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Dante's Poetics of 'Honestum:'
The Difference: 'Parlare Onesto' and 'Parola Ornata'

The purpose of this essay is to analyze Dante's self-definition of poeta rectitudinis and honestatis within the context of medieval philosophical writings regarding the Stoic theory of honestum.¹ I would like to verify to what extent the notion of honestum may be applied both to him, as author, and to his poetry. Recent criticism claims that Dante, in writing the Commedia, is aware of being a deceitful rhetorician.² Any interpretation deserves respect. I would like, however, to stress the difference set by Dante between 'parlare onesto' and 'parola ornata'; for him rhetoric is a genus whose specific differences are honest and dishonest. An honest literature stems from the combination of the author's "right reason" enveloped within 'parola ornata'. I believe that Dante has deliberately chosen the Stoic attribute honestum to qualify his poetical rhetoric as a powerful instrument designed to bring about a sociopolitical redemption. As an honest rhetorician, he will contrast those "who have turned this lady [literature] into a prostitute," (Conv. 1.9.5) and, at the same time, elevate poetry to the rank of a noble lady whose speech is "noble" ("parlando onesto," Inf. 10.23). Dante proposes his new theory of art, which privileges "the good of intellect," that is, the "truth" (Conv. 2.13.6), as the foundation and the soul of rhetoric. False rhetoric is the language of those who have "lost the good of intellect;" hence the distinction between Virgil and Jason. Both use 'parole ornate,' but Virgil, contrary to the deceiver Jason, utters a "noble speech" "in which one may trust" ("fidandomi del tuo parlare onesto" "trusting in your noble speech," Inf. 2.113).³ The honestum, as we will see, is a complex whole made of elements which constitute the heart of his Commedia envisaged as a poetical treatise "of the good" (Inf. 1.8).

After his experience of poetry as an aesthetic contemplation addressed to a limited group of 'intenditori d'amore,' Dante reconsiders, both in the Convivio and in De Vulgari Eloquentia, the notion of poetical activity. Man, seen as the Aristotelian "social animal," must perform a political activity intended to help humans reach their ethical and religious goals. By the attribute honestum, he qualifies both the nature and the scope of the poet's sphere of action, and, consequently, of his product. Indeed, Dante's concept of honestum or rectitudo originates from Cicero's theory as interpreted by St. Augustine and

¹ Cicero's "Honestum" as interpreted by St. Augustine and...
St. Albert the Great. In *De Invenzione* 2.52.157, Cicero defines “virtue,” science” and “truth” as honestum, that is, “something which draws us to it by its intrinsic merit, not winning us by any prospect of gain, but attracting us by its own worth” (quidam quod sua vi nos alliciat ad sese, non emolumento captans aliquo, sed trahens sua dignitatem, quod genus virtus, scientia, veritas`). St. Albert in *De Bono* paraphrases Cicero’s definition and applies it to the notion of honestum: “Honestum est quod sua vi trahit et allicit propria et connaturali sibi dignitatem, quam pretendit” (230.72). In fact, for St. Albert honestum expresses the intrinsic worthiness of something; it is a potential (pote-stativum) concept implying verum bonum pulchrum. Dante devotes chapter two of the second book of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* to discuss the term dignum, the worthiness of the various topics of poetry. He makes a gradation of “worthy,” “worthier” and “worthiest” topics (“aliquid dignum, aliquid dignius, aliquid dignissimum,” *DVE* 2.2.5); then he concludes: “Tertio [the dignissimum] in eo quod est honestum; in quo nemo dubitat esse virtuteum” “Third [the worthiest] as regards what is right, no one doubts that this is virtue” (*DVE* 2.2.7). Following the Ciceronian association between honest politics and rhetoric, Dante, as I noted, corrects his previous notion of poetical activity and presents literature, and specifically poetry, as an expression of an honest socio-political-religious interaction between the poet and his society. Against a “consumers’ literature,” defined as ‘donna meretrice’ ("a prostitute"), Dante promotes a literature which must be an honest “gift” (‘dono’), given by an “honest writer;” its scope, therefore, must “serve many” honestly (Conv. 1.9.2), that is to say, poetry must be the honest guide of the will (“directio voluntatis” *DVE* 2.2.7).5

Dante’s self-definition of poeta honestatis is manifest in the new poetical trend he set, whose originality consists in transferring the poet’s activity from a limited area to a universal sphere of action: Dante makes poetry enter the social-political arena. Obviously, he does not subordinate a poet to a political party, but elevates him to the rank of a prophet.6 Poetry must reflect ratio scripta in nature and enlighten the pilots of the ship carrying humans to their proper ends. Hence, the poet must be honest and responsible in order to create poetry, that is, a true, good, beautiful.

It is worth noting that these traditional values, incorporated within the concept of honestum – each strictly related to the other, and, at the same time, distinct from each other – were considered to be the qualifying attributes of existent reality. the natural product of the divine Artist, which was designed to help humans discover the Supreme Good in nature. The poet’s activity, according to Dante’s ontological mimesis, is supposed to create a poetical artifact modeled on res creata. Honest poetry, like a true-good-beautiful reality, will attract human senses and minds.

In Dante’s works, in fact, the notion of poetics is classical: a poet is an artificer who acts and moves, as any other agent, with a specific end in his mind. As philosophers used to say: *omne agens agit propter finem* [all agents
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act by reason of an end)). The end of Dante’s poetical activity in the Convivio is “fare un generale convivio” (“to provide a full scale banquet,” 1.1.11); in so doing, he is “moved by the desire to give instruction” (Conv.1.2.15); for this purpose, he will dish out “lo pane de li angeli” (“the bread of angels,” Conv. 1.1.7). In the Commedia he attempts “to treat of the good that [he] found” (Inf. 1.8); the Commedia, as an aesthetically accomplished work, is the means to reach the author’s end (finis operantis). But we must be aware of the fact that the masterpiece, as a finished product, has its own specific reason for being (finis operis); it belongs to the artistic category; like an architect’s work, it is judged good or bad (bonum), not just if it carries out a moral or immoral intention, but if it fulfills all the requirements postulated by the canon of art.7 Hence, it is possible to have a work of art that is artistically valuable, but morally worthless. Dante is aware of the differentiation between the two categories. In point of fact, he applies this theory in the Purgatorio. The pilgrim extols both the poetry of Guido Guinizelli’s (“dolci detti” [sweet verses], Purg. 26.112), and Arnaut’s (“versi d’amore” [‘verses of love,” 26.118]): Dante’s aesthetic judgment focuses on their works which show a superior artistic perfection, regardless of their delectabile content; on the contrary, he attacks Guittone’s poetry’s missing its artistic beauty, despite its high degree of morality.

However, Dante’s poetics of honestum differs from all the above-mentioned poets in that he proposes a qualitative transformation of both the content and its aesthetic form: the content must be of a scientific and moral quality and must be presented in a suitable and appropriate dress. This “nova materia e più nobile” constitutes the difference between Dante and Arnaut. As a matter of fact, he makes Arnaut pronounce a self-deprecatory judgement on the moral content of his own poetical product: “Ieu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan; / consiros vei la passada folor” [‘I am Arnaut, who weep and sing as I go; contritely I see my past folly’]. In the Commedia, the intended purpose of the poet happens to coincide with the artistic end of his work.

Perfect poetry, then, must be “honest,” that is, it has to bring into a harmonious unity intellectual-moral values (true-good) and aesthetic worth (beautiful) in order to “direct human will” to its proper end (DVE 2.2.8). I will expand my point by discussing the following issues: (1) Dante’s poetics as an activity implying “science, genius and art.” (2) Honestum, as the true good, must constitute the soul of poetry. (3) Dante’s Ciceronian rhetoric: “bene dicere, quod est scieret et perite et ornate dicere.”

1. Dante’s poetics as an activity implying “science, genius and art”

It is well known that the etymon of poetics is from the Greek verb poieo, which has a variety of meanings, all of them related to human activity (that is, to make, to manufacture, to construct, to invent, to create) and its products
(see Curtius 145-47). The cognate words, generated from this verbal form, are poietes who is the author of the poiesis, that is, of a product, and poietikos is what is pertinent to poiesis. This semantic use of the noun ‘poetics’ remains unchanged for Dante: the poietes is an artifex or artificer (“operarii e artefici di diverse arti,” Conv. 4.6.6); instead, God, the Author of heaven and earth, is considered the artist-creator par excellence. Hence, the human artist is only an artificer (artifex) who makes things in imitation of their divine, genuine correspondent forms. Human activity, therefore, is related to four different categories of being: (I) “natural, supernatural and mathematical things” (“si come sono le cose naturali e le sopranaturali e le matematiche,” Conv. 4.9.5); (II) “intellectual matters” (“si come sono arti di parlare”); (III) “material things” (“mechanical arts”); (IV) moral categories. In this sphere of action, Dante stresses that our intellect is limited; it can study and contemplate things belonging to the first three categories, but it does not have any power to transform their inner structure into new realities. Thus, a sculptor, who deals with material things, may add a form to the marble; but this form does not change the intrinsic composition of elements which make the marble what it is. Only moral activity – in virtue of the agent’s freedom – may generate new forms of life, which bring into existence good or bad historical situations (“There are [...] other activities which the intellect studies that do result from an act of the will [...] all of these are entirely dependent for their existence on their account, for they are entirely ours in the strict sense,” Conv. 7). This consideration leads the Florentine politician to compare “human will” to a “horse” which must be ridden by a rider who knows “the art” of controlling the human will (Conv. 10).

In this part of the Convivio (4.9), Dante focuses on the nature of the ars politica. But, as his discourse proceeds, Dante develops a theory of art which eliminates the rift between artistic, philosophical and theological activity; artistic activity presupposes a philosophical and theological exercise (’studio’). Poets, theologians, philosophers and scientists are all together under the same umbrella of “trovatori” (Conv. 4.2.6) or “finders” who devote themselves to the study of the universe in order to discover the nature of the divine work, and search for what constitutes the true good of the universe. A poet must also discover the rules (the poietikos) the divine Artist applied in order to create His masterpiece. In this context, Dante underlines the contingency of human art on divine art: “natura lo suo corso prende / dal divino intelletto e da sua arte” [“Nature takes her course from divine Intellect and from Its art”], whereas, “l’arte vostra quella quanto pote, / segue, come il maestro fa il discinte; / si che vostr’arte a Dio quasi è nepote” [“your art, as far as it can, follows her, as the pupil does his master; so that your art is as it were grandchild of God”] (Inf. 11.100-4).

The “trovatore-poet”, therefore, first has to find the true-good (“veritade e virtude”) within nature (Conv. 3.3.11). Obviously to find is not to create new
truths, “for it is not we who are their makers in the strict sense; what we do is discover them” (“però che di queste operazioni non fattori propriamente, ma li trovatori semo,” 4.9.6).8

However, once the “trovatore” has discovered the true-good (“veritate e virtude”), he has the duty to share his discovery with others. He has to use his genius or imagination to represent his findings artistically: human art (the unity of res and signum) has to be as close as possible to divine art. In this view, the mimetic nature of art consists not just of imitating the external features of reality, but of bringing into being a visible reality – the external body of poetry – through which the hidden soul – the meaning – reveals itself. Dante offers models of divine art in the Commedia. In the Purgatorio, he describes a meta-historical and prenatural art, which is like an Aristotelian synolos, as a synthesis made of sign and living meaning (“ombre e’ tratti”) affecting the human mind to such a degree that “Morti li morti e i vivi parean vivi” (“dead the dead, and the living seemed alive” (Purg. 12.67). In the Paradiso, all the heavenly vision is presented as a “segno”: Qui si mostraro, non perché sortita / sia questa spera loro, ma per far segno / della spiritual c’ha men salita” (“These showed themselves here, not because this sphere is allotted to them, but to afford sign of the celestial grade that is least exalted,” Par. 4.37]. The Spirits become the soul (res significata) like the twelve Doctors of the Church in the sphere of the sun, whose visible and talking body is a garland (the sign). In the Paradiso 18, each letter of “diligite justitiam qui iudicatis terram” is the sign of a soul. Dante’s art, in other words, is not a ‘presentation’ of a new truth; but an artistic ‘representation’ that, through the poet’s imagination, makes the truth visible, alive and “talking”.9

Dante’s poetics, in fact, is solidly based on the three pillars: scientia, ars, and ingenium (DVE 2.1). All three are required for an honest poet, whose poetry must become a luminous source enlightening and directing individuals in their socio-political life. Contrary to St. Thomas’ notion of art which is merely speculative, Dante presents a poetical system which implies that the liberal arts are the synthesis of both speculative and practical activity, that is to say, poetry is the result of philosophical and theological research, expressed in an artistic form, designed to attract and enlighten. Poetry is the product both of actio and factio.10 The former describes the scientific activity of the “trovatore”-poet who uses his cognitive power to turn his findings into conceptual forms (optime conceptiones, DVE 2.1), which become like a written “right reason” (recta ratio = “la ragione scritta,” Conv. 4.9.8). In this sense, art is not just speculative, but practical: poetry is committed to docere, that is, to enlighten societies and especially those who “are devoid of knowledge and culture” (“coloro che non hanno vita di scienza e d’arte,” Conv. 2.1.3). Hence, the liberal arts embrace the universe (“per cielo io intendo la scienza e per cieli le scienze” [“by ‘heaven’ I mean knowledge”], Conv. 2.13.2), in that an artistic product encapsulates the cosmic “light” of the science which “illu-
mina [le cose] intelligibili” (“sheds light on the things that can be perceived by the intellect.” Conv. 4) and “[induce] perfezione ne le disposte cose” [“and brings about] perfection in things disposed to receive it” Conv. 5]. Factio, on the other hand, regards the artistic activity of composing and disposing (poetria) the matter which is designed to manifest the inner power (the soul) of poetry. The role of the poet’s genius consists exactly in selecting and elaborating and adapting it to the concepts according to the rules of the “art of music” (Conv. 1.7.14; 4.6.4). To accomplish this requirement, the poet (he who creates = facit) has to resort to the rhetorical system which furnishes the material to build a suitable, beautiful and attractive body.

At this point, one wonders what is the difference between a scientific work and a poetical one? May poetry generate truths? Obviously, artistic activity differs from the scientific: a scientific discourse is designed to present a rational, syllogistic demonstration leading to a truth previously unknown; the most perfect demonstration was demonstratio propter quid, an argumentation showing the ultimate causes of a thing (cognitio per ultimas causas). On the contrary, for Dante a poetical discourse is not a demonstration designed to show a new truth, but a visible representation of well-known truths, represented through rhetorical devices, which, however, must not spoil the nature of the truth. In this sense Dante defines himself as a poeta-theologus (Par. 2.10-18). The dogma of Hell presented by theologians is substantially the same as Dante’s: it is eternal; it is made for Angels and humans who have lost the good of intellect by turning their back on God. By creating its architectural structure, Dante shows the same truth more vividly, convincingly and pleasurably both to the physical senses and to the “eye of the mind” (Conv. 1.11.3). For this reason, I believe, Dante’s poetics, as expounded in the De Vulgari Eloquentia, is intended not only as a traditional Poetria, an ars dictandi, metricandi, rithmicandi” (“Art of writing letters, of quantitative verse, and of rhymed syllabic verse”) (John of Garland 2) but rather as a code of principles suggesting how to fashion both the soul and the body of a perfect poem.

As stated earlier, Dante’s notion of mimesis suggests that a poetical product (poiesis) has to be an existent artificial reality analogous to res creata. Poetry must be made of a form, which is first “in the artist’s mind,” then embedded in matter or “in the technique,” and finally “in the medium.” In this view, the human artist is to God as his art is to nature (“nature is in God as its prime mover, then in the celestial bodies, which are his instruments and by which the image of his eternal goodness is manifested in the material flux or medium of his art”). Hence, before becoming visible, art is present in the artist’s mind as causa exemplaris (the mental exemplary pattern); fictio rhetorica is the body fashioned suitable to the artist’s idea. In point of fact, Dante conceives the soul of poetry as analogous either to “the vegetable or animal or rational soul” (DVE 2.2.6). The poetical form must be embedded
in a body, which has to be an “appropriate” (convenientia) sounding language, through which the form manifests itself (DVE 2.1.6).

I would like to examine further these two essential elements of Dante’s poetics: the soul and the body of poetry, because his self-definition as a poet of “rectitude” and “honesty” is contingent on both these poetical components. Both the soul (“la bontade”) and the body (“la bellezza”) of poetry, even though distinct categories (ethics and aesthetics), constitute its substantial unity (“la bontade e la bellezza di ciascuno sermone sono intra loro partite e diverse; che la bontade è nella sentenza, e la bellezza è ne l’ornamento de le parole; e l’una e l’altra è con dilettoto, avvegna che la bontade sia massimamente dilettosa” [“the goodness and the beauty of what is said are always quite separate and distinct from each other; the goodness is found in the meaning, and the beauty in the verbal artistry; both bring delight, though the goodness is supremaly delightful”], Conv. 2.11.4).

2. Honestum: the Soul of Poetry (‘parlare onesto’)

As I stated earlier, the Florentine poet tells us that the “worthy” and “noble” subject he has chosen to be the soul of his poetry is honestum and rectitudo. We all know the profound semantic values implied by these words, which complement each other: rectitudo refers to a proper mental attitude identified with recta ratio (right reason or prudence); meanwhile, honestas connotes an external behaviour resulting from a right state of mind. This notion of honestas is at the center of Dante’s poetics; it is present in nuce in chapters 12-18 of the Vita Nuova, where the character of Love warns the poet to reject simulacra and replace Beatrice as the end of his love. For this reason, the poet is asked to subordinate the “useful” to Beatrice, the true good (“Non dimandare più che utile ti sia” [“do not ask any more what is useful to you”], 74. Trovato, “Il capitolo XII”). Following this admonition, the poet concludes: “a me convenne ripigliare matera nuova e più nobile de la passata [...]. E però pro-puosi di prendere per matera de lo mio parlare sempre mai quello che fosse loda di questa gentilissima” [“I felt forced to find a new theme, one nobler than the last. Therefore I resolved that from then on I would always choose as the theme of my poetry whatever would be in praise of this most gracious one”], 30.

In the Convivio, this proposal was reinforced by his philosophical and theological studies, which led him to interpret the Stoic notion of the end in the light of the Christian finis honorum, identified with divine Wisdom, the final cause of all goodness. As I noted in an earlier essay, (“Dante’s Poetics”) the Convivio is pervaded by the word “good,” which was considered an essential constituent of honestum. For Dante the good (“la bontade”) is the ontological value, the real nobility of any being and particularly of poetry. Dante’s
definition of “onesto,” “E diffinirò così questo onesto: quello che senza utilità e senza frutto, per sé di ragione è da laudare” (4.6.10) refers to Cicero’s De Finibus, where the author reports the Stoic opinion asserting the inseparability of equity and utility (“numquam aequitatem ab utilitate posse sejungi,” [“useful must not be separated from equity”], 3.21.71. For Cicero the foundation of honestum is the good; he writes “whatever is good is laudable, and whatever is laudable is honest; therefore, what is good is honest” (“Quod est bonum, omne laudabile est; quod autem laudabile est, omne est honestum; bonum igitur quod est, honestum est,” De Finibus), 3.8.27.20

The Ciceronian theory of good was re-interpreted by St. Augustine in his De Natura Boni, where he presents a new vision of cosmic reality. He reverses Plato’s and Plotinus’ equation: matter is evil, form is good, and, following the Bible and Aristotle, St. Augustine asserted that matter and form together are one and the same effect of divine cause. However, for the Doctor, even though matter and form have the same principle in God, they remain negative elements, in that they were corrupted by original sin.21 Consequently, man cannot reach the truth by virtue of his nature (reason and intelligence); he must believe in divine Authority in order to grasp the truth (credo ut intelligam).

In the thirteenth century, with the introduction of Aristotelian philosophy, philosophers thoroughly examined three main aspects of the good as presented by previous Neoplatonic speculation: the relationship between being and goodness; the good as the objective value of man’s psychological and ethical activity; whether the beautiful (pulchrum) is also a transcendental quality of being-truth-goodness. These studies, designed to emphasize the ontological goodness of nature, drew material not from Plato, but from Aristotelian works which, since the beginning of the century, were breathing a new cultural atmosphere into Western Europe. Thus, Summa de Bono by Philip the Chancellor (†1236)22 presupposes, as Dom Henri Pouillon has pointed out, “l’ontologie d’Aristote [...] d’Aristote, il reprend [...] quelques éléments concernant les notions d’unité, de vérité et de bonté” (43). Indeed, Philip’s main concern was to set forth a philosophical and theological system designed to present a new vision both of universal and anthropological nature. The influence of Summa de Bono on the works of St. Albert the Great De Natura Boni and De Bono and on St. Thomas’ treatise is indisputable.23

Philip the Chancellor’s Summa de Bono presents a philosophical system based on two main Aristotelian principles: (1) Being is both a participle and a noun. From Aristotle’s Metaphysics (book 4), Philip draws the notions of being as a being in its own nature and essence (ens ut ens); hence, as a participle, being is “He who is,” an essential attribute of Supreme Being. As a noun, being is an accident, attributed to anything existing in the universe; it is a property of res (2). Moreover, the Aristotelian principle of cause and effect helped Philip in thinking of a created being which, like its Cause, has to be one, true and good:
Ut a primo ente, secundum rationem unius efficiatur unumquodque ens unum ab ipso, secundum quod est causa formalis exemplaris, verum, secundum quod est finalis, bonum. (Q. 7.20)

[As depending on the primordial Being, any being is made by Him (God) as a unity, according to the reason of His own unity, as a true one, according to the exemplary cause, as a good one, according to the final cause].

However, the divine, transcendental characteristics (one, true, good) were not thought of as univocal, but analogical. The Supreme Cause shares its qualities in a series of different categories, which go from inanimate to animate beings, from imperfect to the most perfect forms. Oneness (unum) asserts the distinction of one being from another; truth (verum) declares the identity of a thing with its own specific nature; the good (bonum) is the seal affixed to a thing as evidence of its attained perfection, that is, an “act” (actus). Philip identifies the good with the substantial form (actus) and splits it in two:

Respondeo quod duplex est actus; est actus primus ipsius rei perfectio et secundum hoc bonum dicit actum, et est actus secundus qui de re egreditur, et sic actus dicit iustum, bonum autem non. (Q. 7.36)

[I reply that an act is twofold: the first is the perfection itself of a single thing, and according to it, an act is called good; the second act is that which emanates from the thing. In this case the act is called just but not good].

The second act cannot be called good, because it is in fieri, that is, an activity in its process of attaining its ultimate perfection. This distinction – Aristotelian in its origin – will become classic. Albert the Great (De Bono 653) and Thomas Aquinas (S.Th. 1. Q. 73, a.1) will make use of it. Dante, in turn, draws from these authors the concepts of the first and second perfection (“Onde con ciò sia cosa che due perfezioni abbia l’uomo, una prima e una seconda – la prima lo fa essere, la seconda lo fa essere buono” [“Granted, then, that man has two perfections, the first conferring being and the second perfection”], 1.13.3), then he forges a beautiful image to express the idea of good as the first act in its process of moving towards its perfection; he will call it “the seed of happiness, infused by God into the soul that is well placed” (“è manifesto che nobilitade umana non sia altro che seme di felicità, messo da Dio ne l’anima ben disposta”), 4.20.9. As a matter of fact the first ontological perfection, complete in its own nature, is like a seed which, set in its proper condition of living, becomes active and self-propelling to its natural maturity and perfection. Grounded on these metaphysical principles, Dante (a) acquires a new vision of love; (b) this new vision of love becomes the ultimate style of the Commedia; (c) the object of this love is the Universal Good.

By analyzing the Aristotelian theory of self-actualization (energeia), Philip interprets dynamis as the “appetite” or desire which constitutes the spring that compels the substantial form to move toward its full perfection:
Bonum est quod desideratur ab omnibus, est secundum naturalem appetitum Infixum unicumque rei secundum magis et minus. Quibusdam enim Infixus est appetitus respectu boni quod est beatitudo, ut intelligentia que eius nata est capax secundum quod determinatum est a Deo. Res autem irrationnabiles et huiusmodi appetunt conservationem sui esse secundum prefixum terminum a creatore. (Q.1.51)

[The good is what all beings crave for. It is Infixed in each thing according to a more or less natural appetite. In fact, in some there is Infixed an appetite that regards a good which is beatitude; for instance, the desire of an intelligent being is made able to desire what is determined by God. On the contrary, irrational beings and other similar to them long for their own conservation according to the limit established by God].

Consequently, the two cosmic, dynamic elements in nature are “appetite” and “good.” These two elements make all things move. Appetite is the cosmological energeia, that is, the centripetal force (appetitus = petere ad) which compels all beings to move in an orderly way toward the center that constitutes their specific perfection, that is, the good. The good, on the other hand, attracts all things “propria vi sua” (“by its own force”) (Pro A. Licinio Archia Oratio).

It is my conviction that the traditional theory of good and honestum exercised a decisive impact on Dante; it inspired the exiled poet to reject the early poetry which, grounded on Averroistic philosophy, misinterpreted the nature and function of human love. The story of the Vita Nuova shows an author whose vision of reality – particularly of human activity – is linked to Augustinian-Bonaventurian teaching. From the Convivio on, Dante presents his own theory, according to which the profound purpose of the “appetite” is not a selfish, pleasurable “utile.” In reading Convivio 2, one cannot but realize Dante’s enthusiasm in describing the “ardent longing (of that ninth heaven) to be united to every part of that most divine heaven which is at rest” [“lo ferventissimo appetito che è in ciascuna parte di questo nono cielo ... d’essere congiunta con ciascuna parte di quello divinissimo ciel quieto,” 2.3.9]. This “appetite,” as distinct from the Cavalcantian power of Mars, is a cosmic instinct compelling any being ab intrinseco toward its “second perfection.” Dante’s theory of ‘amore’, ‘appetito’, ‘desiderio’, therefore, originates from the traditional interpretation of Aristotle’s notion of good, for which Philip the Chancellor is responsible.24

On the other hand, St. Albert was not a passive recipient of the traditional theory of good. I would like to assert with De Bruyn that St. Albert’s philosophical synthesis of the traditional doctrine of good is truly the work of a genius and, I would add, of a poetical genius. His De Bono is an elaboration of the previous De Natura Boni.25 The basic principle of his cosmic synthesis of the good is the logical (ratione) distinction between reality (res bona) and its properties (21). Res is considered in its tripartite view: (1) in se or in its metaphysical and physical aspects; (2) in opere or in action, and (3) “as ordered to man’s intelligence and love, for whose instruction all things have
been made." Each of these categories is subdivided into three different angles mirroring the good (res bona) from the beginning of its first stage of existence to its full perfection. Thus, like the Dantean Beatrice, goodness-reality turns out to be a potential unity (totum potestativum) made of one, three, nine, twenty-seven.

I believe that the Albertian poetical approach to the macrocosmic and microcosmic reality reinforced the 'trovatore' Dante's determination to propose a poetics based on a new vision of anthropological activity: "Rectitude" and "honesty" must be the essential qualities of a poet who is committed to fashioning an existent, although artificial, piece of reality, which, like any other natural creature, should be one (unum), that is, have its own identity; true (verum), that is, existing in its specific form which is a reflection of the divine truth; and good (bonum), that is, complete and perfect both ethically and rhetorically. Unum, verum and bonum, the components of honestum, must constitute the soul of poetry and shine externally through the beautiful (pulchrum) body. Only on this condition, can the poetical text become an attracting visible res which helps our mind to meet the Supreme Good in nature.

This poetical activity - to discover the truth in nature and reveal it through an artifact which is as close as possible to reality - goes back to William of Conches; but it is likely that the Florentine poet found a confirmation of that idea in the Albertian ontology. Indeed, St. Albert sees reality as a pedagogical instrument purposely made by the Creator to stir up human intellective and affective faculties ("Res secundum quod ordinatur ad hominis intellectum et affectum, propter quem instruendum omnia facta sunt" "reality as related to man's affective and intellective faculties; all things were made to instruct him"); therefore, (1) res is "steadily directed" (constat); it is suitable to humans (congruat) and it "is distinct" (discernitur); (2) res is apprehended by mind and dwells in it as a "true-good-beautiful" (verum, bonum, pulchrum); (3) the cognizant subject must turn this mental [apprehended] true-good-beautiful into an "enlightening-beautiful-good" (lumen, pulchrum, bonum) in order to provide humans with information.

Undoubtedly, this Albertian theory had an impact on the author of the Convivio. In contrast with the Vita Nuova, Dante now discovers that the true-good Object of love is not just "beyond the sphere," but it is present within history "in the various kinds of goodness found in nature" (Conv. 3.2.8). The "trovatore" discovers a new modus essendi of Wisdom: the "primal Mind" ("prima Mente," Conv. 2.3.2), who is identified with Donna gentile (Conv. 4.30.6). This new relationship will constitute the soul of his new poetry which becomes a "Philosophy," an honest affection (philo) for Wisdom (Sophia).

This new vision of love becomes the "materia nuova e nobile," the definite style of Dante's Commedia. The subject matter of poetry must be the result of "the habit of art and science" ("l'abito de l'arte e de la scienza," Conv. 3.12.2); the poet acquires this "habit" through the "study and affection" ("stu-
dio e [...] affezione”) for Wisdom (Conv. 3.12.4). This love compels the “trovatore” to search for, and find his beloved Object “in the various kinds of goodness found in nature” [“ne le bontadi de la natura e de la ragione,” Conv. 3.2.8]. The role of the ‘trovatore-poet’ is to reveal this love to those who are “wandering around in animal pasture” (Conv. 1.1.8) in order to elevate them to their proper dignity.

By his definition of poeta honestatis, Dante shows that he has discovered the finality of his poetical activity, which must consist of honestly helping the process of human actualization. In this view, the work of art turns out to be an analogue of the divine masterpiece as much as it will reflect the “similitudo bonitatis eternae” [“the image of His eternal goodness,” Mon. 2.2], the exemplar cause and the end of human aspiration. Indeed, the core of Dante’s poetics of honestum is strictly related to Christian-Neoplatonic vision of reality, whose foundation is the Absolute Good which shares (metexis or partecipatio) its goodness in the created cosmos. The “universal form” is both the Alpha (“lo ben che fa contenta questa corte,” Par. 26.16), the “first perfection conferring being,” and at the same time the Omega, toward which the human being has to move freely in order to actualize his potential and gain the “second perfection” (Conv. 1.13.3).

“To treat of the good” (Inf. 1.8) is the proposition of the Commedia; it develops particularly in the three central cantos of the masterpiece (Purg. 16-17-18). Human freedom (“innata libertate”) makes humans subjects of love: living is acting, and acting is loving, because acting follows a deliberate choice. The chosen object, however, may be either an honest good or a selfish one. The true good is equated to the “primo ben” (“Primal Good”); in Inferno 11, there is a definition of evil

(1) D’ogni malizia ch’odio in cielo acquista,
ingiuria è ‘l fine, ed ogni fin cotale
o con forza o con frode altrui contrista. (Inf. 11.22-24)
[“Of every malice that gains hatred in Heaven the end is injustice; and every such end, either by force or by fraud, afflicts another”].

From the above statements it follows:

(2) Quindi comprendere puoi ch’esser convene
amor sementa in voi d’ogni virtute
e d’ogni operazion che merta pene. (Purg. 17.103-5)
[Hence you can comprehend that love must needs be the seed in you of every virtue and of every action deserving punishment].

However, given the fact of the original sin, humans need direction and enlightenment to go straight to the proper goal. As remedia contra infirmitatem peccati (“remedies for the infirmity of sin,” Mon. 3.4.14), God has provided
human beings with two Soli ("Suns"), the Pope and the Emperor. This is the philosophical and theological truth, the optima conceptio, which the artificer interprets through his powerful imagination and represents in a huge fresco. To build his world, Dante takes the material from "heaven and earth," from theology, philosophy, history, and even from the kingdom of fables and mythology; the whole material constitutes the fiction, the signifier or the instrumental body, through which the author makes his truth manifest.

Thus, the poet sees history in its cosmic reality. Hell and Heaven (Purgatorio is only a transitional, temporal place) are two cities which represent the ends of earthly humans. These two eternal cities, respectively the Empyrean, the source of light and love ("Luce intellettuale piena d’amore," Par. 30.40) and Cocytus, the pit of ice and hatred (Inf. 34.52), are the extreme poles of Dante’s historical world. That is to say, history lies between these two poles; in historical space and time humans place themselves in the territory of the Empyrean or of Cocytus depending on their personal choice ("lume v’è dato a bene e a malizia, / e libero voler" ["a light has given you to know good and evil, and free will"], Purg. 16.75). History and meta-history, therefore, are strictly related: Hell or Heaven are the eternal continuation of a status vitae freely chosen within space and time. According to Dante’s imagination, on the vertical cosmic axis linking Cocytus to the Empyrean are human beings, some of whom have already made their final decision (the dead), and some who are still living on earth, hence still in the process of making their final choice. Hell and Heaven start within history. What distinguishes the two categories (meta-history and history) is that living people still have the possibility of changing their mind for good or for evil, and, therefore, to move from one city to another. Within this light, I interpret Frate Alberigo’s words: "spesse volte l’anima ci cade / innanzi ch’Atropòs mossa le da" ("oftentimes the soul falls down here before Atropos sends it forth"), Inf. 33.125-26. This is the case of Pope Boniface, who, even though still alive on earth, hic et nunc is destined for a specific place of Hell (Inf. 19.53).

In this artistic world, Dante’s judgments cannot be used as proofs of “the poet’s transgressing of the boundary between life and death;” they are rather ratifications of judgments granted by historians or by himself according to the ethical principles clearly expounded in the De Vulgari Eloquentia (1.16.2-3), which are in full agreement with Christian morality:

ut unumquodque mensurabile sit, secundum quod in genere est, illo quod simplicissimum est in ipso genere. Quapropter in actionibus nostris, quantumcumque dividantur in species, hoc signum inveniri oportet quo et ipse mensurantur. Nam in quantum simpliciter ut homines agimus, virtutem habemus – ut generaliter illam intelligamus – : nam secundum ipsam bonum et malum hominem judicamus; in quantum ut homines cives agimus, habemus legem, secundum quam dicitur civis bonus et malus; in quantum ut homines latini agimus, quedam habemus simplicissima signa et morum et habituum et locutionis, quibus latine actiones ponderantur et mensurantur.
This medieval Scholastic ethic is concerned with humans in their threefold aspect: as responsible individuals, as subjects of civic duties, and as subjects of large institutions (*monarchia*). For the author of the *Commedia*, however, any human judgment made according to these ethical principles remains human, that is, not infallible, because it is based on external evidence. Only divine Justice has the exclusive power to reach the mind of an agent and judge her/his intention. In point of fact, the poet makes clear that even an ecclesiastical judgement is not divine. To prove this theological truth, Dante makes the excommunicated Manfredi repent his sins at the last moment of his life and, therefore, be saved, contrary to what the Church believed (“la bontà infinita ha sì gran braccia / che prende ciò che si rivolge a lei” [“Infinite Goodness has such wide arms that It receives all who turns to It”], *Purg.* 3.122-23). By elucidating the nature of a mortal sin, theologians take into consideration the external evidence of facts; thus, they all agree that a mortal sin *avertit a Deo* (“turns the soul away from God” *S.Th.* 1-2.73. a.1 ad secundum). The guilty state of sin makes the sinner a potential soul of Hell as long as the stain of sin affects the soul (*manente autem causa, manet effectus S.Th.* 87. a.3). Dante, in accordance with the Spiritual Franciscans, was convinced that Boniface took “by guile the beautiful Lady” and turned Her into an Apocalyptic whore. They, therefore, judged Boniface’s actual spiritual-political attitude as a pertinentacious state of sin.

Dante’s poetics of good, therefore, makes a poet both a “finder” (“trovatore”) and an “artificer” (“artece”). The finder, as any scientist, has to search for the *optime conceptiones* which, by their power and dignity, make poetry “supremely delightful” (*Conv.* 2.11.5). The role of the artificer, on the other hand, is to construct a worthy body (“la bellezza”) for his conceptions. The resulting poetry, however, is neither “la bontade” nor “la bellezza,” but the substantial unity of both constituting the poetical text. The world of the medieval ‘trovatore-poet,’ therefore, is cosmic; it embraces history and meta-history; his knowledge encircles past, present and future. Any “trovatore” or scientist is an entrepreneur who discovers forms of life and publicizes them; however, as distinct from a scientist, the “trovatore-poet’s role is not just to write a “beautiful” document, through which he shows his cosmic knowledge; this beautiful document would be missing the specific difference of poetry, which is life. In this sense, as Mazzotta has pointed out, “poetry [...] voices the infinite dimensions of life” [*Dante’s, 17*]). In point of fact, according to the Florentine rhetorician, a poet has to breathe part of his soul (“sensitive or rational,” *DVE* 2.2.6) into an appropriate rhetorical body. Unlike the sensitive soul, the “honest” soul of Dante’s poetry is a conception which, through imagination, turns out to be a powerful poetical form; this form, like a human soul, makes its rhetorical body live and speak. In this sense, poetry, like divine art, becomes a “visibile parlare.” For Dante, as I stated, linguistics and rhetoric are sacred instruments of human communication (*DVE* 1.2.3). Because
they are instrumental, language and rhetoric are contingent on human intelligence and will: humans may use "parole ornate" either for selfish achievement (Jason, Ulysses, Boniface) or for the common good (Virgil, Dante).

3. Dante’s Ciceronian rhetoric: “bene dicere quod est scien ter et perite et ornate dicere”

I am aware of having reached a crucial point of my discourse: by stating that the soul of his poetics is honestum and rectitudo, the poet urges us to believe that his poetic product is a representation of a true-good. I should answer, therefore, the same question that Teodolinda Barolini attempts to answer in her The Undivine Comedy: “How are we to respond to the poet’s insistence that he is telling us the truth?” (4).

For Bruno Nardi, Dante’s truth comes about as a result of a special vision: God vested authority in him and sent him as a Prophet for his own historical time. Giorgio Padoan supports Nardi’s thesis with strong arguments. However, by refuting Nardi’s arguments which reject the authenticity of L’Epistola a Cangrande, Padoan defends its authenticity and uses L’Epistola as an additional strong document reinforcing the truth of Dante’s vision. Barolini places herself in the wake of these authors. In concluding her analysis on different opinions in regard to Dante’s truthfulness, Barolini writes: “In sum, I suggest we accept Dante’s insistence that he is telling the truth and move on to the consequences, which we can only do by accepting that he intends to represent his fiction as credible, believable, true. How to cut the Gordian knot of a true fiction?” (Undivine 13). Barolini cuts the knot by condemning Dante-prophet-visionary to the ninth pit of the Inferno with Ulysses. The writer distinguishes between the “poet” and the “pilgrim”: “the pilgrim is an anti-Ulysses” (Undivine 57); on the contrary, the poet is aware “of his potentially Ulyssian trespasses” (Undivine 57); this Ulyssian attitude urges the poet-prophet to employ any and all means to impose his own vision on the readers; Dante becomes like a magic artist, who, by using the tricks of his rhetorical art, presents his own reality which “causes critics to tend to believe’ Dante without knowing that they believe him” (Undivine 15). Hence, Barolini equates Adam’s sin (“trapassar del segno”) with Ulysses’s transgression, and with “the poet’s transgressing of the boundary between life and death, between God and man” (Undivine 58).

Barolini’s view of Dante’s “transgression” is based on her way of interpreting Singleton’s assumption, according to which, Dante constructs “a system whose fiction is that it is not a fiction” (Undivine 52). Within this system, Dante would play the role of an intermediary agent between the Holy Spirit (“Amor mi spira”) and history; the poet arrogates to himself the divine right of judging, as well as the same privileges granted to the authors of divine
books ("quella materia ond’io son fatto scriba," Undivine 52). His transgression makes the author aware of his similarity with Ulysses. Symptomatic of Dante’s fear is, according to Barolini, the presence of Ulysses in the Commedia as a mirror of his potential wrong-doing.27

In order to establish whether Dante is an honest narrator or a Ulyssian rhetorician, I believe that we must take into account the following issues: (1) who the “Lover” inspiring Dante is (“Amor mi spira”); whether the inspiration is natural or supernatural; (2) the nature of Dante’s vision and its purpose; (3) Fictio as a rhetorical tool to dramatize and represent the true good.

(1) The hermeneutics of “Amor mi spira” must be found in Dante’s writings. It is well known that Dante, through the Vita Nuova, set forth his new way of writing poems, which is in direct opposition to the subject matter of the traditional lyric. As I pointed out earlier, this lyric, grounded in sensual pleasure, treated love ("desiderio") as a negative Platonic eros, without considering its profound and true nature. Contrary to this philosophical trend, Dante presents his theory of love ("desiderio") as a human instinct whose final cause is Wisdom-Beatrice, the beatitude “which cannot fail” (VN 18). In the Convivio, the notion of love takes on cosmic proportions. The philosopher shows where love springs from and how it descends from heaven and is transmitted into humans. The Holy Spirit is the source of love which is conveyed to humans through the Thrones.

Per che è ragionevole credere che li movimenti del cielo ... di Venere siano li Troni; li quali naturati de l’amore del Santo Spirito, fanno la loro operazione, connaturale ad essi, cioè lo movimento di quello cielo, pieno d’amore, la quale prende la forma del detto cielo uno ardore virtuoso, per lo quale le anime di qua giuso s’accendono ad amare, secondo la loro disposizione. (Conv. 2.5.13)

[It is, then, reasonable to hold that those who move ... Venus are the Thrones. These last, whose very nature is to love the Holy Spirit, imbue with an abundance of love the activity which is proper to them and is of a kind with their nature, namely, the movement of that heaven. From this love the form of that heaven takes on a powerful ardour through which it enkindles love in souls here below, to the degree that they are disposed to receive it].

In chapter 15 of the same book, Dante compares Boethius and Cicero to the "Thrones," that is, the "movitori" of Venus, and attributes to both writers the responsibility for his conversion to sapiential love:

Per le ragionate similitudini si può vedere chi sono questi movitori a cui’ io parlo. Ché sono di quello movitori, sì come Boezio e Tullio li quali con la dolcezza di loro sermone inviarono me, come detto è di sopra, ne lo amore, cioè ne lo studio di questa donna gentilissima filosofia. (Conv. 2.15.1)

[From the similarities just discussed, it may be seen who these movers are whom I address: they are movers of that heaven, people such as Boethius and Cicero, who,
through the sweetness of their writings, set my steps on the path of love, or study, of this lady, most noble Philosophy].

In doing so, Dante elevates philosophy and rhetoric to the dignity of heavenly channels, through which the Holy Spirit inspires love in humans and makes them move in the right direction. This inspiration, obviously, is not supernatural; Dante’s theory goes back to Cicero’s view which regards literary, artistic production as of divine origin strictly related to the improvement of society. In commenting Pro A. Licinio Archia Oratio, Adriano Pennacini stresses Cicero’s statement according to which a poet by his own nature is a powerful being. Stimulated by his mental strength, the poet becomes inflated by some divine spirit (“poetam ipsa natura valere, et mentis viribus excitari et quasi divino quodam spiritu inflari”), Retorica 68, n.13. Pennacini suggests that for Cicero the poet’s knowledge materializes not through ratio, but through natura (Retorica 72); poetry is the result not of reason but of divine inspiration. This divine gift has a precise purpose: to enlighten a social community. Cicero blames those who, being devoted to litteris, waste their time in activities that are socially fruitless and unilluminated (“ceteros pudeat, si qui ita se litteris abdiderunt, ut nihil possint ex his neque ad communem adferre fructum neque in aspectum lucemque proferre”), Retorica 66-67.

Obviously the Ciceronian Dante is a Christian and, according to his faith, the Holy Spirit has replaced Venus as the divine source not only of supernatural love but also of natural love (Par. 8.1-63). Scientia, ingenium et ars (DVE 2.4.11) are the essential prerequisites, therefore, for a ‘trovatore’ to meet divine Love in nature and reveal it scienter, perite et ornate. All ‘honest’ poets, being either pagans or Christians, are connected to the heaven of true love and have the duty to reveal it as inspired by the source of Love, in order to improve social institutions. In this view, the poet becomes a “spokesperson” or, as Alain of Lille posed it, a scriba, or a “pen” (“Styli obsequentis subsidio” “with the help of the obedient pen,” De Planctu Nature 216) who writes a text revealing true love. However, this text is not supernatural. I would like to stress Dante’s distinction between the natural inspiration which is found in Boethius’s and Cicero’s “scrittura” (Conv. 2.15.1) and the inspiration which is found in “la verace scrittura divina” (Conv. 4.12.8). Poetry is never “la verace scrittura,” but only a text inspired by honest love. This love, which is desire for the true-good, becomes the intrinsic dynamis of honest poetry, whose purpose is to drive individuals and societies toward their proper perfection.

In point of fact, Dante, like Cicero, sees poetry strictly related to the ship of society (Conv. 2.1.1); poetry is the lumen (recta ratio scripta) emanating from the star through a poet, whose role is to show the right direction to the pilots carrying the wayfarers to their proper destination. A poet must be in contact with that star – the source of the light enlightening the direction. It is from
this perspective. I believe, that we must read the lines from Purgatorio 24.52-54:

I’ mi son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
ch’e’ ditta dentro vo significando.
[I am one who, when Love inspires me, takes note, and goes setting it forth after the fashion which he dictates within me].

One of the meanings of the verb “spirare” is “to blow” and it refers to the wind. The wind carrying Dante’s ship is “Amor verace” rather than the Ulyssean “ardore” or Boniface’s “superba febbre.”

As stated earlier, Dante’s Commedia is solidly grounded on this perception of poetical inspiration: honest poetry originates in the true love, which “is directed to Primal Good, and on secondary goods observes right measure” (“è nel primo ben diretto, / e nei secondi sé stesso misura” Purg. 17.97-98). On the contrary, selfish love fosters a “meretrice” (“prostitute”) poetry, accountable for encouraging a distorted human behaviour (Conv. 1.9.5). For the Florentine poet, love, seen as a mere sensual and selfish activity, not only “against the Creator works His creature”, but hurts the values of human existence. In this case, rhetoric turns out to be the murderous instrument of a deceiving love. In point of fact, Francesca and Guido da Montefeltro are represented as victims of a distorted rhetoric. Meanwhile Ulysses and Boniface are instances of perverted rhetorical geniuses who deceived rather than enlightened human minds.

In Canto Four (80-151) of the Inferno, Dante celebrates “honest” poetry by introducing the “bella scola” of poets, a historical continuum from Homer to himself. The qualifying attribute associating Virgil with all poets is “onore” which, in different cognate words, is repeated no less than seven times. Right reason and imagination, instruments respectively for the inspiration and the communication of honest love, are the conditions sine quibus non required for an artifex of authoritative poetry. That is to say that the poet, according to Dante, is required to possess the same characteristics which he attributes to his Virgil:

Tu se’ lo mio maestro e ’l mio autore:
tu se’ solo colui da cu’ io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m’ha fatto onore. (Inf. 1.85-87)
[You are my master and my author. You alone are he from whom I took the fair style that has done me honor].

“Master” and artist (“lo bello stile”) are the essential attributes qualifying a true poet; for Dante, however, scientia is philo- Sophia, that is sapiential love, which is, in Virgil’s words: “Amore, / acceso di virtú (“Love, kindled by vir-
Dante’s Poetics of ‘Honestum’

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tue”). This “love, kindled by virtue,” and wrapped in imaginative and rhetorical representation, turns out to be the poet’s powerful weapon in fight against the injustice present in the world:

Rimossa ogni menzogna,
tutta tua vision fa manifesta. [...] 
Questo tuo grido farà come vento,
che le più alte cime più percuote. (Par. 17.127-33)
[All falsehood set aside, make manifest all that you have seen ... This cry of yours shall do as the wind, which smites most upon the loftiest summits].

At this point, it is clear that Dante has christianized Cicero’s classic notion of poetical divine inspiration. Through his poetics of honestum, Dante elevates literature to a very high level: a poetic text becomes a ‘scrittura’ which, however, is neither science (a scientific demonstration of truth) nor the Bible (a revealed book), but the splendor of the truth emanating, through poetical fiction, from both science and Bible. In other words, the inspired poet makes the “flame” of science and Bible “appear outwardly,” by his genius and artistic skills.

(2) Therefore, Dante’s desire to represent truth must not be confused with the imposition of a new revealed dogmatic truth. Undoubtedly, the poet presents himself as invested with divine authority; in fact, Virgil’s answer to the pilgrim’s objection: “Io non Enea, io non Paulo sono” (“I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul”), Inf. 2.32, implies that God has selected Dante as a special messanger who has to deliver a political-religious message to the world. May this episode, which is still proemial, be seen as the rhetorical device of capitatio benevolentiae, designed to create an atmosphere of the marvellous in his epic and, at the same time, to assure the audience that his literary story is founded on the truth? Or is the author implying that he is narrating a real vision? If he did have a vision, what is the nature of this vision? Within the Catholic Church, visions are not just phenomena of the Middle Ages; in modern times visionaries of all ages and circumstances reveal special messages. Yet, belief in the truth of these messages is not compulsory either for Catholics or, of course, for non-Catholics. A visionary does not become St. John or St. Paul, for a vision is not a revelation of a new dogmatic truth; it does not add anything new to what is already contained in Biblical and Ecclesiastical teaching.39 In most cases, through a vision, a seer receives messages regarding historical circumstances; they are designed to improve human behaviour. Obviously, if we admit that Dante had a real vision (as many, with Barolini, do), then we are not authorized to affirm that Dante’s judgment on history and personages is “a deviation from orthodoxy” (Undivine 94), in that the poet is recounting what God showed him. To contradict Dante, we should know exactly what God told him. On the other hand, even though the poet is writing
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under the influence of a special vision, the text of the reported vision is not identical with the Book of Revelation. It is rather a "scrittura" reflecting a divine light revealing to the poet why the structures of his religious, political society were not functional.

Indeed, the text contains no truth which is contrary to the Revelation. The Florentine politician puts his finger on the cause of social dishonesty by denouncing a confusion between the dominions of nature and grace. For Dante has a precise idea about the historical debate regarding this relationship: he saw both nature (Ratio = Emperor) and grace (Fides = Pontiff) as the two wings of universal humanity (Ecclesia), and shows how the two orders (ratio and gratia), even though complementary, must exist independently. Through Convivio, Monarchia and Commedia, the author, with all the strength of his rhetoric, claims that the usurpation of civil authority, effected by the absolute authority of the Pope, is the cause of the social, moral, and spiritual failure of his contemporary society:

per che la gente, che sua guida vede
pur a quel ben fedire ond’ella è ghiotta,
di quel si pasce, e più oltre non chiede. (Purg. 16.100-2)
[Wherefore the people, who see their guide snatch only at that good whereof they are greedy, feed upon that, and seek no further].

Even at the summit of Paradise, the eyes of the poet are on earth; he meets St. Peter and makes him inveigh against the Curia Romana, which has distorted the proper ends of the Church:

Non fu la sposa di Cristo allevata
del sangue mio, di Lin, di quel di Cleto
per esser acquisto d’oro usata. (Par. 27.40-42)
[The spouse of Christ was not nurtured on my blood and that of Linus and of Cletus].

In this same Canto, the poet openly declares the second part of his specific mission, which was anticipated in Inferno (Canto 2). In Paradiso (17.124-42), Cacciaguida urges Dante to speak the truth to politicians; in Canto 27, Peter orders the visionary, once he returns on earth, to speak and tell the truth to clerics:

E tu, figliuol, che per lo mortal pondo
ancor giù tornerai, apri la bocca,
e non asconder quel ch’io non ascondo. (Par. 26.64-66)
[And you, my son, who, because of your mortal weight will again return below, open your mouth and do not hide what I hide not]
If Dante had a vision, this was the vision of the universal society, seen as *Ecclesia*, "the Bride of Him who, with loud cries, espoused her with the blessed blood" (*Par*. 11.32-33), who has been turned into a "whore" by temporal power. Throughout his works, Dante is obsessed by this vision and makes himself the advocate who pleads the cause of the "Bride" by showing her human-divine nature – the foundation in which the political and religious powers are grounded.30

However, even though the poet did not have a special vision, any poetic intuition may be defined as a vision. When Dante, following tradition, asserts that *ars* is first "in mente [...] artificis" (*Mon.* 2.2), this first stage in the process of creating a piece of art is nothing else but an object of an intellectual vision,31 that is, a clear perception of a (philosophical, theological, social, political, moral) reality inspired either by God or by *scientia*:

O imaginativa [...]  
chi muove te, se 'l senso non ti porge?  
Moveti lume che nel ciel s'informa,  
per sé o per voler che giù lo scorge. (*Purg.* 17.12-18)  
[O imagination...  
who moves you if the sense affords you naught? A light moves you which  
takes form in heaven, of itself, or by a will that downward guides it].

Dante’s theory of *scientia*, *ingenium* and *ars* suggests that any kind of truth present in the poet’s mind will not be rigorously demonstrated, but rather imaginatively interpreted and faithfully represented.

(3) In the philosophical context of the Middle Ages, a literary product, as any work of art, was modelled on the ontological reality; it was supposed to be endowed with four metaphysical causes.32 For Dante, the formal cause or the true good is "la sentenza" (= "la bontade"), that is, the "best conceptions;" the material cause or the body, in which the good-form is embedded and through which it manifests itself, is made of rhetorical signifiers or verbal artistry ("la bellezza di ciascun sermone"); the efficient cause is the "trovatore" artist; and the final cause is the fruition of the reader. Dante admits a double fruition. The first consists of the intellect apprehending "la bontade [...] ne la sentenza" (notice "ne" not "de"). This fruition is intellectual and is defined as "supremely delightful" (*Conv.* 2.11.4). The second is the aesthetic pleasure of the senses. Rhetoric or the material cause of poetry, therefore, is analogous to the beautiful, the visible ornament of nature ("la bellezza è ne l’ornamento de le parole," *Conv*. 1.11.4). It means that "fictitious words," "allegorical images," and "cloak of these fables" are aesthetic form or *modi essendi* – a glass-body through which the true good shows itself. Hence, the dramatization, or the body provided by the artist, must be both "appropriate" ("est enim exhornatio alicuius convenientis additio," *DVE* 2.1) and "suitable" to the "bontade."
"The bad disposition of the matter" renders even a good form defective (Conv. 3.4.7). However, as the body is not the soul, but makes one substantial unity with it, so rhetoric makes one substantial unity with its soul, the thought.

The above discussion leads to two relevant questions: first, what is the impact of the signifier on the signified? does the aesthetic form show the meaning faithfully or does it function like a magic mirror reflecting a polyvalent, sometimes contradictory meaning? Second, does the poetics of honestum imply that poetry must be moral in order to be perfect?

First, the act of writing is to translate the verbum mentis, that is, to transfer the idea into visible, written word. Dante makes a clear-cut distinction between the author’s written “vera intenzione” and the reader’s interpretation: “E con ciò sia cosa che la vera intenzione mia fosse altra che quella che di fuori mostrano le canzoni predette” (“And since the meaning I really intended to convey in the canzoni mentioned above was other than the obvious”), Conv. 1.1.18. The poet, in fact, is aware that any interpretation, even one made by ourselves to turn our ideas into words, must be carefully checked, since the language, as a system of signs, is what “is seen to have meaning according to a conventional institution” (“significare videtur ad placitum” DVE 1.3.3). The author conveys a meaning through linguistic signs which must be deciphered by the reader in order to meet as close as possible the author’s “vera intenzione,” the form of the word. However, differently from a scientific presentation, ideas in poetry, elaborated by the poet’s imagination, are represented through rhetorical forms which may misrepresent them.

Aware of the distance between image and referent, the author of the Convivio warns poets how a system of rational signs must imitate natural ornatum, which is based on the golden rule of convenitentia. The poet requires that any fictio must be transparent as a veil, that is to say, the dichotomy between signifiers and signified must be minimized as much as possible. Hence, disharmony between the two components would be either like lovely women who are "in a crowd with ugly ones" or "like a coarse woman dressed up in silk or cloth of gold" (DVE 2.1.10). For Dante, the principle for evaluating a literary “sermone” reads as follows:

Ciascuna cosa è virtuosa in sua natura che fa quello a che ella è ordinata; e quanto meglio lo fa tanto è più virtuosa. [...] Così lo sermone [...] è ordinato a manifestare lo concetto umano, è virtuoso quando quello fa, e più virtuoso quello che lo fa di più. (Conv. 1.5.11-12)

[A thing is virtuous with respect to the nature it possesses when it performs the operation to which it is ordered; the better it performs this, the more virtuous it is. … Similarly with speech, it is ordered to give expression to the ideas conceived by the human mind; so it is virtuous when it permorms that function, and the more fully it does so, the more virtuous it is].
In Dante's view, therefore, any literary work, whether fictional or historical, is a reticulated system of signs conventionally chosen to make possible human communication (DVE 1.2.1-2). *Locutio*, either oral or written, is an "instrument" ("instrumentum nostrae conceptionis," DVE 2.1.8) both rational and sensitive ("rationale signum et sensuale," DVE 1.3.2); such instrument must reflect the thought as closely as possible. In this view, while the fable of the "selva oscura," the pilgrim's meeting with beasts, the Vestibule of Hell, are structures created by the poet, in context they are designed to generate a truth regarding the misuse of the "greatest gift" of freedom.

However, given the instrumental nature of verbal artistry, Dante is aware that a writer's mind may misuse the "rationale signum et sensuale." Jason's "parole ornate" and Ulysses's selfish rhetoric may be part of a beautiful discourse well organized and persuasive, but hiding a deceptive intention. For our poet, a 'bad lie' is any istoria, in poetry or prose, whose rhetorical signs ("parole fittizie") and meanings are constructed in such an intentional and logical way as to deceive and distort the human mind and create social victims. Beyond Jason and Ulysses, another instance of this rhetoric is Bono-face's discourse to Guido da Montefeltro. Hence, with George A. Kennedy I would agree that rhetoric is "neither good nor bad; only men are good and bad" (33). There is no proof to demonstrate that Dante has betrayed his commitment to "treat of the good." His vision of historical society, seen as a corpus politicum which must be governed by two independent authorities (religious and civil), has turned out to be true and modern.

As for the second question: since Dante avers that an honest work deals with directio voluntatis (DVE 2.2.8), would he condemn a work aesthetically valuable in the name of its non-honest subject (delectabile or amoris accensio, DVE 2.2.8)? As stated earlier, the poet, like all Medieaval scholars, distinguishes between a moral judgement and an aesthetic one (Purgatorio 26). The aesthetic value of a literary work, seen as an accomplished res in se, is contingent on the rhetorical code: the harmonious unity existing between the soul (thought) and the body (rhetoric) of the work. On the contrary, the moral value is judged according to the author's intention, which is determined immoral if it leads the reader astray and moral if it leads the reader to verum bonum.

The heart of Dante's poetics, then, is the Stoic notion of honestum, reinterpreted within the light of Christian tradition ranging from St. Augustine to St. Albert the Great. Honestum, as equivalent to verum, bonum, pulchrum, implies a metaphysical, ethical and aesthetic value. Honestum may qualify either a piece of real Nature or also an artificial reality which, like the natural one, is a true, good, beautiful artifact designed to help humans in their process of humanization. In this sense, according to Dante, a poet is honest when his poetical product addresses humans in order "to direct their will." Dante does
not reject an artistic product whose subject is “useful” or \textit{delectabile}, but he states unequivocally the specific difference between the moral quality of ‘parlare onesto’ – to tell the truth despite the consequences – and the immoral use of ‘parole ornate’ in order to deceive people for selfish purposes. In his life the exiled poet experienced the consequences of “parlare onesto” and translated his drama in the \textit{Commedia}. I believe, therefore, that Dante wrote the \textit{Commedia} not as a presentation of a new dogmatic truth, but rather as a poetical “treatise of the good” (\textit{honestum}), designed to represent the natural and supernatural process of human actualization (represented by the character of Dante) and, consequently, the tragic irresponsability of a political and religious class of leaders who acting dishonestly (represented by Ulysses, Jason and others) may turn this process into a temporal and eternal dishumanization.

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\textbf{NOTES}

1. In the \textit{De vulgari eloquentia}, Dante discusses “que maxime sunt maxime pertractanda” in poetry. Among three \textit{maxima} (util, delectabile and honestum), he chooses \textit{honestum} (2. 2. 7-8).

2. The subject of controversy regarding Dante’s notion of rhetoric is posed by the role played by Virgil, Ulysses, Jason and others in the \textit{Commedia}. For Teodolinda Barolini 1992, Dante is using the same transgressive rhetoric as his character Ulysses (see \textit{The Undivine Comedy}, especially 17-20 and Chapter 3). Giuliana Carugati goes to the extreme point of the parabolic line of the previous critics. Listing the correspondent structures which link Ulysses to Dante, Carugati exploits (I believe not properly) a passage from Mazzotta’s \textit{Dante, Poet of the Desert}; she writes: “Non è solo Ulisse, colui che a Troia ha rubato il simulacro della sapienza, a dimorare, nell’aria morale della frode pretendendo di possedere la sapienza (79): Dante stesso, l’uomo-poeta Dante, il Dante fabricatore di storie non vere, di questa storia non vera, mentre invoca Minerva e si vanta di essere sulla via della sapienza (il \textit{<<pan degli angeli>>}), sa di non avere altro appoggio che la propria fragile parola” (101).

3. For the traditional quarrel between fiction and truth, I consulted \textit{Medieval Literary Theory} (113-64; 373-438).

4. “Nel datore adunque dee essere la providenza in far si che de la sua parte rimanga l’utilitade de l’onestade, che è sopra ogni utilitade, e far si che a lo ricevitore vada l’utilitade de l’uso de la cosa donata” (Conv. 1.8.8).

5. To my knowledge, no one has focused on the notion of \textit{honestum} as an attribute qualifying Dante’s poetics. By ‘poetics’ I mean the code of principles according to which a poet adjusts his activity in order to produce a specific kind of poetry. In this sense, the substantive adjective \textit{honestum} differentiates Dante’s poetical product from a poetry grounded on the “useful.” The poetics of \textit{honestum} gives impetus to a literature seen as the fruit of a friendly relationship between an honest poet and his society; this relationship, however, must be solidly grounded on the honest love; on the contrary, literature becomes like a beautiful “whore” (“meretrice”) whose purpose is to “gain money” (Conv. 1.9.5): “E a vituperio di loro dico che non si deono chiamare litterati, però che non acquistano la lettera per lo suo uso, mà in quanto per quella guadagnano denari o dignitate,” Conv. 1.9.3); (I declare to their shame that they do not deserve to be called educated, since they do not acquire education for its own sake, but only as a measure to gain money and status.”
6 By "prophet," I mean Dante's "desire to give instruction" ("desiderio di doctrina dare," Conv. 1.2.15) designed to restore a new socio-political-religious order. See Kleinhenz (37-55; esp. "Prophecy and Politics" 43-45). For other opinions about the attribution of Prophet to Dante, see Nardi; Gomi.

7 As Rosario Assunto notes "[il] vocabolo e.[estetica]... solo nell'età moderna ... viene impiegato per designare la teoria filosofica del bello (che in antico era una parte della metaffisica) e quella dell'arte, che dalla metafisica del bello era in antico separata" (750). I would like to underscore that medieval philosophers, concerned with the notion of art, considered the artistic product as an autonomous reality, having in itself its own values independent from the author's intention. The value judgment was grounded on the notion of good (bonum) which in Aristotelian terms means completeness and perfection of a process designed to create an artistic product. Indeed, Dante describes the perfect canto ("canzone") as the result of "actio completa dicentis verba modulatione harmonizata" [DVE 2.8.6]. The famous text of St. Thomas (S. Th.1-2. 57. 3) underscores exactly the difference between bonum appetitus and bonum operis; only the latter is pertinent to the notion of art: "ars nihil aliud est quam ratio recta aliquorum operum faciendorum. Quorum autem bonum non consistit in eo quod appetitus humanus aliquo modo se habeat, sed in eo quod ipsum opus quod fit, in se bonum est. Non autem pertinet ad laudem artificis, in quantum artifex est, qua volonte opus faciat. sed quale sit opus quod facit" ("Art is nothing else but the right reason about certain works to be made. And yet the good of these things depends not on man's appetite being affected in this or that way, but on the good of the work done. For a craftsman, as such, is commendable not for the will with which he does a work, but for the quality of the work"). Pulchrum (beautiful), however, was regarded not as a heterogeneous element of "the good of the work," but rather as a sensitive pleasure resulting from the contemplation of the good or completeness of the work ("pulchrum est quod visu placet"). Convivio 2.11.4 is a confirmation of this theory.

8 Barolini reads this passage as follows: "The verb 'trovare' with its technical thrust as the Romance equivalent of 'invenire' informs a passage in the Convivio where Dante explicitly opposes men -- 'trovatori' -- to God, 'fattore' <però che di queste operazioni non fattori propriamente, ma li trovatori sempo. Altri l'ordinò e fece maggior fattore>> ("Re-presenting" 58, n. 4). I believe that, rather than stressing the opposition between God and man which is too obvious, Dante here is describing the role of the "trovatore," as well as his limit. The role of "trovatore" is not to change divine laws, but rather to share his findings with others. In this passage, Dante is repeating an idea which goes back to William of Conches who, commenting on Timaeus's distinction between Creator ex nililo and fabricator ex materia, explains that God created a special creature (human kind) who was purposely provided with reason and intelligence. Through these gifts, man "would search for divine wisdom," would find it, would love what he found, and would imitate what he loved ("talem creaturam voluit quae ratione et intellectu illam inquireret, inquirendo inveniret [inquire to find or discover], inveniam diliget, dilectam imitatetur" [Glosae super Platonem 116]). The finder must share his discoveries by teaching and writing ("Et ea quae invenit, scripto et voce alios docuit: et sic philosophia inventa est. Visus igitur est causa philosophiae," [Glosae super 252]). In the Purgatorio 10, Dante properly calls God "fabbro" [fabricator] for the "Fattore" neither creates a new matter from nothing nor makes the marble speak. He uses the marble as an instrument of communication and purification. See also West.

9 Freccero resorts properly to St. Paul (2 Cor. 3.3-6) and to St. Augustine (De Doctrina Christiana) to explain Dante's theory of signs (100). Contrary to Inferno and Purgatorio, Freccero referring to Chieranena sees the "figure of the eagle" as "an anti-character" (213). Dante goes from a "corporeal sign" to a mere sign expressing "the words of a text from the Bible" (214). Barolini focuses on "the principles of mimesis as they apply to Dante and to his art.... By proposing an art that surpasses nature, Dante proposes an art that is capable of going beyond verisimilitude or representation, to become presentation, the 'ver' "("Re-presenting" 43). Undoubtedly, Dante proposes an art which must 'present' the "vero" as a poetical re-presentation, that is, "the sentenza," must be communicated through "fictio rhetorica musicaeque poetae: (DVE 2.4.3). In other words, Dante proposes an art that must be veri-similis, that is to say, an art which must "nostre meni
enucleare alii conceptum” effectively (DVE 1.1.3). In this sense, Dante resorts to the synaesthetic art of “visible parlarie,” and foresees our modern cinematic art. The *Commedia* is still the object of admiration, because the author has succeeded in creating a kind of art which represents the truth in a such way that it makes the reader get involved in the situation. We do not know what the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* look like, but we do know the philosophical and bibli-cal sources from which the “trovatore” drew the truth of those kingdoms. One may think that the real *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are not identical to Dante’s; but his/her imagination enjoys the *Commedia* for she sees it as a close picture of a reality which may not be different from that described in Revelation.

10 St. Thomas distinguishes between “recta ratio practica and recta ratio speculativa”: the former is *Prudentia*, whose purpose is to direct our acts to their specific moral ends (“Ratio autem eorum quae sunt agenda propter finem est ratio practica,” S. Th. 2.2.47); the latter is *Ars*, which is not designed to direct human acts to their ends (“in quibus non sunt viae determinatae perveniendi ad finem”), but to shape the concept in a suitable form, like a syllogism or a sentence and so on (“ratio speculativa quaedam facit, puta syllogismum, propositionem et alia huiusmodi,” Ibid. ad tertium). For Dante, poetry is the synthesis of both speculative (the verbal artistry) and practical (the true-good): the former attracts the human mind, the latter directs it. Hence, the artistic work belongs both to a speculative category and to a practical one.

11 Dante’s notion of art is obviously medieval, but in some aspects it is original. *Ars* is *recta ratio* (“right reason”) directing the artistic activity towards its objective. The artistic product is the synthesis of both speculative (natural and supernatural science) and practical activity. Practical activity or right reason directs the imaginative activity (“ingegno”) in its process of conceiving the artistic product, the beauty (*pulchrum*), that is, the artistic representation of the natural or supernatural conceptions. Mechanical arts (grammar, rhetoric, music) concern the mechanical execution by which the internal vision of the true-good is made visible, beautiful and pleasurable. By calling for “science, genius and art” as the essential features of a poetical activity, Dante suggests that the liberal arts of the “Trivio” (Trivium = grammar, rhetoric and logic) and “Quadrivio” (quadri-vium = arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music), plus natural science, (physics and metaphysics), moral science and “divina scienza” constitute the source of a poet, because a poet is at the same time a scientist and an artist. Mazzotta grounds his impressive book *Dante’s Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* on this Dantesan encyclopedic vision of poetry.

12 Erich Auerbach makes Plato responsible for the “parusia” of the idea within the things; “proprio lui [Plato] gettò il ponte sull’abisso tra poesia e filosofia ... La sua dottrina pose ai poeti il compito di poetare filosoficamente” (7). It is my conviction that the Platonic message was captured by William of Conches. In his works, especially in *De Philosophia Mundi*, William, as Gregory has pointed out, performs a reduc-tio aritium ad philosophiam (270). For the Chartistian, eloquentia and cognitio (“knowledge”) are species of the same science, in that science implies both knowledge and the skill to reveal it with ornament ([Eloquen-tia and cognitio] “dicuntur species scientie quoniam in istis duobus est omnis scientia, sicut in cognoscendo res et cognitas proferendo omate” (Glosae in Boethium 57-58). Dante’s poetics is rooted in the Neoplatonic theory as ex-pounded by William of Conches. Even though the poet distinguishes cognitio (“sentenza”) and eloquentia (“bellezza”) in two different categories (doctrinal and rhetorical) and affirms the supe-rior value of the former, he holds that both are components of the same reality (“e l’una e l’altra è con dilettò”).

13 In this sense, the pilgrim addresses Virgil: “O tu ch’onorì scienza e arte” (Inf. 4.73). “Scienza” is a speculative actio; Virgil is the symbol of wisdom in act; and “arte,” the practical activity (fac-tio), refers to Virgil as the “the master” of “the fair style” (“del doce stile”) and of “the fair speech” (“parola omata”). In this sense, poetry is the product and synthesis both of *recta ratio agibilium*, acting wisdom and *recta ratio factibilium*, that is, the poetical organ made by right reason in order to make the enlightening wisdom sweet and attractive. For the different meanings of “arte” in Dante’s works see Salsano.

14 The question whether poetry produces a lie or a truth goes back to Plato; but, in the Middle Ages, mythographers, like Fulgentius (Mitologiarum Libri Tres), Albericus Lundonensis (De Divi...
Gentium et Illorum Allegorias), Amulf of Orlean (Allegorie super Ovidii allegorias), collected, analyzed and interpreted fables and myths as veils hiding rational and supernatural truths. As Curtius has shown, “Aquinas’ theory of knowledge and of art ... made the quarrel flare up again” (220-21). However, the debate between the advocates of poetry-theology, Giovanni del Virgilio and Albertino Mussato, and their opponent Giovanni of Mantua shows a kind of confusion between the Aristotelian word “theologians” (which means authors who dealt with gods or the divine origin of poetry; for Cicero, poetry is divine in its origin) and theology as the science of Revelation. There was confusion especially between the notion of theology as a science producing a theological truth and theology as a poetical representation of a revealed truth. The debate, therefore, did not reach any conclusion. It is my impression that a kind of confusion is still present in some modern criticism focusing on Dante’s modus tractandi in the Commedia: Is Dante’s story poetical or theological? Scholars who believe in the authenticity of Dante’s letter to Can Grande della Scala are split: for some the Commedia is a theological allegory not different from the Bible; for others it is a rhetorical presentation of a truth which is ultimately unknown. I believe that the litterale istoria is the substantial unity of the “thought” (intellectus) and its “written signs” (signa scripta). These signs, however, fail short of expressing the breadth of thought. Rhetorical figures, like metaphors or allegories, originate in this theory; they are extensions of signa to reach and express other areas of thought: “Multa namque per intellectum videmus quibus signa vocalia desunt: quod satis Plato insinuat in suis libris per assumptionem metaphorismorum; multa enim per lumen intellectuale vidit que sermente proprio nequitivit expressere” (Epist. 13.84). Hence, a poetical story is made of signa and other rhetorical devices to represent a philosophical and theological truth. This theory goes back to Macrobius who describes a real and honest narratio fabulosa as “sacramen erum notio sub pio figuramentorum velamine honestis et tecta rebus et vestita nominibus enuntiatu” (78). Thus, the allegory of the she-wolf or the character of Farinata or the pilgrim’s journey are signs designed to utter the amplitude of the poet’s thought. Dante’s insistence on the fact that “literal sense must always be accorded primacy, as the one in whose meaning all others are contained” (Conv. 2.1.8) implies what I have defined as the substantial unity between the vocal, rhetorical images and its true meaning. Among others see Hollander, Allegory and “Dante”: the author examines a vast production of criticism regarding this subject; Mazzotta Dante. Poet of the Desert (esp. chapters two and six); Barolini, The Undivine Comedy (esp. chapters 1, 3 and 10); and “The Cangrande dispute.”

15 Hollander properly observes: “medieval treatises in poetics, often bearing the title De Poetria, or something similar, are principally handbooks for the young students of poetry” (“Dante” 91).

16 “Sciendum est igitur quod, quenmadmodum ars in triplici gradu inventur, in mente scilicet artificis in organo et in materia forma per artem, sic naturam in triplici gradu possumus intueri” (Mon. 2.2.2).

17 “Est enim natura in mente primi motoris, qui Deus est; deinde in celo, tanguam in organo quo mediantem similitudo bonitatis eternae in fluentantem materiam explicatur” (Ibid.).

18 Talking of the “best subject matters” (“optima digna”) of poetry, the author writes: “Ad quorum evidentiam sciendum est quod sicut homo tripliciter spirituatus est, videlicet vegetabili, animali et rationali triplex iter perambulat.” From this anthropological principle, Dante draws the rule to distinguish three genres of poetical arguments: utile, delectabile and honestum. (DVE 2.2.6-7).

19 As Marti points out, Dante and his contemporaries saw in the human compound “a profound unity between the inner world and its external manifestations” (“profonda unità [...] nel composto umano, tra il mondo intimo e le sue manifestazioni sensibili” [155]).

20 This passage from De Finibus is also quoted by G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli 1964. 63, n. 5.

21 “vitium [...] corrumpit in eis bonum naturae” De civitate Dei 12.3.

22 English translations of the original text are mine.

23 We do not know whether Dante ever read Summa de bono; what we do know, however, is that his philosophical principles regarding the metaphysical, psychological and moral aspects of the good are clearly present in the Summa. If not directly, Dante depends on Philip the Chancellor through the mediation of St. Albert’s works. Philip’s influence on Albert the Great’s De natura boni and De bono, the Anonymous Summa Duacenst and De Bonitate Divinæ Naturæ (which is the
third treatise of *Summa Theologiae* by Alexander De Hales) is indeed remarkable.

24 Dante describes the *energeta* of human nature as follows: "questo seme divino [...] ne l’anima incontanente germoglia, mettendo e diversificando per ciascuna potenza de l’anima secondo la essigniezza di quella. Germoglia dunque per la vegetativa, per la sensitiva e per la razionale; e disbrancasi per le vertulti di quelle tutte, drizzando quelle tutte a le loro perfezioni, e in quelle sostenendosi sempre, infino al panto che, con quella parte de la nostra anima che mai non muore, a l’altissimo e gloriosissimo seminadore al cielo ritorna” (*Conv.* 4.23.3).

25 *De Natura Boni* was composed in Germany around 1236. *De bono* was written in Paris between 1240 and 1248 and constitutes the last part of a series of philosophical treatises entitled *Summa de Creaturis*. English translations of the original text are mine.

26 "O misera, misera patria mia! quantà pietà mi stringe per te, qual volta leggo, qual volta scrivo cosa che a un reggimento civile abbia rispetto” (*Conv.* 4.27.11).

27 To the question: "Why did Dante Write the *Commedia*?,” Barolini answers by stressing these very points.

28 "orrevol gente” (72) “O tu ch’onorì scienza e arte” (73), cotanta onranza” (74), l’onnata nominanza” (76), “Olorate l’altissimo poeta” (80) “fannomi onore” (93), “e più d’onore ancora assai mi feno” (100).

29 Dante’s definition of his *Commedia* as a “poema sacro” is not designed to identify it as a Book of Revelation. The origin of this definition is in Aurelius Theodosius Macrobius’s *Commentarium*. This author distinguishes *narratio fabulosa*, based on a mere *fictio*, from *narratio fabulosa* based on "*sacrarum rerum notio*" (78). In the *Purgatorio* 29.100-105, the poet is not asserting that St. John deviates from Ezekiel and agrees with Dante; on the contrary, by stressing that “Giovanni è meco,” Dante means “Giovanni mi sostiene,” that is, St. John’s authority is the foundation of my belief.

30 I expand on this theme in “The True Donna Gentile”.

31 St. Thomas concludes his *Questio* on visions and prophecies with the following statement: “In singulis temperibus non defuerunt aliqui prophetiae spiritum habentes, non quidem ad novam doctrinam fidei depromendam, sed ad humanarum actuum directionem (“At each period there were always some who had the spirit of prophecy, not for the purpose of setting out new doctrines to be believed, but for the governance of human activity,” 2-2.174).

32 On the four metaphysical causes was based the *accessus ad auctores*. See Minnis *Medieval Literary Theory and Critism* (especially 15-28 and 28-33).

33 The poet is asserting that his “vera intenzione” was present in the canzone, but the form or the body was not subtle; therefore, it was hard for the readers to grasp “la bonitate”.

34 One of St. Thomas’s definition of sign is: "signum autem est per quod aliquis devenit in cognitionem alterius” *S. Th.* 3.62.

35 In the Middle Ages, the noun ‘form’ had a polyseme value; it was used to mean the external configuration of something or someone. In this sense, Dante says: “Queste cose visibili, si le proprie come le comuni in quanto sono visibili, vengono dentro a l’occhio *non dico le cose, ma le forme loro*” (“Whether strictly speaking or commonly visible, all things – or rather not *the things themselves but their forms* – come into the eye”) (*Conv.* 3.9.7). Form, meaning the essence of something, is the specific difference determining the nature of any individual reality. The Creator of these forms is God (“Ciascuna forma sostanziale procede da la sua prima cagione, la quale è Dio”) but according to St. Thomas, analogically speaking an artist too is a producer of specific forms: "artefex enim producit determinatam formam in materia, propter exemplar ad quod inspicti, sive illud sit exemplar ad quod extra intuetur, sive sit exemplar interius mente conceptum” [For an artificer produces a determinate form in matter by reason of the exemplar before him, whether it is the exemplar beheld externally, or the exemplar interiorly conceived in the mind,” (*S. Th.* 1. q. 44. a.3). For Dante, the specific form, i.e., the essence of poetry, is the thought, which is "goodness” ("la bonitate”); whereas, the external form is its visible beauty, made of linguistic sounds. For the Florentine poet, however, there must be a close link between *conceptiones* and *loquela*; both must be *optime* (“optime conceptiones non possunt esse nisi ubi scientia et ingenium est; ergo optima loquela non conveniet nisiillis in quibus ingenium et scientia
est," "DVE 2.1.8). As stated, even though Dante distinguishes the moral category from the aesthetic, and confines more value to the former, he claims their inseparability in order to create a perfect piece of art. Barolini (The Undivine Comedy) infers the notion of form from the phrase "Anzi è formale" (Par. 3.79) which means "Anzi essenziale." She continues: "form, in this sense, is not less deep than metaphysics; it is not abstractable as a surface value." She privileges "form over content;" but, at the same time, she claims that her reading differs from "earlier formal readings, essentially stylistic, in that, in my reading form is never disengaged from content." Through this methodology, Barolini attempts to put Dante on trial, because she finds that the poet "ideologizes form in such a way as to draw [her] attention from it to the ideology it serves" (17). Barolini has reached the profound meaning of Dante's notion of art, but misses the essential point: Dante's art is inseparable from "science" and "genius." Dante's art is his ideology enucleated in artistic forms. Greek, Etruscan and Roman arts are "ideologized forms," that is, through their visible and pleasurable beauty, they direct our mind to their religious, social and political substrata. The more we understand the nature of the soil in which they are rooted, the more we appreciate and enjoy the art itself. However, the point Barolini misses is essential: Dante's Commedia is divine not because its subject matter is dogma, but because the poet was able to filter the dogma through his imagination and feelings. In other words, the Commedia is artistically divine because Dante's genius—or his humanae naturae deus (Horace, Epist. 2.2.187)—was able to turn the invisible world into a visible one and show it as the real divine world made of the same philosophical and theological truths.

36 I would extend Mazzotta's interpretation of Dante's notion of allegory in the Commedia to this chapter of the Convivio. Mazzotta writes: "L'antropomorfismo -con le sue varianti comme prosopopea o fiction personae, che sono le figure dominanti della Divina Commedia e sono comuni ai testi sacri e profani, - postula la continuità mimetica tra l'universo di segni ed immagini e il mondo delle essenze; ma esso è la simultanea conferma della distanza che vige nel cuore delle immagini tra l'immagine e il suo referente" ("Teologia" 107).

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Mario Trovato

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