“I DID NOT DIE, NOR DID I STAY ALIVE:” THE DARK GRACE OF NONEXISTENCE IN *INFERNO* XXXIV.

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Summary: In the final canto of *Inferno*, Dante confronts Dis, “la creatura ch’ebbe il bel sembiante” (XXXIV.18). In response, the poet declares: “Io non mori’ e non rimasi vivo; / pensa oggimai per te, s’hai fior d’ingegno, / qual io divenni, d’uno e d’altro privo.” (XXXIV.22-27) Beneath this apparently innocuous proclamation is a metaphysical “event” unique among Western letters, as the poet arrogates godly power and bestows on the pilgrim the experience of “existence” beyond the divine will. By this gracious gift of non-existence, the Pilgrim surpasses the mere corruption of Satan and his kingdom, and enters into a state of uncreation. Evidence of this unparalleled passage is found in the pilgrim’s absence of fear during his remaining time in hell.

In the final canto of *Inferno*, Dante confronts Dis, “la creatura ch’ebbe il bel sembiante” (XXXIV, 18), become now as horrid as once he was fair. This encounter occasions a declaration of infernal ineffability and personal paradox:

Com’ io divenni allor gelato e fioco,
nol dimandar, lettor, ch’i’ non lo scrivo,
però ch’ogne parlar sarebbe poco.

Io non mori’ e non rimasi vivo;
pensa oggimai per te, s’hai fior d’ingegno,
qual io divenni, d’uno e d’altro privo. (*Inf.* XXXIV, 22-27)

(Then how faint and frozen I became / reader, do not ask, for I do not write it / since any words would fail to be enough. / I did not die, nor did I stay alive. / Imagine, if you have the wit / what I became, deprived of both.)

A famosa confessione, to be sure, but, not unreasonably, Dantisti have generally accorded it indifferent attention. If “faint,” “frozen,” and “half-dead” are the best the poet can muster at this moment, then perhaps Eliot’s assessment that in his depiction of Satan “Dante made the best of a bad

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1 Italian text and English translation of the *Comedy* are taken from the *Commedia* of Robert and Jean Hollander.

2 Pasquini and Quaglio, *La Divina commedia*, 381.

job” must also stand for the poet’s self-depiction. *Inferno* XXXIV presents no diabolic counterparts to the pilgrim’s ravishing by the Divine Light, his efflorescing joy, and his enraptured sight at heaven’s zenith. Satan exudes no foul quintessence that binds the pilgrim to him, as the Divine Light breathes forth a fire that draws Dante into the Triune, Incarnate God. Dis is serviceable, yet hardly involving, and so perhaps is well met with stock emotion and clichéd phrase.

Yet, this seems a conclusion unworthy of poet and pilgrim alike. In this essay, after examining some trends in the handling of these verses, I argue that what Dante is intimating in these verses is completely unique, both within the *Divine Comedy* and within creation, and a far more fitting inverse to his embrace by the “Valore Infinito” (*Par.* XXXIII, 81) than the pasteboard dread it first appears. At the bottom of hell, Dante travels beyond man’s Foe to become the only truly “uncreated man.”

I. Silence, Fear, Conversion, and Parody

The first and most prominent trend regarding *Inferno* XXXIV, 22-27 is silence. Many commentaries pass over these verses without notice, taking Dante at his Wittgensteinian word that of what cannot be spoken, nothing should be said. Of the seventy-seven commentaries on *Inferno* available at the Dartmouth Dante Project, reaching as far back as A.D. 1322, only twenty-eight offer anything besides unblemished reticence, or a simple paraphrase of the passage.

In commentaries that do address this text, a second trend appears, reflected in Nicola Fosca’s (2003-2006) observation of “la banalità degli usuali commenti,” evidenced by the repeated claim that Dante means no more than that the sight of Lucifer left him suspended between life and death, physically and intellectually frozen, “mezzo morto dallo spavento” and the like. Bernardino Daniello (1547-1568) says that Dante simply

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4 Citations from the *Inferno* commentaries found at http://dante.dartmouth.edu/commentaries.php are given by author and year(s).

5 But note that silence is still the option of some modern commentators. Giorgio Petrocchi does not even reproduce vv. 22-27 in his *lettura Dantesca*, but simply, in passing, dismisses Dante’s address to the reader as a distraction which delays the description of Dis. See “Il canto XXXIV dell’*Inferno*,” in *Letture Dantesche*, 659.

6 Dino Provenzal (1938); Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio (1979), followed here by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (1991-1997), construe “Io non mori’ e non rimasi vivo” to be a rejuvenation of the Latin adjective “semivivus” or “semi-animis,” meaning the pilgrim was “mezzo morto.”
became “stupido and muto,” and many other commentators gloss “gelato e fioco” in terms of confusion and/or speechlessness.⁷ L’Ottimo Commento (3) (1338) provides some biological detail: “tutto il sangue li fuggie dentro verso il cuore donde le parti di fuori affreddarono et l’arterie prenderono il loro calore”; and Vellutello (1544) follows in this vein: “i vitali spiriti, che spetialmente stanno nel sangue, e ritiratisi al cuore, sedia de l’anima, in soccorso di quella.... E cosi, quanto al corpo, venne ad esser privo di vita, e quanto a l’anima privo di morte.”⁸ The result is that Dante is delivered into a “quasi sospensione d’esistenza,”⁹ a state of “suspended animation,”¹⁰ either total¹¹ or partial.¹²

A third trend, compatible with the previous one (e.g., Fosca and di Siena), finds in these stanzas the allegorical depiction of a crucial turning point. Torricelli declares, “Elegantissimamente è detto privo di morte e di vita il Penitente, nell’ ora, nel momento in ch’egli passa dallo stato della morte del peccatore allo stato della vita del perdonato.”¹³ John Freccero takes up this view, describing verse 25 as the logical “zero point” in the continuous process of Dante’s grace-filled conversion from corruption to justification.¹⁴ The plausibility and attractiveness of this approach are evident, for it situates the scene centrally within the grand scheme of the Commedia, and supplies a coherent and non-trivial reading of “Io non mori’ e non rimasi vivo.”

Still, the central difficulty with the second and third trends¹⁵ is pre-

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⁷ For example, Giacomo Poletto (1894), G.A. Scartazzini and G. Vandelli (1929), Carlo Grabher (1934-36), and Fosca (2003-2006). Giuseppe Giacalone (1968) goes further, seeing here the “annichilamento...di ogni senso corporeo del Poeta.”
⁸ Likewise Anonimo Fiorentino (1400[?]), Lombardi (1791-92), di Siena (1867), Casini and Barbi (1921), and Ernesto Trucchi (1936).
⁹ Raffaello Andreoli (1856).
¹⁰ Musa, Inferno: Commentary, p.447.
¹¹ Benvenuto da Imola (1375-80) writes that Dante lost “omnem sensum et intellectum.”
¹² Enrico Mestica (1921-22 [1909]); Carlo Steiner (1921); Bruno Nardi, Il Canto XXXIV dell’Inferno, 8
¹³ Torricelli, Studi sul poema sacro di Dante Alighieri, parte prima, 771. See also Fosca (2003-2006).
¹⁴ Freccero, The Poetics of Conversion, 173-174, 266; see also Durling and Martinez, Inferno, 544, n.25.
¹⁵ There are a number of other interpretations which have enjoyed more moderate approbation, and which also fall under Hollander’s indictment. Ernesto
cisely framed by Robert Hollander, who turns Dante’s claim of ineffability against his commentators. When he considers the likelihood that Dante meant no more than *ero mezzo morto*, Hollander asks, “Does Dante need to ask us to exercise our wits, if we have these, in order to understand *that*? The portentousness of his declaration that he cannot write what he became because words would fail him cannot be squared with such an interpretation, words for which would fail no one...” And truly, it does not seem that grasping the notions of “half-dead” and “fear-struck and frozen” requires an especially agile imagination. Dante’s resolution not to speak, and his counsel to the reader not to question, appear absurdly overblown in direct proportion to the utter conventionality of their object.

Extending Hollander’s query, the same is true of the theme of conversion. Is the experience of conversion so rare, and its dynamics so occult, that Dante’s confession of his own stupefaction can remain unchallenged? Unquestionably, a crucial moment in the pilgrimage is at hand, but would it demand much more than routine insight to comprehend an assertion such as, “Here, where sin can reach no lower, I died to what I was, and so was born anew”?

Two recent readings, noteworthy for their creativity and plausibility, appear to meet Hollander’s objection. Giuseppe Ledda, in *La guerra della lingua*, addresses head-on the paradox of claiming extreme ineffability for a mundane experience by interpreting vv. 22-27 of *il canto di Lucifero* as a diabolic parody of mystical experience. The parody of the divine presented in the figure of Lucifer—its cruciformity and “perverse trinitarianism”—finds its complement in the parody of ineffability. The pilgrim’s speech—

16 Hollander, *The Inferno*, 587, nn. 22-27. Along these lines, a number of authors assert that Dante’s address to the reader is an appeal to empathy. Paul writes that the poet “does not seem to be bothered by the reader’s not having gone through any equivalent experience, and he certainly seems confident that the reader is familiar with the emotion he describes.” *The Metaphysics of Reading Underlying Dante’s Commedia: The Ingegno*, 20. A similar tack is taken by Spitzer, “The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*,” 150; and Franke, *Dante’s Interpretive Journey*, 146.

lessness, the poet’s wordlessness, the use of contradiction, and the ban on inquisitive requests from the audience, all fit comfortably within established conventions for reporting *visio mystica*; but here, as the pilgrim stands before Satan, the “anti-God,” it is “anti–ineffability,” a parody of the true speechlessness which attends an authentic experience of the divine, that afflicts both pilgrim and poet:

La facilità con cui chiunque può pensare lo stato del pellegrino al cospetto di Lucifero è in totale opposizione rispetto all’impossibilità di concepire lo stato del soggetto di una genuina esperienza dell’autentica divinità. Inoltre la facilità di intendere, per qualunque lettore che abbia “fior d’ingegno”, le sensazioni provate dal pellegrino o di immaginare le dimensioni di Lucifero si oppone anche alla assoluta inattingibilità e inintelligibilità, per le creature, dell’autentica divinità nella sua misteriosa trinità e unità...18

In this light, the banality of the traditional comments on vv.22-27 is wholly justified. Just as Satan himself, though enormous, is readily described, so, too, the pilgrim’s response, far from the true transcendence which demands mystic silence,19 is easily captured in words.

Kathleen Verduin offers a different reading, one which, while recognizing the parodic depiction of Satan, underscores the serious, literal intent of Dante’s words through the idea of participation. At each level of hell, Dante is not simply a disinterested spectator of sins, but a participant in them, at least *in potentia*. Just as the pilgrim’s wavering resolution at the start of his journey mirrors the eternal indecision of the Ignavi, so, too, in his confrontation with Dis, the frozen, speechless pilgrim is “participating in the essentially deathful condition of the devil.... a union and commingling with the Satanic essence.” She continues:

What the Pilgrim must be made to understand, then, is that to unite one’s will with Satan rather than with God is to be swallowed up into a condition that is tantamount to extinction: Thus Dante’s immersion into the nature of sin climaxes in what is both its end and its origin: and he tastes, for a dizzying instant, that deathful state which is both the wages of sin and the just retribution of Satan’s disobedience.20

18 Ledda, 172.
19 Ledda, 173.
Verduin’s reading seems to me the more defensible, not least because it can accommodate the theme of conversion while also giving Dante’s depiction of the “zero point” of the processus iustificationis its dramatic due; whereas if one treats the scene as Ledda does, as merely “una contraffazione, un’imitazione grottesca,” the contrapasso of Dis is illuminated, but Dante’s own experience is, once more, reduced to “una sensazione di paura agghiacciante, terribile ed enorme ma in fondo poi perfettamente concepibile e immaginabile.” But this brings us back to Hollander’s question. If the pilgrim’s experience was terrible but understandable, why does the poet report it as ineffable? The poet tells us the pilgrim did not die and did not stay alive, and challenges us to imagine such a state. Why does the poet falsify his experience? Especially since a reaction of extreme terror, causing a momentary pause but unable to bring the pilgrimage to an end, is exactly suited to the encounter with this counterfeit deity. To parody ineffability is to give the devil more than his due.

Still, even Verduin’s reading does not go far enough. I believe there is a case to be made that within the pilgrim’s encounter of Satan, there is an “experience” (the word will not do, for reasons discussed below) not merely of extreme corruption or mystical “liminality.” At the bottom of hell, Dante descends even lower than Dis - who, after all, still exists, is still part of the created order which is brought forth by and remains eternally dependent upon God. From a Christian perspective, no creature is a true anti-God. The only true anti-divinity is nothingness. All creation comes ex nihilo; Dante alone goes in nihil.

II. Creation and Its Discontents

Justification of this claim, and of its application to the pilgrim, demands a brief account of the metaphysics of creation which informs the Commedia. For Dante, who follows St. Thomas and the mainstream of scholastic theology, creation is at its core an event of iustitia, as the divine art brings forth a universe which harmonizes with the Artist’s will. This is accom-

22 Ledda, 165.
23 Ledda, 173.
24 Raffa, Divine Dialectic: Dante’s Incarnational Poetry, 62.
25 Among the analogical senses of justice which St. Thomas distinguishes is “primal” or “cosmic” justice, wherein the Creator realizes a universe in harmony
plished through form, the metaphysical agency which determines the proper fulfillment of every type of creature, and the cosmos as a whole, precisely in virtue of its determination of the degree of participation each creature has in the divine existence. For example, the form of a rose receives, and thus limits, the act of existence in a manner different from that of a swan. Dante spells this out in the *Convivio*: “Onde, con ciò sia cosa che ciascuno effetto ritegna della natura della sua cagione... ciascuna forma ha essere della divina natura in alcuno modo: non che la divina natura sia divisa e comunicata in quelle, ma da quelle [è] participata, per lo modo quasi che la natura del sole è participata nell’altrre stelle.” (“Consequently, since every effect retains part of the nature of its cause...every form in some way partakes of the divine nature; not that the divine nature is divided and distributed to them, but that it is shared by them in almost the same way that the nature of the Sun is shared by the other stars”; *Convivio* III.2.5.) In such a universe, Beatrice explains, form is the principle of action and perfection:

> “Le cose tutte quante hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma che l’universo a Dio fa simigliante. Qui veggion l’alte creature l’orma

with his plan: “the nature of justice is preserved, because creation accords with divine wisdom and goodness.” (*Summa Theologiae*, I.21.4, ad 4; see also *Summa contra Gentiles*, II.28.13) This is famously expressed by the declaration of hell’s gate: “Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore...” (*Inf.*, III,9)

26 “For to each thing that is good which is in keeping with its form, and that is evil which is out of keeping with its form.” (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II.18.5, resp.) See Took, “‘Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram’: Justice and the Just Ruler in Dante,” 139; and idem, ‘L’Etterno Piacer’: Aesthetic Ideas in Dante, 18-19.

27 Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher*, 259.


29 “[E]sse...non est absolutum sed receptum, et ideo limitatum et finitum ad capacitatem nature recipientis.” *De ente et essentia*, V.48-49.
de l’eterno valore, il qual è fine
al quale è fatta latoccata norma.

Ne l’ordine ch’io dico sono accline
tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
più al principio loro e men vicine;
onde si muovono a diversi porti
per lo gran mar de l’essere, e ciascuna
con istinto a leidato che la porti.”

(Par. I, 103-114)

(“All things created have an order / in themselves, and this begets the form / that lets theuniverse resemble God. / Here the higher creatures see the imprint / of the eternal Worth, the end / for which that pattern was itself set forth. / In that order, all natures have their bent / according to their different destinies, / whether nearer to their source or farther from it. / They move, therefore, toward different harbors / upon the vastness of the sea of being, / each imbued with instinct that impels it on its course.”)

How a thing harmonizes with the divine will depends on the proper realization of its innate powers, its divinely-bestowed “internal order,” e.g., cogitating roses and two-headed swans would be “unjust” in relation to the Creator’s scheme.30

Unlike birds and flowers, human beings must knowingly and willingly move towards the realization of their forms, actively cooperating with the plan of Providence,31 until they reach that glorious realm which is the full harmonization of created wills with Will Itself.32

“Vero è che, come forma non s’accorda
molte fiate a l’intenzion de l’arte,
perch’ a risponder la materia è sorda,

30 However, a range of differences of ability and achievement within a given form is part of the divine plan, e.g., not every musician is equal in skill, nor does every apple tree bear the same quality of fruit: “‘ma la natura la dà sempre scema, / similemente operando a l’artista / ch’a l’abito de l’arte ha man che trema’.” (“‘But nature always fashions it defective, / working like the craftsman who, to the practice / of his craft, brings an unsteady hand’”; Par. XIII, 76-78.)

31 Summa contra Gentiles, III.111; Summa Theologiae I-II.91.2, resp.

32 As the Eagle of Jupiter proclaims in Paradiso: “‘perché il ben nostro in questo ben s’affina, / che quel che vole Iddio, e noi volemo.” (“‘because in this good is our good perfected, / for that which God wills we will too’”; Par. XX, 137-138.) Likewise, Piccarda answers Dante’s question about the possibility that a soul in heaven might desire a higher station: “Anzi è formale ad esto beato esse / teneri dentro a la divina voglia, / per ch’una fansi nostre voglie stesse...” (“‘No, it is the very essence of this blessèd state / that we remain within the will of God, / so that our wills combine in unity’”; Par. III, 79-81.)
così da questo corso si diparte
talor la creatura, c’ha podere
di piegar, così pinta, in altra parte...” (Par. I,127-132)
(“It is true that as a work will often fail / to correspond to its intended form, its matter / deaf and unresponsive to the craftsman’s plan, / so sometimes a creature, having the capacity / to swerve, will, thus impelled, head off another way, / in deviation from the better course...”)

The human “capacity to swerve” arises from the substantial form of the human soul, in virtue of which men and women possess freedom and intelligence (Purg. XVIII, 49-75).

The sins of incontinence, violence, and fraud, for all their differences in severity, motivation, and proximate end, are at heart matters of injustice, departures from the divine will which effect a self-imposed disharmony: “D’ogne malizia, ch’odio in cielo acquista, / ingiuria è ‘l fine...” (Inf. XI, 22-23) God redresses the injustice of sin in numerous ways (penance, earthly punishment, prophets, the good example of the virtuous, actual grace, Purgatory), which prepare for, and/or build upon, the ultimate “re-proportioning” achieved through justifying grace, by which sinners are conformed to Christ. The inferno is also a means of cosmic harmony. Hell is “di giustizia orribil arte” (Inf. XIV, 6), the “divin’ arte” (Inf. XXI, 16) through which contrapasso (Inf. XXVIII, 142) is meted out by “la ministra / de l’alto Sire infallibil giustizia” (Inf. XXIX, 55-56). Hell imposes a proper correspondence between soul and sin, as the eternally blaspheming Capaneus testifies: “Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto.” (Inf. XIV, 51) As heavenly justice is a matter of the alignment of human wills with the divine will, so infernal justice, far from dealing out revenge, is the harmonization of morally corrupt wills with the blessed rage for order which pulses through the cosmos. Hell effects a dismal justification which is the counter-image of the gracious justification of sinners by Christ; and hell’s punishments are just because they are the “continuation, intensification, and definitive fixation” of the earthly lives of the damned.

34 Hollander translates this as “fit punishment.” For Dante, hell is not a simple matter of “mirror reciprocity,” but the execution of a more discerning fit - a “bespoke punishment,” we might say. The erudition and skill which inform the art of contrapasso are meticulously analyzed by Cassell, Dante’s Fearful Art of Justice.
35 Auerbach, Dante: Poet of the Secular World, 88,134.
III. Degraded Existence, Nonbeing, Annihilation

A frequent question within contemporary Christian theology is whether or not the annihilation of the eternally unrepentant sinner is more in keeping with the mercy of God than eternal suffering, however just it might be.\textsuperscript{36} The powerful depictions of \textit{Inferno} only sharpen this question. As we hear the self-serving, unrepentant voices of Francesca, Farinata, Pier della Vigne, Ulysses, and Ugolino, we are meant to harden our hearts and straighten our own paths; but when reflection pursues these sinners into hopeless eternity, and their punishments into unrelenting wind, fire, and ice, then the scandal of an inferno raised by “primo amore” intensifies beyond endurance. And it can be argued that this is just what Dante designs: not a logical, soothing theodicy, but a poetic bellows put to the theological forge of a God both just and merciful, desiring the salvation of all yet willing to deliver over the wicked to the undying worm and unquenchable fire.

The ties between justice and mercy need not be pursued here;\textsuperscript{37} rather, an \textit{a priori} question is at issue: Within the Christian universe of the \textit{Commedia}, does it make sense to speak of annihilation? And, if it is possible, will it (or has it) ever occurred? These questions have particular relevance to Dante, since his interpreters do speak of the pilgrim’s descent as a journey into “nonbeing” and “nothingness.”\textsuperscript{38} The lack of a fixed technical vocabulary, both in Dante and in scholastic philosophy, lends itself to vague claims in this regard.

St. Thomas introduces some sorely needed conceptual clarity, as he (1) distinguishes between corruption and annihilation, (2) probes both the possibility and the occurrence of annihilation, and (3) examines the impact of sin on the good of human nature. Aquinas also articulates the critical principle which guides his thinking in all of these areas: “A man who in so far as he can abandons the divine will by sinning nevertheless re-enters its

\textsuperscript{36} See Pinnock, “Annihilationism,” 462-475.

\textsuperscript{37} See \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I.21.3-4.

\textsuperscript{38} Verduin writes of the pilgrim’s “intense experience of what can only be termed non-being.” “Dante and the Sin of Satan,” 212; Hawkins views the pilgrim as taking “step after step towards nothingness, descending into the spiritual version of a black hole.” “Bottom of the Universe: Dante and Evil,” 150. Marc Cogan asserts that in Dante’s encounter with Dis, “he is about to pass from as close as it is possible to come to the absolute point of nonbeing into the world of life.” \textit{The Design in the Wax: The Structure of the Divine Comedy and Its Meaning}, 297; and Warren Ginsberg writes of a “metamorphosis of unbecoming.” \textit{Dante’s Aesthetics of Being}, 115.
plan when by divine justice he is punished.”39

From Augustine to Aquinas, orthodoxy recognized that creation is a matter of complete dependence on God, both in the coming to be of things (creatio ex nihilo) and in their ongoing sustenance (creatio continua). That anything exists is entirely the action of the Almighty; what kinds of things exist, is entirely due to the action of God, although, in some cases, the workings of secondary causality are required to move these from potentiality to actuality. But whether created immediately in complete actuality, as are angels and the heavenly spheres, or created immediately in a state of potentiality, as are all natural composites of matter and form, everything is equally dependent upon the creative power of God for its initiation and its continuance.40

From this, a critical distinction arises: “If a thing cease to exist this is either by reason of its matter or because it is produced from nothing.”41 In one sense, angels are not less ontologically poor than insects: both are created from nothing, and so both are subject to the possibility of absolute annihilation, in the sense that the withdrawal of the divine power would reduce both to nothing: “And so the consequence is that, if the divine action should cease, all things would fall into nothingness at the same moment...”42 However, both are not subject to the corruption which is non-being. “Certain of the things we find in the world are able to exist and able not to exist (quaedam quae sunt possibilia esse et non esse); for some things are found to be generated and corrupted and, as a result, they are able to exist and able not to exist.”43 Such corruptibility is intrinsic to all

39 Summa Theologiae, I.19.6, resp. Unless one grasps this principle at work throughout Inferno, Dante’s hell will be wrongly seen as “a factitious fragment banished from harmonious communion with the totality of God’s universe...perfect and eternal injustice...” Heinze, The Concept of Injustice, 66.
40 See Convivio, III.2.4-7; O’Keeffe, “Dante’s Theory of Creation,” 45-67; and Moevs, The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy, 107-132.
41 Aquinas, On the Power of God, V.1, obj. 8.
42 Aquinas, On the Power of God, V.1, resp. “Now the creature’s whole being depends on God’s simple will, since he is the cause of things by his will and not by natural necessity. Therefore, if it be his will, creatures can be annihilated.” On the Power of God, V. 3, sed contra, arg.1; “Therefore, just as before things existed God had the power of not giving them existence, and thus of not creating, so also once they are created he has the power of not continuing to uphold them in existence; they would then cease to be. That is annihilation. [Quod est eas in nihilum redigere.]” (Summa Theologiae, I.104.3, resp.);
43 Summa Theologiae, I.2.3, resp.; see also Summa Theologiae, I.104.3, ad 2; and Summa contra Gentiles, I.15.5.
material composites, and its actualization leads to nonbeing, i.e., the loss of accidental or substantial form (e.g., wood burns, colors fade); but this is not the same as annihilation. “For when a thing is corrupted it does not dissolve into absolute non-entity \(\text{[non enim corruptitur aliquid in omnino non ens]}\), any more than a thing is generated from absolute non-entity.”

Given that any creature can be annihilated, even those with no potential for corruption, the key question becomes whether a creature ever has been or will be annihilated. Thomas is unambiguous in his assertion that the created universe will never be annihilated. Beneath the flow of generation and corruption, the material substratum of the cosmos endures. So, too, will God never withdraw his power from any creature. Thomas explicitly applies this to the damned: “Although in justice God could deprive of existence and annihilate a creature that sins against him \(\text{[creaturae contra se peccanti posset esse subtrahere, et eam in nihilum redigere]}\), yet it is a more becoming justice that he keep it in existence to punish it...” Sin is a rebellion of the will against God, but not a rebellion of created nature \(\text{per se}\). The annihilation of the sinner would punish the nature but not the will. Thus, we may say that (1) from the perspective of creation, immaterial beings have no potentiality for corruption, and material things which do

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45Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.104.4, resp. *On the Power of God*, V.4, resp. “Though material things are corruptible because continuing a given form can become impossible, matter cannot be without form because form can be ‘lost’ only by replacement, by ‘succession’ in matter; that is one reason why formless matter cannot occur; thus, matter, as locus of succession of form, is not corruptible; matter cannot be lost from reality by change. ‘Matter,’ here, is of course not sensible matter, but the subject of structure, one manifestation of which is sensible matter.” Ross, “Aquinas and Annihilation,” 197.


47“When a sin is committed the will rebels against God, whereas nature does not, but observes the order assigned to it by God: so that the punishment should be such as to afflict the will by hurting the nature which the will had abused: whereas if the creature were utterly annihilated, nature would be hurt indeed, but the will would not be afflicted.” (Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, V.4, ad.6)

48“Now, where there is no composition of matter and form, there can be no separation of them; neither, then, can there be corruption. It has been shown, however, that no intellectual substance is composed of matter and form. Therefore, no intellectual substance is corruptible.” Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, II.55.2.
corrupt imply an enduring material foundation; and (2) from the perspective of grace, annihilation serves no purpose, “since the divine power and goodness are shown rather through the keeping of things in existence.”

So far, we have seen that the movement towards non-being (the loss of form) in material beings cannot be plotted on a line of greater degrees culminating in annihilation (complete loss of existence; the cessation of all participation in the divine bestowal of esse). The latter is possible, given the conditional necessity of every creature, but for various theological reasons Aquinas rejects the withdrawal of divine conservation. Two further questions, intimately linked, remain. First, is self-annihilation a possibility for human beings? Second, what sort of non-being is wrought in a person due to the sinful exercise of the will?

Both questions must be addressed in light of what St. Thomas says about the three-fold good of human nature. First, there are the principles constitutive of nature (body and soul) together with the properties which arise from them (e.g., the powers of soul); second, the inclination to virtue which arises from this nature; third, the gift of original justice, given to Adam. This good is subject to a measure of diminishment, properly understood: the good of body and soul per se is neither destroyed nor damaged; by Adam’s sin, original justice is completely lost; and the natural inclination toward virtue is diminished, since with the lack of original justice, along with actual sins, there arises the disorder of reason. In terms of creation, original sin and actual sin cannot destroy the form of the human person, the soul, which is part of the goodness human nature enjoys simply by existing; however, since human goodness is not exhausted by sheer existence—since men and women possess an inclination to full perfection—there is a freely willed non-being of which we are capable, one which turns on the difference between initial and complete actuality (primum actum et ultimum actum):

‘Good’...expresses the idea of desirable perfection and thus the notion of something complete. So things are called ‘good’ without qualification, when they are completely perfect; when their perfection is not so complete as it should be, then, even though having some perfection inas-

49 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.104.4, resp.
50 This final good is a result of grace perfecting nature (see Aquinas, *De malo*, IV.8, resp.), rather than a principle constitutive of nature. Part of Ginsberg’s confusion arises from the fact that he treats the bestowal of the intellectual soul on the newly formed as an act of grace (*Dante’s Aesthetics of Being*, 120), rather than as the completion of nature which Dante holds it to be (*Purg. XXV*, 68-75).
much as they actually exist, they will nonetheless not be called perfect or
good without qualification but only in a certain respect.\textsuperscript{51}

No degree of sin can result in either the absolute annihilation of a
human being, or in the transformation of human nature into something
lower, just as no gift of grace, however extravagant, transforms a human
being into an angel.\textsuperscript{52} Whether or not any of the damned would actually
opt for annihilation is debatable,\textsuperscript{53} but their incapacity to achieve it is
not.\textsuperscript{54} The non-being human sin can effect, writes Thomas, is a matter of
intensifying the wounds of original sin (ignorance, malice, concupiscence,
weakness of the irascible appetite), which all give rise to habitual obstruc-
tions of the inclination to virtue. This inclination is subject to “unlimited
diminution,”\textsuperscript{55} but cannot be completely extinguished, since the nature it
arises from remains intact.

IV. “And in the lowest deep a lower deep still.” The Pilgrim’s Annihilation

Satan epitomizes the ugly rupture between created form and its complete

\textsuperscript{51} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I.5.1, ad 1.

\textsuperscript{52} But what of the endless cycle of transformation inflicted on the thieves of the
seventh bolgia? Ginsberg insists that when the poet writes that sin makes a per-
son “dissimìle al sommo bene” (\textit{Par. VII}, 80), he means that the soul becomes
so degraded that it leaves the damned as no more than “matter invested with a
form unable to actualize it as something human.” \textit{Dante’s Aesthetics of Being}, 120.

\textsuperscript{53} Ginsberg’s argument is complex, and would require more of a response than is
possible here. I register two initial objections: First, such a transformation must
raise the question of whether the same creature who sinned is also the creature
being punished, given Ginsberg’s view that the rational soul loses “its substan-
tive principle, its power to be that intrinsic and unifying form that makes human
beings what they are.” (119) Secondly, however plausible this view may appear
in regard to the thieves, it is much less compelling as an illumination of the rest
of the inferno.

\textsuperscript{54} I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out that the Ignavi long
for just such an annihilation: “‘Maestro, che è tanto greve / a lor che lamentar li
fa sì forte?’ / Rispuose: ‘Dicerolti molto breve. / Questi non hanno speranza di
morte...’” (“‘Master, what is so grievous to them, / that they lament so bitterly?’
/ He replied: ‘I can tell you in few words. / They have no hope of death...’”; \textit{Inf.}
III, 43-46.)

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I-II.85.2. For an opposing view, see Paul Griffiths, “Self-

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Summa Theologiae}, I-II.85.2, resp. Compare C.S. Lewis’ view that what one
finds in hell are “remains.” \textit{The Problem of Evil}, 127-128.
actualization. Dante does not encounter an intelligent, sinister creature, brooding over his exile and plotting a violent restoration; rather, he beholds a drooling, chewing, weeping, flapping automaton, spirit fashioned to behold God directly become a grinding, clanking testimony to the un glamor of sin. The intellectual power by which spiritual creatures can engage one another is permanently occluded. In Satan, Dante portrays the limits of the injustice free, intelligent creatures can achieve. Satan’s sin does not result in “complete disharmony” from the divine will. Lucifer is allowed to fall to the edge of existence, but not out of it. That Lucifer sins is his own affair: the angel was given a form which included the capacity to defeat its own perfection. But that Lucifer exists is God’s decision alone. Lucifer can chose only how, but not whether, to exist. Sepulchred in the chill lake, his dramatic plunge halted by the art of justice, Satan stands, like the hell under which he presides, as a monument to the inescapability of the divine will for order.

But Dante does escape that will. For a moment, the fear-fast pilgrim is the image of Satan: “stationary, indeed transfixed.... Hardly alive in any proper sense of the word, yet suffering vividly...”56 But then the poet arrogates godly power and bestows on the pilgrim the “experience” of “existence” beyond the divine will. (We see that the ineffability of this instant is not a parody, but very real.) The pilgrim no longer exists in accordance with human form, which limits men and women to being alive or dead. There is no tertium quid. But Dante is neither: “I did not die, nor did I stay alive. / Imagine, if you have the wit / what I became, deprived of both.” Dante “experiences” what Satan, and, indeed, all sinners, merely ape through their moral corruption.57

This annihilation is indescribable, for what can be said about what is absolutely not? It cannot be imagined, since all imagination plays within the confines of created form. It is there, whether grandly realized or dreadfully mutilated, that existence presents itself to the plasticizing power of the mind. There can be found human form unfolding itself into glorious artistry, steadfast virtue, and damning deviation. There is the realm of analogy and metaphor, simile and contradiction, action and rest. What Dante says is quite literally true, and is all that can be directly said: I did not die, nor did I stay alive. Death and life are contrasts applicable only within cre-

57 For a very different understanding of the nature, outcome, and value of annihilation, proposed by a contemporary of Dante, see Joanne Maguire Robinson, Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete’s Mirror of Simple Souls, especially chapter 4.
ation, including hell. Dante’s experience at the bottom of hell, unlike his experience at the summit of heaven, will remain forever truly, terribly sui generis. Despite the tendency of interpreters to call what Dante provides in these stanzas a “description,” it is nothing of the sort. Dante describes no “appalling experience,”58 gives no indication that he was in a trance,59 or had fainted.60 His address to the reader is a shrouded invitation to the impossible attempt of imagining sheer nothingness;61 not corruption, privation, or imperfection, but nihil. This impossibility stands in contrast to the positive ineffability of Paradiso XXXIII, in which the poet is united to the fullness of existence. Despite his protests, Dante coram Deo does find descriptive speech which, while wildly inadequate, is not therefore simply wrong. Dante asks God for words to convey no more than “un poco di quel che parevi...una favilla sol de la tua gloria” (69-71). The pilgrim then tells of light, colors, circles, rainbows, reflections, and “nostra effige” (131). With these, Dante opens out the lips of speech to drink “che d’un fante / che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella” (107-108), catching only drops of light, yet catching light all the same. This is the fullness which St. Bernard described as an “almost annihilation.... an apparent loss of nature,”62 born of the unfathomable fulness of God. Conversely, Dante coram Sathana undergoes complete annihilation, the true loss of nature.

Dis has fallen as far as creation can, reached that minimal actualization less than which even the most sinful nature cannot achieve, and now exists in just accord with that withered thread of form he has chosen as his own, which verges on, but does not vanish into, nothingness.

But Dante goes further. Not of his own accord, to be sure, for it is grace that delivers Dante from the dark wood, grace that escorts him to face the Triune Light, and grace that pushes him out of existence. It is not Dante’s sin

58 Cherrell Guilfoyle, “‘If Shape It Might be Call’d That Shape Had None’: Aspects of Death in Milton,” 50.
59 Olivia Holmes, Dante’s Two Beloveds: Ethics and Erotics in the Divine Comedy, 51.
60 Melvin Storm, “Troilus and Dante: The Infernal Centre,” 157.
61 Thus Leo Spitzer’s view that Inf. XXXIV, 26 is one of those addresses in which “Dante pleads to the reader to plunge deep into the memory of his own experiences in order better to approximate those of Dante” is off the mark. See “The Addresses to the Reader in the Commedia,” 150.
62 “Te enim quodammodo perdere, tanquam qui non sis, et omnino non sentire teipsum, et a teipso exinaniri, et pene annihilari, coelestis est conversationis, non humanae affectionis.” Bernard of Clairvaux, De diligendo Deo, in Migne, Patrologia Latina 182, col. 990 C.
that takes him out of creation, for as we have seen, Dante has no notion of a natural capacity for self-annihilation. Since it is not created agency that accounts for this, it must be God’s favor. This is a gift of dark grace, both in the sense that Dante goes where no human intellect and speech can follow, and in the sense that Dante “experiences” complete dissolution. The absurdity of sin, which seeks to live beyond God’s will, is revealed in the ineffability of its total realization. By the gift of God alone, given for the sake of his salvation, Dante is borne out of creation into nothingness.

But how does Dante know this has occurred? Would coming in and out of existence (rather than simply disappearing for a time) leave a trace? Of what sort? Dante assigns this “event” no duration, mentions no celestial coordinates. Would Virgil note the pilgrim’s “absence”? In Cocytus, there is no alteration or shadow caused by change. Nothing gives way, nothing progresses, no climates vary, daylight neither expands nor contracts, and such movement as there is measures no passing time. Judas and Brutus and Cassius are never more consumed than when Dante first beholds them. How, then, does one register the advent and the end of a “period” of absolute nothingness? If Dante is consumed in the dark grace of non-existence, how would he know?

It is, of course, very convenient for my thesis that Dante’s descent into nothingness is entirely indescribable. Such an explanation of “Io non mori’ e non rimasi vivo” may be reasonably accused of setting a new standard for obscurum per obscurius. Aside from the questions of whether the pilgrim’s annihilation finds a plausible place within the Commedia, and whether such an interpretation does make an advance on other perspectives, there remains the problem of evidence. What might lead the pilgrim to suspect, and the poet to suggest, such a dissolution?

A solution can be drawn from Aquinas’ discussion of grace, wherein he distinguishes three ways of knowing something: First, through divine revelation; second, with the certainty of human judgment (“per seipsum, et hoc certitudinaliter”), and third, inferentially through signs (“conjecturaliter per aliqua signa”). The first and third ways are pathways to true knowledge of grace. God can make special revelation of the gift of grace to its recipients, “so that the joy of complete security may begin in them even in this life, and so that they may carry out remarkable tasks more confidently and courageously and endure the evils of this present life.” Such

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63 The only way of registering change I can think of is through the addition of new residents to Cocytus.

64 Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I-II.112.5, resp.
knowledge is also underwritten by experience, for example, taking delight in God and despising worldly things.

While Dante may certainly be the recipient here, as he is in the final canto of the Comedy, of an immediate revelation of God, a fulgore which illuminates an absence more than dark, there remains the question of what could even be said about a gracious revelation of absolute annihilation. More likely, Dante’s dreadful passage is known through a combination of revelation and inference. Here, the theme of fear makes a fruitful contribution to my thesis. From the selva oscura—a veritable valle della paura65 where Virgil minces no words about Dante’s cowardice (II, 45: “l’anima tua è da viltade offesa”; 122: “perché tanta viltà nel core allette?”) - to the gate of Hell (III, 14-15: “Qui si convien lasciare ogne sospetto; / ogne viltà convien che qui sia morta”), to the edge of the abyss (XVII, 81: “Or sie forte e ardito”), fear has been Dante’s constant companion.66 And as Dante has supp’d full with horrors, “la gradazione della paura”67 has steadily increased. His swelling fear reaches its limit as Dante beholds Dis, and hears his master’s admonition: “Ecco Dite...ed ecco il loco / ove convien che di fortezza t’armi” (XXXIV, 20-21). But after he beholds the enormous figure and takes in its features, when he grabs hold of his guide and they climb the hairy hide, Virgil makes no further encouragements to fortitude, and Dante’s paura puts in no appearance. Dante “marvels” at Satan’s size, and is “confused” about his passage through the center of the earth, but he expresses no fright. The only mention of fear in the rest of the canto is that shown by the primordial waters, as they flee from Lucifer’s plunge. And this story adds further weight to the interpretation I propose. Satan’s plummet into the sea reflects the drive of sin to violate created form, to melt back into the formless abyss over which the Spirit of God moved at the beginning. But Satan is stopped in his descent towards chaos, held forever fast to the cosmic plan by external force rather than the inner bond of love.

But where Dis could not go, Dante does. He is, for a “moment,” com-

65 Paura appears five times in Canto I of Inferno. By contrast, it appears only three times in the whole Paradiso, and then only once in reference to Dante (XXVI.19).

66 See Boyd, Perception and Passion in Dante’s Comedy, 217-244.

67 Tommaséo, Commedia di Dante Allighieri, 405, n.9. See also Giacalone’s observation: “Questa paura è la suprema che il Poeta sostiene nell’Inferno; essa è più forte ancora di quella che l’assale nella selva dei vizi, perché se quella fu amara poco meno che morte, questa è morte stessa che il Poeta sente penetrare in sé e ucciderlo...”
pletely abandoned by God. Neither dead nor alive, he is no more. After this, what fear should the pilgrim have of this pathetic, ice-raveled seraph, whose fall must forever appear half-hearted to Dante the annihilated?

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