Dante’s *Vista Nova: Paradiso* XXXIII. 136

In the final *terzine* of his *Commedia*, the poet Dante must confront a problem similar to that faced by mystical writers in many religious traditions: he must narrate the pilgrim Dante’s direct encounter with divinity, his unmediated vision of God. The penultimate sentence in the poem describes the pilgrim’s difficulty in making the final step toward this vision:

Qual è ’l geomètra che tutto s’affige  
per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,  
pensando, quel principio ond’ellì indige,  
tal era io a quella vista nova:  
veder voleva come si convenne  
l’imago al cerchio e come vi s’indova;  
ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:  
se non che la mia mente fu percossa  
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.  

(Par. XXXIII. 133-41)\(^1\)

At the crux of this sentence, and of the pilgrim’s difficulty, is the *vista nova*. Explication of this phrase may contribute to an understanding of the nature of the experience which the phrase designates or — if that is too much to ask from explication — to an understanding of the structure of the poem whose culmination this phrase represents.

Joseph Mazzeo and Francis X. Newman have provided students of the poem with much valuable information about the philosophical and theological foundation of the final verses of the *Commedia*.\(^2\) Both point out Dante’s reliance on St. Augustine’s explication of the word *paradisus*, which occupies the final book of the *De Genesi ad litteram*. Commenting on St. Paul’s report (II Corin. 12: 2-4) that he was carried up to the third heaven, Augustine explains that the three “heavens” represent three kinds of vision, three modes of apprehension available to mortals: *visio corporalis*, *visio spiritualis* or *imaginativa*, and *visio intellectualis*. These three modes of vision may be seen, respectively, as characteristic of the three *cantiche* which form the *Commedia*. The *Inferno* would then
represent corporeal vision, derived from the activity of the senses; the *Purgatorio* would represent spiritual or imaginative vision, which apprehends forms without physical substance, including those in dreams; and the *Paradiso* would represent intellectual vision, which apprehends what is beyond the senses and beyond the imagination. I wish here to pursue the notion of *visio intellectualis*, not primarily as a theological tradition but indeed as the basis of Dante’s practice of poetry in the *Paradiso*, through a study of verbal structures, specifically the semantic fields associated with the word *vista*.

Because Mazzeo’s indispensable book broke new ground in its exposition of the sources of the *Paradiso*, including the *De Genesi*, it could not also explicate each of the many difficult words and phrases of that *cantica*. Similarly, Newman’s article, while it provides a framework admirable for its concise and suggestive formulation, is self-described as “necessarily schematic” (p. 77). After studying their remarks on the *Commedia*’s final vision, the reader of the poem may still feel uneasy about his ability to integrate their exposition of sources and delineation of a structuring schema into a reading of Dante’s lines, many of which remain troublesome or ambiguous. While the ending of the poem designates an experience which resists human understanding, this does not mean that the reader can permit himself to settle for a reading of the words of that ending themselves as beyond understanding.³ Even phrases which present themselves as designating an incomprehensible experience must be comprehensible as verbal structures, as elements in a system of reference. I hope the observations I will make here will be useful in the explication of just one of these phrases: *vista nova*.

The location of this phrase a mere nine lines from the end of the poem suggests that it is of particular interest. Moreover, this is the phrase which designates the vision which is the goal of the fictive journey the poem narrates. A pertinent question one may, I think, ask first in investigating this phrase is this: does the combination of “vista” and “nova” occur elsewhere in the *Paradiso*? To my knowledge, it occurs twice: “rinovando vista” (*Par. XIV*. 113) and “novella vista” (*Par. XXX*. 58). I will examine both in turn.

The phrase “rinovando vista” occurs in a passage which immediately follows St. Thomas Aquinas’s lengthy response to the pilgrim’s expression of two doubts. St. Thomas occupies the better part of four cantos resolving them and explaining to the pilgrim certain principles of interpretation which will help him avoid further such doubts.⁴ The pilgrim is then transported to the next
level of Paradise, where he immediately sees a vision. The poet describes the experience as follows:

Qui vince la memoria mia lo 'ngegno;
ché quella croce lampeggiava Cristo,
sí ch'io non so trovare essempro degno;
ma chi prende sua croce e segue Cristo,
ancor mi scuserà di quel ch'io lasso,
vedendo in quell'albor balenar Cristo.
Di corno in corno e tra la cima e 'l basso
si movien lumi, scintillando forte
nel congiugnersi insieme e nel trapasso:
cosí si veggion qui diritte e torte,
veloci e tarde, rinovando vista,
le minuzie d'i corpi, lunghe e corte,
moversi per lo raggio onde si lista
talvolta l'ombra che, per sua difesa,
la gente con ingegno e arte acquista.
E come giga e arpa, in tempra tesa
di molte corde, fa dolce tintinno
a tal da cui la nota non è intesa,
cosí da' lumi che lì m'apparinno
s'accogliea per la croce una melode
che mi rapiva, sanza intender l'inno.  (Par. XIV. 103-23)

The micro-context of rinovando vista suggests that vista here has a denotation quite different from that in Paradiso XXXIII: in the six lines beginning with "cosí," the lengthy clause which provides an earthly correlate to one moment in the pilgrim's celestial experience, rinovando vista seems to describe le minuzie d'i corpi. What is here being depicted is a common circumstance: to protect himself from the rays of the sun, one creates a place of shadow or darkness — by drawing heavy draperies over a window, for example. One ray of light penetrates the darkness, though, perhaps through a narrow gap between the edge of the window and that of the draperies. In this ray, traversing the darkness, what would now be called specks of dust can be seen drifting and whirling. These specks are taken to be the smallest particles of matter. It is these particles which are rinovando vista, "changing appearance," constantly as they move through the light. They are, one infers, in the air all the time, but they become visible only when human "ingegno e arte" create the necessary dark setting in which they can be seen.

But if within this single clause it seems legitimate to understand rinovando vista as "changing appearance," one wonders why Dante chose those two words when others would more aptly express
this feature of the minuzie. Instead of indicating the (changing) appearance of these motes of dust by *vista*, he could have written *parvenza* (a word he uses in *Paradiso* XXIV. 70-71: *Le profonde cose / che mi largiscon qui la lor parvenza, / a li occhi di là giù son si ascose*) or *apparenza* or *aspetto* or *sembianza*. Any of these would have designated more clearly than *vista* that property in the specks which makes them visible in different forms — “*diritte e torte, / veloci e tarde . . . lunghe e corte*.” Since Dante is not given to vague expression, one suspects he chose *vista* rather than one of these possible alternatives because it carries some meaning he intended which these other words do not. Similarly, one wonders why he selected *rinnovando*. *Mutando* or *cambiando* would have conveyed the idea of change effectively enough, without introducing the additional connotations of “*newness*” and even “renewal.” The phrase *rinnovando vista*, considered in relation to the clause in which it appears, is too strong to carry only the burden of “changing appearance.” There is a surplus of meaning, of referential weight, which remains disturbing unless it can be explained by connecting it to other elements in the passage.

The passage which immediately follows the clause under discussion provides a clue which, I think, helps to suggest the broader connotation of the phrase *rinnovando vista*. This passage concerns the situation of one who hears music but does not understand it. He hears only as a *dolce tintinno* what would be better appreciated by another who understands notes (*da cui la nota . . . è intesa*): the difference between the two types of hearers is that one apprehends the sounds as ordered sounds, ordered notes, while the other does not. The hearer who has this understanding of the ordering of sounds as notes is aware of certain principles which divide sounds into distinct notes, so that they are not merely a *tintinno* but a *melode* (v. 122). Moreover, he understands these notes as elements and as relations in what he hears. The pilgrim, at this point, lacks this understanding; he hears the *tintinno* but cannot understand the notes. He does not know the principles, the elements, the relations appropriate to the movement of specks he sees. This suggests that the clause which precedes this sentence about the kinds or degrees of understanding of music — the clause about the specks moving in the ray of light — may also have something to do with kinds or degrees of understanding: understanding of things seen.

This notion is supported by examination of the four cantos which precede the passage on the specks in the ray of light: as I mentioned earlier, their central topic is interpretation, whose
principles are expounded to the pilgrim by the soul of St. Thomas Aquinas. In the canto immediately preceding the one under discussion here, Thomas alludes to a type of person closely related to the one who hears the *tintinno* but does not understand the *note*. Thomas speaks of *chi pesca per lo vero e non ha l’arte* (Par. XIV. 123). The idea is that even when the object of such a person’s attention is the very model of truth, Holy Scripture, he will not be able to “fish” the truth out of it. He must possess the *arte* of interpretation. Fundamental to this art of interpretation is, no doubt, an understanding of the principles, the elements, and the relations of what one is trying to interpret: just as an understanding of these things is necessary if one is to hear a *melode* and not just *tintinno*. Thomas’s admonition on interpretation shares yet another feature with the passage on the vision of specks of dust in the next canto: a common set of terms. Thomas says that those who do not know the art of fishing for the truth make *torti li diritti volti* (v. 129); the particles in the light beam are seen *diritte e torte*. The recurrence of this pair of antonyms points to another similarity between the one who fishes for the truth in Scripture and the one who tries to see Christ in the specks as clearly as he might hear a melody in sounds: the apprehension of both may be confused, mistaking the *diritto* for the *torto* and *vice versa*.

The sentence which contains the phrase *rinovando vista*, then, is both preceded and followed — in a sense framed — by passages which concern the interpreter or hearer and the art or understanding which permits him to interpret or hear. This suggests that perhaps Dante uses *vista* rather than a word which means simply “appearance” because he does not wish to refer only to the “appearance” of the specks, but also to the viewer’s capacity for seeing them. This is, in fact, generally the primary meaning of *vista*: the faculty of sight. If, in the phrase *rinovando vista*, *vista* means the power to see (as well as the thing seen: “appearance”), the phrase would refer to some kind of renewal or regeneration of the power to see. The *terzina* in which the phrase *rinovando vista* occurs bears examination in this light:

cosi si veggion qui diritte e torte,  
veloci e tarde, rinovando vista,  
le minuzie d’i corpi, lunghe e corte.

In the line just before the one containing *rinovando vista*, the poet refers to seeing with a reflexive verb having passive force: *si veggion* refers to the particles, which “are seen.” Even if the other
contextual clues I have pointed out did not already suggest this, 
the proximity of two forms of the verb "to see," veggion and vista, 
indicates that the connection between them in this passage 
deserves attention. The main verb in this clause, si veggion, positi-
ioned at the beginning of the clause, designates the action of see-
ing the particles, not the action of the particles' moving. Had 
Dante wanted to write only about the analogue to what the pil-
grim saw, the specks of dust which moved like the lumi of the 
cross which "lampeggiava Cristo," he could have omitted si veggion 
and used si movien (as in v. 110), writing a perfectly effective 
description of the movement of the particles to explain the move-
ment of the sparks. It might have been translated like this: "so 
they move here, straight and twisted, fast and slow, changing ap-
pearance, the particles of bodies, long and short, through the 
ray." But Dante chose to write of the seeing of the movement, not 
of the movement alone, in itself; moreover, he chose to place the 
words which designate their seeing first in the clause, thus 
emphasizing by their position the importance to his simile of see-
ing. The specks are not only "changing appearance"; they are also 
"renewing the faculty of seeing."

It thus seems safe to say that, in the phrase rinovando vista, vista 
is used to connote both "vision: the faculty of sight" and "vision: 
that which is seen." It refers both to the subject, the one who 
sees, and to the object, the one who is seen. In this passage the 
subject is Dante the pilgrim and the object is Christ. In the final 
episode of the poem, the one which represents the vista nova 
which I started out to investigate, the subject and object are, simi-
larly, the pilgrim and God (although it is absurd to refer to God as 
the "object" of Dante's vision or of anything else — a problem 
which I will address in discussing Paradiso XXX.) The simile of the 
specks in the ray of light which Dante uses in Paradiso XIV is espe-
cially apt to describe a vision of Christ. In the simile, people em-
ploy their ingenuity to block out light, from which they feel they 
must defend themselves: they create, through artifice, an unnatu-
ral darkness. When just one ray makes its way into this man-
made darkness, however, a vision of Christ appears. The reader 
familiar with the most basic terms of the Commedia, the opposition 
between God as light and the environment of darkness — the 
"selva oscura" — which man's sinfulness creates for him on earth, 
will see the irony at the core of this simile. Man's mortality erects 
a barrier between himself and the light of God, creating the cir-
cumstances which make possible the supreme act of God's love, 
His entry into that dark world through Christ's Incarnation. The
mystery of the Incarnation, God’s taking on the flesh of a man, is crucial not just to this passage, of rinovando vista, but also to that at the end of the poem, with its vista nova.

I have not said much yet of “nova” or “rinovando.” In what sense is the vision at the end of the poem “new”? The passage I have so far been examining, from Paradiso XIV, does not refer elsewhere to “newness.” It will be necessary to examine still a third passage from the Paradiso to see “new vision” treated in such a way that the sense of “new” can be explicated clearly. This third passage is from Paradiso XXX. In this canto, the pilgrim has just arrived in the Empyrean, the highest realm of heaven and dwelling place of God. He has left behind the spheres of heaven which, Beatrice told him in Paradiso IV. 37-42, were populated with souls to help him understand the order of blessedness, even though these souls all really reside eternally in this Empyrean: he is beyond that artificial spectacle, which was devised exclusively for his benefit and does not exist in the way he has seen it, under normal circumstances. As soon as the pilgrim and Beatrice arrive in the Empyrean, her normal place of residence, Dante sees his beloved become much more beautiful than he has ever before seen her. This woman who is the cause of the direction of his journey and who represents the highest form available to earthly love is visible in her most brilliant form; to see any brighter light the pilgrim will have to turn from this creature to her Creator. He does so in the passage which concerns novella vista:

Non fur piú tosto dentro a me venute queste parole brevi, ch’io compresi me sormontar di sopr’a mia virtute; e di novella vista mi raccesi tale, che nulla luce è tanto mera, che li occhi miei non si fosser difesi; e vidi lume in forma di rivera fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive dipinte di mirabil primavera. (vv. 55-63)

Here the word vista seems again to mean both “the faculty of seeing” and “the object seen,” but certainly the first meaning predominates. The pilgrim’s visual faculty is transformed so that he is capable of enduring any degree of light. This fulfilled visual faculty — a faculty which is able to perform its function in the highest degree, with no limitation — is the novella vista of which the poet writes, quite different from the “old” faculty of vision characteristic of earth. When Dante says that his eyes were not so strong that
they did not any longer need to be difesi against any light, no matter how bright, he suggests a contrast to the situation described in the simile from Paradiso XIV, just discussed: there the poet wrote of those who create a dark place per . . . difesa. This dark, sinful place of difesa against the light, penetrated by the ray of Christ, is recalled some sixty lines later in this canto, by way of contrast:

La vista mia ne l’ampio e ne l’altezza
non si smarriva, ma tutto prendeva
il quanto e ’l quale di quella allegrezza.  (vv.118-20)

The verb smarriva brings to mind immediately the pilgrim’s pitiable situation as described in the opening lines of the Commedia:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

This verb, unlike the simpler perdere, “to lose,” which Dante did not use in these passages from Inferno I and Paradiso XXX, strongly connotes fear, confusion, and perturbation. The pilgrim was at the poem’s outset terrifyingly lost in a darkness from which he could see rays of light falling on a hill, but he was nonetheless unable to begin the ascent of that hill, to draw nearer to the light, no matter how much he yearned to do so. By Paradiso XXX, his vision strengthened, he can see without confusion the dimensions (l’ampio . . . l’altezza) of the Empyrean, although it is beyond space (Par. XXII. 67), and grasp both the quanto and the quale of what he finds there. To return for a moment to the terms of the discussion of Paradiso XIV: the pilgrim is now like one who hears music and understands the notes. Whereas, when he saw the vision of Christ at that earlier stage in his journey through Paradise, he was like one who heard the tintinno but could not make out the melody, now his stronger vision, novella vista, should permit him to know the principles, the elements, and the relations in what he sees. The gradual increase in his capacity to endure light, a theme throughout Paradiso, culminates in a visual capacity which is not merely greater but “new.”

The novella vista is described as “kindled” in the pilgrim: this implies that he not only is enabled to see pure light but is himself lit, enflamed. When himself alight, he will share that property with the light he sees. His kindling occurs immediately after Beatrice speaks certain parole brievi, explaining to the pilgrim why
he has just been surrounded by a light so strong that he is unable to see. She says:

"Sempre l'amor che queta questo cielo
accoglie in sé con sí fatta salute,
per far disposto a sua fiamma il candelo."  (vv. 52-54)

The pilgrim is the candle, being prepared to burst into flame. Since the novella vista is what is "kindled," the novella vista must be equivalent, metaphorically, to flame. Beatrice attributes the preparation for kindling into flame of the candle, that is, of the pilgrim, to something which is also often described metaphorically as a flame: love. Here Beatrice is playing on the representation of love as a flame in both erotic and spiritual contexts: in, for example, the love poetry of Dante's youth and in the story of Pentecost. Thus, both the One who kindles and the one who is kindled are flames. An identity between them is established, as any wall between subject and object vanishes.

The "greeting" of "Love" to its "candle" which makes this wall vanish has been introduced by Beatrice and then described by the poet in the following terms:

. . . "Noi siamo usciti fore
del maggior corpo al ciel ch'è pura luce:
luce intellettuál, piena d'amore;
amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;
letizia che trascende ogni dolzore."

. . .

Come subito lampo che discetti
li spiriti visivi, sí che priva
da l'atto l'occhio di piú forti obietti,
cosí mi circunfuse luce viva;
e lascionmi fasciato di tal velo
del suo fulgor, che nulla m'appariva.  (vv. 38-42, 46-51)

To understand the meaning of novella vista it is important to note that the pilgrim is given it only after leaving behind the maggior corpo, that is, the Primum Mobile, the last realm of the corporeal universe. There is no corpo, nothing material, in the Empyrean, which è pura luce. This is another way of saying that there are no objects to see through the senses: nulla . . . appariva to the pilgrim because he is beyond the world of appearances. He is not seeing bodies, nor images, nor appearances of any kind: he is seeing pure light.
The river of light which the novella vista, beyond appearances, enables the pilgrim to see recalls the river Lethe, which bordered the Edenic paradise on the peak of Mt. Purgatory. As the pilgrim had to drink of Lethe’s waters before entering that paradise (Purg. XXI. 102), so he must drink of this river of light before proceeding to the final vision of his journey, that of the heavenly Paradise. He must drink of this light because even his novella vista, the new visual faculty kindled at his entry into the Empyrean, is unequal to this final visual task, as Beatrice tells him:

"...è difetto da la parte tua,
che non hai viste [cose] ancor tanto superbe."  (vv. 80-81)

He drinks of the river of light and sees it transform itself from linear to circular: it becomes a circle of light, the celestial rose (vv. 89-90).

Having examined these two appearances of the word vista in conjunction with forms of nova, I will now return to my point of departure: the phrase vista nova in the poem’s final canto. Gazing into the light, the pilgrim sees it become three concentric circles of three colors (Par. XXXIII. 116-17). The poet has qualified this vision, though, explaining that the light did not transform itself to take on this shape. Rather, the pilgrim’s visual faculty changed so that the same light looked different from the way it had looked to him before; he saw it better.

ma per la vista che s’avvalorava
in me guardando, una sola parvenza,
mutandom’ io, a me si travagliava.

This strengthened degree of visual capacity (che s’avvalorava / in me), greater than that designated novella vista in Paradiso XXX, is that which apprehends the vista nova. The vista nova itself, that which the pilgrim sees, includes the appearance of nostra effige in the second of the concentric circles at which he gazes (v. 131). To my knowledge, no one has seriously disputed that the three circles suggest the Trinity and that the appearance of the effige in the second refers to Christ Incarnate. Again, then, as in the passage about the specks in the beam of light, Dante is here dealing with the seeing of an image of Christ. Two of the major mysteries of Christianity are implied by this final vision: the Incarnation is here along with the Trinity. The simile indicates that the pilgrim, contemplating these two mysteries, is not capable of grasping a
principio (v. 135) which would enable him to understand a relationship (misurar, v. 134: to measure is to understand the relationship between, for example, the length of an inch and the length of a particular line segment, or between the radius and the circumference of a circle). He wants to know the "how" of the Incarnation (vv. 137-38: come si convenne . . . e come vi s’indova). But, though he strives to comprehend this melode — the principle, the relationship, the "how" — he hears only tintinno. His experience of the vista nova is therefore incomplete, in that his desire is not extinguished. He still wants (veder volea come . . .) and has not yet reached the state of divine repose in and enjoyment of God.

To understand how this impasse is overcome in the pilgrim’s case, how he reaches the state in which there is no longer anything to want,7 it is, I think, necessary to understand one further aspect of the phrase vista nova. Its form connects it to the title Vita nova. The pertinence of the poet’s early masterpiece to the final cantos of Paradiso and especially to the phrase vista nova is suggested by a passage which plays upon the earlier work’s title, emphasizing the formal similarity of vita and vista. This passage appears in Paradiso XXX, the canto, discussed just above in explicating the phrase novella vista, in which the pilgrim enters the Em-pyrean.

Dal primo giorno ch’i vidi il suo viso
in questa vita, infino a questa vista,
non m’è il seguire al mio cantar preciso;
ma or convien che mio seguir desista
più dietro che sua bellezza, poetando,
come all’ultimo suo ciascuno artista. (Par. XXX. 28-33)

There is a great deal of alliteration in the first terzina I have cited (and in the one preceding it). The alliteration draws attention to four words: vidi; viso (a word which means "face" but also eyes, being derived from the verb "to see," of which it was the past participle; cf. Par. VII. 4-5); vita; and vista. The prominent use of alliteration, emphasizing a formal similarity among these four words, invites the reader to ask why the author chose to create such a grouping here.8 Three of these vi-words share a common feature not only formally but also etymologically,9 for they have a common root. The one which does not share this root, vita, is nonetheless extremely similar formally to one of the etymologically-linked words, vista, from which it differs only in the omission of one letter. Is this phonological and semantic patterning significant or not?
One other verbal feature of the terzina in question leads me to believe that it is significant: the careful structure of the line in which vita and vista appear. Dante further emphasizes the already close relationship of vita with vista by creating a phonologically and semantically symmetrical line in which these two words counterbalance each other: in questa vita, infino a questa vista. On opposite sides of infino, the poet has placed phrases consisting of (1) a monosyllabic preposition, followed by (2) questa, followed by (3) a word of the form vi(s)ta. The occurrence of questa twice in this line, in both the balancing elements which create its symmetry, serves an important function syntactically, phonologically, and semantically. Syntactically, its placement, in an identical feminine form, before each of a pair of formally similar words, further stresses their similarity. Phonologically, the repetition in its end sound of the end sound of vita and of vista adds to this emphasis. Semantically, the doubled questa serves both a positive and a negative function. Its positive function, the most obvious, is to create a parallelism linking vita and vista, helping to make them a pair. Its negative function, perhaps more crucial though less obvious, is to suggest its antonym, quella, despite that antonym’s absence. When questa appears as one of a symmetrical pair, the other element is normally quella; when this norm is violated, as it is here, the expectation of the norm’s fulfillment is nonetheless powerful. One expects quella vita at the end of the line, and because it is so strongly expected it is heard, though not written. Another way of saying this is that quella vita indeed is written, but negatively rather than positively. The absent antonym quella designates the contrast between what is articulated, questa vita and questa vista, and what is not articulated, quella vita and quella vista. This contrast in itself is of considerable semantic significance in the poem — whether one thinks of the contrast as semantic demarcation, as décalage, or as a moral, temporal, or spatial abyss, dividing earthly life and understanding from the eternal. The difference between questa vi(s)ta and (quella) vi(s)ta is the difference between mortality and immortality. It implies a total change, in Christian terms analogous to a conversion, from old life to new. Dante has designated such a conversion by the title Vita nova. In the first terzina cited he alludes to the beginning of the work which bears this title as he announces, in the second, the end of the poetic strain which it began. For these terzine are not merely examples of the modesty topos, expressing the poet’s inability to describe adequately Beatrice’s radiant beauty here; they also mark the end of Dante’s lifelong song to her, because he is now going beyond that love to an-
other love. In this passage, Dante is looking back over his poetic career — from the beginning of which he has written poems about Beatrice’s beauty — from the perspective of the ending of that career.

When Dante puts forward this retrospective view of his career as a poet and in the same terzine prominently emphasizes the connection between vita and visla and between his poetic evocation of changes in each, he suggests, I believe, the possibility of seeing that career as divided into three stages, all of them focused on Beatrice as subject. In the first, he wrote erotic verses about her. Then, after a spiritual conversion, he entered the second stage, in which he read his earlier erotic verses about her as representations of the nature of spiritual rather than carnal love; this might be called a stage of allegorical readings of originally non-allegorical poems. The title Vita nova refers to the conversion experience which initiates this second stage, the turning away from an erotic view of his love for Beatrice to a spiritual view of the same love. The third stage of his poetic career is that of the Commedia, a poem which, like all his other poems, turns on his love for and pursuit of Beatrice. In this stage, he comes to see his love for her as typological rather than merely allegorical in significance that is, he sees the events of their love repeated again and again in his life, in different forms and contexts, each time creating an occasion for him to understand that love better or to experience it more intensely. The moment when she first notices him, for example, “occurs” three times, in three different works, and each time it means something different: each time Dante sees more deeply or correctly into the meaning of her taking notice of him.

The model for the way Dante understands human events, including the event of his falling in love with Beatrice and pursuing her, is the Exodus, as interpreted by Christian tradition. According to the typological view, leaving Egypt and crossing the Red Sea is a real historical event which God repeats in other real historical events when, for example, each Christian leaves the slavery of sin and passes through the waters of baptism. The series of recurring events which began with the Exodus will, according to this view, be fulfilled after the last judgment when the souls of the blessed will be liberated from their captivity in mortality and cross over into a state of union with God. At the point in the Commedia at which the poet alludes to the course of his career writing poetry about Beatrice and announces its end, the pilgrim is about to make this crossing, through the river of light. For this reason, he will at last stop rewriting his love of Beatrice: to do so
is no longer necessary. He ends his — until now — never-ending praise of her because he has at long last arrived at a new beginning instead of an old beginning. He has poured over the story of his life again and again, trying to find the art of fishing for the truth God has written there. Now he is very close to the end point of this effort to understand.

What does this context have to do with the relation between vita and vista which Dante’s line suggests? How does it clarify his use of the phrase vista nova a few lines before the end of his poem? To think of Vita nova is to recall Dante’s conversion from eros to spirituality. To see the phrase vita nova recast as vista nova is, first of all, to think of a change which is radical, but specifically a change in seeing rather than generally a change in living: as the life was once liberated from carnality and began anew in spirituality, so the faculty of vision is released from its captivity to the material world and its offspring, the imaginable world, to begin anew. The contrast between, on the one hand, questa vita . . . questa vista in Paradiso XXX and, on the other, quella vista nova (Par. XXXIII. 136) further emphasizes radical change — from “this,” which is available here in “this” mortal life on earth, to “that,” which is available only there, in heaven. The phrase vista nova replaces vita nova as the Commedia, the book which pursues and celebrates the vision of God, replaces the book called Vita nova.

Moreover, the implied pairing of the two phrases suggests yet another link between Dante’s final version and his earlier poetic experience. The new and final version of the Commedia fulfills not only Dante’s love for Beatrice but also Beatrice’s love for Dante, several times re-enacted in Dante’s poems, in that, in this final version, the beloved condescends to reach out toward the lover to help him better see its beauty. This happens in the penultimate terzina of the poem: the pilgrim’s mind, striving to reach God but unable to do so, is shaken by the lightening flash of God’s grace, which takes him the final step he cannot go by himself. This love, this reaching out of God to man who cannot reach Him, is what the Incarnation represents in Christian doctrine. The Incarnation, the presence of “nostra effige” in the Trinity, bridges the abyss between God and man. Two become one, and eros is fulfilled.

To reach the stage where God can so strike his mind with lightening, the pilgrim undergoes what might well be called an ascesis of vision. As an ascetic gives up the pleasures of earthly life, training himself to give up even thoughts of them, in order to prepare himself for an act of God’s love, or grace, so the pilgrim gives up the sight of material things and then the sight of images.
He therefore becomes, in any traditional sense, blind. It is his blindness — that is, his escape from appearances — which enables him to see. To say that one can see only by becoming blind is mad, in the Platonic sense of divine madness. When one is beyond appearance, no longer imagining, what is left? To return to a line I quoted earlier, from Paradiso XXX. 40: in the Empyrean, the residence of God, there is nothing but *luce intellettiual*, available to *visio intellectualis*. When corporeal and imaginative vision fall away, the pilgrim is left with a new vision, unmediated vision.

Dante the poet, too, approaches the poem's end ascetically. What poetic tools are left to him, if he is to leave images behind? He provides a partial answer when he describes Paradiso, in its first canto, as an esemplo.

Trasumanar significar *per verba*
non si poria; però l'esemplo basti
a cui esperienza grazia serba. (Par. I. 70-72)

I take esemplo to mean more than merely *example* here: I believe esemplo refers to the genre *exemplum* and indicates that the Paradiso shares common features with this type of tale.

This inference finds support in the canto just preceding that in which Dante is absorbed into the light of the Empyrean. Much of Paradiso XXIX is taken up by a diatribe against the tales told by some preachers, tales known by the general name exempla. In this canto, Dante attacks the misleading exempla some of them tell, calling these exempla favole (v. 104), ciance (v.110), and motti (v. 115). Although this lengthy (vv. 82-126) diatribe against misleading stories about Paradise is characterized as a digression (v. 127), it serves several important functions. First, it permits the poet implicitly to contrast to these misleading favole the narrative which immediately follows his diatribe, the story of a pilgrim who is guided by St. Bernard to the unmediated vision of God. Second, it links, by its placement, the theme of unmediated vision and that of false narrative, for the topic of the ciance in question is the nature of angelic vision:

"... le viste lor furo essaltate
con grazia illuminante e con lor merto,
si c'hanno ferma e piena volontate

Queste sustanze, poi che fur gioconde
de la faccia di Dio, non volser viso
da essa, da cui nulla si nasconde:
The waking dreams of those who do not understand that the angels never turn away from the vision of God and hence have no need of memory might be called, in the terms of St. Augustine's typology of vision, instances of visio spiritualis or imaginativa gone astray. Dante implies that he hopes, in the narrative which immediately follows, not to follow these preachers in their errors. Third, the digression on misleading suggests that the reader is to see the audacious cantos which follow, and judge their success or failure, primarily as religious literature.

I am not implying that Dante means his readers to view the final cantos as "merely" literature, but rather that they present a particular, though not unprecedented, narrative problem, which the poet resolves in a way similar to that adopted by other writers of narrative. The questions I posed at the beginning of this study were these: how does Dante deal with the difficulty implicit in the end of his poem? What does his use of the phrase vista nova reveal about his solution to this problem? His difficulty is to designate the vision of the eternal, a limitless "moment" which can be known only by an apprehension which is itself beyond temporal limits, by using mortal language, the temporal structures of which grow out of an experience of time as a series of discrete moments. Studying his use of the phrase vista nova uncovers two elements fundamental to his fictive metamorphosis of earthly, discrete moments into the heavenly, eternal "moment." First, the passages employing rinovando vista and novella vista indicate that it is the apprehending faculty, not the object apprehended, which must change, if such a metamorphosis is to occur.

Second, the recall of the work Vita nova in the context of the phrase vista nova suggests that the new vision is a re-vision, a new reading of an earlier text.

That the vista nova of Paradiso XXXIII is a re-vision, a re-reading
of a text earlier understood in a different and less successful way, is confirmed by the poet's adoption in that canto of a metaphor which contrasts the eternal vision, as a broad and therefore coherent volume, with the vision of life in the material world, as scattered, unbound quires:

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,  
legato con amore in un volume,  
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:  
sustanze e accidenti e lor costume  
quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo  
che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume.  

(Par. XXXIII. 85-90)

The scattered quires, like discrete moments, cannot be read with complete success or confidence while they are unbound and incomplete. Their incomplete legibility results from their status in the finite world of temporal imperfection. Beatrice explains the relation between the realm of time and that of eternity with a horticultural analogy which suggests the derivative character of what is apprehended on earth as time:

"e come il tempo tegna in cotal testo  
le sue radici e ne li altri le fronde,  
omai a te può esser manifesto."  

(Par. XXVII. 118-20)

Unlike most plants, time's roots are above, its leaves below. Because time's roots are in heaven and what is seen below on earth is merely foliage, any observation of time made on earth apprehends only what changes and passes with the seasons. Such observation amounts to unstable reading, the only kind of lettura attainable là giù: reading which seeks its truth through "dreams" (Par. XXIX. 74-83).

The character of the poem's new and final vision as a re-vision appears in another metaphor from the world of books; life in the material world is compared to a manuscript copy which reads differently from its manuscript archetype:

"udir convienmi ancor come l'esemplo  
e l'esemplare non vanno d'un modo"  

(Par. XXVIII. 55-56)

What happens on earth is thus an inferior copy which one reads and re-reads in different ways, trying to get back to the archetype. Similarly, each of the visions of the discrete spheres in Paradiso is a reading of the final vision, but a reading which must differ from
the true and final one because it is presented in a version adapted to the pilgrim’s inferior reading ability. As Beatrice tells the pilgrim, his vision of the souls distributed through the spheres of Paradise are representations which are suited to his earthly faculties but which nonetheless differ radically from the way Paradise truly looks:

“Qui si mostraro, non perché sortita
sia questa sper lor, ma per far segno
de la celestial c’ha men salita.
Così parlar convieni al vostro ingegno,
però che solo da sensato apprende
ciò che fa poscia l’intelletto degno.
Per questo la Scrittura condescende
a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano
attribuisce a Dio e altro intende” (Par. IV. 37-45)

This implies that the series of visions which constitute Paradiso all mean something else (altro intende). That altro is the true rather than the fictive Paradise: the state of eternal union with God. This repetition of visions, described by Beatrice as “concealing” fictions and presented as pre-visions, employs a narrative mechanism which Dante shares with other narrative writers. “Repetition is the mechanism for extending the life of a present which it is in fact impossible to extend.” To double the moment of vision, triple it, quadruple it — to extend it into a lengthy though still finite series — is to make of a finite moment a fictive eternity.

To point to this narrative mechanism as the basis of the Paradiso’s final image is not, as I commented earlier, to reduce it to a “mere” linguistic structure, constituted by references to other words and phrases in the Commedia and in other texts. What I hope to have shown is, rather, that Dante’s narrative of the pilgrim’s final vision has a form which imitates the very form of Dante’s relationship to something he was presumably as committed to as he was to God, to Beatrice, or to Florence: his own language. Just as his writing (or any writing) is a creation of duration for a lived moment which vanishes, the moment of writing, so his Vista nova is a creation of a duration for a vanishing moment. But the duration Dante seeks to create is not merely finite. To write infinity, he writes the vision over and over. The more often it is written, the more like something eternal it seems. I believe that Dante does this not only because he was acutely conscious of the limitations of language, its inability to express the infinite, but also because he was acutely conscious of its greatest
power: what Roland Barthes has called language’s “depth.” Writing of “the crisis of the commentary,” the tendency of the act of literary criticism to, itself, generate a literary text, Barthes noted that one could deal with language in three ways: use it, appreciate its beauty, or experience its depth.\(^{18}\) Barthes defines the writer as one who goes beyond the first two to experience this depth. It is out of Dante’s experience as a writer that his vista nova, I believe, develops. Recurrent verbal patterns, and the intratextual glosses they establish, make the Commedia mean, even in its final vision of the altro which is beyond meaning and beyond words.

The University of Kansas

NOTES

3 This principle is suggested by John Freccero, “The Final Image: Paradiso XXXIII, 144,” MLN 79 (1964), 14-27, who stresses Dante’s movement, in the final lines of the poem, from the abstract cerchio to the concrete rota. I am much indebted to Freccero’s work, especially, in this reading, to his stress on the “perspective of the ending.” Salvatore Battaglia, “La visione divina,” Eseemplarità e antagonismo nel pensiero di Dante (Napoli: Liguori, 1966), pp. 223-26, sees Dante as striving to maintain rational consciousness in the final vision: although employing an orthodox rhetoric of ecstasy, the poet tries to minimize what Richard of St. Victor calls alienatio mentis. Already in 1909, the anti-Crocean Adelchi Baratono had emphasized the continuing presence in Par. XXXIII of Dante’s social and civil concerns: Dante e la visione di Dio (Genova: Gabinetto Stenografico Ligure).
4 This section is singled out by Benedetto Croce as an example of doctrinal exposition, in contrast to the “intuizione” of the final canto of the poem: La Poesia di Dante (1920; rpt. Bari: Laterza, 1966), pp. 152-55. In contrast to this now notorious interpretation, the present explication will show a continuity between Paradiso XIV and XXXIII.
5 I have treated the relation of “nota” to the theme of interpretation in the entry on Inferno XVI for the forthcoming Berkeley Dante commentary.
6 Lucia Ricci Battaglia, “Dall’Antico Testamento alla Commedia. Indagini su lessico e stile,” Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa 7 (1971), 252-77, demonstrates the relationship of the image in the following terzina to the pictorial mode of Giotto in a way which extends the notion of novella vista as a “new faculty of seeing.”
7 Cf. Par. XXVIII. 109-14.


10 *Infina* begins with a syllable which is also the first syllable of the line in question; moreover, in it the sound written "i," which occurs a total of five times in the line, is heard twice.

11 I cannot agree with the contention of E.R. Vincent, "The Crisis in the *Vita Nuova*," in: Members of the Oxford Dante Society, *Centenary Essays on Dante* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 132-42, that *Vita Nuova* means "youth" and not "new life"; I believe it meant both — though I do think Vincent is right to focus on "the dramatic change in [Dante's] poetry" (p. 136) as crucial to the work.


13 Michelangelo Picone, taking issue with the position of Gianfranco Contini, argues convincingly that the *Vita nova* represents something of an attack by Dante on his friends of the *Stilnovo* and, more particularly, a rupture with Guido Cavalcanti: "Strutture poetiche e strutture prosastiche nella *Vita nuova*," MLN 92 (1977), 117-29. Robert M. Durling, "'Io son venuto': Seneca, Plato, and the *Microcosm*," *Dante Studies* 93 (1975), 95-129, provides a framework for understanding how the early poems, non-allegorical in method, become the basis of the structures of the *Commedia*.


16 Cf. also *Par. XXX*. 76-81; *Par. XXVIII*. 13-18.
