Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Dante’s Commedia and the Forgotten Truth of Apocalyptic Dreamworlds

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According to Jacques Derrida, symbolic languages of apocalypse lay bare a fundamental insecurity, a structure of crisis in the way we use language and signs. In principle this structure of crisis allows for any language game to be inscribed into an apocalyptic context. Our attempts to make sense of the world we inhabit are, so to speak, permanently at risk. With Derrida, the last book of the Bible can therefore be read as an “exemplary revelation” of a “transcendental structure.”¹ Having developed through the Middle Ages into the symbolic language of heaven, hell, and purgatory, which found its ultimate articulation in Dante’s Divina Commedia, the powerful symbolism of biblical apocalypticism is more than a remnant of pious projections. Whoever encounters it will not be able to shed it.

It is remarkable that even postmodern Catholics distrust this symbolic language. For example, Dies Irae, a product of the generation before Dante, was banned from the requiem in the 20th century, because it was regarded as an expression of “negative spirituality.”² The medieval image of a divine judge was downplayed in favor of the Christian longing for a forgiving God. However, there is no forgiveness without what Walter Benjamin called the “striking violence” of a God who does not judge by charging up guilt against atonement, but rather by exposing the strategic calculation of law abiding hypocrites who are hostile to life.³ As Derrida puts it, “forgiveness can take place only where there is something unforgivable. … It becomes possible only were it does something impossible.”⁴

Without the incalculable power of a judging God, the symbolic language of humanistic gestures of reconciliation turns into nothing but a tool of strategic power. It was for good reasons that in early Christianity neither the Gospels nor the apostolic letters were considered a hermeneutical key to the New Testament. Instead, this role fell to the last book of the biblical canon: St. John’s Apocalypse⁵, a labyrinth of criss-crossing voices, missions, angels, and messengers, in which one can never tell who is speaking or writing and who is authorizing and dispatching the messages.⁶ Entry into God’s kingdom could not be attained via the canonic authority of apostolic charismatics, nor through a series of well-organized narrations about Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, it could be accessed only via a sequence of messages which come over the reader “like a thief” (Apoc 16,15; 1 Thess 5,2; 2 Pet 3,10; Mt 24,42f.; Lk 12,39f.). In other words: through a spiritual exercise of reading that pushes the reader towards answering the divine call on his or her very own responsibility.

This is where we can find the philosophical core of apocalyptic language games which resist any kind of deconstruction. They perform language’s awakening from the night of sanctimonious commonplaces and strategic calculations which are hostile to life: “I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up …” it says in the introduction to the Apocalypse of St. John (Apoc 3,1-2).⁷

Postmodern societies tend to defer the moment of “crisis,” which forces us to take a stand and make a decision in favor of life. As a result, the task of criticism, of sorting out the sheep from
the goats, is left to the demonic logics of religious fundamentalists. Already Dante created a monument to this kind of skepticism when he made the character of Belacqua appear in the ante-purgatory. The former lute maker from Florence seeks shelter behind a rock, keeping out of sight of the heavens, head between his knees, in keeping with his usual habit of postponing the moment of truth. We encounter a whole host of radicalized successors of this archetypal figure in the proto-postmodern works of Samuel Beckett. His tormented characters have made their home in the lukewarm space between good and evil. They do not even know where they are and for how long they will stay there. In this skeptical intermediate state, the liberating gaze of Beatrice is as unlikely to arrive as is Godot – this is what distinguishes Beckett from Dante.

Contrary to this trend, Derrida’s later works feature more and more signs that our skepticism towards the language of crisis of the past cannot endure. This is precisely what imbues Dante’s tripartite scheme of Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso with enduring relevance. The urgency to act asks of us nothing short of the impossible. In Dante’s case, of course, this impossibility consisted of nothing but compensating for the powerlessness of the exile by writing an apocalyptic story of conversion which anticipates the moment of truth. But his poetic exercise achieved the impossible and this made it unforgettable.

To what extent might this mystagogic-poetic practice be reinvented in a late modern context? The hermeneutic key to Dante’s exercise is found in the final cantos of the Commedia – the very part which seemed the most boring to modern readers from the Romantics up to post-modern revenants of Belacqua (such as Romeo Castellucci). However, Heinrich Heine’s suspicion that the medieval order of hell, purgatory, and heaven resulted in lulling the people with the “ancient holy lullaby” (Eiapopeia vom Himmel), might turn out to be shortsighted. Dante’s ambitious project of using literary means in order to evoke the medieval pilgrimage towards the divinizing contemplation of God speaks a different language; and it does so even where it uses the allegory of “heaven”. But let us first turn to the apocalyptic sources of Dante’s conversion narrative.

The Divina Commedia’s Apocalyptic Main Features

The language of apocalypse is the language of dreams. This is what differentiates it from the language of rational calculation. The rules of logical coherence are handled rather careless. For example, Dante complains about the harshness of divine punishment (“For I who saw it hardly can admit it,” Inf. 25, 46); but shortly thereafter, he is pleased to see “the vengeance which, concealed, Makes sweet thine anger in thy secrecy” (Purg. 20, 94). Dante has little concern for the laws of logical exclusion, nor does he bother to engage in self-censorship when it comes to curbing his aggressions and to polishing his choices of words and images along the lines of Petrarca’s Renaissance aesthetic. The keyboard of apocalyptic visions has, so to speak, no delete button.

It therefore does not come as a surprise that the Renaissance and its aftermath perceived the style of the Divina Commedia as strange. Dante does not shy away from lending his voice to the anger of the blessed, nor does the emerging sense of decorum and good taste of the bourgeois age prevent him from calling priests wallowing pigs. He goes as far as letting impertinent sinners raise their hands against God in the utmost vulgar gesture of “fuck you” (“Lifted his hands aloft with both the figs, Crying: ‘Take that, God, for at thee I aim them.’” [Inf. 25, 1]).

Dante’s appropriation of the dramaturgy of apocalyptic dream sequences reaches far into the text’s own gestures and imagery. Starting with the seventeenth canto, he refers back to St. John
in a very explicit manner. Already in the first canto, the experience of a personal crisis – alluded to be of suicidal proportions – morphs into an allegorical landscape. In it, the poet’s inner self is turned outward, taking the form of undergrowth populated with demonic beasts and monsters. The imagery of this landscape is archetypal and surreal.

As soon as Vergil enters the scene, however, this nightmarish language of existential crisis – which is not least a crisis of meaning – blends with another vision of crisis, namely one of historical and political proportions, in which the fate of the Roman Empire is at stake. We witness a blurring of lines between reality and fiction and a superimposition of documentary precision onto archetypal phantasmagoria, rendering futile any attempt to classify the text generically.

The literary model for such writing is the Apocalypse of St. John itself. Like the Divina Commedia, it “wavers allegorically” between the symbolic-spiritual and the historical-political, between a personal experience of conversion and political prophecy, and in doing so it can be compared to the modern fantasy genre. Similar to St. John’s canonical text, Dante’s pilgrimage towards the contemplation of God features events of both microcosmic-individual and macrocosmic-universal dimensions. Already the forest in which the author awakens at the beginning of the inferno is both inside and outside, standing both for a biographical as well as universal event of cosmic-political magnitude.

Dante employs this stylistic feature of apocalyptic writing till the very end. When Vergil exits the stage and Beatrice takes the lead at the end of the Purgatorio, she functions both as a mirror to Dante’s erotically charged redemption fantasies and as focal point of a political interpretation of the universe. Henry VII makes an appearance as seminal historical figure, but his future return is more than doubtful. Instead, cantos 32 and 33 of the Purgatorio stage the arrival of the beloved according to the apocalyptic model of the Second Coming of Christ who is reflected in Beatrice’s eyes as a mythological Gryphon.

Once again, this is Dante’s method of dissolving the logic of binary oppositions. The individual and the universal, the private and the public, the minute recording of seemingly insignificant details and the cosmic gaze to the stars all collapse into one. In opposition to the modern cliché of medieval order, this subversive trait conflates even the contingent and the necessary. Vacillating between historicizing prophecies and archetypal symbolism, the Divina Commedia preempts any attempt at classifying its literary disposition. Given their incompatibility with the rules of literary convention, the literary visions of Dante’s journey through the heavens force the reader into a precarious position of hermeneutic indecisiveness: the decision about the meaning (or its lack!) of what he reads rests with him alone. The crisis of set patterns of interpretation creates the very space of the event of meaning.

According to Ronald Herzman, Dante’s dream-like language of apocalypse finds its most condensed expression in the image of St. Francis of Assisi in the eleventh canto of the Paradiso – a terse synthesis of Bonaventura’s Legenda Major as re-narrated by the ironically chosen Thomas Aquinas. The historical figure of St. Francis appears as the angel of the sixth seal (Apoc 6,12; 7,2) who directly precedes the end time and restores the church. The (materialized) image of the stigma-carrying mendicant of La Verna coincides with the archetypical vision of an ancient sealed document and instructs us in an exemplary fashion on how to read Dante’s cosmic exercise: “each character and event a document written by the hand of God.”

Read in this light, Dante’s exercise is exemplary for what Derrida, following Freud, has called the “scene of writing.” Dante anticipates the moment of decision while at the same time operating
with strategies of distortion and defamiliarization which undermine the power of sound judgment to discern between what is real and what is fantastic. Once again, these strategies refer the reader back to nothing but himself. There is nothing descriptive in the manner in which Dante’s dreamscape reaches its reader via the medium of the author; it is, instead, performative. Dante’s multimedia travelogue, interlaced with images, songs, tastes, with bad stenches and enchanting fragrances, presents itself to the reader as an apocalyptic “Come!” Derrida reminds us of this basic feature of apocalyptic writing when comparing St. John’s Apocalypse with a labyrinth wherein the “Come” rings out repeatedly, “engaging perhaps in the place in which Ereignis (no longer can this be translated as event) and Enteignis unfold the moment of propriation.”

For this reason, Georg Friedrich Hegel’s influential interpretation of the Divina Commedia in part three of his Lectures on Aesthetics is as illuminating as it is misleading. It is illuminating to the extent that it zeros in on the critical issue of the decisive moment. In Dante’s dreamscape, each encounter aims to uncover the universal in the particular, the permanent in the transient: “Here, in the face of the absolute grandeur of the ultimate aim and end of all things, everything individual and particular in human interests and aims vanishes, and yet there stands there, completely epically, everything otherwise most fleeting and transient in the living world, fathomed objectively in its inmost being, judged in its worth or worthlessness by the supreme Concept, i.e., by God.” However, Dante does not present the “passions and sufferings” of individuals as “solidified into images of bronze“, as Hegel would have it. His particular mode of writing undermines the view of the permanent and well-ordered with a counter-movement that uses strategies of defamiliarization to historicize what seems to be permanent. In so doing, he ties everything back to the expectation of a revelatory event of meaning.

The Secret and the Pudenda

In the framework outlined above, it comes as no surprise that, in Dante, deviations from the alleged norm of medieval order are the rule rather than the exception. Already the basic composition of the first part of the Commedia upsets the horizon of expectation of his contemporaries to a degree which both confirms and deconstructs modern myths about the well-ordered medieval world view. Contrary to the more representative depictions of hell by Giotto in the Cappella Scrovegni in Padua, or in the cupola of the Battistero di San Giovanni in Florence, Dante’s inferno is not a formless chaos in which evil shows its violent nature. It is, rather, tiered and nuanced. One would be tempted to call it well-ordered, were it not for Dante’s micro-taxonomy that simultaneously undermines any sense of scholastic order. Why, for example, are seduction and adulation punished more severely than lust and greed? Why is the teacher Bruno Latini, whom Dante describes with such tender admiration, in hell? And why is Piccarda Donati, sister of the most detested of his enemies, allowed to give one of the most important speeches about freedom and harmony in paradise (Par. 3)? Why is Cato, the heathen, suicide, and enemy of Caesar, made guardian of the redemptive purgatory, while Dante throws Caesar’s other enemies Brutus and Cassius, along with Judas, into Satan’s throat (Par. 1; Inf. 34)? And how does Ripheus, an unbaptized character from the legend of Troy, get to live in Paradise? Why is Francesca da Rimini depicted as a thoughtful, sensitive, sympathetic and noble lover whose fate makes Dante break down with compassion and sorrow in the second circle of hell (Inf. 5), when elsewhere he does not hesitate to let voluptuaries, sodomites and prostitutes ascend to purgatory or even paradise (Purg. 26, Par. 8 und 9)? Such inconsistencies appear to be neither random nor constructed. At nearly any unexpected turn of Dante’s dreamscape, the
marveling pilgrim is tempted to shout: “Naturally! But why?” The answer to this question is left to the reader who frequently reacts with irritation.

There is no better proof for this irritating trait of Dante’s poetics than the split reaction of his readership over the centuries. Already Petrarca perceived the “rhymes both rough and stridulous” (Inf. 32, 1) of the *Inferno*, along with Dante’s perverse talent for vulgar and scatological talk, as insufferable. Even Goethe, 400 years later, expressed revulsion at Dante’s punitive fantasies. It was not until the Romantics, such as Schelley and Blake, that the *Commedia’s* grotesque and unsavory features were greeted with enthusiasm.

However, Dante’s audacity to claim the position of the divine judge for himself, as the one who separates the sheep from the goats, is considered highly questionable up to this late day – despite the hesitations of modern theologians to accuse him of heresy for this reason. Starting from the Middle Ages, the Catholic magisterium believed itself to hold the authority of canonizing eminent believers; but even the most autocratic popes did not claim for themselves the mandate to send individuals to hell. Dante seems to disregard this orthodox rule just as much as the rule of logical exclusion. On the one hand, he takes a decisive stand against instrumentalizing the divine wrath for political ends, such as anathematizing opponents of papal policy (Purg. 3.103ff.). Yet on the other, he does not shy away from placing friends and foes in heaven, hell, and purgatory and from canonizing his beloved Beatrice. “Dante pronounces his sentence; god, angels and devils execute the verdict.”

We are, of course, at the threshold of the Renaissance. Dante’s self-confidence is not in every respect that of a medieval person. He intervenes in history with an unprecedented political sense of mission. Apart from that, unlike Western modernity, and much more so than his late medieval contemporaries, Dante is fully aware of the apophatic-negating roots of medieval theology. God’s being and doing is beyond our grasp. The darkness of divine light manifests itself solely through effects and refractions within the history of creation and salvation. Consequently, God’s existence is as much beyond doubt as is the truthfulness and goodness of his being – the problem of theodicy simply does not exist. “And you, O mortals! hold yourselves restrained in judging” (Par 20, 130ff.), the mystical eagle of justice announce in Jupiter’s heaven to the pilgrim who pleads for a tribunal for greedy popes. What the unrelenting questioner Dante wants to know “so deeply sinks in the abyss of the eternal statute what thou askest, from all created sight it is cut off” (Par. 21,91ff.). He still knows that no creature may anticipate God’s judgment. This is what distinguishes his thought from the allegedly enlightened, yet anemic philosophy of modern theorists of theodicy. Satan, the first theorist of theodicy in all of the history of creation, had misjudged that; he falsely assumed that God would be accountable for the judgment of his creatures; but, on the contrary, it is that every judgment made by his creatures must answer to the unfathomable judgment of God (Par 19, 46-48). It is not we who are the judges, but God. That, of course, makes the enormity of such a demand still more irritating still. Does Dante violate the biblical commandment ‘thou shalt not judge’? Even Romano Guardini, whose admiration for Dante knew no bounds, confessed toward the end of his life to having no real answer to this question.

Derrida’s aporetic writings may help us at this juncture in that they instruct us to pose the counter question. If we were to paraphrase the key question of Derrida’s engagement with the tradition of apophatic theology in relation to his older, apocalyptic writing, we could summarize this counter question with the rhetorical question: How not to judge? How not to judge considering the rubble of history? How not to judge, knowing that even Derrida, who dreamed
in his essay on apocalypse of an “apocalypse (…) without the last judgment”\textsuperscript{31}, could not resist the temptation to pass judgment on the “rogues” of the early 21st century\textsuperscript{32} How not to judge the ones you love and hate, both near and far? Do we not do so incessantly in any case?

It seems that Dante had no qualms about exposing himself at this most intimate point of his nocturnal fantasies. Towards the end of his journey to the hereafter, he even pokes fun at those keeping their cards close to their chests. For example, he admonishes himself via his ancestor Cacciaguida: “A conscience overcast or with its own or with another's shame, will taste for sooth the tartness of thy word; but ne’ertheless, all falsehood laid aside, make manifest thy vision utterly, and let them scratch wherever is the itch” (Par. 17, 121ff.).

When reading the Commedia in light of this apocalyptic tradition, it becomes clearer where modern readers fall prey, knowingly or unknowingly, to the treacherous logic of Hegel's view of the Commedia. Dante’s dreamscape does much more than color the Greek cosmos of ideas with the fate of individuals, which would then replace Plato’s philosophical abstractions with the petrified “being-for-itself” of individual fates. At the very latest, the moment of Dante’s first reunion with Beatrice makes clear that his mystagogic exercise cannot be reduced to philosophical idealizations (Purg. 31). Rather one can compare the Commedia to the Confessiones, in which Augustine assumes the position of both sinner and leader of souls. In both cases, what is fleeting and transient flows into the same figure of meditation which, seeking the permanent in the ephemeral, also does something quite different: it transposes what is permanent onto an individual process of catharsis and conversion, one that is distorted through opposing sentiments, tears, and embarrassing revelations.\textsuperscript{34}

To be sure, Dante pushes toward a perspective which finds the permanent in the ephemeral by announcing the judgment of individual fates. At the same time, however, Dante is a successor to the apocalyptic St. John. His cosmic exercise speaks the language of the aged one who, all by himself in the earthly paradise, follows the chariot of Christ “like in gait, each dignified and grave” (Purg. 29, 133). In the visions of this old man, he could read that even Plato’s cosmos of ideas is fleeting. “And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.” (Apoc 6,14)\textsuperscript{35} This passage comes immediately after the opening of the sixth seal which, in Dante’s Commedia, is associated with the stigmata of St. Francis.

The Aleatory Erring of the Apocalypse

But what is the relationship between these intertextual variations of a (both embarrassing and sublime) apocalyptic language on one side, and the canonical status of St. John’s Apocalypse on the other? Where could Dante, an orthodox Christian, find the audacity to add his own apocalypse to the last book of the biblical canon?\textsuperscript{36} Derrida’s essay on the Apocalypse provides an illuminating answer to this question as well. Towards the end of his text, Derrida reminds us that the book with the seven seals, on which the Apocalypse of St. John writes, on which Derrida writes
in turn, was written “within and on the back” (Apoc 5,1). The inscription of the founding text of Christian apocalypses spilled outside the book’s cover.\textsuperscript{37}

The biblical Apocalypse is not a discrete book. It is at the same time younger and older than the biblical canon. Not only does it draw upon the ancient prehistory of symbolic crisis scenarios and writes over older apocalyptic traditions such as the Books of Daniel and Ezekiel,\textsuperscript{38} but its internal, iterative structure also provides an inherent opportunity for extension. Derrida calls this capacity the aleatory erring, interrupted and marked by incalicable incidents, of the western apocalypse. The latter can be traced all the way to Hölderlin’s Patmos (“But where danger is, grows the saving power also”), to Heidegger’s tireless attempts to continue this poem, and into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.\textsuperscript{39} Its canonical prototype, the Apocalypse of John, can be compared with a spiritual Exercitium whose repetitions (of visions, menaces, hymns, repeated announcements of the end, etc.)\textsuperscript{40} serve as introductions to the apocalyptic writing style, marking the last book of the Bible not as the end of the bible, but instead as the beginning of a literary series. Hence, in the western apocalypse the same is again and again received and passed on in an alienated (and at times perverted) form as “Gospel and Apocalypse” with “shifts of accent, lines skipped or moved out of place, as if they reached us over a broken-down teletype, a wiretap in an overloaded telephone exchange.”\textsuperscript{41}

Paradoxically, this comparison of the last book of the biblical canon with a broken-down teletype may even draw on the exact wording of the final “canonical dictate” of the Apocalypse of St. John which threatens anyone who might dare to add anything to the “prophecy of this book” (Apoc 22,18f.; Dtn 4,2) with infernal punishment. Among the four figures of text transformation known since Antiquity, only insertion and deletion are mentioned here. This means that the Apocalypse does not prohibit permutation and substitution. Given that we are dealing here with the most elementary strategies of defamiliarization and distortion in Freud’s language of dreams – viewed by Derrida as the most essential scene of writing – this omission is hardly accidental. According to Freud, substitution and permutation are the two basic syntactic operations generating metaphors and metonymies in a dream.\textsuperscript{42} In a way, this allows us to read St. John’s omission of substitution and permutation as an opening up of the canon. It passes on the letter of the biblical text to the visions of artists, prophets, philosophers, politicians and poets who receive “Gospel and Apocalypse” in distorted and permuted form, and revive the same erring in a different way – from Augustine, St. Francis, and Joachim of Fiore through Dante, Hölderlin, and Heidegger all the way to 21\textsuperscript{st} century Africa.

The Christian Traits of the Commedia

Dante’s Commedia deserves its reputation as the most important synthesis of the medieval Lebensgefühl (its attitude towards life). And yet, the micro-structure of his poem does not support the modern cliché of the well-ordered medieval world view. But what do we make of Dante’s teleology and the hierarchical macro-structure of hell, purgatory, and heaven erected on top of it? This is the moment to recall the rift between Dante’s Christian apocalypse and modern-Jewish, not to mention postmodern variations on the theme. Despite some tendencies to the contrary, Derrida’s postmodern apocalypse mistrusts the moment of decision; Derrida imagines this moment as a radically future event. As in the tradition of Jewish messianism, we live in a time of adjournment; the place of history is wholly provisional.\textsuperscript{45}

This future-oriented tradition survived in the Christian West in millennial (i.e. horizontal) readings of the Apocalypse, starting with north-African Christianity during antiquity (Tertullian,
Victorinus of Pettau, Lactantius). Mediated by Joachim of Fiore (1130-1202), this tradition culminated in the millennialism of the late Middle Ages (Petrus Olivi, Ubertino of Casale) whose influence on the modern period – stretching from Hegel up to the myth of the ‘Third Reich’ – cannot be overstated.\textsuperscript{44} It is this rather dubious heritage of late medieval apocalypticism which explains Derrida’s skepticism regarding the moment of decision.\textsuperscript{45}

Apart from such horizontal, forward-looking readings (which are essentially literal), there exists another branch of spiritual readings that highlight the archetypal and timeless moments of apocalyptic texts. Church father Origen is considered the founder of this allegorical tradition that can be traced all the way to C.G. Jung. One sometimes includes in this camp the tradition of the High Middle Ages which dates back to Ticonius and Augustine, although it presents more of a mixture of the historical/political and the presentist/symbolic traditions. Augustine, in \textit{De Civitate Dei}, distinguishes between two kinds of resurrection. (\textit{Civitate Dei} XX 6-10) The first resurrection, from the death of sin, is identical with baptism and access to the new life of the church as the body of Christ; this resurrection points in the direction of the vertical, symbolic traits of the apocalypse as a drama of decision-making in the present time. The second type corresponds with the resurrection of the body on Judgment Day when the souls of the dead will finally realize the full potential they were destined to acquire in their earthly lives. The horizontal dimension becomes apparent once again in this future-oriented perspective, although it is accompanied in Augustine by a radical skepticism toward knowing the future.

The emphasis of medieval theology is without a doubt on the presentist-vertical dimension; this does not mean, however, that we are dealing here with a static metaphysical system of interpretation along the lines of Hegel’s caricature of Dante. Medieval thought focuses rather on the \textit{litrugical} presence of Christ to which Dante alludes in the thirtieth canto of the \textit{Paradiso} (30,10f.);\textsuperscript{46} or, more precisely, to the patristic conception of the church as the mystical body of Christ (\textit{corpus mysticum}). Church liturgy marks the place of intersection between the eternal liturgy of the “holy city, new Jerusalem” (Apok 21, 2) and the temporal gathering of the church (\textit{ecclesia}), which was triggered by the encounter with the historical Jesus.\textsuperscript{47} This coming-together of heaven and earth, God and man combines three different branches of the church: the \textit{ecclesia militans} of the present time, the suffering and hoping church (\textit{ecclesia patiens, ecclesia expectans}) of those in the purgatory, and the triumphant celestial church (\textit{ecclesia triumphans}) which knows no temporal limits. Past, present, and future are united in their focus on the eternal Now of the liturgical presence of Christ.

As a consequence, both perspectives (horizontal/diachronic and vertical/timeless) on the apocalyptic drama can be chosen. For example, in the liturgical canto mentioned above, Dante provides a visionary anticipation of the Last Judgment. In the immutable movement of the eternal presence of God, the separation of the sheep and the goats has already taken place. Therefore, the liturgical presence of Christ makes it possible to anticipate future events as future events; liturgy has a divinatory and even prophetic dimension.

But where is the moment of decision, the moment of separation of good and evil, to be located in the temporal world? As Erik Peterson has argued with regard to the biblical sources and the early Christian notion of the church, the only thing that matters is the mystical encounter with the incarnated and resurrected Christ in the liturgical assembly of the church.\textsuperscript{48} Precisely therein lies the difference to the Jewish tradition. In Judaism, the judgment comes at the end of a process of conversion; in the Christian tradition, the moment of truth is here and now. The future Judgment Day, the ‘apocalypse’ in the strict sense of this word, will only ‘uncover’
(ἀποκαλύπτο) who has taken seriously the call to make a decision and who has ignored or made light of it. The decision allows for no deferral; it has always already taken place here and now, even though we can have no more than a dim premonition of its actual content.\footnote{49}

It is in the here and now where one must commit to the kind of life that can withstand the test of God’s all-revealing gaze. It happens in the liturgical praise of God and the Saints who awaken the spontaneous praise of the elected and, by doing so, crack open fallen man’s self-centered nature; hence the fundamental significance of poetic praise in the \textit{Paradiso}\footnote{50} which is intensified by Dante’s reunion with Beatrice, his “God bearing image.”\footnote{51} The true church of God, in the sense of Augustine’s \textit{civitas dei}, is the assembly of those who are ready to forget themselves in their dedication to the praise of God, and who will remain true to the decision it affords.

Dante draws our attention to this decisive point already in the fourth canto of the \textit{Inferno}, when he bans the great scholars of the pagan world (including Vergil) into an \textit{Elysium}, albeit one which spares them the torment of hell. Their existence may be venerable, yet they suffer from a lack of understanding of the most fundamental truth: it is the “right manner of adoring” God that ultimately matters (\textit{Inf.} 4,23ff.); it is only God’s praise that lends true insight to the believer. It empowers him to see God in all creatures, since everything has been created in God’s image. As Guardini points out: “The human face in the second circle of the trinity, which is revealed in the final vision of the \textit{Commedia}, points to the most basic content of the whole poem; it receives its meaning retroactively from this point.”\footnote{52}

The question of whose life may stand the test of God’s judgment, however, is another matter entirely. Only Judgment Day will reveal who belongs to the church of the blessed, who has narrowly reached his final destination, and who has rejected life by leading the life of a hypocrite without partaking even faintly in the fullness of life available through the body of Christ. The church as ‘body of Christ’ is not a set of juridical rules designed to reward conformists or to tie salvation to the obedient keeping of superficial rituals and orders. Those solidly occupying the grounds of the institutionalized laws may end up on the outside – and vice versa – given that the church father Justin (unlike the zealot Augustine) already considered unbaptized worshippers of the logos, like Heraclitus and Socrates, Christians.\footnote{53} Dante rests upon this orthodox tradition when he redeems the unbaptized heathens Ripheus and Cato while sending straight to hell five of the six popes he lived to see.\footnote{54}

As in the case of Walter Benjamin referred to above, the Last Judgment is not about creating a balance sheet for sin and expiation. The goal is rather to expose the hypocrisy of evil. The devil is God’s double, says Michel Foucault, rather unoriginally.\footnote{55} Already by the Middle Ages, the devil was considered God’s monkey.\footnote{56} Dante relies on this tradition when portraying the devil as a frozen, three-faced counter-image of God’s Trinitarian fullness. Satan has no regard for the copyrights of the reformed age of Gutenberg; there are no rational criteria by which to secure our righteousness. But that does not prevent us from following the example of the seer of Patmos by engaging in divination and anticipating the moment of truth. The counter-image of God is loveless because it is loveless. Here, prophets, seers, exorcists, and saints are in a position to provide help due to their ability to detect differences that do not exist in academic modes of inquiry.
The Smile of Beatrice

In full accordance with the medieval apocalyptic tradition, Dante’s *Commedia* focuses on the here and now of the moment of truth; at the same time, however, it has the character of an *Itinerarium* in the style of Bonaventura. In keeping with the tradition of medieval mystagogy and its literary pendant, the courtly novel (clearly invoked by the first verses of the *Commedia* with their motifs of paths and forests), this road map consists of three steps: purification, illumination, and unity with God.

In the beginning, Dante faces a mysterious mountain. In the peculiar movement toward conversion, however, the road to salvation first leads downward. The grace of salvation is granted only to those who have learned to look down into the infernal abyss of their souls. Following the scene in the forest, Dante meets great historical figures on his pilgrimage through hell (purification), purgatory (illumination) and heaven (unity with God). Their faces, however, also serve as mirror images of his own soul— from the lovable but unredeemed face of Francesca (Inf. 5) which throws Dante to the ground, to the uplifting gaze into the mysterious face/visage of Christ (Par. 30,40ff).

The crucial mediator between the passages more accessible to the modern reader, that is the historical and documentary parts of the first two stretches of the pilgrimage, and the more abstract and contemplative passages of Dante’s heaven, is the figure of Beatrice. When first reunited with the real-world love of his youth, Dante turns “like a child” to his pagan guide Vergil (Purg. 30, 22ff.). Vergil, however, is no longer able to follow at this crucial juncture. After all, Beatrice’s eyes reflect Christ and therefore serve as a reminder of that what, according to Dante at least, Vergil never possessed and Dante temporarily lost sight: the divine grace to rejoice in the beauty of creation in a state of selfless love (Purg. 30-31).

Beatrice then speaks a few words of warning. Dante, conscious of guilt, agrees with her, without however being able to utter as much as a simple ‘yes’; the face of Beatrice repeatedly reduces him to stammering child. When Dante matures into a grown-up again after this first reunion, his regained sense of responsibility is not the one of a modern, Kantian ‘subject’; it is more like that which belongs to a creature that is born to be free and has never lost his innocence. After all, children have one thing in common with ‘God’s children’ who are reborn in Christ: they are neither bound by ends and duties, nor restricted by the clear demarcation between a ‘subjective’ inner and an ‘objective’ outer world. Dante’s newly awakening childhood restores his appreciation for the calm and contemplative serenity of a liturgy that transcends the distinction between dream and reality. There is no more purpose, only the meaningful presence of the being-as-gift which has to be neither earned nor fought for. Shortly before this, Vergil had bid his farewell with the enigmatic words “Take what pleases you to be your guide” (Purg 27, 131). The encounter with Beatrice reveals to Dante the playful seriousness of his regained freedom.

Subsequent to this turning point, the gaze up to the stars unfolds the contemplative sense of the world’s symbolic weight on the level of a ‘cosmic liturgy’. Dante’s gaze to heaven, like his astronaut’s gaze back to “this globe such that I smiled at its ignoble semblance” (Par 22,133ff.), is real in a spatial sense and yet differs from the paranoiac gaze of a modern, distanced observer. Stars and Beatrice’s smile have one thing in common: God’s being manifests itself in ephemeral
concreteness; and this chance concreteness is transparent to his unchanging being. Dream and reality, the visible and the invisible, touch each other and reveal the meaning of the lived moment.

The symbol for this synthesis of unrestrained expression and sober reflection is the smile.\(^{61}\) Each smile of Beatrice brings Dante one step closer to reconciliation with himself: “To the divine delight which shone upon me when to her smiling face I turned me round” (Par. 27,88ff.). When everything that appears to be unfolded across our temporal universe ultimately enfolds into one single point (Par 33,79ff.), then the regained simplicity allows for a tentative insight into the dialectically unmediated oneness of dream and reality in the mystical contemplation of God. Dante recognizes in the simplicity of the divine point the triune bond of divine love through which God smiles at himself: “O Light Eterne, sole in thyself that dwellest, sole knowest thyself, and, known unto thyself and knowing, lovest and smilest on thyself!” (Par 33,121ff.)\(^{62}\)

In this context it will not come as a surprise that, in the end, the face of the Redeemer incarnate enters into the threefold circular movement of the Trinitarian smile – the same face which Nietzsche’s \textit{Anti-Christ} would still associate with the rolling wheel of an innocently playing child: “Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea”\(^{63}\), says Zarathustra. The face of Dante’s Christ icon says the same. It belongs to someone who has not lost sight of the playful innocence of God’s self-sufficient fullness even in moments of the most desperate misery.

The symbolism of this kind of mystagogic ascendency is no longer meaningful for us since, in the aftermath of the Reformation, even Catholics have forgotten the Occident’s liturgical-spiritual heritage.\(^{64}\) The final cantos of the \textit{Divina Commedia} have a visionary character; however, they are not engaging in an esoteric experiment, but rather seek to give us a foretaste of the mystical vision of God (\textit{visio dei}, 1 Kor. 13:12). During Dante’s lifetime, this vision still had a clearly defined space: contemplation.\(^{65}\)

A Foretaste of \textit{Visio Dei}: Dante’s “Heaven”

Our natural desire for the beautiful, perfect and good cannot find its fulfillment in a parallel universe populated with individualized immortal souls. Modern atheists like Ludwig Feuerbach and Richard Wagner still had knowledge of the fact that the “soap bubbles of the world of the future” was an invention of the modern bourgeoisie.\(^{66}\) There is no space for soap bubbles in Dante’s symbolic-realist universe. God’s glory does not manifest itself in a parallel universe, but in the ‘Empyreum’ which, according to Dante, can never be pinned down, neither on a spatial, nor on a temporal axis. The Empyreum is both infinite sphere and unextended point.\(^{67}\) What appeared to be temporally and spatially separate throughout the pilgrimage exists there in complete, albeit unmixed, unity and in perfect harmony – what comes apart in our creation coalesces into the blossoming life of a rose.\(^{68}\)

As a consequence of recognizing his unity with God, the Christian pilgrim is also united with his brothers and sisters. In the end, however, these are merely poetic transcriptions of a truth that can only be seen and understood in the mode of contemplation. Dante makes this abundantly clear. When he seemed to encounter the souls of the dead during his ascent towards the contemplation of God, these were only figurative manifestations of an ecstatic and transcendent reality beyond time and space. “To speak thus is adapted to your mind, since only through the sense it apprehendeth what then it worthy makes of intellect” (Par 4, 40ff.).
The Frost Point of the Universe: Dante’s Hell

The symbolic opposite of this poetic scenario of heaven is the exact reverse of its contemplative symbolism. For this reason, the notion of ‘sin’ does not primarily refer to moral wrongdoing, but instead circumscribes a habitual lack of orientation: the desperate attempt to turn away from God which has now become the sinner’s second nature. Moral wrongdoing is nothing more than a symptom; it betrays Adam’s irrational fear of losing himself in the marveling praise of the divine fullness of life. This explains the perverse intent of Dante’s sinners to cross the Acheron at the edge of hell. Their fear has turned into an inverted desire. (Inf 3,112)

Following this logic, God’s name is not mentioned a single time in the Inferno. The language of those who call God by his name expresses the joy of receiving – a joy lost to those living in hell. This is consistent with the Augustinian tradition of the Middle Ages in that evil is a consequence of Adam’s superbia, that is the narcissist desire to have full control over oneself, to be ‘autonomous’. Envy and hatred are the most elementary symptoms of this compulsion to control. Such attitudes thwart the ability to give and receive freely, with gratitude and without calculation. Typical for such a perverted attitude towards life is the pathos-ridden pride of Ugolino at the end of the last canto of the Inferno. The unfathomable hatred of the traitor against his avenger, the archbishop Ruggieri, turns him into stone. His inability to forget makes him deaf, and blocks his ability to respond to the voices of his innocently suffering children.

Dante’s mercilessly realistic ontology of evil follows this path when depicting the devil at the end of canto 33. Modernity re-mythologized evil in the wake of the Romantic rebellion against the moralizing cult of virtue, as put forward by post-reformation Christianity, with Milton’s Paradise Lost serving as founding document. For this reason, the ambiguity of evil is considered sexy nowadays. From De Sade to Tarantino and to post-modernity’s evening television, modern evil is seen as an appealing option. Dante’s cosmology, however, has as little regard for this soap bubble as for Immanuel Kant’s postulate of ‘heaven’. His theory of the Satanic can be compared only to the Deutschlandtrilogie of the German performance artist and director Christoph Schlingensief: evil is impotent, mechanical, monotonous, and lacks imagination; it is the sheer negative (privation) of life which gives itself up freely. When Dante crosses the river Lethe at the edge of heaven towards the end of the Purgatorio, he leaves his habitual feelings of hatred behind. Hell is the opposite of this blissful forgetting: the waters of Lethe are frozen under Satan’s monotonously rising and falling wings. The fallen three-faced angel is barely alive enough to chew mechanically on the traitors Judas, Brutus, and Cassius.

It goes without saying that God’s name does not appear in this frozen world, and yet, the divine fullness of life is present in a depressing manner. After all, the paradox of evil consists in its ontic impossibility: “Since we cannot think of any being standing alone, nor from the First divided.” (Purg, 17, 91-111) Hence resentment, hence the inability to forget. And yet, Divine light is omnipresent; it shines like bright daylight in even the darkest of hell’s abysses. Already the psalmist knew this when he wrote: “If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in hell, you are there! (…) If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.” (Psalm 139:8.11-12)
This ontological paradox explains the phantom-like yet corporeal character of the Dantesque torments in hell. When one is forced to disregard the difference between what is animated and what is dead in an effort to keep God at bay, mourning the loss of the spiritual center of life becomes indistinguishable from physical pain. The evil subject resembles the petty bourgeois from Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death*: he has lost the ability to distinguish between the pain suffered from lost love from the pain caused by spoiled fish.

The Indefinable “In-Between”: Dante’s Purgatory

The evil subject turns pathetically around itself; the redeemed creature turns around the overflowing abundance of the self-giving divine life. By contrast, purgatory moves like a spiral, which allows Dante to symbolize the ‘in-between-space’ between the fickle temporality of our unredeemed earthly life and the eternal instant of the contemplative life of the blessed.

For this reason, it is misleading to follow Luther and Jacques Le Goff in defining purgatory as a third space. Strictly speaking, not even eternal life holds the status of a spatially distinct ‘afterlife’. It fulfills itself in the eternal Now, which has neither beginning, nor end. This Now, however, may reverberate in the world of those who are still inhabiting the temporal world as a kind of ‘afterlife’. What enfolds into a seamless Now in the contemplation of God, unfolds into past, present, and future in our temporal mode of being. In this manner, the traces left behind by the dead in our physical and spiritual world can have an impact on our threefold temporal life.

In our earthly life, nothing happens that does not echo in the resonating cavern of the universe; and the things we do frequently create an ambivalent echo. The medieval individual was not yet “buffered” against such resonances; he or she was rather open and permeable, at the mercy of the spirits of his or her environs. Nor was it thought to be in any way desirable to seek immunization against such resonances. After all, the desire for redemption was tantamount to the desire to rid oneself of those buffers and shells that seal the individual off from God and his or her fellow creatures (Purg 2, 118ff.; 11, 121ff).

The orthodox prayer for the dead is a logical consequence of this musical understanding of life. The articulation of love, friendship, and intercession, materialized in liturgical and cultic habits, enable the deceased to remember the past and to rejoice in the higher beatitude of superior beings without resentment and envy. Lingering feelings of envy and hatred, by contrast, prevent the deceased from accepting the lives they led as part of a harmonious and well-ordered whole.

The prevailing mood in the spiraling circular movement of the deceased in Dante’s purgatory is consequently one of hope and joy, although it cannot yet manifest itself in all its impulses and affections. For that to happen, the intercession of the living is required, and even then, the unfulfilled potential of the lives they lived can only become actualised in the Last Judgement, at the point when the earthly life’s fickle flow will calm down and when the enduring kernel of their souls will be re-united with the traces of their historical and physical existence.

At the end of the purifying ascent through this interim world, Dante sees processes of creative forgetting (the waters of *Letha*) and of grateful remembrance (the waters of *Eunoe*). Nobody has described the dynamics of this ascent of contemplative abstraction in more fitting terms than William Wordsworth in his poem *Tintern Abbey* (1798). The poet returns to the place
of his childhood and, for the first time, sees his whole life without distortion, with alert memory, vivid volition and sober insight all in complete harmony (Purg. 25,76ff.):

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and ’mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration (...)
That serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on, –
Until, the breathe of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

6 “As soon as one no longer knows who speaks or writes, the text becomes apocalyptic.” Derrida, “Apocalyptic Tone,” 57. For an interpretation of the meaning of the messengers and guides in Dante, see Romano Guardini, Dantes Göttliche Komödie. Ihre philosophischen und religiösen Grundgedanken (Vorlesungen) (Mainz: Matthias-Günewald-Verlag 1998), 275-331.
Ambrosio’s reading of Dante focuses on Derrida’s “aporia of forgiveness” without giving much thought to Derrida’s reading of the *Apocalypse of St. John*. The following reception of Derrida puts his negative thinking in brackets, based on a radicalized notion of the post-structuralist *epoche*, which I have discussed elsewhere in greater depth: Johannes Hoff, "Mystagogy Beyond Onto-theology. Looking back to Post-modernity with Nicholas of Cusa". In: Arne Moritz (Ed.), A Companion to Nicholas of Cusa (Leiden: Brill 2013).


12 "Wo geht (...) schon so zu, dass ein Ungeheuer herabstürzt und nicht ankommt?" Guardini, *Dantes Göttliche Komödie*, 89.


15 See Herzman, "Dante and the Apocalypse" 412. Differing from Flasch in his "Einladung, Dante zu lesen," Herzman rejects modern attempts to project the historical-realist position the first book of Dante's *Monarchia* back into the *Commedia* – and does so with sound reason. Similarly, he also rejects Kenelm Foster’s argument (for which Flasch also has sympathies) that *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* deal with our earthly, while the *Paradiso* would be about our celestial destiny. See Kenelm Foster, *The Two Dantes, and Other Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1977). Instead, Herzman argues, the dramaturgy of the *Divina Commedia* would have the character of “a poem of conversion (...) ending in the vision of God face to face” (Herzman, 403).


18 Herzman, "Dante and the Apocalypse" 407. On Dante’s explicit references to St. John, see Beal, Rebecca S., "Beatrice in the Sun: A Vision from Apocalypse." In: *Dante Studies* 103 (1985), 57-78.


23 Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Einleitung, loc. 214-27; and Canto 3, Anm. 1-9 (loc. 13595). Einleitung, loc. 533ff.; und loc. 684-701; Inf. 5, Anm. 88f. (loc. 13694); Purg. 1, Anm. 31 (loc. 14754ff); and Par. 20, Anm. 37-72 (loc. 17349ff).

24 Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Einleitung, loc. 214-27; and Canto 3, Anm. 1-9 (loc. 13595). Einleitung, loc. 533ff.; und loc. 684-701; and Inf. 5, Anm. 88f. (loc. 13694); Purg. 1, Anm. 31 (loc. 14754ff); and Par. 20, Anm. 37-72 (loc. 17349ff).

25 Inf. 15,100ff. The widespread suspicion of sodomy with regard to medieval intellectuals like Bruno Latini cannot be substantiated in his case.


35 In all phases of his thought, Derrida appears to be inspired by this tonality of biblical apocalypticism. His very first publication states in response to his phenomenological teacher Husserl "no doubt [he] would admit that a universal conflagration, a world-wide burning of libraries, or a catastrophe of monuments or ‘documents’ in general would intrinsically ravage bound cultural idealities." Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (First Bison Book Printing 1989), 94.

36 The following paragraph is paraphrasing Hoff, "Fundamentaltheologische Implikationen der Apokalyptik" 117-119.

37 The words of Apoc 5,1 are modeled after the description of a scroll in Ez 2,10: “And it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.” See Müller, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 153ff.

38 Here, Dante also follows in the footsteps of his model St. John: Inf. 14; Purg. 29; Par. 4; 29


For this reason, the modern tendency to elevate Hegel's notion of God's self-revelation to the status of a key concept of Christian theology is very problematic. Johannes Hoff, "The Rise and the Fall of the Kantian Paradigm of Modern Theology". In: Conor Cunningham; Peter M. Candler (Ed.), *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism* (London: SCM-Press 2010), 167-196.

Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Purg. 20, Anm. 19f. (loc. 15728); Purg. 29, Anm. 16f. (loc. 16046ff.); and Par. 1, Anm. 1f. (loc. 16345).

Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice. A Study in Dante* (London: Faber and Faber limited 1943).


Justin, *The First and Second Apologies*. Transl. with an introduction and notes by Leslie William Barnard (New York: Paulist Press 1997), I 46. Dante repeatedly deals with the embattled theological question of whether the unbaptized can reach heaven. However, he does not hesitate to place them in heaven whenever his poetic intuition calls for it. See Inf. 4, 34ff.; Purg. 3,40ff.; 7,25ff.; 21,18; 22,67ff; Par. 1, 67ff.; Par. 19,70ff.


Michel Foucault, "Das Trugbild Gottes". In: Michel Foucault; Pravu Mazumdar (Ed.), *Foucault* (München: 1997), 134ff.

Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Einleitung (loc. 321ff.).

On the Christian notion of "maturation" as "an event within childhood", see John Milbank, John, "Fictioning Things: Gift and Narrative." In: *Religion & Literature* 37 no. 3 (2005), 1-35.


Purg. 21,103ff.; 32, 1ff.; Par. 7,10ff.; 14, 67ff.; 15,55ff.; 21,1ff.; 27,1ff.; etc.

Kirkpatrick translates this passage as follows: "You, knowing, love and smile on your own being". By contrast, Flasch, more prosaically, speaks of "Lachen".


Western modernity took little notice of Dante's theory that "For evermore the man in whom is springing thought upon thought, removes from him the mark, because the force of one the other weakens." (Purg. 5,15). It was not until the 20th century that the contemplative roots of Christianity were rediscovered: "The call to meditation, for the early Fathers of the Church, was a call to purity of heart and that is what innocence is (...). Meditation leads us to pure clarity – clarity of vision, clarity of understanding and clarity of love – a clarity that comes from simplicity." John Main, *The Way of Unknowing. Expanding Spiritual Horizons Through Meditation* (New York: Crossroads 1990), 19f.


According to Dante, the Empyreum is both a sphere surrounding all of the universe and an unextended point in God's mind (Par 17,109-20). See also Guardini, *Dantes Göttliche Komödie*, 133, 419-421.

Par 2, 19-51; 30,100ff.; 33,79-96.

On the habitual character of sin as ossified misconduct, see Inf. 11.


For a deconstruction of the tendency in classical modernism to see Ugolino's desperation as an act of heroism (still visible in Kurt Flasch), see Robin Kirkpatrick and Vittorio Montemaggi, "Theology and Literature: Reflections on Dante and Shakespeare". In: Crisp.Oliver D.; Peter Hampson; Gavin D'Costa; Mervyn Davies (Ed.), *Christianity and the Disciplines* (London - New York: T & T Clark 2012).

Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press 2010), 120f.


For this reason, Dante gives those who live in hell phantom-like bodies (Inf. 3,31f.).


According to Dante, the cross holds the musical universe together. (Par 14,82-126; Par. 1,73ff.)
Dante illustrates this serene attitude towards the beauty of earthly hierarchies with the example of Jacob (Gen 25), who was given preference over his elder brother based on the color of his hair alone (Par. 32,49ff.; Par 3, 67ff.; and 6,112ff.).

“Brother, our will is quieted by virtue of charity, that makes us wish alone for what we have, nor gives us thirst for more.” Par. 3,67ff.