue. In fact, ancient writers often suggested that manliness was the best or even the whole of 'virtue' – as in the Roman term *virtus*, 'virtue,' derived from the Latin word *vir*, 'man' as opposed to 'woman' (Balot 136).

This might explain why Longfellow translated *virtù* in the manner that he did. The word *virtù* does have masculine connotations when taken in isolation, especially considering its proto-Indo-European roots. It is notable that Longfellow "... began translating single lines and short passages in 1838 and '39, he apparently did so spontaneously, in accordance with his taste, and under the stimulation of his teaching; and presumably he continued this practice of translating lines and passages for several years" (Griffiths and Matthews 23). It is therefore likely that Longfellow did, in fact, consider the word *virtù* in isolation. This shows that Longfellow did not translate the *Commedia* with the entirety of it in mind but rather focused in on individual lines and not necessarily in chronological order. Longfellow's practice of translating isolated lines of the text factors into his interpretation of the *Commedia* as a whole. This is because the shifts in allegory and the play of meaning might be lost in the process of translating isolated pieces of text. Because an aspect of *virtù* is connected to manliness, the word in isolation may have been accurately translated as 'manhood' but becomes increasingly incongruent, especially once one considers the role that Beatrice plays in this canto in justifying Dante's journey and then further on in *Paradiso* as his guide for the majority of that canticle.

It is notable that Longfellow would have likely believed the contemporary gender ideology known as 'domesticity' which "... accepted the notion that men and women had separate but complementary spheres of activity..." (van Anglen 183). It is notable that Longfellow, along with Singleton, conducted what could be considered Protestant reading of the *Commedia* and that this influenced their interpretation of it and, subsequently, Beatrice's role in the text. Longfellow's gender ideology of domesticity is a consequent of his Protestant identity. This can be acknowledged from the following:

The Reformation impacted women significantly. As convents were closed, opportunities available to women narrowed to being a wife and being a mother. Nuns were returned to their families or made to marry, and education opportunities were increasingly restricted throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The relegation of women to the role of the second sex was firmly embedded in Protestant communities, with Martin Luther stating ‘the wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household as one who has been deprived of the ability of administrating those affairs that are outside and concern the state’, while John Calvin agreed that ‘the women’s place is in the home’ (Ramirez 13).

Protestantism considered the role of women to be strictly in the home and a reading of Beatrice in this manner therefore regulates her solely to the realm of heaven. However, Dante’s Catholicism would have made a space for Beatrice beyond the home, particularly in the case of nunneries which was a space in which women could exist beyond marriage and the home. Arguably, Dante’s Catholic poem would have regulated this space to Beatrice, as she in many ways exemplifies and embodies Christian virtue. Longfellow, following a more Protestant reading of the *Commedia*, might have interpreted *Inferno II* and Beatrice’s role in it as the two genders acting out their respective spheres of activity – with the women sequestered safely above in heaven while the men act below. This would align with the ideas of Machiavelli – along with other established male western philosophers such as Aristotle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who have been accused of “...supposing that men have natural and indefeasible privileges and that women’s destinies lie in fulfilling men’s purposes” (Balot 139). Therefore, in line with these western philosophies, Beatrice, by justifying and facilitating Dante’s spiritual journey, is merely acting out her assigned destiny of fulfilling men’s purposes. While this may be the case for Beatrice’s role in *Inferno II*, it does not extend to the entirety of *Commedia*. This reading would discount her actions in the Earthly Paradise in *Purgatorio* and her role as guide in *Paradiso*. Beatrice descends into Hell, which cannot harm her in her state of blessedness, and into the Garden of Earthly Paradise to translate Dante into Heaven. While a component of the original Latin does mean ‘manliness’, Longfellow’s

translation of 'manhood' is nevertheless reductionist and bypasses much of the nuances inherent in the original word in favour of an overtly patriarchal reading. Additionally, it prioritises a Protestant reading of the dynamics of gender over that of its original Catholic origins.

Another dimension to this putative mistranslation from Longfellow is that the term *virtù* is "...one of the most discussed questions of Machiavelli's thought..." (Gilbert 53). Niccolò Machiavelli "...held senior office in the Florentine government for twelve of the tumultuous republican years between 1494 when Piero de' Medici was overthrown and Savonarola was ascendent, and 1512 when Medici rule returned" (Grayling 188). It can be observed just by these dates that, although Machiavelli and Dante share some parallels in terms of political power and city of residence, Machiavelli was born almost one hundred and fifty years after Dante's death. I am therefore not positing that Machiavelli had influence upon Dante nor am I stating that Dante had influence on Machiavelli, insofar as it has been previously stated that Machiavelli potentially criticised Dante for his placing the vernacular above the Florentine dialect. It is, however, possible that Machiavelli's word and use of *virtù* had influence upon the way that Longfellow translated *virtù*. This is because of the following reason:

When scholars became aware of the central importance of this term in Machiavelli's thought, they also realized that *virtù* was a most elusive term to which it was difficult to assign a precise and definite meaning; the term seemed to contain a great variety of meanings (Gilbert 53).

It can therefore be acknowledged that the term *virtù* is a complicated one with a multitude of meanings. It has posed significant challenges for scholars studying Machiavelli and has therefore posed similar challenges for the translation of Dante. It is Machiavelli's use of the word which imbues it with its strongest strain of patriarchal meaning. It is the case that "Susan Moller Okin, Hanna Pitkin, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Wendy Brown, and others have all concluded that Machiavelli believes women undermine the *virtù* of men and are, therefore, antithetical to political living" (Clarke 230). However, in *Inferno II*, it is three women, Beatrice, the Virgin Mary and St. Lucy, who play a significant role in justifying Dante's journey and strengthen his resolve to

descend into Hell. Longfellow's translation of *virtù* could therefore encourage an interpretation of *Inferno II* which emphasises Virgil's role over Beatrice's, an interpretation that could have been influenced by Machiavelli's particular use of the word. When one reads Dante, one is looking back into the past and will encounter this kind of historical layering of concepts which obscures what might have originally been intended which furthers the debate of whether or not one is required to take into account Dante's original intention. For instance, it has also been noted that "...the term *virtù* has a strictly scientific function in Leonardo da Vinci's notes on dynamics where it designates the motive power in a physical sense and that a very similar meaning of the term can be found in Machiavelli" (Gilbert 53–54). This allows for a reading of *virtù* that is separate from issues associated with gender, whether they are social, political, or simply at the level of grammar. This reading could encompass the following:

In the Italian Renaissance, one use of the term *virtù* occurred in medicine.

There *virtù* signified the force which gave vitality to a living being, and on whose presence life and strength of the whole organism depended (Gilbert 54).

It is interpretatively plausible to consider that Dante used the term *virtù* in this medical sense rather than in a gendered sense. Dante is asking Virgil if he is worthy of such a journey and if he is strong and healthy enough for such a strenuous undertaking.

However, it must be noted that this meaning of the word *virtù* also originates in the Renaissance period, after Dante's death. Leonardo Da Vinci lived approximately fifty years after Dante's death and, therefore, this meaning of the word *virtù* is likewise an example of looking at Dante's use of language through the obscuring layers of time. Nevertheless, this way of using the word *virtù* is still congruent with various other translations of the *Commedia*. One way to discern the meaning of the word in the way that Dante used it would be to look at the other times within the *Commedia* that Dante used the word *virtù*.

Longfellow's emphasis on the masculine when translating the word *virtù* is not consistent throughout other translations nor is it consistent within his own translation. The second time Dante uses the word *virtù* is within that very same canto of *Inferno II*. In the original, medieval Italian, it reads:

'O donna di virtù, sola per cui
l'umana spezie eccede ogni contento
di quell'ciel c'ha minor li cerchi sui,
Inf 2.76–78

Longfellow translates it in the following manner:

'O Lady of virtue, thou alone through whom
The human race exceedeth all contained
Within the heaven that has the lesser circles,
Inf 2.76–78 (Digital Dante)

It is notable that, in this case, Longfellow translates *virtù* simply as 'virtue' and not as manhood when it is still the same word. In this case of *virtù*, it is applied directly, without much ambiguity, to Beatrice. By stating 'donna di virtù', Dante has shown the way that Beatrice embodies virtue, the trait that Dante questioned in himself at the onset of the canto. If one interpreted this through the lens of an absolute personification allegory, then it would be *virtù* that Beatrice would personify. In the abstracted realm of allegory, *virtù* is therefore the concept which she is made of. In the footnotes of his translation, Anthony Esolen writes that the use of the word *virtù* in this line refers to "...probably the particular virtue, or power, symbolized by Beatrice, that of theology: reflection upon what God has revealed" (Esolen 421). It can therefore be interpreted that Beatrice embodies and personifies that which Dante feels that he lacks when he asks Virgil to "Guarda la mia virtù s'ell è possente" (Inf 2.11). Therefore, by translating *virtù* as manhood, Longfellow has over-emphasised an aspect of the word pertaining to masculinity, which is embedded in the literal understanding of the word, at the expense of the figurative meaning of Beatrice. For this reason, Longfellow's and by extension the American school's emphasis on the literal sense, has influenced the translation of the *Commedia* into English.

It is now necessary to examine other translations of *virtù* to evaluate the ways that literal or figurative interpretations have influenced the method of meaning inherent in the word. Nichols, as the default translator for this current inquiry, translates it in the following manner:

I started: "Poet, you who are my guide,

Consider if I have the strength and skill,

Before you set me on this rugged road.

(Nichols 2014, 17).

As previously stated, Nichols does not attempt to maintain the *terza rima* nor does he use overly historized words. He does not present a masculine rendering of the word *virtù* but instead splits the word into two – 'strength' and 'skill' – which encompasses the several of the potential meanings of the word that have been discussed. The theories of Charles Singleton were a focus in my last chapter and therefore I will consider his translation. He translates the tercet as follows:

I began, "Poet, you who guide me, consider if my strength is sufficient, before you trust me to the deep way" (Singleton 1971, 13).

It is notable that Singleton does not attempt to maintain either the rhyme scheme of the *terza rima* or any semblance of the *Commedia* being poetry. Instead, he renders his translation as though the *Commedia* were written as prose. In other words, he writes horizontally, not vertically. Arguably, this was done because, regardless of the kind of wordsmithing available, the *terza rima* simply does not work in English⁵¹ and it is therefore incapable of maintaining Dante's poetry. Singleton's translation therefore aims to maintain the space for meaning, as it fits the language of the poetry into a new shape. However, it must be noted that, in order to preserve meaning, Singleton sacrificed what is arguably a core fundamental of the text – the fact that it is a poem. This is Singleton's Protestant practice of iconoclasm taken even further.

⁵¹ There are some instances of the *terza rima* being rendered successfully in English, notably Percy Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*.

The manner in which Singleton translates the *Commedia* as prose is not the default. It is comparatively rare as it is the case that none of the other translations, I will be examining in this exploration of the word *virtù* break away from the poetic structure of the text in a similar way. Some of them, including Dorothy Sayers and Ciaran Carson, attempt to maintain the *terza rima*. Out of the eight translations under consideration, at least two exhibit “...the complex ways in which people’s beliefs about the past have refracted their image of the poem” (Griffiths and Reynolds 21). Both Dorothy Sayers and Ciaran Carson make use of ‘backdating’ and thus exhibit “... a tendency which corresponds to a sense of the poem as a curio from a more or less superseded world” (Griffiths and Reynolds 21). Dorothy Sayers translated the passage in the following manner:

I soon began: “Poet – dear guide – ‘twere wise
Surely, to test my powers and weight their worth
Ere trusting me to this great enterprise (Sayers 1949, 78)

It is notable that although Sayers, like Longfellow, uses the same kind of ‘backdating’ that reveals a certain idea projected onto the past, Sayers wrote this translation in the twentieth century as compared to Longfellow’s translation which was written in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it could be argued that this kind of backdating is a continuing problem because Carson exhibits it when he writes in 2002. Ciaran Carson translated the passage in the following manner:

I then began: ‘O poet guiding me
Before you trust me to this epic task,
Consider if I’m fit to go with thee.’ (Carson 10)

Sayers’ use of “twere’ and ‘ere’ as well as Carson’s use of ‘O’ and ‘thee’ create a “...furry-tongued mouthful” (Griffiths and Reynolds 20) that exemplifies the kind of ‘backdating’ that is common in English translations. Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds present a potential explanation of this when they write:

As the *Commedia* is a work intent on trying to understand its own past, it's fitting that it has in turn become part of that same process for its later readers, but such a fit is not always neat, let alone comfortable; we fight over our pasts as well as coo over them and Dante's poem has often been caught in our cross-fire (Griffiths and Reynolds 21).

For this reason, it is necessary to consider not only the past's influence upon Dante but also our past's (and Dante's future) influence upon the translation of the *Commedia*. Both translators choose to translate the line 'Guarda la mia virtù s'ell è possente' in different but not ultimately contradictory ways. Sayers translates it as 'test my powers' which aligns with the idea of *virtù* connecting to one's ability to perform virtuous actions. Carson translates it as 'fit' which aligns more with the Renaissance medical use of the word *virtù*. Essentially, the manner in which Sayers translates *virtù* makes it mean that Dante is asking if he is morally good and actionable enough to undertake the journey, while the manner in which Carson translates *virtù* connects to if Dante is physically strong and able to undertake the journey. Many translators use 'strength' to translate *virtù*. These include Robin Kirkpatrick, Anthony Esolen, J.G. Nichols and Allen Mandelbaum. Robin Kirkpatrick translates it in the following manner:

'You,' I began, 'my poet and my guide,
Look at me hard. Am I in spirit strong enough
For you to trust me on this arduous road' (Kirkpatrick 7)

For Kirkpatrick, this strength is logically linked to Dante's spirit. This does consolidate several of the potential meanings of the term *virtù*. By not only referring to strength in the bodily sense but also in the spiritual sense, Kirkpatrick is able to encompass both the physical and spiritual senses of the word *virtù*. This is in contrast with Carson's translation of *virtù* as 'fit' which only encompasses the meaning of the word in its medical and physical sense. Kirkpatrick's translation is similar to Allen Mandelbaum's in this respect. Allen Mandelbaum translated it in the following manner:

I started: 'Poet, you who are my guide,
See if the force in me is strong enough

Before you let me face that rugged pass.’ (DigitalDante)

However, Mandelbaum’s concrete use of the word ‘force’ rather than ‘spirit’ renders the line more physical than spiritual. Ostensibly, Dante is not only asking if he is strong enough in the physical sense but also in the spiritual sense to make such a journey. This is a dichotomy that Anthony Esolen also fails to balance in his translation:

‘Poet,’ I started, ‘you who guide my steps,

See to my strength, make sure it will suffice,

Before you trust me to so hard a road.’ (Esolen 13)

In John Ciardi’s translation, the appeal to both the spiritual and physical sense of the word *virtù* is encapsulated. Ciardi translates it in the following manner:

Thus I began: ‘Poet, you must guide me,

Before you trust me to that arduous passage,

Look at me and look through me – can I be worthy?’ (Ciardi 35)

The use of the English word ‘worth’ rather than ‘strength’, ‘power’ or ‘fitness’ invokes a sense of adventure that can then be further applied to the landscape in which Dante finds himself in *Inferno II*. The word ‘worth’ echoes the Arthurian legends wherein the once and future king can pull the sword of Excalibur from stone, if he is worthy. This is not an aspect of the original Italian, but it is a layer of meaning that will exist in an English translation that can account for figurative meaning that is imbued in the text in both the physical and metaphysical landscape of *Inferno II* by invoking a textualist landscape that exists in Britain, if not in the original Italian.

In summation, the manner in which Longfellow’s translation of *virtù* as ‘manhood’ is not consistent with other translations of the text. In general, most other translations tend to look at the word *virtù* without invoking gender, focusing on Dante’s spirit, strength, and fitness as disconnected from his masculinity. While these translations are by no means uniform, and each displays the nature of translation itself, this comparison reveals that Longfellow’s singular approach to isolated lines of the

Commedia is a product of his own socio-political context wherein he emphasises the literal sense of the word. The way in which he reads the poem, and thereby translates it, is influenced by his Protestant beliefs regarding gender and the place that women hold in the home and in society. Additionally, it is possible to see how the way in which Dante is translated is inevitably connected to the way in which it is read when the text is encountered in the Anglosphere. From Longfellow to Singleton to the numerous other translations examined in this enquiry, there have been sacrifices made when it comes to the translation of the *Commedia* and, because the text is at times considered to be aligned with the concept of the Other, what is often sacrificed is either the poetry or the language of the *Commedia*. This is seen in Longfellow when he sacrifices the allegorical role of Beatrice as the embodiment and personification of Christian virtue to instead manifest his own ideas regarding gender within the text which is, as was seen in the comparisons with other translations, not the norm.

In summation, when reading the *Commedia*, it is important to note that one is reading an act of translation and that this therefore carries with it all the positive and negative connotations associated with that act. Dante is writing in the vernacular, and the *Commedia* is therefore an act of translation of the various Italian dialects. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow suggested that Dante has unified a language in his poetic text that only exists in separate parts in reality. It is this act of synthesis amounts to translation. There are several responses to Dante's use of the vernacular that are, at times, contradictory. While Boccaccio stated that Dante's text attained sublimity *despite* his use of the vernacular, Auerbach argued that Dante's text is sublime *because* of his use of the vernacular. Machiavelli (potentially) views Dante's use of language as an outright transgression and likens it to an act of revenge – a *vendetta* – against the city that exiled him. Dante's approach to poetry and philosophy has also pointed towards universalism which is likewise embedded in the encyclopaedic nature of the text. However, Dante's attempt to create a universal encyclopaedic body of knowledge and consolidation of various Italian dialects was viewed by some subsequent writers, most notable the author of the *dialogo*, to undermine his native Florentine. This chapter examined the contrary statements made by Dante about the city Florence and acknowledged that the text can be interpreted as simultaneously in favour and against

it. Therefore, accusations that state that Dante betrayed Florence must contend with the fact that Dante also wrote of his love for Florence and his desire to return home.

Dante's contradictory relationship with Florence is just one example of how it is possible to misinterpret or mistranslate the *Commedia* if a reader were only to take into account an isolated element of his allegory. There are several cantos in the *Commedia* in which Dante warns of the dangers of misinterpretation and mistranslation. This is notably done in *Inferno V*, with Francesca who blames the act of reading for her damnation. However, Dante continues to create space for the potential of misinterpretation with Statius, who is saved by an act of misinterpretation. Both characters ascribe the act of misinterpretation to their damnation or salvation. While it is the act of reading that leads Francesca to sin, it is the act of misreading Virgil's pastoral poetry that leads to Statius' salvation in Purgatory while the actual author of those words remains consigned to Limbo. It is therefore the case that, while Dante warns against the dangers of misinterpretation, he still sees potential for salvation in that same act. Through the spirit of *disputatio*, it is possible to consider how both interpretation and misinterpretation is all part of the act of reading and that one can not necessarily be removed from the other. This is extended to the act of translation. The Anglophone school's need for translation is a function that is necessary for the interpretation of the poem in English. Without translation, there is no interpretation. Arguably, when there is a need for translation, there is a greater potential for mistranslation and, consequently, for misinterpretation. Translation is the defining feature of the Anglophone school of Dantean interpretation. This amounts to more than merely rendering the Italian into English. It is also a characteristic of interpretation in the Anglophone school. American scholarship attempts to use translation to render the *Commedia* anew and, in so doing, create novel ways of reading the poem. Without translation, there is no interpretation but, without interpretation, there is no translation. This results in diverse responses from Dante's readership, as they attempt to reconcile this dichotomy that resembles the dichotomies set forth by Noakes and Carruthers in the first chapter. Using the spirit of *disputatio*, it is possible to consider interpretation and misinterpretation, as well as translation and mistranslation, as all inevitable parts of the act of reading. This is something Dante reveals in the text when

he presents characters who are also readers, and he encourages a sustained, continuous readerly relationship with the text. This is because Francesca is only damned when she stops reading, while Statius is in continuous movement in *Purgatorio*, and beyond.

CHAPTER 6: THE SIN OF MISINTERPRETATION

"...Where is my son? Why is he not at hand?"

I answered him: "My strength is not my own:

He who is waiting there, perhaps will guide me

To one for whom your Guido felt disdain."

What he said, and the way he was tormented,

Immediately informed who this was;

And that was why my answer was so pointed.

He started up, and cried: "What? Did you say

He 'felt disdain'? Is he not still alive?

Does he no longer see the light of day?"

When he perceived there was a pause before

I found the words in answer to his question,

He fell back, and he failed to reappear.

Inf 10.60–72

"...mio figlio ov'è? E perché non è teco?"

E io a lui: "Da me stesso non vegno:

colui ch'attende là, per qui mi mena

forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno."

Le sue parole e 'l modo della pena

m'avean di costui già letto il nome,

però fu la risposta così piena.

Di subito drizzato gridò: "Come

dicesti? Elli ebbe? Non viv'elli ancora?

Non fiere li occhi suoi il dolce lume?"

Quando s'accorse d'alcuna dimora

*ch'io facea dinanzi alla riposte,
supin ricadde e più non parve fora.*
Inf 10.60–72

The opening quote of this chapter originates from *Inferno X*. It is an exchange between Dante and the father of his former friend and colleague, Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti. It occurs just after Dante passes through the Gates of Dis and enters Lower Hell in *Inferno IX*. It is notable that this exchange occurs in the canto following the one with Dante's most repeated numerological element, the number nine, and that it is thus the first canto after a narrative break in the poem. After this point, Dante's narrative structure changes from moving through the circles one canto at a time and instead spends multiple cantos in multiple circles of Hell. Additionally, *Inferno X* extends and repeats many points that Dante has previously made about the nature of misinterpretation and the role that it plays in the construction of his allegory. In both *Inferno V* and *Inferno X*, Dante is confronted with the uncomfortable truth that, despite his best intentions or his apparent skill as a poet, there remains the possibility that people such as Francesca or Cavalcante might misinterpret him. While Francesca's act of misinterpretation is only obliquely connected to him, because he wrote the same kind of poetry that she blames for her damnation, it is the case that Cavalcante is much closer to him, as the father of his friend, and his misinterpretation plays out in real time within the narrative. In the sixth circle, it is the sin of heresy that is punished. These heretics, who believed that the soul perished with the body, are entombed in coffins that are set ablaze. Cavalcante rises from his grave to ask Dante about his son's fate. He then misinterprets Dante's words, overreacts, and falls back into his coffin, now additionally entombed by his misinterpretation. This canto is deeply personal, addressing who Dante is as an individual with references to his friendship with and the exile of Guido Cavalcanti. It is also a canto in which language fails at several crucial moments which allows space for both the characters within the narrative and the reader of the narrative to misinterpret events.

This enquiry has focused on the role that misinterpretation plays in the construction of Dante's allegory and the way in which readers engage with the text. It is therefore necessary to conclude with how Dante represents the heretics. This is because heresy is the sin of misinterpretation. I will examine the manner in which *Inferno X*, the canto featuring the heretics, prefigures the role that misinterpretation plays in Dante's allegory by arguing that Dante 'tricks' the reader into committing this act of misinterpretation in the course of reading the canto. First, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the chapters and the trajectory that my argument has taken.

Throughout this enquiry, I have highlighted a series of binary oppositions that have been applied to the readerly interpretation of the poem. The first set of binary oppositions is encapsulated by the theories of Susan Noakes and Mary Carruthers. Noakes's ideas of interpretation and exegesis acknowledge the temporality of reading and how the act of reading has changed over time. This was examined in chapter two, which showed how different readers, such as Giovanni Boccaccio and Ciaran Carson, engaged with Dante's own mythic and allegorical reinvention of his own biography through the figure of Beatrice grants him the authority to speak of such exalted matters. Carruthers's ideas of fundamentalism and textualism incorporate the issue of *memoria* into reading, emphasising how the role of *memoria* functioned in medieval readings. In conjunction, these theories from Carruthers and Noakes describe the urge to read Dante in his medieval context, emphasising his original intention, and the desire to render Dante anew by allowing different interpretations. It is this tension that governs the landscape of Dantean interpretation and was encountered repeatedly in my exploration into how the *Commedia* is read. In chapter two, I examined the manner in which *memoria* is present in Dante's mythical and allegorical reinvention of the biographical details of his own life is continued in Boccaccio's allegorical depiction of the dream that Dante's mother had shortly before his birth. This is in contrast with recent translations, such as Carson's, tend to focus more on the documentary approach to Dante's biographical details. Both Carson and Boccaccio are writing about the details of Dante's life and death within the confines of their own context. This is revealed by Boccaccio's memorial rendering of Dante's birth through the allegorical construction of the peacock that appears in Dante's mother's dream that contrasts with Carson's

documentary approach that measures the exact size and shape of the bones in precise and medical detail.

Another binary opposition that I encountered in my exploration was between modern and medieval conceptions of the universe. The medieval concept of the universe is finite and harmonious while the modern conception of the universe is infinite and chaotic. These differing conceptions of the universe are present in additional materials added to various publications of the *Commedia*, in particular the use of maps. This invokes Carruthers's ideas regarding textualism as these additions influence the manner in which the text is subsequently interpreted. Additionally, in chapter three, the scholarly use of Dante's other texts to substantiate readings of the *Commedia* also invokes textualism. Singleton's theories lie at the intersection of fundamentalism and textualism because he uses secondary texts, an element of textualism, to claim that he has 're-discovered' the true, immutable and ultimately fundamentalist readings of the *Commedia*. Additionally, Singleton's theories invoke but do not uphold Noakes's exegetical readings because while he attempts to situate his reading in the medieval context, he cannot extract himself from his own historical and social context of the American, Protestant mythos of the puritan Pilgrim. He is therefore, in effect, re-interpreting the *Commedia* to align with a particular American voice, creating a distinctly American approach to reading the poem and thereby solidifying his dominance over American criticism by effectively creating it in a way that makes it distinct from its medieval, European counterparts.

There are additional binaries that accompany the reading of the *Commedia*, that governed the laws of interpretation that are applied to its allegory and thereby determine the meaning that is derived from it. Additionally, there was a binary opposition between medieval and modern approaches to Dante's allegory. While medieval scholarship tends to focus on more figurative, theological readings, modern American twentieth-century approaches tend to be literal and secular. It was through my comparison between modern conceptions of allegory with Dante's own conception of allegory in the *Convivio* and the *Epistle* that it was revealed how, as Giuseppe Mazzotta claims, the way that allegory is understood inevitably shapes the manner in

which it is read. A particular understanding of allegory will lead to a particular reading of the *Commedia*. As a scholarly descendant of both Auerbach and Singleton, Mazzotta argues against both their interpretations of the *Commedia* as well as the practice of making *a priori* judgments of where in the economy of poetic fiction one places the truth of Dante's allegory. He instead argues that it is in the act of reading that the binary oppositions of truth and fiction are not, ultimately, mutually exclusive.

Additionally, there are binaries between the allegory of theologians and the allegory of poets that inform one's reading of the *Commedia*. In the landscape of modern, twentieth-century American Dantean scholarship, the choice between either the allegory of theologians and the allegory of poets is made in conjunction with the choice to prioritise either the *Epistle* or the *Convivio*. This is, in turn, predicated on the choice of whether to view the *Epistle* as either true or false. I focused on the theories of Charles Singleton and showed how he prioritized the *Epistle to Can Grande* over the *Convivio*. This split that formed in the history of Dantean interpretation shows that not only does a particular conception of allegory influence the manner in which the *Commedia* is read, but also that a varying emphasis on Dante's other texts influences the way that the allegory in the *Commedia* is thought to be constructed. Therefore, there are a series of *a priori* choices that precipitate the manner in which a reader will interpret the poem. Additionally, many of these choices are made outside of the poem itself, in Dante's other texts, or in following a certain hermeneutic continuity or a split from the hermeneutic continuity.

The theoretical framework of textualism and fundamentalism, as well as the opposition between exegesis and interpretation, is also seen in the issue of translation. In chapter five of this enquiry, I focused on how a fundamentalist approach to translation would attempt to adhere, as closely as is possible, to the original language. However, the impossibility of true fidelity to the original must submit to the necessity of interpretation, thereby ensuring that translation will always transgress and undermine the original. These distinctions are further emphasized by the Anglosphere's pragmatic need for translation which opens additional space for further potential misinterpretation when the language of the original text is not the reader's own. The

imperfection of language, and the inability to transfer true meaning, is prevalent in the construction of Dante's allegory. An additional binary could be drawn, and subsequently collapsed, between the original medieval Italian and modern English because, in either case, there remains the potential of misinterpretation. The difference between them is where this misinterpretation occurs and not, ultimately, in the lack of any potential of it.

These binaries may, at first, appear to be incommensurable and mutually exclusive, dictating one reading over the other. However, in this exploration of Dante's allegory, I suggested that the collapse of these binaries was central to the act of reading which allows for both interpretation and misinterpretation. It is through the spirit of *disputatio*, by fully exploring each side of the binary and how it is subsequently applied to the reading of the *Commedia*, that it is possible to gain a more holistic understanding of the text and how it is interpreted. In examining these series of binary oppositions as they are applied to the reading and interpretation of Dante's allegory, it becomes apparent that any *a priori* judgements made on how to interpret the text will inevitably lead to a certain kind of reading that is merely a product of that decision and the socio-political and historical context in which it is rendered. It is therefore in the examination of the interpretation of the *Commedia* as essentially an act of reading, an act of both interpretation and misinterpretation, that one is able to, through the spirit of *disputatio*, access the universality and multiplicity of meaning in Dante's design of his allegory. The manner in which the *Commedia* is read has evolved and changed over time, from its medieval origins towards the current landscape of Dantean interpretation in modern, twentieth-century American scholarship. Some scholars, such as George Corbett, might view this change as a schism, a degeneration, that departs too strongly from the original intention of the text. There is always the danger in interpretation of indulging in purely subjective reading, disengaging too abruptly with the intentions of the text in its original context. This is what Giuseppe Mazzotta would describe as "...an interpretative heresy of sorts in projecting on to the text strictly subjective preoccupations" (Mazzotta 1979, 275)

However, as Dante showed through the character Statius, there is even value in these perceived misinterpretations that reveal matters of poetic and allegorical truth. In exploring Singleton's claim that he had re-discovered Dante's true intention, the current ideological and political landscape of the United States of America is made manifest. Even if his reading of the allegory of theologians is ultimately a misinterpretation, it nevertheless reveals certain truths of contemporary society and the manner in which it has shifted historically, politically, and allegorically from Dante's own context. Longfellow's mistranslation of *virtù* reveals the manner in which nineteenth century Bostonians engaged with the concepts of *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii*, as well as their Protestant gender ideology of domestication. These are two instances in which a potential misinterpretation or mistranslation can potentially still generate knowledge and understanding, the same type that initiated Statius' salvation in the *Commedia*. It is this kind of understanding that this current enquiry attempted to achieve through the spirit of *disputatio*, that even when I have not endorsed certain perspectives or argued that they were mistranslations, there is still value in exploring them. Therefore, as can be seen in the character of Statius, there is still a possibility for salvation even in an instance of misinterpretation.

However, if any interpretation is as good as any other, if any objective element can be taken as either allegorical or literal, and all things are true, then this ultimately undermines the interpretative process as a whole. The immense interpretability of the *Commedia* is ultimately an aspect of its language of exile, in which one is removed from their stable reference point of home and left in a wandering state of meaninglessness. However, while it is true that Dante constructs a language of exile, the aim of the *Commedia* is not to remain in that state of meaninglessness. Rather, it is meant to be a way of writing oneself home, either in his hopes that his poetry will grant him re-entry to Florence or to his representation of Heavenly Paradise, which for Christians is their true home. Dante does not remain in the *selva oscura* and instead moves from that indeterminate space to divine beatitude. This is to say that Dante moves from a state in which all things are interpretable to a place where the truth can be witnessed even if it cannot be truly understood or described in its entirety. Dante uses allegory because its continuously shifting nature and potential to contain vast

amounts of information is best suited to the description of this journey to his true home, in *Paradisio*, where he might be able to remedy his exile in a way that it simply not possible on earth. Dante uses allegory to reach the end of his journey, to write himself home, but is aware of the innate changeability of language and therefore allows for a measure of misinterpretation. Therefore, it is the case that “While in the symbolic world of heresy there is only death and the madness of illusory changes, faith ostensibly affords the perspective from which language can have precise signification, and the contingent and the eternal are fused together” (Mazzotta 1979, 292). It is through Dante’s depiction of heresy, his allowance of a certain level of misinterpretation, that one can acknowledge the point at which he disengages from this immense interpretability and instead represents what he perceives to be absolute and certain truth.

Inferno X begins with a small argument between Virgil and Dante about when it is appropriate for Dante to ask questions, which Virgil has previously admonished him for. Before they can come to some sort of consensus on this matter of language, they are interrupted by the appearance of Farinata who states:

“O Tuscan walking through this land of fire,
While still alive, and with such courteous speech,
May it please you to pause and linger here.
To me your way of speaking makes it clear
That you’re a native of that noble city
Where I perhaps was too unpopular.

Inf 10.22–27

“O Tosco che per la città del foco
vivo ten vai così parlando onesto,
piacciati di restare in questo loco.

La tua loquella ti fa manifesto
di quella nobil patria natio
alla qual forse fui troppo molesto.”

Inf 10.22–27

At first, it is unclear that this is not Virgil speaking. Up to this point, there has been a structured dialogue between Dante and Virgil with one taking a turn to speak after the other. This interruption from Farinata appears at first to be merely a continuation of that dialogue and therefore the reader may assume that it is Virgil who is speaking merely because, following convention, it is his turn to speak. What Dante the poet has done is essentially trick the reader into misinterpreting the text, to read the speech as though it is Virgil who is speaking. While the first few lines appear to match Virgil, it progressively become stranger to ascribe this speech to Virgil. It is not until Dante writes that the voice is coming from inside one of the tombs that it becomes clear that it is not Virgil who is speaking. This ‘trick’ of Dante’s writing embodies the allegorical meaning of this canto in which heresy is the main subject. In previous circles, Dante has shown tendencies to re-enact the sin that is punished there. In *Inferno V*, it is suggested that he faints because he acknowledges his own role in the intermingling of lust and literature through writing the *Vita Nuova*, the same intermingling that damned Paolo and Francesca in their reading of Lancelot and Guinevere. Dante displays righteous fury in *Inferno VIII* towards Filippo Argenti in the Fifth Circle thus re-enacting the wrathfulness which that circle punishes. In this way, Dante repeatedly shows a re-enactment or reinterpretation of the sins of the circle of Hell that he is in. However, in the Sixth Circle with the heretics, it is, at least initially, the reader who is re-enacting the sin of misinterpretation – heresy.

Giuseppe Mazzotta claims that Dante’s conception of heresy is distinctly Thomistic. He states that:

In an elaborate passage of the *Summa*, Aquinas views heresy as a sin of choice [...]; as a misinterpretation of Scripture, it is a denial of the truth on which faith

is founded and, in this sense, it designates an intellectual error (Mazzotta 1979, 283–4).

In this way, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, and by extension Dante, heresy is more than a sin of mistaken opinion. It is the deliberate and obtuse refusal to see the truth thereby committing one's mind to mistaken thinking. This is the sin which Farinata and Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti committed by following Epicurus and his materialist beliefs about the destruction of the soul after death. This is why the *contrapasso* of their infernal punishment involves their souls lying in coffins as their bodies would after death. If it is the case that Dante follows the Thomist conception of heresy as an intellectual error, then this has implications for the various reading and interpretations of the text. Therefore, when it stated that Dante's allegory contains a multiplicity of meaning, this does not entail that any interpretation is possible without the potentiality of intellectual error or, in other words, heresy. Through the use of the language 'tricks' in *Inferno X*, Dante is suggesting that the reader is in danger of committing heresy, perhaps particularly in the misinterpretation of the very text that they are reading. This is not to say that Dante entirely shifts the weight of sin from himself to the reader for the full duration of the canto. Dante commits the same intellectual error in reverse. This occurs when, in response to Cavalcanti's emotional pleas for information about the whereabouts of his son, Dante misspeaks and causes Cavalcante to misinterpret.

Cavalcante misinterprets Dante's use of the past tense as meaning that his son is dead. By the time that Dante wrote and published *Inferno*, Guido Cavalcanti would be dead, but at the time in which this particular interaction is set within the narrative, he was still alive. He was exiled by Dante which is condition that they would ultimately share but Dante has not yet experienced in the narrative itself. The temporal condition of the *Commedia* affects the nature of the interpersonal drama between these two characters which in turn makes it more difficult to interpret the correct meaning of their words. Dante, at this point, commits an intellectual error by not being able to convey the true meaning of his words in a way that Cavalcante will understand. This is further emphasized in the fact that, regardless of his misuse of tense, it is not immediately

apparent to whom he is referring to when he speaks of the person that Guido had disdain for. This question has been long debated. In the footnotes of Nichols's translation, he states "Probably Beatrice, as a representative of the Christian faith, but this could equally refer to God" (Nichols 2014, 101). Anthony Esolen also claims that it is Beatrice and makes no reference to the scholastic uncertainty. Dorothy Sayers seems to assume that it is referring to Virgil and lists possible reasons for Guido's disdain rather than question the validity of Virgil rather than God or Beatrice. This disparity among translators of the *Commedia* shows that there is little consensus upon the meaning of Dante's words. This emphasizes the kind of interpretative heresy which occurs in *Inferno X*. Dante, as both poet and pilgrim, fails to make himself clear and the reader misinterprets his words, just as Cavalcante has done.

In terms of the role of misinterpretation in the construction of Dante's allegory, it is notable that the examples that I have used for characters who misinterpret are confined to the *Inferno*. Both Francesca and Cavalcante commit an act of misinterpretation. However, Statius is an example of a character in the *Commedia* who misinterprets but is then saved for it. In this way, Dante's allegory is constructed in such a way that allows for a measure of interpretability. However, while there does exist ambiguity, multiplicity, and a condition of exile which lends itself to uncertainty, there is a point at which all signs remain fixed in their fields of signification and at which, in Dante's worldview, all things are rendered certain, complete, and true. This point is seen in Dante's attempts to provide an adequate description of the indescribability of *Dio* in *Paradisio XXXIII*:

Since all the good the will has ever sought

Concentrates in that Light, and what is there

Is perfect, which outside of It falls short.

Par 33. 103–105

Però che 'l ben, ch'è del volere obietto,

tutto s'accoglie in lei, e fuor di quella

è defettivo ciò ch'è lì perfetto.

Par 33.103–105

This shows that, while Dante does allow and expect a certain level of misinterpretation to occur in the reading of the *Commedia* and allows the reader to be either complicit in the act or to reject it, he nevertheless maintains a point within the construction in his allegory where all ambiguity ceases. He begins in a space, the *selva oscura*, "...where everything appears uncertain, open-ended and tentative..." (Mazzotta 1979, 275) and attempts to make the journey towards a point of certainty. This is, ultimately, the point in which he encounters God. However, there remains a measure of misinterpretation even there because Dante, as a mere human, fails to capture and describe the inexplicable, the divine, that exists at the height of his journey. Although certainty has been reached, it cannot be represented. The point Dante is making through this repeated emphasis on misinterpretation is that misinterpretation is only a sin when one stops reading and one does not continue that pursuit towards absolute certainty. This is because, following the Thomist depiction, heresy is a sin of active choice and not merely of error. The main difference between readers like Francesca and Cavalcante and readers like Statius and Dante himself is that Francesca and Cavalcante actively choose to stop reading. Francesca stops reading in order to re-enact the scene she was reading with Paolo and thereby commits adultery. Cavalcante disappears back into his tomb before Dante can explain what it he meant. Statius misinterprets, and this allows him to reach salvation in *Purgatorio*, where he is in constant movement, going up the mountain with Dante and Virgil. Dante, as both the poet and pilgrim, continues to move through the three realms of the Christian afterlife despite there being many moments in which his journey seems impossible until he reaches that point of certainty, in the representation of God at the end of *Paradiso*. This enquiry explored the manner in which the allegory in Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* is read and interpreted or misinterpreted. I examined both modern and medieval approaches to reading the *Commedia* as well as readings that emphasize either the literal or figurative senses of Dante's allegory. In conclusion, the role that misinterpretation plays in Dante's allegory

is to encourage further and continuous interpretation, a constant engagement with the text. It is an invitation to interpret, with an allowance made to misinterpret, and a call to keep reading despite the dangers of misinterpretation. Reading Dante is therefore an ongoing exploration that will continue beyond the confines of this current enquiry.

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