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Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a theurgic act,
a guide for the blessed reader from
a state of misery to a state of bliss.

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I declare that this dissertation represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to the University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

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Abstract

The enduring fascination of Dante's *Divina Commedia* has attracted, for centuries, not only scholars of medieval literature, Italian or Renaissance studies, but also scholars of modern cosmology and mathematics who, seeking explanations for their research results, rediscover and find inspiration in Dante's poetry. In this widespread scholarly discussion the dissertation proposes an esoteric interpretation of Dante's cosmological journey, with the hypothesis that the *Commedia* was designed as a theurgic act.

Structurally, this paper will first give a general overview of Dante's time emphasizing the cultural, political and religious atmosphere in Florence and in Europe. After that, the dissertation will draw an outline of theurgy, emphasizing the theurgic tradition and its Christian adaptation as it relates to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5th century CE). The dissertation will then provide the arguments for the main claim in five steps. The first step will discuss the evidence for Dante's esoteric affiliation. The second step will examine Dante's understanding of his *Commedia* as sacred poetry. The third step will compare Dante's understanding of sacred poetry with the Christian adaptation of the pagan, theurgic tradition as it relates to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. In the fourth step the dissertation will offer an interpretation of the *Commedia* as a theurgic act. In the fifth step, the question of whether Dante's cosmological journey represents some sort of cosmological vehicle for the reader will be discussed, focusing on the reception of Dante's work by occultists, and poets in the 19th and 20th centuries.

1. Introduction

The enduring fascination of the cosmological journey in Dante's (1265-1321) *Divina Commedia* has attracted, for centuries, not only scholars of medieval literature, philosophy, Italian or Renaissance studies, but also scholars of modern cosmology and mathematics who, seeking explanations for their research results, rediscover and find inspiration in Dante's poetry.¹ The literature available is enormous, as A. Iannucci in his introduction to Dante states: "With the exception of the Bible, no single text in the Western cultural tradition has generated more literature than Dante's *poema sacro*."² However, the general purpose and the detailed interpretation of the *Commedia* are widely disputed in the scholarly literature. The topics of these scholarly disputes cover many parts of the *Commedia*, for instance the role of the main characters, like the role of Virgil whether as a mentor or as representing reason, or the role of Beatrice whether as a symbol or as a true living person; and if she is a symbol, does she represent theology or philosophy or, as Mirsky suggests, an allegory related to Dante's sexual life?³ In addition, Dante has been called a Heretic, Templar, Alchemist, Rosicrucian, "Massone ante litteram", Mohammedan and of course Christian.⁴ The Catholic Church first branded Dante as a heretic and blacklisted his political

¹ Bruno Binggeli, *Primum Mobile: Dantes Jenseitsreise und die Moderne Kosmologie*, (Zürich: Ammann, 2006).

Robert Osserman, *Geometrie des Universums: von der Göttlichen Komödie zu Riemann und Einstein*, (Braunschweig; Wiesbaden: Vieweg, 1997).

² Amilcare A. Iannucci, *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1997).p. ix.

³ Mark Mirsky, *Dante, Eros & Kabbalah*, (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

⁴ E. Aroux, *Dante, Hérétique, Révolutionnaire et Socialiste; Révélation d'un Catholique sur le Moyen Âge*, (Paris: J. Renouard, 1854).

Primo Contro, *Dante Templare e Alchimista : la Pietra Filosofale nella Divina Commedia : Inferno*, (Foggia: Bastogi, 1998).

Leonardo Olschki, *Mohammedan Eschatology and Dante's Other World*, (Berkeley, Calif., 1951).

treatise on the Empire and the Papacy “*La monarchia*” in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1564, then removed the treatise from the index in 1881, and finally, in 1921, Dante was called “the most eloquent singer of the Christian idea” by Pope Benedict XV.⁵

In this widespread and disputed scholarly discussion the dissertation aims to contribute to that part of the discussion concerned with the esoteric interpretation of Dante’s *Commedia* by developing the hypothesis that the *Commedia* was designed as a theurgic act. The main objectives are first to show that Dante’s cosmological journey can be considered as a description of an inner journey through sins, vices, virtues, and higher qualities of consciousness achieved through initiation, and second to show that Dante arranged the mythical sacred images, which he gained through the initiation, in a kind of theurgic poetry designed to lead the “blessed” reader, who can understand the anagogical terms, from a state of misery to a state of bliss.⁶

⁵Anthony Cassell, Guido K. Vernani ' *The Monarchia controversy an historical study with accompanying translations of Dante Alighieri's Monarchia, Guido Vernani's Refutation of the Monarchia composed by Dante and Pope John XXII's bull, Si fratrum* ', Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

Praeclara Summorum Encyclical of Pope Benedict XV on Dante, on http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xv/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xv_enc_30041921_in-praeclara-summorum_en.html accessed 05.03.2013

⁶ Dante Alighieri, *Epistole XIII* 15, Società Dantesca Italiana, (please note: all translations from www.danteonline.it are supervised by the scientific council of the Società Dantesca Italiana, which selects single passages from different translators) at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=7&idlang=OR> , accessed on 23.05.2013. Translation in English from *Letter to Can Grande* by James Marchand of the University of Illinois, at <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/cangrande.english.html>, accessed on 23.05.2013 “...we can say briefly that the purpose of the whole as well as the part is to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and to lead them to the state of bliss.” Dante Alighieri, *Commedia Paradiso XXXII*.66, Società Dantesca Italiana at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR>, accessed on 23.05.2013 “O Highest Light, You, raised so far above the minds of mortals, to my memory give back something of Your epiphany, and make my tongue so powerful that I may leave to people of the future one gleam of the glory that is Yours, for by returning somewhat to my memory and echoing awhile within these lines, Your victory will be more understood”.

Structurally, the paper will first give a general overview of Dante's time emphasizing the cultural, political and religious atmosphere in Florence and in Europe with the intention of showing Dante's strong ethical approach towards them. After that, the dissertation will draw an outline of theurgy, emphasizing the theurgic tradition as related to the *Chaldean Oracles*, the Neo-Platonists Plotinus (204-270 CE), Iamblichus (ca. 245–325 CE), Porphyry (233-305 CE) Proclus (412-415 CE) and its Christian adaptation related to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5th century CE). In particular the role of poetry in a theurgic context will set a frame for the main hypothesis. The arguments for the main claim will then be developed in five steps. The first step will discuss the evidence for Dante's esoteric affiliation, in which the initiation argument will be concerned with Dante's relationship with the esoteric group known as the *fedeli d'amore* (The Faithful Followers of Love), and the use of coded, secret language in their poetry as emphasized in the academic discussion on Dante's esotericism started by Giuseppe Rossetti (1783-1854).⁷ The second step will examine Dante's understanding of his *Commedia* as a "Poema Sacro."⁸ The third step will compare Dante's understanding of sacred poetry with a Christian adaptation of the pagan, theurgic tradition as related to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and in particular to his work *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in which theurgy is characterised as "the consummation of theology."⁹ In the fourth step the dissertation will offer an interpretation of the *Commedia* as a theurgic act. Finally, in the fifth step, the question of whether Dante's cosmological journey represents

⁷ Luigi Valli, *Il Linguaggio Segreto di Dante e dei "Fedeli d'Amore"*, (Milano: Luni, 1994).p.12.

⁸ Dante Alighieri, *Commedia Paradiso* XXIII.63 and XXV.3, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 24.08.2013 "Sacred Poem"

⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, Scazzoso Piero, Ramelli Ilaria, and Bellini Enzo, *Tutte le Opere*, (Milano: Bompiani, 2009). 432b, p. 230. "καὶ ἔστι τῆς θεολογίας ἡ θεουργία συγκεφαλαιωσις."

some sort of cosmological vehicle for the reader will be discussed focusing on the reception and the influence of Dante's work by the French metaphysician René Guénon (1861-1951), the Russian philosopher, theologian and poet Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), and the cofounder of Russian Symbolism and poet Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949), who emphasized the Dionysiac and the theurgic aspect of sacred poetry as a "sacred vessel through which universal mystical truths could be expressed."¹⁰

2. Dante's time, a tumultuous time

Dante was born in Florence, probably between May and June 1265. Florence at that time was expanding, transforming and fighting. The increasing trade and commercial activities with distant countries produced prosperity, general wealth, rich cultural exchange, and a remarkable immigration from the countryside to the town. Not only were peasants trying to find their fortunes, minor aristocrats also came to town and started small businesses. Dante's father Alighiero, as William Anderson reports, "may have been a notary and was certainly a money-lender, doing well enough out of his transactions to buy property in the city and the *contado*, the income from which supported Dante without the necessity of his practising a profession up to the time of his exile."¹¹ The urban structure also developed visibly, not only through enlargements of the town walls or new bridges over the Arno, but also the skyline of the town became dominated by towers constructed by the richest families with the purpose of keeping control over the town. The towers represented not only symbolic power; they were

¹⁰ René Guénon, *L'Esotérisme de Dante*, (Paris: les Éditions traditionnelles, 1949).
Pamela Davidson, *The Poetic Imagination of Vyacheslav Ivanov. A Russian Symbolist's Perception of Dante*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). p. 46.

¹¹ William Anderson, *Dante the Maker*, (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980). p. 53.

indeed real battle places as Florence's richest families were restlessly fighting each other in the conflict between Guelphs and Ghibellines throughout Dante's life.¹² Furthermore, Florence's transformation was also very much influenced by the increasing number of new Churches spreading through the town. The Franciscans built Santa Croce in 1228, the Dominicans built Santa Maria Novella in 1246, the Augustinians settled permanently in Florence in 1269.¹³ These new religious orders, which were also in competition with each other, played an important role in creating places for study and work, organizing the community life of the urban population and influencing political, cultural and religious life.¹⁴ Cultural influence came also from the rest of Italy, in particular from Palermo in Sicily through Frederick II (1194-1250) and his court, famous for its prolific relations among philosophers, artists, musicians, scientists, and poets from Latin, Arabic, Italian, Northern European, and Greek traditions.¹⁵ Furthermore, Frederick II's foundation of the Sicilian School, which drew inspiration from the troubadour poetry of Southern France, contributed to establish vernacular poetry against the classic Latin form.¹⁶ Also from Sicily the popularity of the founder of the monastic mystic order of San Giovanni in Fiore, Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) contributed to the variety of Florence's cultural and religious life.¹⁷ Finally, cultural influences from the rest of Europe, especially France, played a major role in Florence's cultural life through ideas coming from the University of Paris; in particular the teachings of Albertus Magnus (1200-1280) and Thomas Aquinas

¹² Anderson, *Dante*. pp. 54-55.

¹³ *The World of Dante, Timeline*, University of Virginia at <http://www.worldofdante.org/timeline.html> accessed 12.07.2013

¹⁴ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 80.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 31.

¹⁶ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 32.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 81.

(1225-1274) developed a Christian interpretation of Aristotle challenging the Islamic interpretation of the philosopher Averroes (1126-1198).¹⁸

However, our task is not to give a detailed account of all the cultural influences playing a role in Dante's work. For the purpose of the dissertation it is sufficient to have briefly outlined that Dante lived in a time of political, cultural, social and religious turmoil, and that his attitude towards this was an active one. Dante took active part in all the disputes mentioned above; he fought with the Guelph cavalry at the Battle of Campaldino (1289), he was involved actively in Florence's political life, in 1295 he was elected to the *Consiglio dei Cento* and a few months later was elected in the *Consiglio dei Trentasei*, in 1300 he was elected as one of the six Priors of the town (the highest governing body of Florence) and of course he participated vigorously in cultural life, taking in his own stance among the debates of his time.¹⁹ Thinking of Dante as a poet sitting under a veranda on the Florence hills in a warm summer evening, and writing some inspired lyrics, will not contribute to an understanding of his work. Dante was a man of facts; as the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari, commenting on Beatrice as the main inspirational figure in Dante's work, states: "Beatrice is not a pure symbol, but a woman who really lived, and whom Dante really met. In Dante's works, Beatrice assumes an increasingly significant meaning up to the *Commedia* in which she represents not only theology, but operating theology. It is not possible to understand Dante if we are not aware of his practical language."²⁰

¹⁸ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 58.

¹⁹ Richard H. Lansing, *Dante: the Critical Complex*, (New York: Routledge, 2003). Vol.5 p.19.

²⁰ Massimo Cacciari, *Massimo Cacciari racconta Dante e la Divina Commedia* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Llvv6g2M4I8> at min 17:57 accessed 15.08.2013 "Beatrice non è puro simbolo, ma è una donna realmente vissuta e che Dante ha realmente incontrato e che

Dante's practical language, expressing his ability to activate symbols in a theological mythical context, making them alive as agents leading to the aim of spiritual advancement, is a quality that can be observed also in a theurgic context.

3. Theurgy

3.1. Theurgy: an outline

Theurgy, which literally translated means "divine-work", was basically a ritual practice used by Neo-Platonists starting about the 3rd century CE. According to Gregory Shaw, Iamblichus can be considered as a primary source on theurgy:²¹

Iamblichus had been led to the higher reaches of Platonism by Porphyry, and although Porphyry also introduced Iamblichus to theurgy it was Iamblichus who discovered its deeper significance. For Porphyry theurgy functioned as a mere *preparation* for the philosophical life and was to be left on the periphery of its higher disciplines. Iamblichus, on the other hand, moved theurgy from periphery to center, not only in the life of the philosopher, but for anyone who worshiped the Gods.²²

For Crystal Addey, Iamblichus' *De mysteriis* is "the most extensive surviving treatise from the ancient world on polytheistic religious phenomena, such as divination and sacrifice, and on theurgy and the reason for ritual."²³ In fact, according to Gregory Shaw, Iamblichus not only placed theurgy at the heart of Platonic discipline; he intimately tied the salvation of the soul to the ritual

viavia assume sempre più ricchi significati, fino a giungere alla commedia . Nella commedia a rappresentare non solo come si dice la teologia, ma la teologia operante."

²¹ Θεουργία = divine work LSJ *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon* at <http://www.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=49658&context=search> accessed 24.09.2013

²² Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul : the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). p.14.

²³ Crystal Addey, 'Oracles, Dreams and Astrology in Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*', in *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays in Astrology and Divination*, ed. by Angela Voss Patrick Curry (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2007). p. 36

invocation of the natural power of the cosmos and provided “a philosophic rationale for the performance of these rites.”²⁴ Furthermore, for Shaw, Iamblichus’ distinction between theology and theurgy is crucial for understanding his Platonism; for Iamblichus, theology was only a discourse about the gods, and like philosophy remained, however exalted, a human activity, while theurgy was capable of elevating man to a divine status and fulfilled the goal of philosophy.²⁵

Iamblichus explains the relevance of the theurgic rites as soteriological:

“It is plain, indeed, from the rites themselves, that what we are speaking of just now is a method of salvation for the soul; for in the contemplation of the “blessed” vision the soul exchanges one life for another and exerts a different activity, and considers itself then to be no longer human and quite rightly so: for often, having abandoned its own life, it has gained in exchange the most blessed activity of the gods....For it is not the case that such activity draws down to passionless and pure into proneness to passion and impurity; on the contrary, it renders us, who have come to be subject to passions by reason of birth, pure and immutable.”²⁶

Iamblichus distinguished different types of soul, and different kinds of rites correspond to each type of soul.²⁷ However, the ritual of theurgy operated basically with *synthémata* and *symbola*, signatures and symbols.²⁸ *Symbola* were normally used in the Greek world to establish a sort of agreement: a piece of pottery was broken in half, and the pieces given to two parties. When the two pieces were put together again, and the whole restored, identification was

²⁴ Shaw, *Theurgy*. pp. 4-5.

²⁵ Shaw, *Theurgy*. p. 5.

²⁶ Iamblichus, Clarke Emma C. Dillon John M. Hershbell Jackson P., *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).41.9

²⁷ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. 149.-17

²⁸ Shaw, *Theurgy*. pp. 48-50.

established and thereby recognition and trust were confirmed.²⁹ In a theurgical ritual, symbols and signatures accomplished a similar task, helping to invoke the gods or the daemons related to them. The working principle that links the symbols, the soul and the divine is that of *sympatheia*.³⁰ The aim of the theurgist was then to activate ritually the *sympatheia* present in the symbols with the help of the so-called *telestiké*.³¹ This was accomplished by placing material signs like stones, plants and figures on or in an object, and performing prayers, chants and invocations to the god or daimôn, inviting them to enter into the object. The main aim of the *telestiké* was to obtain advice from the specific god who was invited to enter the object. A similar practice, called *desmos*, 'binding', had the same purpose, but instead of an object, the receiver was a person.³² The advantage was that the receiver had more possibility than a simple inanimate object to express the advice coming from the god or daemon. Finally, the most important theurgical operation was that of the ascent and conjunction with the divine as *anagógé*. Iamblichus described the conjunction:

“And when it has conjoined (the soul) individually to the parts of the cosmos and to all the divine powers pervading them, this leads and entrusts the soul to the keeping of the universal demiurge and makes it external to all matter and united to the eternal logos alone. What I mean is, that it connects the soul individually to the self-begotten and self-moved god, and with the all-sustaining intellectual and adorning power of the cosmos, and with that which leads up to the intelligible

²⁹ Todd. M., Compton, 'The Handclasp and Embrace as Tokens of Recognition' in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds. *By Study and Also By Faith*. The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Brigham Young University at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=108&chapid=1249> accessed 13.07.2013

³⁰ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. 138.1-5

³¹ Majercik Ruth Dorothy, *The Chaldean Oracles : Text, Translation, and Commentary*, (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1989). p.26.

³² Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. p. 27.

truth, and with the perfected and effected and other demiurgic powers of the god, so that the theurgic soul is perfectly established in the activities and the intellections of the demiurgic powers. Then, indeed, it deposits the soul in the bosom of the demiurgic god as a whole. And this is the goal of (the soul's) sacred ascent according to the Egyptians."³³

Nevertheless, according to sympathy's law of attraction, expressed as "like attracts like", the ritual of theurgy needed the theurgist to have purified his soul to a degree that was suitable for the unification with the gods.³⁴ The purification required for theurgy was to be achieved through knowledge and sacred rites since, according to Iamblichus "Effective union certainly never takes place without knowledge".³⁵ Even though Iamblichus considered rites essential for the purification of the soul, he granted a similar quality to comedy and tragedy:

"The power of the human passions that are within us, when they are repressed, become correspondingly stronger; but if one exercises them in brief burst and within reasonable limits, they enjoy moderate relief and find satisfaction, and hence, being "purified" are laid to rest through persuasion, and not by violence. That is why, when we behold the passions of others both in comedy and tragedy, we stabilise our own passions, and render them more moderate, and purify them; and similarly in the sacred rites by viewing and listening to obscenities we are freed from the harm that would befall us if we practised them."³⁶

The above statement (which can be related to the Aristotelian theory of catharsis as expressed in the *Poetics*), together with the fact that the main source of inspiration for the theurgists were the *Chaldean Oracles* (a collection of verses

³³ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. 292.4-14.

³⁴ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. 38.8-10.

³⁵ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. 98.6.

³⁶ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. 39.11

written in hexameters), and the fact that chants were a substantial part of theurgic rites, show a first preliminary connection between sacred poetry and theurgy.³⁷

3.2. Theology and Cosmology of the Chaldean Oracles

The *Oracles*, regarded by later Neo-Platonists as being as authoritative as Plato's *Timaeus*, were said to have been directly revealed by the gods to two holy men: Julian the Chaldean and his son, Julian the Theurgist.³⁸ In 1898, Wilhelm Kroll (1869-1939) collected about three hundred lines that survived as fragments, which together with the citations and commentaries spread through the writings and the ritual teaching of Proclus, Damascius, and other, as Majercik called them, "such Platonizing Christians" as Arnobius of Sicca (c. 253-327 CE), Marius Victorinus (c. 280-363 C.E.), and Synesius of Cyrene (370-413 CE) represent the documents available today.³⁹ However, the *Oracles* were still commented upon in the 11th century by the Byzantine philosopher, Michael Psellus (c. 1019-1078).⁴⁰ For the purposes of the dissertation, it is now relevant to mention a few elements concerning the theology, cosmology and relevance of Love as *Eros* and *Hecate* as operating World Soul in the *Chaldean Oracles*.

The *Oracles* can be located in a Platonic context, according to Majercik: "Chaldean theology largely reflects its Middle Platonic origins, with a stress in

³⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics 1449b*, Perseus Digital Library at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0056%3Asection%3D1449b>

accessed 28.09.2013

Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. p. 1.

³⁸ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. pp. 1, 2.

³⁹ E. R. Dodds, 'New Light on the Chaldaean Oracles', *H. Theolo. Review Harvard Theological Review*, 54 (1961). p. 263.

Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. p. 3.

⁴⁰ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. p. 3.

particular on the transcendence of the Highest God”.⁴¹ In the *Chaldean Oracles*, God is represented in a threefold form. The first is the Father, also primordial Fire and First Intellect who generates the Demiurge as a Second Intellect.⁴² In the midst of the Fathers is Hecate, described as “around the hollow of her right flank a great stream of the primordially-generated Soul gushes forth in abundance, totally ensouling light, fire, ether, worlds”, also “in the left flank of Hecate exists the source of virtue, which remains entirely within and does not give up its virginity”.⁴³ In Fragment 56 the generative source is described: “Truly Rhea is the source and stream of blessed intellectual (realities). For she, first in power, receives the birth of all these in her inexpressible womb and pours forth (this birth) on the All as it runs its course.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, in the *Oracles* a way of how to comprehend the Intelligible is given as, “...you should extend an empty mind toward the Intelligible in order to comprehend it, since it exists outside of (your) mind”, also as “Arrayed from head to toe with a clamorous light, armed in mind and soul with a triple-barbed strength, you must cast into your imagination the entire token of the triad, and not go toward the empyrean channels in a scattered way, but with concentration.”⁴⁵ According to the *Oracles*, principles and ideas flying out from the Father are still connected with him through several vehicles, and function as a link between the Father and matter, producing manifest images of unmanifest things.⁴⁶ Heaven has been constructed as a round figure, with the seven planets, placing the earth in the middle surrounded by a settlement of

⁴¹ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. p. 5.

⁴² Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 7.

⁴³ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Frr. 50, 51.

⁴⁴ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 56.

⁴⁵ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Frr. 1,2.

⁴⁶ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 37, 40, 78.

stars, which have no error, and produce celestial melodies.⁴⁷ The world, which has been made with the elements of fire, water, earth and all-nourishing aether, is full of symbols sowed from the Paternal Mind.⁴⁸ The soul as the mistress of all life remains immortal, but the soul which is born has something of the body; she contains the mind, and she is contained in the body.⁴⁹ The paternal Mind also sowed symbols in the souls, filling them with pure love, “as the guide and holy bond of all things”, which constitutes the essence of *sympatheia*.⁵⁰ The souls descending from the Father can avoid the influence of destiny by conceiving the works of the Father (theurgy).⁵¹ Nevertheless, the souls descending to earth can be corrupted by the dark world of mortality, described as squalid, containing lies, always involving a dark abyss.⁵² Nature, suspended from the great Hecate, rules both world and works, and also persuades us that demons are pure.⁵³ Evil matter can be profitable and good, but one should not invoke the demons involved before the body is initiated, as the soul can be enchanted by them.⁵⁴ The soul should accomplish works of piety, and should not look down but rise up again, seeking paradise, joining action to sacred speech.⁵⁵ The Paternal Mind will not accept the soul’s will to re-join the Father until she (the soul) emerges from oblivion and pronounces the word, inserting the remembrance of the pure paternal token.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 57-71.

⁴⁸ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 67, 108.

⁴⁹ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 96.

⁵⁰ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 39, 42, 43.

⁵¹ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 153.

⁵² Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 105, 134.

⁵³ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 70, 88.

⁵⁴ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 135.

⁵⁵ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 128, 163, 164, 165.

⁵⁶ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 109.

At this point, important points gained from the *Chaldean Oracles* can be articulated as a threefold God as First Intellect, Second Intellect and a feminine operating World Soul power conflated with Hecate which is located between the intelligible and sensible realms and is able to travel from one level of reality to another.⁵⁷ For the purpose of the dissertation it is particularly relevant to keep in mind the role of Hecate as traveling World-Soul in relation to the role of Dante's Beatrice and her transformations. Furthermore, the following elements from the *Oracles* will be also discussed together with Dante's cosmological journey: the strong cosmic order, which emanates from god and permeates all levels of reality; the Father who fills the souls with profound love; the bond of divine love as Eros, linking and guiding all souls, things and ideas; and the presence and agency of daemons and angels. Also relevant are the following concepts: the concept of the ideas beyond matter; the concept of paradise as expressed by Psellus following fragment 165 as "The Chaldean paradise is the entire chorus of divine powers around the Father and the empyrean beauties of the demiurgic Principles"; and the concept of "a dark-gleaming world beneath which an abyss is spread."⁵⁸ In addition, the relation between First and Second Intellect, and the way to reach it, needs to be emphasized as related to the Aristotelian metaphysical concept of *nous noetikos*, according to the definition of God given in the *Metaphysics*: "And thought thinks itself through participation in the object of thought; ...For the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality."⁵⁹ Last but not least, the soteriological role of catharsis, intended as purification of the soul from corrupted

⁵⁷ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. p. 7.

⁵⁸ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr.163.

⁵⁹ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. p. 111.

Aristotle *Metaphysics* 12.1072b on

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0052:book=12:section=1072b> accessed 07.07.2013

matter, will be considered as the main objective of the theurgic practices which aim to save the soul and attain immortality.

However, one question has to be answered before engaging in discussion on Dante's theurgy. This question concerns the cultural route of transmission of theurgy, since there is no documented evidence that Dante's knew the *Oracles* or the work of Iamblichus directly, or that he was involved in ritual practices. Nevertheless, a possible answer about the cultural route of transmission of theurgy can be traced through Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Furthermore, the evidence of Dante's affiliation to an esoteric, occult society, gained through scholarly works on the *fedeli d'amore*, can deliver some arguments for the main hypothesis of the dissertation.

3.3. Theurgy from Iamblichus through Proclus to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

Theurgy persisted after Iamblichus, as Dylan Burns reports, "... with seemingly little deviation from his model, through Proclus in the mid fifth century to the end of the school itself in the sixth."⁶⁰ At the age of nineteen Proclus joined the Academy in Athens (430 CE) where he was instructed in the teachings of Aristotle and Plato. Furthermore, according to Lucas Siorvanes, Dionysius "was also instructed in 'theurgic' Neo-Platonism, as derived from Orphic and Chaldaean writings, and was initiated into its secret rites by Asclepigeneia, the daughter of Plutarch."⁶¹ Proclus' theurgy did not differ significantly from that of Iamblichus, as he used, like Iamblichus, material objects as symbols to establish,

⁶⁰ Dylan Burns, 'Proclus and the Theurgic Liturgy of Pseudo-Dionysius', *Dionysius*, XII (2004). p. 112.

⁶¹ Lucas Siorvanes, *Proclus : Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Science*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1996). p. 5. Plutarch of Athen(350-432).

by means of sympathy, a link between them and their higher counterparts. In this context, mimetic activities imitating the work of the Platonic Demiurge were considered as the most effective way to manifest the all-linking sympathy.⁶² However, Proclus also employed, according to Burns citing Sara Rappe, a sort of verbal theurgy in which the ritualized use of words as symbols for the divine names lying within the soul, could elevate the individual from the material to the divine.⁶³ Furthermore, Siorvanes underscores Proclus' large use of and high regard for sacred poetry, in verse or prose "because it facilitated the beginning of the soul reversion and elevation to unity."⁶⁴ Thus, the simple reading of theurgic verses was already considered a part of a theurgic invocation.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, two more aspects of Proclus's theurgy need to be mentioned. The first aspect is negative theology, which Proclus gained from Plato's *Parmenides*, and which basically consisted of naming what the One is not.⁶⁶ Furthermore, negative-theurgy is essentially immaterial, as Burns reports: "In order to ascend past Intellect, Proclus turned inward from theurgic interaction with the material, natural world of lotuses and statues, towards an immaterial, internal theurgy - a negative theology."⁶⁷ The second aspect is contemplative silence, which also, according to Burns, is the effect obtained through the contemplation of negative theology; the contemplation of negative theology allows at first an identification with the negative and then its abandonment.⁶⁸

⁶² Burns, *Proclus*. p. 116.

⁶³ Burns, *Proclus*.p. 117.

Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000). pp.173-181.

⁶⁴ Siorvanes, *Proclus*. p. 189.

⁶⁵ Burns, *Proclus*. pp.117, 118.

⁶⁶ Burns, *Proclus*.p. 119.

⁶⁷ Burns, *Proclus*.p. 120.

⁶⁸ Burns, *Proclus*.p. 120.

In the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the word theurgy appears frequently, suggesting a Neoplatonic influence. According to Burns the question of “whether Neoplatonic influence on him was cultic as well as metaphysical”, has been affirmatively answered.⁶⁹ In this context, Burns offers three main arguments that link Pseudo-Dionysius to Iamblichus. First, both used symbols as primary theurgic, anagogic tools. Second, both argued that theurgic practices utilizing material objects preceded practices with immaterial ones. Third, “both theurgists use Neoplatonic triads and mean terms to articulate their cosmologies, and both thought there were three kinds of participants in rituals: those who have gone beyond material theurgy to immaterial theurgy; those who have not; and those who partake in both.”⁷⁰ Nevertheless, even if there is no direct documented evidence that Dionysius read *De Mysteriorum*, Burns demonstrates a clear influence of Proclus on Dionysius’s theory of theurgy.⁷¹ However, according to Burns,

“The most important thing to keep in mind about Pseudo-Dionysius’ theurgy is that, as with the theurgy of Proclus, it is defined as a soteriological, anagogic activity. ... When Pseudo-Dionysius attempted to describe his own theurgic practice, he thought the best way to do so was to discuss the proper administration of the Eucharist. In this way Pseudo-Dionysius identifies the sacraments themselves as theurgic rites. When he argues that ‘theurgy is the consummation of theology,’ he refers to a system of ritual liturgics in which the priest not only needs to be saved through theurgic symbols, but needs to save others by using them properly, as prescribed.”⁷²

Furthermore, the sacrament of the Eucharist, as a mimetic imitation of Jesus, and the reading of the sacred Scripture in which Christ’s life was recorded,

⁶⁹ Burns, *Proclus*.p. 112.

⁷⁰ Burns, *Proclus*. p. 112.

⁷¹ Burns, *Proclus*. p. 113.

⁷² Burns, *Proclus*. p. 122.

constituted for Dionysius the most natural theurgic rite.⁷³ However, another aspect that needs to be considered is Dionysius' use of theurgic symbolism within a hierarchic system; as Burns reports, "The active sense of 'hierarchy' in the Dionysian corpus is very much like Proclus' descriptions of a dynamic universe traversed by the theurgist, for whom the immanence of the transcendent in all things has been illuminated by the sympathetic relationships flowing through the various classes."⁷⁴ Finally, Burns concludes that "...Pseudo-Dionysius found the Iamblichus-Proclean theurgic system intellectually and practically satisfying and did not hesitate to draw on it (probably from Proclus' writings) extensively when conceptualizing his own theory of Christian liturgics."⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Pseudo-Dionysius' Christian adaptation of theurgy cannot be considered just as a copy, as he enlarged the power of material theurgic symbols, reconsidered the relation with the transcendent through love, and designed his theurgy not only to elevate and save oneself, but others too.⁷⁶

At this point, after having showed that the cultural route of the transmission of theurgy can be traced from Iamblichus through Proclus to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who will be later related to Dante, the dissertation will now provide the evidence for Dante's affiliation to an esoteric, occult group called the *fedeli d'amore*.

⁷³ Burns, *Proclus*. p. 126.

⁷⁴ Burns, *Proclus*. p. 123.

⁷⁵ Burns, *Proclus*. p. 131.

⁷⁶ Burns, *Proclus*.p. 132.

4. Dante's esotericism

4.1. The faithful followers of Love⁷⁷

In this part, the dissertation will discuss the scholarly studies on *the fedeli d'amore* with intent to show first that they existed as an occult sect, second that Dante was affiliated to them and third that their ideas were compatible with the theurgic tradition.

According to Luigi Valli, it was Ugo Foscolo in 1825, who, discarding the old comments on Dante's *Commedia*, started a new interpretative approach stating that Dante's main work was filled with a deeply innovating political and religious spirit, that it had a mystical and prophetic content, and that Dante's *Commedia* represented a great prophecy expressed in an occult system.⁷⁸ However, it was the Rosicrucian Gabriele Rossetti between 1826 and 1847, who first proposed the thesis that Dante's entire poetry of love was constructed according to a conventional jargon hiding the initiatic ideas of a secret sect.⁷⁹ Furthermore, also according to Valli, Francesco Perez in 1865 showed that Dante's *Vita nuova* was a mystic and symbolic story about the mystic holy wisdom; the same wisdom of Solomon's *Book of Wisdom* and *Song of Songs*.⁸⁰ As William Anderson suggests, it is relevant at this point to introduce an episode in Dante's life which can be

⁷⁷ *Fedeli d'amore* as translated by Anderson see Anderson, *Dante*. p. 76.

⁷⁸ Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto*. p. 11, for Ugo Foscolo see:

Ugo Foscolo, Giovanni Da Pozzo. *Studi su Dante*. (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1979).

⁷⁹ Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto*. p. 15, for Gabriele Rossetti see:

Gabriele Rossetti, and Luigi Anelli. *Disamina del Sistema Allegorico della Divina Commedia*. (Vasto: Società editrice Anelli & Manzitti, 1890)

⁸⁰ Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto*. p. 12, for Perez see:

Francesco Paolo Perez, Giuseppe Lo Manto. *La Beatrice Svelata: Preparazione alla Intelligenza di Tutte le Opere di Dante Alighieri*. (Palermo: Flaccovio, 2001).

considered as the starting point of the esoteric interpretation of Dante: the second meeting with Beatrice.⁸¹

At the age of eighteen, nine years after his first meeting with Beatrice, Dante meets her again accompanied by two other ladies; she just looks at him and greets him. Dante described in *Vita nuova* the overwhelming feeling that he experienced: "...I became so ecstatic that, like a drunken man, I turned away from everyone and I sought the loneliness of my room, where I began thinking of this most gracious lady and, thinking of her, I fell into a sweet sleep, and a marvellous vision appeared to me."⁸² During the vision, a joyous Love spoke to him, carrying in his arms a lady asleep, and holding in one of his hands what seemed to be Dante's flaming heart. After that, Love woke the lady and forced her to eat the heart, turning his joy "to bitterest weeping, and weeping he folded his arms around this lady, and together they seemed to ascend toward the heavens."⁸³ Dante woke up and decided to "make it known to many of the famous poets of that time. Since just recently I had taught myself the art of writing poetry, I decided to compose a sonnet addressed to all of Love's faithful subjects (*li fedeli d'Amore*); and, requesting them to interpret my vision, I would write them what I had seen in my sleep. And then I began to write this sonnet, which begins: To every captive soul and loving heart."⁸⁴

(10)A ciascun'alma presa e gentil	(10) To every captive soul and loving
corenel cui cospetto ven lo dir	heart to whom these words I have

⁸¹ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 76.

⁸² Dante, Alighieri *Vita Nuova* III.2, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/english/opere.asp?idope=5&idlang=OR> accessed 12.07.2013

⁸³ Dante, Alighieri *Vita Nuova* III.7, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/english/opere.asp?idope=5&idlang=OR> accessed 12.07.2013

⁸⁴ Dante, Alighieri *Vita Nuova* III.9,10,11,12, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/english/opere.asp?idope=5&idlang=OR> accessed 12.07.2013. The English translation omits 'and loving heart'.

presente, in ciò che mi rescrivano suo parvente, salute in lor signor, cioè Amore.

composed are sent for your elucidation in reply, greetings I bring for your sweet lord's sake, Love.

(11) Già eran quasi che atterzate l'ore del tempo che onne s tella n'è lucente, quando m'apparve Amor subitamente, cui essenza membrar mi dà orrore.

(11) The first three hours, the hours of the time of shining stars, were coming to an end, when suddenly Love appeared before me (to remember how he really was appalls me).

(12) Allegro mi sembrava Amor tenendo meo core in mano, e ne le braccia avea madonna involta in un drappo dormendo. Poi la svegliava, e d'esto core ardendo lei paventosa umilmente pascea: appresso gir lo ne vedea piangendo.

(12) Joyous, Love seemed to me, holding my heart within his hand, and in his arms he had my lady, loosely wrapped in folds, asleep. He woke her then, and gently fed to her the burning heart; she ate it, terrified. And then I saw him disappear in tears.

Guido Cavalcanti (1255-1300) answered Dante's request for interpretation, telling him that what he had seen in his vision was all nobility and joy, and he invited him to join his circle.⁸⁵ Cavalcanti's circle was frequented mostly by poets praising love in their verses, not in a traditional sense but as an instrument for spiritual ascent.⁸⁶ The poets associated with the circle were, among others: Guido Guinizelli (1230-1276), Cino da Pistoia (1270-1337), Cecco d'Ascoli

⁸⁵ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 82.

⁸⁶ Alberto, Canfarini, *L'esoterismo di Dante Alighieri - Dante segreto - Celato - Fedeli D'amore - Rosa Croce* at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WuZdsnyfpQ at min 08:38 accessed 13.08.2013

(1257-1327), Lapo Gianni (d.1328), and of course Dante Alighieri.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the style developed by these poets became famous under the name of *Dolce Stil Novo*, a name given by Dante in the *Commedia*.⁸⁸

Ma d'ì s'ì veggio qui colui che fore
trasse le nove rime, cominciando
'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore.'
E io a lui: "I' mi son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
ch'e' ditta dentro vo significando".

"O frate, issa vegg'io", diss'elli, "il nodo
che 'l Notaro e Guittone e me ritenne
di qua dal dolce stil novo ch'i' odo"

But tell me if the man whom I see here
is he who brought the new rhymes forth,
beginning: 'Ladies who have intelligence
of love.' I answered: "I am one who, when
Love breathes in me, takes note; what he,
within, dictates, I, in that way, without,
would speak and shape."

"O brother, now I see," he said, "the knot
that kept the Notary, Guittone, and me
short of the sweet new manner that I
hear"

Cavalcanti was deeply steeped in Albertus Magnus and Averroes and can be considered as one of the major authorities amongst the *fedeli d' amore*.⁸⁹ His poem *Donna me prega* ("A lady bids me...") was considered later by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) as "a supreme Neoplatonic statement of love."⁹⁰ Furthermore Ficino, in his *El Libro d'amore* (*The Book of Love*), in a passage titled "Ove si conchiude tutte le cose decte con la opinione di Guido Cavalcanti philosopho" (Where we conclude all things that have been said with the opinion of the

⁸⁷ Canfarini, *L'esoterismo di Dante* at min 08:20

⁸⁸ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia Purgatorio* XXIV.49-57, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 12.08.2013

⁸⁹ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 83.

⁹⁰ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 83.

philosopher Guido Cavalcanti) directly associated Cavalcanti with Plato's *Symposium* and the speech of Diotima of Mantinea:⁹¹

“Socrate finalmente, ammaestrato da Diotima, ridusse in somma che cosa sia questo amore, e quale e onde nato, quante parte egli abbia, ad che fini si dirizzi e quanto vaglia. Guido Cavalcante, philosopho, tutte queste cose artifciosamente chiuse ne' sua versi.”	“Socrates finally, instructed by Diotima, reduced summarizing what this love is, and when born what part it has, and what purpose it address, and what its value is. Guido Cavalcante, the philosopher enclosed all this things artistically in his verse”
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For Valli, Cavalcanti was the leader of the *fedeli d' amore*, a sect communicating in a secret language for two main reasons: the first related to the risk of being branded as heretic by the inquisition, and the second, citing Rossetti's arguments, related to the tradition of veiling mystic and initiatic ideas with conventional love phrases, which can be traced back as coming from the Persians through the Manicheans, the Cathars (Albigensians) and the Templars, reaching the troubadour Provençal poets, influencing the Sicilian school (Frederic II, Pier delle Vigne [1200-1249], Jakopo da Lentini [1210-1260]) and from there to Cavalcanti.⁹² Andrea Cuccia also offers an interpretation of the influences of the main secret societies on Dante, stating that “There has never been a century in history that was more filled with secret sects than in Dante's time, although the most important were the Templars, the Albigensians, and the Ghibellines, all with antipapal objectives.... The first were called *Palmieri*, the second *Peregrini* and

⁹¹ Marsilio Ficino, *El libro dell'amore*. Oratione VII, Capitolo 1. (Bivio Bibliotheca Virtuale). pp. 177-178. My translation, from original Italian, at <http://bivio.filosofia.sns.it/bvWorkPage.php?workTitleSign=EILibroDellAmore&workAuthorSign=FicinoMarsilio&pbNumber=177>

⁹² Anderson, *Dante*. p. 84.
Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto*. p. 21.

the third *Romei*.⁹³ Cuccia shows that Dante referred to the three sects in the *Vita nuova* and interpreted them as the three women in Dante's *Rhymes*.⁹⁴

Tre donne intorno al cor mi son venute, e seggonsi di fore; ché dentro siede Amore, lo quale è in signoria de la mia vita. Tanto son belle e di tanta vertute, che 'l possente signore, dico quel ch'è nel core, a pena del parlar di lor s'aita.	Three women have come round my heart, and sit outside it, for within sits Love who holds sway over my life. They are so beautiful and of such dignity that the mighty Lord, I mean him in my heart, almost shrinks from speech with them.
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However, the main theory is that of a possible connection between the Templars and the *fedeli d'amore*. The theory, according to Anderson

“was fully developed by Robert John, and René Guenon who said that Dante was a member of the tertiary order of the Templars known as *La Fede Santa*. This powerful, aristocratic order had a house in Florence up to the dramatic period of his crushing and condemnation on a charge of heresy in 1307-12, and its rule certainly allowed laymen to be affiliated to the order in the way, for example, that the Franciscans had a tertiary order.”⁹⁵

Furthermore Anderson, answering the question of whether the Templars could have provided the cultural transmission for the similarities between the Sufi writers and the poetry of the *fedeli d'amore*, states: “...many Templars were soaked in the culture of the East and some may well have come into contact with Sufi schools and have learned the doctrines of the Perennial Philosophy

⁹³ Andrea Cuccia, *Il Pensiero Esoterico nella Commedia di Dante*, (Soveria Mannelli (Catanzaro): Rubbettino, 2009). p. 77. My translation.

⁹⁴ Cuccia, *Il pensiero*. p. 77.

Dante, Alighieri, *Rime CIV-1-8*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=6&idlang=OR> accessed 14.08.2013

⁹⁵ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 84.

underlying the symbolism.”⁹⁶ That Dante had a high regard for the Templars, whether he was affiliated or not, is well documented in the role that he assigned to Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) in his *Commedia* as his final guide through the Empyrean. Bernard, who traced the outlines of the rules of the Knights Templar, presents himself in the *Commedia* as:⁹⁷

E la regina del cielo, ond'io	And Heaven's queen, for whom I
ardo	burn
tutto d'amor, ne farà ogni grazia,	with love, will grant us every grace,
però ch'i' sono il suo fedel Bernardo	since I am her own, her faithful Bernard

Finally, Anderson concludes that “Whether or not the *fedeli d'amore* possessed these contacts with the East, and whether or not they were connected with the Templars or other bodies at this time, one thing is clear. They formed a closed brotherhood devoted to achieving a harmony between sexual and emotional sides of their nature and their intellect and mystical aspirations.”⁹⁸

Furthermore, Valli suggests that the doctrine of the *fedeli d'amore* was the result of at least five traditions joining together: 1) A philosophical tradition related to the Avveroistic interpretation of Aristotle's *active mind* or *active intellect* (*nous poiêtikos*) represented and figured as a woman; 2) A Platonic mystical tradition which represents Wisdom seeing God as a beloved woman. 3) The tradition of Catholic orthodox mysticism, in particular related to Augustine and the role of Rachel representing the virtue of contemplative life as holy Wisdom; 4) The

⁹⁶ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 85.

⁹⁷ Dante, Alighieri *Commedia, Paradiso XXXI.100*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/english/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed on 12.07.2013.

⁹⁸ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 85.

orthodox and heterodox traditions of considering the Church of Rome as corrupted; 5) The tradition among sects of using secret, coded, language.⁹⁹

In addition, Valli's conclusions from his extensive investigation on the *fedeli d'amore* are listed as: 1) The poetry of the *fedeli d'amore*, in particular that of Dante, is written in a secret coded language; 2) All the women of the *dolce stil novo* represent only one woman which is "Sapienza santa", holy Wisdom; 3) Dante's *Vita nuova* is written from beginning to end in a coded language, concerned with Dante's initiatic life and his relation to the holy Wisdom; 4) Even the most obscure poetries of the *fedeli d'amore*, in particular the obscure songs of Dante, become clear and fully understandable when their jargon is deciphered; 5) The poetries of the *fedeli d'amore*, once their true meaning is revealed, disclose an intense life and a deeper love for a mystical idea, which is considered to be the true essence of Catholic revelation as holy Wisdom, in contrast with the corrupted Church.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, Dante himself reminds the readers of the *Commedia* that:¹⁰¹

O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani,	O you possessed of sturdy intellects,
mirate la dottrina che s'asconde	observe the teaching that is hidden here
sotto 'l velame de li versi strani.	beneath the veil of verses so obscure.

At this stage, for the purposes of the dissertation, it can be said that the scholarly literature on the *fedeli d'amore* seems to confirm that Dante was involved in an esoteric circle, and that the main elements of their doctrine, such as a high use of mystical symbolic language, the predominant figure of

⁹⁹ Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto*. pp. 93-94.

¹⁰⁰ Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto*. pp. 24-25.

¹⁰¹ Dante, Alighieri *Commedia, Inferno IX-61-63*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 16.08.2013

personified Love, and the female operative quality of the divine as holy Wisdom, are at least compatible with that of theurgy. Furthermore, even without documented evidence for an organised ritual practice by *the fedeli d'amore*, their use of symbolic, sacred poetry in a mystical, theological context can be compared with the ritualized verbal theurgy of Proclus and Dionysius. However, not only can the influences of Guido Cavalcanti and the *fedeli d'amore* provide some rationales for the main purpose of the dissertation, the influences of Brunetto Latini on Dante's work can also contribute, first to establish a relationship between Dante and the East, and second to emphasize some elements concerned with French influences.

4.2. Brunetto Latini

The dissertation will now take a closer look at Dante's friend and teacher Brunetto Latini aiming to show that Brunetto was, in relation to the main topic of the dissertation, a significant source of knowledge concerned with the cultural influence coming from France and from the East.

Two main passages in the *Commedia* show that Dante considered Brunetto Latini as one of his masters and suggest that Brunetto's teaching influenced Dante on two main subjects: the stars and "how man makes himself eternal":¹⁰²

Ed elli a me: "Se tu segui tua stella,	And he to me: "If you pursue your star,
non puoi fallire a glorioso porto,	you cannot fail to reach a splendid harbor,
se ben m'accorsi ne la vita bella;	if in fair life, I judged you properly;
e s'io non fossi sì per tempo morto,	and if I had not died too soon for this,
veggendo il cielo a te così benigno,	on seeing Heaven was so kind to you,

¹⁰² Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Inferno XV-55-60 and 79-87*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 18.08.2013

dato t'avrei a l'opera conforto.

I should have helped sustain you in your work.

...

...

"Se fosse tutto pieno il mio dimando",
rispuos'io lui, "voi non sareste ancora
de l'umana natura posto in bando;
ché 'n la mente m'è fitta, e or m'accora,
la cara e buona imagine paterna
di voi quando nel mondo ad ora ad ora
m'insegnavate come l'uom s'eterna:
e quant'io l'abbia in grado, mentr'io vivo
convien che ne la mia lingua si scerna.

"If my desire were answered totally,"
I said to Ser Brunetto, "you'd still be
among, not banished from, humanity.
Within my memory is fixed-and now
moves me-your dear, your kind paternal
image, when, in the world above, from
time to time you taught me how man
makes himself eternal; and while I live, my
gratitude for that must always be apparent
in my words.

The Guelph Brunetto Latini, who was trained as a notary, played a major role in Florence's political life, and, as Anderson reports, can be considered as "(t)he chief link between the young Dante and the culture and the new influence coming from France."¹⁰³ Brunetto wrote an encyclopedia, *Li Livres dou Tresor*, in French, the *Tesoretto* and a few poems in Tuscan, and also translated Cicero's *De Inventione*.¹⁰⁴ However, for the purposes of the dissertation, three main elements from Brunetto Latini's biography need to be emphasized: the embassy to Alfonso X of Castile, his exile in France, and the content of his work *Tesoretto*. Brunetto Latini's embassy to Alfonso X could possibly link Dante with the Muslim *Book of the Ladder*, which contains a description of Hell and Paradise as shown by the Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet.¹⁰⁵ According to Olschki, the book was

¹⁰³ Anderson, *Dante*, pp. 59-60.

¹⁰⁴ Les Archives de littérature du Moyen Âge (ARLIMA) at http://www.arlima.net/ad/brunetto_latini.html accessed 15.07.2013

¹⁰⁵ Olschki, *Mohammedan eschatology*, p.3-4.

translated from the Spanish version into French and Latin by the Tuscan exile Bonaventura of Siena and, as Olschki reports, “Of this polyglot Italian writer nothing is authentically known, but it can be presumed that he met Brunetto Latini at the court of Castile where he was employed as a notary and scribe.”¹⁰⁶ The relevance for the cultural transmission from the East is not only restricted to the question of whether Dante, through Brunetto, could have got a copy of the *Book of the Ladder* or not, since, as Olschki admits “The whole external and symbolic structure of Dante’s heavenly city can easily be reconnected with Biblical figures, the system of Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, and the Neoplatonic revival in the Christian mystic literature of the late Middle Ages”.¹⁰⁷ Relevant also is the fact that the possibility of a cultural exchange in the form of translations between the Byzantine world and Florence existed, even if somehow unofficially. Furthermore, through the documents related to Brunetto’s exile, the possibility that more literature from the East could have come from Spain to Florence and to Dante can be assumed. Brunetto could not return to Florence from his embassy in Spain as the Guelphs had lost the battle of Monteperti (1260) and were driven away from the city.¹⁰⁸ After six years of exile, in 1266 he returned to Florence where he continued his political career.¹⁰⁹ However, in relation to Brunetto’s exile Julia Bolton Holloway states that, “The literary manuscripts underscore what the political documents have also demonstrated:

¹⁰⁶ Olschki, *Mohammedan eschatology*. p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Olschki, *Mohammedan eschatology*. p. 9.

¹⁰⁸ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 60.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 60.

that Brunetto Latini was in Arras first and then Paris”.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, relevant for the cultural transmission from the East is Holloway’s statement that

“Besides the Arabic learning Brunetto acquired at Alfonso's court, the *Tesoretto* text also shows the influence of the *Roman de la Rose*, which originated in the Lorris-Meung region to the southwest of Champagne's Troyes and Bar-sur-Aube. He wrote his books on the models of both Cicero and Aristotle, for his commune, for rich bankers, for counts, for kings, for emperors, for popes. Given this evidence, it is now clear that the *Tesoretto* or "little treasure" was originally written as a charming and witty diplomatic thank-you letter to Alfonso el Sabio, perhaps prefacing a translation into French or Italian of the Alfraganus-Ptolemy *Almagest* or of the entire *Tresor* (the dream vision breaks off just as Ptolemy is about to narrate to Latini all of his wisdom).”¹¹¹

Furthermore, Dante’s knowledge of Ptolemaic astrology and the correspondence between the Arabic, Syrian and Roman calendars (which is discussed in the Alfraganus-Ptolemy *Almagest*) is well documented in his *Vita Nova* when he spoke about the relationship between the number nine and the “regina benedetta virgo Maria”, (holy queen Virgin Mary):

Let me begin by saying that if one counts in the Arabian way, her most noble soul departed this life during the first hour of the ninth day of the month, and if one counts the way they do in Syria, she departed in the ninth month of the year, the first month there being Tixryn the First, which for us is October. And, according to our own way of reckoning, she departed in that year of our Christian era (that is

¹¹⁰ Julia Bolton Holloway, *The Road Through Roncesvalles: Alfonsine Formation of Brunetto Latini and Dante - Diplomacy and Literature* in Robert I. Burns, S.J. *Emperor of Culture* THE LIBRARY OF IBERIAN RESOURCES ONLINE p. 5. at <http://libro.uca.edu/alfonso10/emperor8.pdf> accessed 15.07.2013

¹¹¹ Julia Bolton Holloway, *The Road*. p. 6.

in the year of Our Lord) in which the perfect number had been completed nine times in that century in which she had been placed in this world: she was a Christian of the Thirteenth Century.

One reason why this number was in such harmony with her might be this: since, according to Ptolemy and according to Christian truth, there are nine heavens that move, and since, according to widespread astrological opinion; these heavens affect the earth below according to the relations they have to one another, this number was in harmony with her to make it understood that at her birth all nine of the moving heavens were in perfect relationship to one another.¹¹²

Besides Dante's astronomical knowledge, which could have come from Brunetto, as given also extensively in the *Convivio* and through the more than one hundred passages in the *Commedia* in which it appears, it is relevant to note that Brunetto's being familiar with the Arabic culture suggests that he may have been also involved directly with the translations of more texts coming from the East, and, at least orally, with a specific theurgic knowledge.¹¹³

However, for the purposes of the dissertation, Brunetto's influence on Dante's discussion of "how man makes himself eternal" needs a closer look.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Dante, Alighieri, *Vita Nova XXIX.1-2*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=5&idlang=OR> accessed 19.08.2013
"lo dico che, secondo l'usanza d'Arabia, l'anima sua nobilissima si partio ne la prima ora del nono giorno del mese; e secondo l'usanza di Siria, ella si partio nel nono mese de l'anno, però che lo primo mese è ivi Tisirin primo, lo quale a noi è Ottobre; e secondo l'usanza nostra, ella si partio in quello anno de la nostra indizione, cioè de li anni Domini, in cui lo perfetto numero nove volte era compiuto in quello centinaio nel quale in questo mondo ella fue posta, ed ella fue de li cristiani del terzodecimo centinaio. Perché questo numero fosse in tanto amico di lei, questa potrebbe essere una ragione: con ciò sia cosa che, secondo Tolomeo e secondo la cristiana veritade, nove siano li cieli che si muovono, e, secondo comune oppinione astrologa, li detti cieli adoperino qua giuso secondo la loro abitudine insieme, questo numero fue amico di lei per dare ad intendere che ne la sua generazione tutti e nove li mobili cieli perfettissimamente s'aveano insieme"

¹¹³ Alison Cornish, *Reading Dante's Stars*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000). p.1. at http://www.yale.edu/yup/pdf/076797_front_1.pdf accessed 18.08.2013

¹¹⁴ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Inferno XV-55-60 and 79-87*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 18.08.2013

First, *the fedeli d'amore* used the word for love, *amore*, also as “*a mor*”, which meant, according to their jargon, immortal and sometimes also anticlerically, as the Roman Church was considered as “Morte”, death.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, the dissertation will interpret Dante’s statement “how man makes himself eternal”, as the result of a catharsis from sins and vices, and being reborn in the world of virtues. In this context, the converging similarities between the *Roman de la rose*, Brunetto’s *Tesoretto* and Alanus ab Insulis’ works *De planctu Naturae* and *Anticlaudianus* need to be outlined. The *Roman de la rose* is an allegorical dream vision in which vices, virtues, and a personified Love interact with the vicissitudes of a lover who falls in love with a lady, as symbolized by the rose. In the *Tesoretto*, Brunetto relates that on his way back from Spain he was informed that he could not return to Florence because he had been condemned to exile. Here begins a dream vision in which Brunetto is lost in a strange wood. From there he begins a journey during which he first meets the God's Vicar, *Natura*. *Natura* first complains that God bypassed her law with the creation of the Virgin Mother, and then teaches him about God's creation and man's fall, the four humors, the parts of the soul, astronomy and geography. Brunetto’s visionary journey continues in the realm of Philosophy where he meets the Aristotelian virtues, the realm of Fortune and Love where he meets god Amor and Ovid, to whom he confessed all his sins. At this point of the journey, Brunetto starts to preach against pride, envy, anger, avarice, simony, gluttony, adultery, sodomy and a multitude of other sins. Finally Brunetto meets Ptolemy, but at this point the dream breaks off just as Ptolemy is about to narrate all his wisdom to Latini.

¹¹⁵ Alfonso Ricolfi, *Studi sui Fedeli d'Amore: dai Poeti di Corte a Dante: Simboli e Linguaggio Segreto*, (Foggia: Bastogi, 1983). p. 95.

Alanus' major works follow the same line of thought; in *De Planctu Naturae*, written in the 12th century, Alanus uses prose and verse to show the way in which Natura describes her task as inferior to that of God, illustrating also the way in which humanity, through sexual sins, has desecrated itself before God and nature.¹¹⁶ In *Anticlaudianus*, Alanus illustrates, using a more poetic style, how Natura comes to realize that she failed in her task to create a perfect man; she could create only a soulless body, and therefore has to undertake a journey to heaven to ask for a soul, using the Seven Liberal Arts as a chariot and the Five Senses as horses.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, Brunetto could have informed Dante about Alanus' small *Sermo in die Sancti Michaelis*, which contains a description of how men can work to reach the same status as all the nine angelic Hierarchies (in a slightly different order than Dante does in *Paradiso*) up to the Seraphim, given as "*Labora ergo. o homo, ut vel feruore caritatis ordini Seraphin ascribaris*".¹¹⁸

In the context of the dissertation, the relevance here is concerned on the one hand with Brunetto's engagement with soteriological literature coming from France in which sins, virtues and a personified female Natura play a major role, and on the other hand with Alanus' relationship to the Platonic Cathedral school of Chartres, which shows that the influence on Dante from France was not restricted to the Aristotelian University of Paris and the teachings of Albertus Magnus, or the cultural dispute between Averroes and Thomas Aquinas.

¹¹⁶ Alain of Lille [Alanus de Insulis], d. 1202., *The complaint of nature*, (Yale studies in English, v. 36 1908), Translation of *De planctu natura*. by Douglas M. Moffat. At <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/alain-deplanctu.asp> accessed 13.08.2013

¹¹⁷ Alanus ab Insulis, *Anticlaudianus; or The Good and Perfect Man translated by Sheridan James*, (Toronto: , J.Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973).

¹¹⁸ Wolf-Ulrich Klünker, *Alanus ab Insulis : Entwicklung des Geistes als Michael-Prinzip : mit einer Übersetzung der Michael-Predigt des Alanus*, (Stuttgart: Edition Hardenberg Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 1993). p. 54.

5. Dante's sacred art and the purpose of the *Commedia*

In this part, the dissertation will outline first the main frame in which sacred art was generally understood in Dante's time. It will then show that the aim of integrating classical ideas into Christian ideas constituted a major influential aspect for sacred art. Finally, through a comparative text analysis between Dante's and Aquinas ideas on sacred art, it will outline Dante's ideas about poets and poetry in general and his *Commedia* in particular.

The overwhelming influence of Christianity in medieval art provides the main frame in which sacred art has to be understood. As Pope Gregory the Great (540-604 CE), in his Epistle XIII to Serenus, Bishop of Massilia, states, "For it is one thing to adore a picture, another through a picture's story to learn what must be adored. For what writing offers to those who read it, a picture offers to the ignorant who looks at it, since in it the ignorant see what they ought to follow, in it they read who do not know letters; whence for gentiles a picture is a substitute for reading".¹¹⁹ In his Dante biography *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, in a passage titled *in difesa della poesia* (in defense of poetry), Boccaccio (1313-1375) attributes to Gregory a similar statement concerning Sacred Scripture; he claims the same also for poetry as he states:

"using the words of Gregory. Who says about the Sacred Scripture what can even be said about poetry: that the one and the same sermon contains an open text and an underlying mystery; in this way the one teaches the wise and with the other comforts the simple, and in public feeds the children; but the hidden text serves the minds of the sublime experts with suspended admiration."¹²⁰

¹¹⁹Celia M. Chazelle, 'Pictures, books, and the illiterate: Pope Gregory I's letters to Serenus of Marseilles', *Word & Image*, 6 (1990). p. 139.

¹²⁰ Boccaccio, *Trattatello in laude di Dante* XXII, my translation, at

However, classical literature available up to the end of the 13th century plays a major role in the general understanding of sacred art and in Dante's cultural formation. First of all, Plato can be considered as a main source, even though the only work available was the *Timaeus* as translated by Calcidius (4th century CE), together with Apuleius of Madura's (123-179 CE) *On Plato and his doctrine*, Macrobius' (385/390; 430) *Commentary on Dream of Scipio* and Calcidius' *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*.¹²¹ There is a passage in Dante's *Letter to Can Grande* in which Dante explains the employment of metaphoric terms in his poetry, citing Plato's example:

"For we perceive many things by the intellect for which language has no terms -- a fact which Plato indicates plainly enough in his books by his employment of metaphors; for he perceived many things by the light of the intellect which his everyday language was inadequate to express."¹²²

In addition to Plato's argument on the use of metaphors, Dante uses the plural form here to indicate Plato's works as *libris*, which may show that he had access not only to the *Timaeus* but also to other Platonic *libri* too. Furthermore, the Platonic influence from the School of Chartres through Bernard of Chartres (died before 1130), described by John of Salisbury (1110 -1180) as "the most perfect

http://www.liberliber.it/mediateca/libri/b/boccaccio/trattatello_in_laude_di_dante/pdf/tratta_p.pdf. p. 21. accessed 21.08.2013

"usando di Gregorio le parole. Il quale della sacra Scrittura dice ci' o che ancora della poetica dir si puote: cio' e che essa in uno medesimo sermone, narrando, apre il testo e il misterio a quel sottoposto; e cos' i ad un' ora coll' uno gli savi esercita e con l' altro gli semplici riconforta, e ha in publico donde li pargoletti nutrichi, e in occulto serva quello onde essa le menti de' sublimi intenditori con ammirazione tenga sospese".

¹²¹ Ralph McInerney, *A History of Western Philosophy*. Vol. II (Chicago: Regnery, 1963.) a <http://www2.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/hwp212.htm> (page number are of the print version) p .2. accessed 26.08.2013

Daniel D. Mc Garry, 'Theory of Education in the Metalogicon of John of Salisbur', *Speculum*, Vol. 23, (1948).P. 662.

¹²² Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.84, Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

„Multa namque per intellectum videmus quibus signa vocalia desunt: quod satis Plato insinuat in suis libris per assumptionem metaphorismorum; multa enim per lumen intellectuale vidit que sermone proprio nequivit exprimere.“

among the Platonists of our century””, can also be considered as significant: for example, Bernard’s personification of Nature as a huge organism having a soul of its own.¹²³ Also, Thierry of Chartres’ (?-1150?) and William of Conches’ (1090-1154) Platonic interpretation of Genesis can be considered as aiming to integrate classical cosmology into Christian cosmology.¹²⁴ However, not only Plato but also other classical authorities were known and studied, as John of Salisbury outlined in his *Metalogicon*.¹²⁵ The *Metalogicon* shows an impressive list of classical authorities, in which Aristotle’s *Organon* occupied over half of the treatise, representing, according to McGarry, “John’s principal sources”.¹²⁶ Sources for John’s Aristotelian readings included the translation and commentaries of Boethius, and Porphyry’s *Introduction*.¹²⁷ However, the main center for Aristotelian teaching and interpretation was the University of Paris, in particular through the work of Thomas Aquinas. For the purposes of the dissertation the relevance of Thomas’ influence on Dante is in the four senses of meaning outlined by Thomas:

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

¹²³ John of Salisbury *Metalogicon* IV CCCM XCVIII, (Hall, John Barrie, 1991). My translation “perfectissimus inter Platonicos saeculi nostri”

¹²⁴Mc Inerny, *A History*. p. 12.

¹²⁵Mc Inerny, *A History*. p. 19.

¹²⁶Mc Garry, *Theory of Education*. p.662.

¹²⁷Mc Garry, *Theory of Education*. pp. 662-663.

division. For as the Apostle says (Hebrews 10:1) the Old Law is a figure of the New Law, and Dionysius says (Coel. Hier. i) 'the New Law itself is a figure of future glory.' Again, in the New Law, whatever our Head has done is a type of what we ought to do. Therefore, so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are types of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. But so far as they signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the anagogical sense".¹²⁸

In his *Letter to Can Grande*, Dante explains the meaning of the *Commedia* using the same terms as Thomas.

"(20) For the elucidation, therefore, of what we have to say, it must be understood that the meaning of this work is not of one kind only; rather the work may be described as 'polysemous', that is, having several meanings; for the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical [or moral, or anagogical].

(21) And for the better illustration of this method of exposition we may apply it to the following verses: 'When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion'. For if we consider the letter alone, the thing signified to us is the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption through Christ is signified; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified."¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.i.10 Translation at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1001.htm> accessed 28.08.2013

¹²⁹ Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole XIII.20-21* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at

Likewise, in the *Convivio* Dante explains the four senses:

“(3) The first is called the literal, and this is the sense that [does not go beyond the surface of the letter, as in the fables of the poets]. The next is called the allegorical, and this is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction. Thus Ovid says that with his lyre Orpheus tamed wild beasts and made trees and rocks move toward him, which is to say that the wise man with the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow tender and humble and moves to his will those who do not devote their lives to knowledge and art; and those who have no rational life whatsoever are almost like stones.

(4) Why this kind of concealment was devised by the wise will be shown in the penultimate book. Indeed the theologians take this sense otherwise than do the poets; but since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets.

(5) The third sense is called moral, and this is the sense that teachers should intently seek to discover throughout the scriptures, for their own profit and that of their pupils; as, for example, in the Gospel we may discover that when Christ ascended the mountain to be transfigured, of the twelve Apostles he took with him but three, the moral meaning of which is that in matters of great secrecy we should have few companions.

<http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

“(20) Ad evidentiam itaque dicendorum sciendum est quod istius operis non est simplex sensus, ymo dici potest polysemos, hoc est plurium sensuum; nam primus sensus est qui habetur per litteram, alius est qui habetur per significata per litteram. Et primus dicitur litteralis, secundus vero allegoricus, sive moralis, sive anagogicus.

(21) Qui modus tractandi, ut melius pateat, potest considerari in hiis versibus: «In exitu Israel de Egipto, domus Iacob de populo barbaro, facta est Iudea sanctificatio eius, Israel potestas eius». Nam si ad litteram solam inspiciamus, significatur nobis exitus filiorum Israel de Egipto, tempore Moysis; si ad allegoriam, nobis significatur nostra redemptio facta per Christum; si ad moralem sensum, significatur nobis conversio anime de luctu et miseria peccati ad statum gratie; si ad anagogicum, significatur exitus anime sancte ab huius corruptionis servitute ad eterne glorie libertatem”.

(6) The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is to say, beyond the senses; and this occurs when a scripture is expounded in a spiritual sense which, although it is true also in the literal sense, signifies by means of the things signified a part of the supernal things of eternal glory, as may be seen in the song of the Prophet which says that when the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made whole and free.

(7) For although it is manifestly true according to the letter, that which is spiritually intended is no less true, namely, that when the soul departs from sin it is made whole and free in its power."¹³⁰

A juxtapositional analysis of Aquinas' and Dante's statements in relation to the four senses of meaning shows, first, that Dante was well aware of Aquinas' definitions of the four senses, Second, given that Aquinas' statements are related to the Sacred Scriptures, and that Dante uses the same line of thought as Aquinas for his *Commedia*, it can be assumed that Dante considered his *Commedia* as being as sacred as the Sacred Scripture, which he confirms in the

¹³⁰ Dante, Alighieri, II, i, 3-6 *Convivio* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Richard H. Lansing, at

<http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/convivio.html> accessed 26.08.2013

(3) L'uno si chiama litterale, e questo è quello che [...]. L'altro si chiama allegorico, e questo è quello che] si nasconde sotto 'l manto di queste favole, ed è una veritate ascosa sotto bella menzogna: sì come quando dice Ovidio che Orfeo facea colla cetera mansuete le fiere, e li arbori e le pietre a sé muovere: che vuol dire che lo savio uomo collo strumento della sua voce faccia mansuescere ed umiliare li crudeli cuori, e faccia muovere alla sua volontade coloro che [non] hanno vita di scienza e d'arte; e coloro che non hanno vita ragionevole alcuna sono quasi come pietre.

(4) E perché questo nascondimento fosse trovato per li savi, nel penultimo trattato si mosterrà. Veramente li teologi questo senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti; ma però che mia intenzione è qui lo modo delli poeti seguitare, prendo lo senso allegorico secondo che per li poeti è usato.

(5) Lo terzo senso si chiama morale, e questo è quello che li lettori deono intentamente andare apostando per le scritture ad utilidade di loro e di loro discenti: sì come apostare si può nello Evangelio, quando Cristo salio lo monte per transfigurarsi, che delli dodici Apostoli menò seco li tre: in che moralmente si può intendere che alle secretissime cose noi dovemo avere poca compagnia.

(6) Lo quarto senso si chiama anagogico, cioè sovrasenso; e questo è quando spiritualmente si spone una scrittura, la quale ancora [che sia vera] eziandio nel senso litterale, per le cose significate significa delle superne cose dell'eternal gloria: sì come vedere si può in quello canto del Profeta che dice che nell'uscita del popolo d'Israel d'Egitto Giudea è fatta santa e libera:

(7) che avegna essere vero secondo la lettera sia manifesto, non meno è vero quello che spiritualmente s'intende, cioè che nell'uscita dell'anima dal peccato, essa sia fatta santa e libera in sua potestate.

Commedia by calling his poem a *poema sacro*. Furthermore Christian Moevs states: “When the *Comedy* grants itself scriptural authority, it is claiming to be such a text”;¹³¹ Third, given that Dante and Aquinas somehow consider the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical sense as a unity - for Aquinas they were part of a spiritual threefold sense and for Dante “Et primus dicitur litteralis, secundus vero allegoricus, sive moralis, sive anagogicus” - it is important to emphasize Dante’s statement “Veramente li teologi questo senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti” about the theologians taking the allegorical sense (which includes also the moral and the anagogical) otherwise than the poets do.¹³² The difference between the theologian (Aquinas) and the poet (Dante) may lie in the final purpose of all four senses together, since for Dante all four are needed.¹³³ Aquinas’ final purpose of the anagogical sense relates generally to eternal glory and is based on examples concerned with the Old Laws and the New Laws, and it is about what we ought to do according to Christ’s teachings; for Dante, according to the examples that he used in his explanation like “the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made whole and free“, the final purpose of the anagogical sense is explicitly soteriological and about freedom.¹³⁴ Aquinas’ anagogical sense relating to eternal glory shows no trace of freedom, whereas

¹³¹ Dante Alighieri, *Commedia Paradiso* XXIII.63 and XXV.3 at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 24.08.2013
Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's 'Comedy'*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). p. 9.

¹³² Dante, Alighieri, II, i, 4 *Convivio* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Richard H. Lansing, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/convivio.html> accessed 26.08.2013
also see footnote 124

¹³³ Dante, Alighieri, *Convivio* II, i, 9-15, Princeton Dante Project, translated by Richard H. Lansing, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/convivio.html> accessed 26.08.2013

¹³⁴ Dante, Alighieri, II, i, 6 *Convivio* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Richard H. Lansing, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/convivio.html> accessed 26.08.2013
Dsi ad allegoriam, nobis significatur nostra redemptio facta per Christum; si ad moralem sensum, significatur nobis conversio anime de luctu et miseria peccati ad statum gratie; si ad anagogicum, significatur exitus anime sancte ab huius corruptionis servitute ad eterne glorie libertatemante,”
Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.21 Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

for Dante the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of eternal glory is explicitly about freedom; the soul at the end is free in its own power and immortal. In this sense the difference between the poet (Dante) and the theologian (Thomas) can be interpreted as; the poet is free to seek freedom, the theologian is bound to seek laws. Furthermore, a poet can create new sacred texts; a theologian can only interpret the old ones. Dante was not a priest or a theologian, but a poet and thus free to include in his work, as he did, elements that can be considered as explicitly heretical. In the *Letter to Can Grande* Dante offers an example of the poet's freedom as he explains the purpose of a preamble:¹³⁵

(46) Rethores enim concessere prelibare dicenda ut animum comparent auditoris; sed poete non solum hoc faciunt, quin ymo post hec invocationem quandam emittunt.

(46) For orators are wont to give a forecast of what they are about to say, in order to gain the attention of their hearers. Now poets not only do this, but in addition they make use of some sort of invocation afterwards.

(47) Et hoc est eis conveniens, quia multa invocatione opus est eis, cum aliquid contra comunem modum hominum a superioribus substantiis petendum est, quasi divinum quoddam munus.

(47) And this is fitting in their case, for they have need of invocation in a large measure, inasmuch as they have to petition the superior beings for something beyond the ordinary range of human powers, something almost in the nature of a divine gift.

¹³⁵ Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.46-48, Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

<p>(48) Ergo presens prologus dividitur in partes duas, quia in prima premittitur quid dicendum sit, in secunda invocatur Apollo; et incipit secunda pars ibi: 'O bone Apollo, ad ultimum laborem'.</p>	<p>(48) Therefore the present prologue is divided into two parts: in the first is given a forecast of what is to follow; in the second is an invocation to Apollo; which second part begins: 'O buono Apollo, all'ultimo lavoro',</p>
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In this passage Dante portrays the poet as a priest-like medium. In fact, the poets, according to Dante, can contact superior beings beyond the ordinary range of human powers. Furthermore Dante's invocation is not to any holy Christian saints or angels; his invocation is to Apollo, a pagan God. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that Dante's purpose for his *Commedia* is not speculative but practical, as the *Letter to Can Grande* explains:¹³⁶

<p>(40) [16]. Genus vero phylosophie sub quo hic in toto et parte proceditur, est morale negotium, sive ethica; quia non ad speculandum, sed ad opus inventum est totum et pars.</p>	<p>(40) The branch of philosophy to which the work is subject, in the whole as in the part, is that of morals or ethics; inasmuch as the whole as well as the part was conceived, not for speculation, but with a practical object.</p>
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For Dante the practical aim of the *Commedia* is also explicitly soteriological, not for himself but for others, as a guide for the blessed reader from a state of misery to a state of bliss; as Dante explains in his *Letter to Can Grande*:¹³⁷

<p>(39) Finis totius et partis esse posset et</p>	<p>(39) The aim of the whole and of the part</p>
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¹³⁶ Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.40, Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

¹³⁷ Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.39 Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget, Toynbee at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

<p> multiplex, scilicet propinquus et remotus; sed, omissa subtili investigatione, dicendum est breviter quod finis totius et partis est removeere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis. </p>	<p> might [be] manifold; as, for instance, immediate and remote. But leaving aside any minute examination of this question, it may be stated briefly that the aim of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness. </p>
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To summarise, at this point, concerning Dante’s understanding of sacred art, it can be said that: the double purpose of sacred Scripture as given by Gregory, for the simple man and for the wise man, was still influential and could be also applied to poetry. The cultural authority from France and in particular from Thomas influenced Dante’s understanding of sacred art. Dante extended Thomas’ definitions of the four senses of meaning related to the sacred Scriptures, developing a more explicit soteriological view and the concept of freedom. The difference that Dante made between a theologian and a poet, which is fundamental for an understanding of his poetry, is concerned with freedom. Dante considered his *Commedia* to be as sacred as the Sacred Scriptures. The explicit pagan role that Dante assigned to the poets cannot be related to Christian theology. Dante’s *Commedia* is not only speculative, but ethical and practical, being concerned with catharsis and freedom; and the practical purpose of the *Commedia* is explicitly soteriological towards others. However, the main link for the argument of Dante’s *Commedia* as a theurgic act is concerned with the relation between Dante and Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. The dissertation will now take a closer look at this.

6. Dante and Dionysus the Areopagite

The dissertation in this part will provide evidence for the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on Dante's *Commedia*, evaluating on the one hand the scholarly literature on the topic, and on the other explicitly interpreting Pseudo-Dionysius' influence as theurgical.

The direct influence of Aristotle on Dante's work is evident particularly through Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Ethics*, which Dante cites frequently to explain the character of his *Commedia*, as the following example shows:¹³⁸

Nam si in aliquo loco vel passu	(41) For if in certain parts or passages
pertractatur ad modum speculativi	the treatment is after the manner of
negotii, hoc non est gratia speculativi	speculative philosophy, that is not for
negotii, sed gratia operis; quia, ut ait	the sake of speculation, but for a
Phylosophus in secundo	practical purpose; since, as the
Methaphysicorum, «ad aliquid et nunc	Philosopher [Aristotle] says in the
speculantur practici aliquando».	second book of the <i>Metaphysics</i> :
	'practical men occasionally speculate
	on things in their particular and
	temporal relations'.

However, Dante also interpreted Aristotelian natural philosophy in the light of Neo-Platonism gained from the *Liber de Causis*, in which most of the content is taken from Proclus' *Elements of Theology*; and from the Christian Neo-Platonist

¹³⁸ Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.41 Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

interpretation of the Pseudo-Dionysius, as he directly quotes in the *Letter to Can Grande* and in the *Paradiso*:¹³⁹

Et hoc dicitur in libro De Causis quod	(57) And this is stated in the book <i>On</i>
«omnis causa primaria plus influit super	<i>Causes</i> , namely, that 'every primary cause
suum causatum quam causa universalis	has influence in a greater degree on what it
secunda». Sed hoc quantum ad esse.	acts upon than any second cause'. So
	much with regard to being.

E Dīonīsio con tanto disio	And Dionysius, with much longing, set
a contemplar questi ordini si mise,	himself to contemplate these orders: he
che li nomò e distinse com'io.	named and distinguished them just as I do.

Diego Sbacchi, reporting Gardner's investigation concerning Dante's relation to mystical texts, states that the most corresponding and satisfying result was the connection between Dante and the writing of Pseudo-Dionysius, in particular relating to Dante's *Paradiso* and Dionysius' concept of light, God's image, the creation of the emanating process, the universality of love and the soul contemplating all things in the final vision of God.¹⁴⁰ However, for Gardner, according to Sbacchi, it was necessary to add the influence from Bernard of Clairvaux' work *De Consideratione* to explain convincingly some obscure passages in Dante's cosmology.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, according to Diego Sbacchi the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on Dante's *Commedia* in general and the

¹³⁹Wetherbee, Winthrop, "Dante Alighieri", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2011 Edition) Cap. 3. At <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dante/> accessed 27.08.2013
Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.57. Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013
Dante Alighieri, *Commedia Paradiso* XXVIII.133-135, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 27.08.2013

¹⁴⁰ Diego Sbacchi, *La presenza di Dionigi Areopagita nel Paradiso di Dante*, (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 2006). P. IX. Sbacchi, *La presenza*. P. XIX. For Gardner see: G.E. Gardner, *Dante's Ten Heavens. A Study of the Paradiso*, (New York: Haskell House, 1970). pp.20-25

¹⁴¹ Sbacchi *La presenza*. p. xix.

Paradiso in particular, can be related to four key concepts: the conception of light, apophaticism or negative theology, the mystic ascent to unification with God, and the angelic hierarchies.¹⁴² Following Sbacchi, the dissertation will now discuss the key concepts as expressed in the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius and in Dante's *Commedia*.

According to Susanna Barsella, the nature and function of light within Dante's angelology seems to combine Neo-Platonic tradition within a more scientific Aristotelian-Arab tradition.¹⁴³ The Neo-Platonic tradition basically interpreted Plato's metaphor of the sun as given in the *Republic*: Plato uses the Sun's metaphor to associate the physical light of the Sun with the intelligible metaphysical light emanating from the Good, considering both as causes in two ways.¹⁴⁴ Just as the sun gives light which allows us to see objects, so the Good's metaphysical light provides order and intelligibility to allow us to know objects. Furthermore, according to Plato's metaphor of the Sun, the sun provides the energy for the nourishment and growth of all living things, as the metaphysical light of the Good provides the order and structure which is the source of the existence of all things. In the Neo-Platonic tradition light emanated from God and penetrated the all universe through a hierarchy of luminous beings.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the *Chaldean Oracles* not only attest to the gods the same double function: "For it as a double function: it both possesses the intelligibles in its mind and brings sense-perception to the worlds", but also associated divine intellectual

¹⁴² Sbacchi *La presenza*. p. ix.

¹⁴³ Susanna Barsella, *In the Light of the Angels : Angelology and Cosmology in Dante's Divina Commedia*, (Firenze: Olschki, 2010). p. 36.

¹⁴⁴ Plato *Republic* 507c-511e Perseus Digital Library at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D6%3Asection%3D507d> accessed on 25.08.2013

Barsella, *In the light*. p.37.

¹⁴⁵ Barsella, *In the light*. p.37.

light directly with Eros, Love, since "...the self-generated Paternal Intellect sowed the bond of Love, heavy with fire, into all things", and more precisely "In order that all might continue to love for an infinite time and the things woven by the intellectual light of the Father might not collapse."¹⁴⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius contributed to the early Christian adaptation of the Neo-Platonic concept of light and helped, according to Barsella, to develop "a language based on the metaphorical expansion of light as revelatory sign of the divine presence that penetrated the universe through luminous streams."¹⁴⁷ Dante was clearly influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius' concept of light, as the *Letter to Can Grande* states:¹⁴⁸

<p>Propter quod patet quod omnis essentia et virtus procedat a prima, et intelligentie inferiores recipiant quasi a radiante, et reddant radios superioris ad suum inferius ad modum speculorum. Quod satis aperte tangere videtur Dionysius de Celesti Hierarchia loquens.</p>	<p>(60) Whence it is evident that every essence and every virtue proceeds from a primal one; and that the lower intelligences have their effect as it were from a radiating body, and, after the fashion of mirrors, reflect the rays of the higher to the one below them. Which matter appears to be discussed clearly enough by Dionysius in his work <i>On the Celestial Hierarchy</i>.</p>
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Furthermore, Dante's vast use of metaphors of light in the *Commedia* can be considered essentially instrumental as a cognitive medium connected to the angelic operations.¹⁴⁹ In addition, Barsella demonstrates that the Dionysian

¹⁴⁶ Majercik, *Chaldean oracles*. Fr. 8, 39.

¹⁴⁷ Barsella, *In the light*. p.37.

¹⁴⁸ Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.60. Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

¹⁴⁹ Barsella, *In the light*. p.37.

influence on Dante's *Commedia* provided "a viable model of cosmic harmonization based on the contemplative and illuminative faculties of angels."¹⁵⁰ It is relevant now to show how Dante presents, through Beatrice, the angelic hierarchies in his *Commedia*:¹⁵¹

E poi che le parole sue restaro,
non altrimenti ferro disfavilla
che bolle, come i cerchi sfavillaro.
L'incendio suo seguiva ogne scintilla;
ed eran tante, che 'l numero loro
più che 'l doppiar de li scacchi s'inmilla.

Io sentiva osannar di coro in coro
al punto fisso che li tiene a li ubi,
e terrà sempre, ne' quai sempre fuoro.
E quella che vedëa i pensier dubi
ne la mia mente, disse: "I cerchi primi
t' hanno mostrato Serafi e Cherubi.

Così veloci seguono i suoi vimi,
per somigliarsi al punto quanto ponno;
e posson quanto a veder son soblimi.
Quelli altri amori che 'ntorno li vonno,
si chiaman Troni del divino aspetto,
per che 'l primo ternaro terminonno;

And when her words were done, even as
incandescent iron will shower sparks, so
did those circles sparkle; and each spark
circled with its flaming ring sparks that
were more in number than the sum one
reaches doubling in succession each
square of a chessboard-one to sixty-four.

I heard "Hosanna" sung, from choir to
choir to that fixed Point which holds and
always shall hold them to where they have
forever been. And she who saw my mind's
perplexities said: "The first circles have
displayed to you the Seraphim and
Cherubim.

They follow the ties of love with such
rapidity because they are as like the Point
as creatures can be, a power dependent
on their vision. Those other loves that
circle round them are called Thrones of
the divine aspect, because they

¹⁵⁰ Barsella, *In the light*. p.69.

¹⁵¹ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Paradiso XXVIII.88-135* Società Dantesca Italiana at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 26.08.2013

e dei saper che tutti hanno diletto
quanto la sua veduta si profonda
nel vero in che si queta ogni intelletto.
Quinci si può veder come si fonda
l'esser beato ne l'atto che vede,
non in quel ch'ama, che poscia seconda;
e del vedere è misura mercede,
che grazia partorisce e buona voglia:
così di grado in grado si procede.

L'altro ternaro, che così germoglia
in questa primavera sempiterna
che notturno Ariete non dispoglia,
perpetuamente 'Osanna' sberna
con tre melode, che suonano in tre
ordini di letizia onde s'interna.

In essa gerarcia son l'altre dee:
prima Dominazioni, e poi Virtudi;
l'ordine terzo di Podestadi è.

Poscia ne' due penultimi tripudi
Principati e Arcangeli si girano;
l'ultimo è tutto d'Angelici ludi.

Questi ordini di sù tutti s'ammirano,
e di giù vincon sì, che verso Dio
tutti tirati sono e tutti tirano.

E Dionisio con tanto disio

terminated the first group of three; and
know that all delight to the degree to which
their vision sees-more or less deeply- that
truth in which all intellects find rest. From
this you see that blessedness depends
upon the act of vision, not upon the act of
love-which is a consequence; the measure
of their vision lies in merit, produced by
grace and then by will to goodness: and
this is the progression, step by step.

The second triad-blossoming in this
eternal springtime that the nightly Ram
does not despoil-perpetually sings
'Hosanna' with three melodies that sound
in the three ranks of bliss that form this
triad; within this hierarchy there are three
kinds of divinities: first, the Dominions, and
then the Virtues; and the final order
contains the Powers.

The two penultimate groups of rejoicing
ones within the next triad are wheeling
Principalities and the Archangels; last, the
playful Angels.

These orders all direct-ecstatically- their
eyes on high; and downward, they exert
such force that all are drawn and draw to
God. And Dionysius, with much longing,

a contemplar questi ordini si mise, set himself to contemplate these orders:
che li nomò e distinse com'io. he named and distinguished them just as I
do.

The role of imitation, as the dissertation has showed, is a fundamental aspect in the theurgy of Dionysius.¹⁵² This is also for Dante relevant, in particular in the anagogical process of purification and enlightenment toward the unification with god, but not only for humans; it is fundamental for angels too, as Dante writes, “per somigliarsi al punto quanto ponno” (to be similar to God as much as they can). Furthermore, as Barsella reports: “Through angelic orders, God’s science descended in the form of intellectual light from the highest to the lowest spiritual creature, thus stimulating in them the desire to return and reunite with Him”¹⁵³ This is the sense of the passage “che verso Dio tutti tirati sono e tutti tirano” (that all are drawn and draw to God). Dionysius in his *Mystica theologia* describes the hermeneutics of this process in two ways: the descending movement of divine light created from an act of divine love corresponded to positive (*cataphatic*) theology, and an ascending movement corresponded to negative (*apophatic*) theology.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, according to Barsella, citing Marta Cristiani, the idea of divine obscurity implicit in Dionysius’ apophatic theology is compatible with Dante’s cosmology, and also with Dante’s incapacity to express what lies beyond the center of light at the end of his journey.¹⁵⁵ The connection between Dionysius’ Christian adaptation of theurgy and Dante’s *Commedia* can also be related to the significant role of the divine names: the names of God and the names of the hierarchies. The names of God help to praise Him and to define

¹⁵² Burns, *Proclus*. p. 126.

¹⁵³ Barsella, *In the light*. p.57.

¹⁵⁴ Barsella, *In the light*. p.57.

¹⁵⁵ Barsella, *In the light*. p. 57.

Him, while the names of the hierarchies help to understand their position and their function.¹⁵⁶ However, Dante in the *Commedia* clearly relates to Dionysius' work *De Divinis Nominibus*: "he distinguished them as I do", naming the nine angelic categories as: in the first circle Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; in the second circle Dominions, Virtues and Powers; and in the third circle Principalities, Archangels and Angels. The relevance here is concerned with the theurgic practice of spelling the apparently meaningless divine names, as Iamblichus (answering Porphyry) states:

"But they are not meaningless in the way that you think. Rather, let us grant that they are unknowable to us – or even, in some cases known, since we may receive their explanations from the gods – but to the gods they are all significant, not according to an effable mode, nor in such a way that is significant, and indicative to the imaginations of human beings, but united to the gods, either intellectuality or rather ineffably.... Thus, the symbolic character of divine similitude, which is intellectual and divine, has to be assumed in the names."¹⁵⁷

Furthermore, for Iamblichus the ineffability of the divine names represents the most venerable aspect, because it awakens the ineffable presence of the divine in the soul.¹⁵⁸ The point here at first concerns the term ineffable (*aphthengtos*), which both in Greek and Latin literally means voiceless, speechless or unutterable. According to Sbacchi, citing M. Colombo's investigation of the adjective *ineffabilis*, "in the classic literature we have very few traces of the term; it is only with Augustine and later with Pseudo Dionysius that we have also a theory of the ineffable.... Dante was the first author to use the term *ineffabile* in

¹⁵⁶ Sbacchi *La presenza*. p.XX.

¹⁵⁷ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. 255,1-9.

See also Shaw, *Theurgy*. p. 179.

¹⁵⁸ Shaw, *Theurgy*. pp. 179-180.

our language.”¹⁵⁹ The second point is that Dante used the term *ineffabile* not only in relation to the impossibility for humans to speak about the Gods, but also when he, Dante, comes to speak about his beloved lady Beatrice.¹⁶⁰ It must be noted that when Dante hears the divine names he is in paradise and that the ineffable Beatrice tells him the names. According to this it can be said that Dante received the explanation of the divine names from the gods through the ineffable Beatrice, who awakened the ineffable presence of the divine in Dante’s soul. However, here the point is not whether Dante knew the names of the hierarchies from Dionysius or Gregory or not, because of course he knew the names from somewhere; the point is that Dante understood what they really meant only when he reached paradise, standing in the middle of the sparkling, flaming circles of light, hearing "Hosanna" sung, from choir to choir and with Beatrice as the one “who saw my mind’s perplexity” naming what he saw.

Finally, for Barsella, Dante’s poetry was capable of reproducing what could not be said, and by doing so it aimed to the same result as that of the angels; participation through imitation as the highest point of the anagogical process and as the consequence of illumination, involving intellectual and moral spheres.¹⁶¹ For Barsella, “even Dante’s poem is enlightened participation and imitation”.¹⁶² Last but not least, the soteriology for others, which the dissertation has presented as one of the main characteristics of Dionysius’ theurgy, is present in the *Commedia* (among other passages) as:¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Sbacchi *La presenza*. p. XXI-XXII. My translation.

¹⁶⁰ Sbacchi *La presenza*. p. XXII

¹⁶¹ Barsella, *In the light*. p. 58.

¹⁶² Barsella, *In the light*. p. 58.

¹⁶³ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Paradiso XXXIII.67-72*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 19.08.2013

O somma luce che tanto ti levi
da' concetti mortali, a la mia mente
ripresta un poco di quel che parevi,
e fa la lingua mia tanto possente,
ch'una favilla sol de la tua gloria
possa lasciare a la futura gente

O Highest Light, You, raised so far above
the minds of mortals, to my memory give
back something of Your epiphany, and
make my tongue so powerful that I may
leave to people of the future one gleam of
the glory that is Yours

This becomes a component of Dante's main aim, "quod finis totius et partis est remove vivere in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis." (the aim of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of bliss).¹⁶⁴

To summarise, the scholarly literature on the connection between Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Dante shows a clear Dionysian influence on Dante's work, in particular the conception of light, apophaticism or negative theology, the mystic ascent to unification with God, the angelic hierarchies, the relevance of divine names and soteriology for others. Furthermore, this dissertation has demonstrated that Dionysius' influence on Dante's *Commedia* can be directly related to theurgy. Also, according to the scholarly studies, Dionysius' influence on Dante's *Commedia* can be indirectly related to its main characteristics: providing a language based on the metaphorical expansion of light as a revelatory sign of the divine presence that penetrated the universe through a luminous stream, providing a viable model of cosmic harmonization based on the contemplative and illuminative faculties of superior beings. In addition, Barsella's interpretation of Dante's poetry as capable of reproducing the ineffable, in which the aim of participating in the divine through imitation is

¹⁶⁴ Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.39 Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

intended as the highest point of the anagogical process and as the consequence of illumination involving intellectual and moral spheres, can be seen as a main point of the Dionysian influence on Dante's *Commedia*.

7. Dante's *Commedia* as a theurgic act

In the first part of this chapter, the focus will be on the absence of the term theurgy in Dante's work. In the second part, Dante's *Vita nuova* will be interpreted, in agreement with Valli, as an autobiographical report of Dante's initiation, in which Dante begins to depict, and interpret symbolically by means of poetry, the main episodes of his life, and in which the two main figures interacting in Dante's visionary autobiography will be interpreted as theurgic agencies. The first is the figure of personified Love as Eros and the second is the figure of Beatrice as the human form of the divine female power, the traveling World-Soul Hecate. In the third part of this chapter, in accordance with Dante's understanding of poetry and the role of poets, the dissertation will interpret the *Commedia* as an evolution of his initiation, from the initial ability to depict and interpret his life symbolically, to the ability to see and understand the symbolism of his life as a higher form of reality, and finally to the ability to reproduce the higher form of reality in symbolic mystical verses. Furthermore, this last ability will be interpreted as an imitation of the Paternal Mind and considered as a theurgic act for the reader. In addition, according to the theurgic premise that the world is full of symbols sowed from the Paternal Mind, all three abilities will be interpreted explicitly as increasing theurgic skills,¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Majercik, *Chaldean oracles*. Fr. 67, 108.

7.1. The term theurgy in Dante's work

First of all, it must be acknowledged that Dante never used the word theurgy in his work. This is not surprising, since using the word theurgy in Dante's time could have been dangerous due to the possibility of it being related to heretics. The inquisition against the heretics started by Pope Gregory IX in 1231 and declared in the Council of Tarragona in 1242, had (since 1254) its main tribunal in Florence within the Franciscan's Santa Croce, a few streets away from Dante's house.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, Dante was already in trouble with the Roman Church because of his political ideas. But if political disagreement with the Roman Church could mainly cause exile (as Dante's condemnation to exile shows), to be branded as a heretic by the inquisition meant a condemnation to death, which Dante could directly perceive through the persecution of the Knights Templar. Furthermore, Johannes Scotus Eriugena (c. 815 – c. 877) translated the term theurgy from Greek into Latin mostly as *divina operatio* (divine work), for example in the translation of Pseudo Dionysius' statement in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies* “καὶ ἔστι τῆς θεολογίας ἡ θεουργία συγκεφαλαιωσις”, as “Et est theologiae divina operatio, consummatio.”¹⁶⁷ The practice of translating the word theurgy as divine work can often be found even today (in translating from Greek to Italian, Scazzoso uses the words *opera divina*).¹⁶⁸ However, even if the term theurgy cannot be found explicitly in Dante's work, a few comments can be made about Dante's definition of his *Commedia* as a *poema sacro*. Dante defines not only his

¹⁶⁶ A Brief History of the Inquisition at http://rarebooks.library.nd.edu/digital/inquisition/collections/RBSC-INQ:COLLECTION/info/brief_history accessed 16.08.2013

¹⁶⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius. 432b. p.230.

Johannes, Scotus Eriugena, *Libri Sancti Dionysii Areopagitae, quos Joannes Ierugena transtulit de Graeco in latinum, jubente ac postulante rege Carolo Ludovici Imperatoris filio* at <http://www.binetti.ru/collectio/theologia/areopag/eccl.shtml#3> accessed 27.08.2013

¹⁶⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius. 432b. p.231 .“l'opera divina è una ricapitolazione delle parole di Dio“

poem as *sacro*, for him it is as sacred as the Sacred Scripture. By doing so Dante implicitly defines his *poema* as divine. Furthermore, given that for Dante the role of the poet is also explicitly a priest-like spiritual role and the work of a poet is a poem, it follows that for Dante the term *poema sacro* had the same meaning as *opera divina*, divine work which is also the meaning of the term theurgy. However, it is not the purpose of this dissertation to look explicitly for the term theurgy in Dante's work, but to offer a theurgic interpretation of his work.

7.2. The *Vita Nuova* as an account of Dante's initiation

The dissertation has demonstrated that Dante's affiliation to the esoteric group called *I fedeli d'amore* is at least plausible. Furthermore, one of the most important moments at the beginning of an affiliation to an esoteric group is the moment of the initiation. Whether through initiation rites, or orally, or both – or even spontaneously – the initiate comes to a knowledge that can completely transform his interpretation of the world and his life to the extent that he may feel himself to be reborn into a new life. Now the dissertation will show, in agreement with the previously explored conclusions of Valli, that this is the case for Dante as described in his work *Vita nuova*, "New Life". Anderson describes Dante's *Vita nuova* as "the growth in Dante of an expanded consciousness."¹⁶⁹ Even more, Jacob Burckhardt, according to Anderson, commenting on the poems contained in the *Vita nuova* states, "The human spirit had taken a mighty step towards the consciousness of its own secret life."¹⁷⁰ The *Vita nuova* was written in an autobiographic style full of visions, dreams and revelations, in which the main figures interacting in Dante's real and visionary life are Beatrice as a beloved,

¹⁶⁹ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 125.

¹⁷⁰ Anderson, *Dante*. p. 125.

divine woman, and the figure of a guiding personified Love. However, without getting into a detailed analysis, a few elements of the *Vita nuova* can give an idea of its initiatic content.¹⁷¹ Dante's determination to keep his love for Beatrice secret, for instance, can be related to Dante's affiliation to a secret esoteric sect.¹⁷² The second meeting with Beatrice, which has already been discussed, can be considered as the starting point of Dante's initiation through Love and the beginning of the friendship with Guido Cavalcanti.¹⁷³ Furthermore, the second appearance of Love dressed as a pilgrim could be a reference to the Albigensians, which according to Andrea Cuccia were called *Peregrini*.¹⁷⁴ The third appearance of Love dressed in white, who orders him to write a poem about love, could refer to the necessity of a catharsis.¹⁷⁵ Also, the sufferance and compassion of Beatrice as she comes to know that Dante had another lady, could represent the moment in which Dante understands the relevance of compassion and piety as instruments of catharsis.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, the place in which Love recovered Dante's love for Beatrice (the poem *Ladies who possess the intellect of love* in which Beatrice is celebrated and desired by Heaven and praised for her wonderful presence on Earth) which, together with the last appearance of Love, who tells Dante that Beatrice is also Amor and that she is very similar to him, may indicate that Dante was aware of the interplay between

¹⁷¹ Dante, Alighieri, *Vita Nuova* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Mark Musa, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/> accessed 15.08.2013
see also Anderson, *Dante*. pp. 127-132.

¹⁷² Dante, Alighieri, *Vita Nuova II.10* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Mark Musa, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/> accessed 15.08.2013

¹⁷³ Dante, Alighieri, *Vita Nuova III.1-15* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Mark Musa, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/> accessed 15.08.2013

¹⁷⁴ Dante, Alighieri, *Vita Nuova IX.3* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Mark Musa, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/> accessed 15.08.2013
Cuccia, *Il pensiero*. p .77

¹⁷⁵ Dante, Alighieri, *Vita Nuova XII.3* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Mark Musa, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/> accessed 15.08.2013

¹⁷⁶ Dante, Alighieri, *Vita Nuova XII.6* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Mark Musa, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/> accessed 15.08.2013

Love, Heaven and a divine female power interacting in his life as divine agencies.¹⁷⁷ Finally, Dante's decision not to write any more verse about Beatrice until he was able through study to write verses about her that had never been written for any women before, and the supplication to God that he may ascend to see the glory of his beloved Beatrice, may indicate that Dante was aware that he was just at the beginning of a spiritual journey, one which could lead to eternal glory.¹⁷⁸ However, the first element that may bring together Dante's work *Vita nuova* and theurgy is the figure of personified Love as guide and interpreter through Dante's biography. This personified Love can be related to the theurgic Eros according to the Paternal Mind that sowed also symbols in the souls, filling them with pure love, "as the guide and holy bond of all things", and as the essence of *sympatheia*.¹⁷⁹ The second element is the almost divine role of Beatrice, which for purposes of the dissertation will later be directly related to Hecate, as her earthly, human appearance. However, the main objective here is to emphasize how Dante starts to see his life symbolically. The autobiography of *Vita nuova* is full of symbolic meanings, which allow simple life episodes, such as Beatrice's greetings, to transform into a kind of mystical orientation. Dante, as he relates it, had just started to teach himself the art of writing poetry, but poets for Dante, as he explains years later in his *Letter to Can Grande* and after having written *the Commedia*, need to use invocation in a large measure, inasmuch as they have to petition the superior beings for something beyond the ordinary

¹⁷⁷ Dante, Alighieri, *Vita Nuova XIX.1-22 and XXIV.5* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Mark Musa, at

<http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/> accessed 15.08.2013

¹⁷⁸ Dante, Alighieri, *Vita Nuova XLII.1-3* Princeton Dante Project, translated by Mark Musa, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/> accessed 15.08.2013

¹⁷⁹ Majercik, *Chaldean oracles*. Fr. 39, 42, 43.

range of human powers, something almost in the nature of a divine gift.¹⁸⁰ The interpretation of his new life is that in the early stages he may have just begun to learn how to describe his life symbolically; later he will be able to see the symbols in his life as real living symbolic agencies, transforming his life episodes into mystical knowledge. Dante, according to this interpretation, is aware that he has more to learn, as he decides not to write any more verse about Beatrice. Furthermore, his supplication to God that he may ascend to see the glory of his beloved Beatrice can be seen as one of Dante's first petitions to the superior beings; they listen to him and grant him access to that glory, but first he has to cleanse his soul, starting in fear in a dark and wild forest. This is, according to the interpretation given here, what Dante reports in his *Commedia*.

7.3. The *Commedia* as a theurgic act

Before starting with the interpretation of the *Commedia* as a theurgic act, a few premises need to be laid out. The first is that the *Commedia* will be interpreted as a symbolic autobiographical report of real episodes in Dante's life, which started with Dante's exile and lasted for some time, thus not as a dream or a single vision. The second premise is that when Dante started to write the first part of the *Commedia*, the *Inferno*, the main biographical episodes, concerned with the theurgic interpretation of the *Commedia*, were already part of his past. The third premise is that the structure of the *Commedia* in its three parts, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* will be interpreted as an account of a corresponding progression in Dante's poetic skills as theurgic skills. For example, interpreting life symbolically will be interpreted as the way to leave *Inferno*; seeing and

¹⁸⁰ Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.46-47, Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toymbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

understanding life as an interaction with symbolic agencies leading to catharsis will be interpreted as the purpose of *Purgatorio*; finally the imitation of the divine as the highest form of catharsis which will allow Dante to reproduce the divine in symbolic mystical verses will be interpreted as the final purpose of *Paradiso*.

These interpretations of the *Commedia* will begin from the very last verses:¹⁸¹

Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige	As the geometer intently seeks
per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,	to square the circle, but he cannot reach,
pensando, quel principio ond'elli indige,	through thought on thought, the principle
tal era io a quella vista nova:	he needs, so I searched that strange sight:
veder voleva come si convenne	I wished to see the way in which our
l'imgo al cerchio e come vi s'indova;	human effigy suited the circle and found
ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:	place in it and my own wings were far too
se non che la mia mente fu percossa	weak for that. But then my mind was
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.	struck by light that flashed and, with this
	light, received what it had asked.
A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;	Here force failed my high fantasy; but my
ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,	desire and will were moved already-like a
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,	wheel revolving uniformly by the Love that
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.	moves the sun and the others stars.

This moment, reinterpreted as a real episode in Dante's life, in which Dante sees himself in the middle of the highest divine circle, and knows his desire and will to be synchronous with the movement of the sun and the stars moved by Love, defines the highest similarity with the divine. Furthermore, it can be considered as the moment in which the idea of the *Commedia* is born to accomplish Dante's soteriological task. At that point Dante's will and desire aim to *removere viventes*

¹⁸¹Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Paradiso XXXIII. 142-145*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 19.08.2013

in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitates (remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness).¹⁸²

First of all he has to show what misery is, starting with his own, in the first part of the *Commedia*, the *Inferno*. The real life episode that can be related to the first verses of the *Commedia* is that of Dante's exile. Here Dante has borrowed the scenery from Brunetto's *Tesoretto*, in which Brunetto too, after he is informed of his exile, suddenly passed out and woke up in a wild forest.¹⁸³

Dante:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.
Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinnova la paura!

Dante:

When I had journeyed half of our life's
way, I found myself within a dark forest, for
I had lost the path that does not stray. Ah,
it is hard to speak of what it was, that
savage forest, dense and difficult, which
even in recall renews my fear:

Brunetto Latini:

e io, in tal corrotto
pensando a capo chino,
perdei il gran cammino,
e tenni a la traversa
d'una selva diversa.

Brunetto Latini:

And I, in such anguish,
Think with dead downcast,
Lost the great highway,
And took the crossroad
Through a strange wood . . .

¹⁸² Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole* XIII.39 Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

¹⁸³ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Inferno* I.1-6, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 19.08.2013
Brunetto Latini, and Ciccuto Marcello, *Il Tesoretto*, (Milano: Rizzoli, 1985).p. 6. At http://www.letteraturaitaliana.net/pdf/Volume_1/t22.pdf accessed 26.08.2013

This beginning suggests that Dante symbolized his real life situations caused by the exile by describing his feeling as fear, loss of orientation, and as a dark savage forest. Without knowing where to go, having lost his entire cultural heritage and what he had believed until now, Dante is angry with the world and, looking at his feelings inside his soul, he encounters three beasts blocking his way out of the savage forest. Because it is not the purpose of the dissertation to analyse each symbol, it will be enough here to interpret the three beasts as the corrupted component of Dante's soul which, through the shocking episode of the exile, become so strong that Dante can recognize them as existing within his soul. This is a relevant pre-cathartic moment, which will lead Dante to the necessity of cleansing his soul. However, Dante cannot face the three beasts directly, as Virgil (as reason), suggests.¹⁸⁴ Dante must take another way around the beasts and strategically cut off their nourishment.¹⁸⁵ To do so, he has to go where the pictures, representing the beasts' nourishment, have been made: his own hell. Dante himself tells us in his *Letter to Can Grande* that:¹⁸⁶

<p>(24) Est ergo subiectum totius operis, litteraliter tantum accepti, status animarum post mortem simpliciter sumptus; nam de illo et circa illum totius operis versatur processus.</p>	<p>(24) The subject, then, of the whole work, taken in the literal sense only, is the state of souls after death, pure and simple. For on and about that the argument of the whole work turns.</p>
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<p>(25) Si vero accipiatur opus allegorice,</p>	<p>(25) If, however, the work be regarded</p>
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¹⁸⁴ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Inferno I.64, II.70 II.94-99*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 19.08.2013

¹⁸⁵ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Inferno I.91-105*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 19.08.2013

¹⁸⁶ Dante, Alighieri, *Epistole XIII.24-25*, Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee, at <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html> accessed 26.08.2013

subiectum est homo prout merendo et
demerendo per arbitrii libertatem iustitie
premiandi et puniendi obnoxius est.

from the allegorical point of view, the
subject is man according as by his merits
or demerits in the exercise of his free will
he is deserving of reward or punishment
by justice.

Dante exercises his free will for himself, looking into the dark side of his soul. The whole journey through *Inferno* is full of biographical episodes of Dante's real and cultural life, in which sins and their related punishment are depicted. However, Dante is the one who creates those pictures, reflecting his attitude on condemning sins and vices. He has to go through his own hell, reviewing his biography, possibly without stopping and without getting involved in the punishments, using Virgil as a guide. Virgil has been sent by Beatrice to help according to the will of a gentle lady in Heaven and Lucia (representing grace), with these words: "For I am Beatrice who sends you on; I come from where I most long to return; Love prompted me, that Love which makes me speak."¹⁸⁷

However, Dante's role throughout the *Inferno* is passive, as in fact nothing happens to him directly, and the overwhelming atmosphere of sorrow for those punished souls rising from the verses shows the real intent of Dante's journey through hell: he has to develop compassion and a sense of piety, as these represent the only way to cancel those images which nourished the three beasts. As the dissertation has previously showed, the soul according to the *Chaldean Oracles* should accomplish the work of piety, and should not look down but rise up again, seeking paradise, joining action to sacred speech.¹⁸⁸ This is what

¹⁸⁷ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Inferno II.70*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 19.08.2013 for Lucia as grace see Anderson, *Dante*, p. 306.

¹⁸⁸ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 128, 163,164, 165.

Dante does in the *Inferno*. Here it is also relevant to emphasize that Dante understood how pictures, images and symbols operate as soul nourishment for the corrupted part of the soul involved in earthly matter, and that he developed a strategy, through reason, based on it; he created pictures able to awake sorrow, piety and compassion. The strategy will work; Dante will leave *Inferno* and will find himself upside down at the entrance of *Purgatorio*.

Mount *Purgatorio* has basically the same moral structure as the abyss *Inferno*. However, the direction is upwards: Dante has to climb the mountain, while in the *Inferno* the direction was downwards and Dante had to descend. In the *Purgatorio*, Dante is still reviewing his life, looking inside his soul; as in *Inferno* he will meet well known persons, situations, and places that were part of his biography, but this time in a positive way. The punishments are not as harsh as in hell and they are not final, since the possibility of reaching Heaven through catharsis exists. Furthermore, Dante has now learned at this stage that catharsis can only begin with the help of superior beings and that is why he has to invoke the Muses:¹⁸⁹

e canterò di quel secondo regno	and what I sing will be that second
dove l'umano spirito si purga	kingdom, in which the human soul is
e di salire al ciel diventa degno.	cleansed of sin, becoming worthy of
Ma qui la morta poesì resurga,	ascent to Heaven. But here, since I am
o sante Muse, poi che vostro sono;	yours, o holy Muses, may this poem
e qui Calliopè alquanto surga,	resurrect from dead; and may Calliope rise
seguitando il mio canto con quel suono	somewhat here, accompanying my singing
di cui le Piche misere sentiro	with that music whose power struck the

¹⁸⁹ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Purgatorio* l.7-12, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 20.09.2013

lo colpo tal, che disperar perdono.

poor Pierides so forcefully that they
despaired of pardon.

Furthermore, the guardian of Purgatory grants Dante entrance to the *Purgatorio* because the “*donna del ciel ti move e regge*” (lady of the Heaven moves and holds you). However, besides the biographical components, symbolic visions and dreams, which accompany Dante during the journey through *Purgatorio*, the main difference, compared to his journey through hell, is that Dante this time has an active role.¹⁹⁰ The symbols of the catharsis were cut by an angel with the point of a sword into Dante’s forehead as seven P’s symbolising the seven deadly sins; Dante’s task is to wash away these wounds during his journey through Mount *Purgatorio*.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, the symbols are alive, cut in his flesh by an angel’s sword, and they will also be finally cancelled by the angels. In fact, Dante’s symbolism is not like in hell, only concerned with sins and vices, because the P’s will be cancelled by the corresponding virtue; pride by the angel of humility, envy by the angel of mercy, wrath by the angel of peace, sloth by the angel of solicitude, avarice by the angel of justice, gluttony by the angel of abstinence and lust by the angel of chastity. This transformation in Dante’s depiction of his life can be interpreted as the ability to see and understand life as a task directed toward a higher form of reality, guided by symbolic agencies and superior beings who interact with him through the catharsis. Life is intended as catharsis, and thus Dante, as in a theurgic context, activates the symbolic present in his life to purify his soul to a degree that is suitable for the unification

¹⁹⁰ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Purgatorio*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 20.09.2013

¹⁹¹ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Purgatorio I.91 and IX.112*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 20.09.2013

with the gods.¹⁹² However, not only reason, as in hell, will help Dante to succeed, but also the ineffable agency of a divine female power, which moves and holds him on his path through a chain of female beings (the lady from Heaven as the Virgin Mary, Lucia, and Beatrice). Furthermore, the divine female power will show itself directly to Dante in its human form. It is so powerful that Dante cannot withstand its beauty and passes out as Beatrice appears and tells him to look at her. The moral structure of *Purgatorio*, relating to the virtues and to the divine female power, can also be interpreted as Hecate's left flank: "in the left flank of Hecate exists the source of virtue, which remains entirely within and does not give up its virginity".¹⁹³ In addition, in the moment in which Beatrice appears to Dante, reason disappears: Virgil is gone. Reason, which guided Dante from sins and vices to virtues, has no function anymore, and cannot go any further. Beatrice takes over, and from now on Dante is moved directly by Love, because Love makes Beatrice speak: "Love prompted me, that Love which makes me speak."¹⁹⁴

Dante's symbolism of the *Inferno* or the *Purgatorio* may still be considered rational as it suggests the avoidance of sins and vices and the cultivation of virtues, but in Dante's *Paradiso* there is no place for rationality. Dante's depiction of paradise is beyond the rational, since it is about angels moving planets, mystical knowledge, revelations about the past and prophecies about the future.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, the revelations are not only about Dante's biographical past or future; they are also about the past and the future of the whole human

¹⁹² Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. 38.8-10.

¹⁹³ Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr. 52

¹⁹⁴ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Inferno II.70*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 19.08.2013

¹⁹⁵ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Paradiso*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 24.08.2013

race. In *Paradiso* Dante has left Earth behind, after having crossed the river Lethe (the river of memory), and travels through the planetary spheres. Here he will come to know, for instance, if it is true what Plato said about the souls' returning to the stars, as well as the state of the body after resurrection, the origin of his family, his future, the story of the Roman Eagle, the meaning of Jesus' death, the real existence of Adam, the future ruin of the Venetian cities and what will happen on Judgement Day. Furthermore, Dante depicts the journey through the *Paradiso* as a complex interplay of seeing, watching, and reflecting light as a form of divine contemplation. The highest form of the contemplation will start when Dante reaches the Empyrean, in which a river of light forms a circle. The sparks of the river become saints and angels forming a rose with the Virgin Mary standing in the middle with seven ladies sitting at her feet, Beatrice among them. Finally Bernard appears at Dante's side and asks the Virgin Mary to grant Dante the vision of God, to which Mary agrees: Dante is one with God.

The relation to theurgy can be here related to Iamblichus' description of the final aim of theurgy as anagoge:

“And when it has conjoined (the soul) individually to the parts of the cosmos and to all the divine powers pervading them, this leads and entrusts the soul to the keeping of the universal demiurge and makes it external to all matter and united to the eternal logos alone. What I mean is, that it connects the soul individually to the self-begotten and self-moved god, and with the all-sustaining intellectual and adorning power of the cosmos, and with that which leads up to the intelligible truth, and with the perfected and effected and other demiurgic powers of the god, so that the theurgic soul is perfectly established in the activities and the

intellections of the demiurgic powers. Then, indeed, it deposits the soul in the bosom of the demiurgic god as a whole.”¹⁹⁶

Furthermore, the prophetic knowledge gained through Dante’s divine ascent can be considered as a high form of divination. Also the Virgin Mary with the seven ladies symbolising the female divine power, and operating at different levels of consciousness and reality, can be interpreted as Hecate, the traveling World Soul. Lastly, Dante’s petition to the Highest Light as “O Highest Light, You raised so far above the minds of mortals, to my memory give back something of Your epiphany, and make my tongue so powerful that I may leave to people of the future one gleam of the glory that is Yours”, has been granted.¹⁹⁷ In fact, Dante could preserve the remembrance of his epiphany and, since his desire and will are now synchronous with the movement of the sun and the stars moved by Love (so that the theurgic soul is perfectly established in the activities and the intellections of the demiurgic powers), he is now able to reproduce the divine in symbolic mystical verses as an imitation of God’s *Opera Divina* (divine work), which can lead from a state of misery to the highest form of catharsis as a state of bliss by means of a verbal theurgic act: his *Commedia*.

To recapitulate: in this chapter the dissertation has explained that the absence of the term theurgy in Dante’s work is not surprising and does not have any influence on the main hypothesis of the dissertation. Furthermore, the meaning of the term theurgy as divine work has been directly related to Dante’s term *poema sacro*. In addition, the dissertation has indicated the interpretation of Dante’s *Vita nuova* as an autobiographical report of Dante’s initiation, and that at this early stage Dante may have just begun to learn how to describe his life

¹⁹⁶ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*. 292.4-14.

¹⁹⁷ Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Paradiso XXXIII.67-72*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at <http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR> accessed 19.08.2013

symbolically. Furthermore, the decision not to write any more verse about Beatrice until he was able through study to write verses of her that had never been written for any women before, shows that Dante was aware he was at the beginning of his initiatic journey. Also the dissertation has explained that Dante's poetic skills as theurgic skills consisted in: Dante's initial ability to depict and to interpret symbolically his life as the way to leave his biographical hell; the intermediate ability to see and understand the symbolism of his life as an interaction with symbolic agencies leading to catharsis and as the content of Dante's biographical purgatory; and the final ability to reach an anagogical conjunction with god as the content of Dante's biographical paradise. Furthermore, in this chapter the dissertation has indicated that Dante's anagoge will allow Dante to reproduce the higher form of reality in symbolic mystic verses in the *Commedia* as imitation of the divine and as a way to reach the highest form of catharsis.

8. Dante's reception as theurgic art

In this last step, the dissertation will look for some of those *viventes in hac vita*, focusing on metaphysicians and poets involved directly in the reception and interpretation of Dante's work at the end of the 19th century. They will not need to demonstrate that they have been removed from a state of misery and brought to a state of happiness by Dante's *Commedia*; it will be enough to demonstrate that they shared the idea that the *Commedia* can be interpreted as a theurgic act. The esoteric interpretation of Valli (1878-1931), as the dissertation has already discussed, has its great value in the detailed investigation about the *fedeli d'amore* and in the analysis of the coded, secret language of their poetry.

However, Valli's interpretation of the poetry of the *fedeli d'amore* relates mainly to

their political role in the conflict between the Roman Papacy and the Emperor, and shows only superficial insights about the esoteric content related to initiatic traditions.¹⁹⁸ Valli, responding to a critical article by the French metaphysician René Guénon (1886-1951) in 1929, on his interpretation of Dante's work, confirms that he never had any experience with initiatic traditions.¹⁹⁹ This represented Guénon's main argument against Valli: only an initiate could truly understand Dante's work.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, Guénon explains Dante's anagogical sense as "for us, it can only be an initiatic sense, metaphysical in its essence, which indicates through the many references, without being strictly metaphysical, an implicit esoteric character."²⁰¹ In 1925 Guénon, in his book *L'Esotérisme de Dante*, interpreted Dante's work from the prospective of the Knights Templar, Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, emphasizing that true esotericism is something different from "la religion extérieure".²⁰² Furthermore, Guénon defines pure metaphysics as "not pagan or Christian, it is universal."²⁰³ According to Guénon, pure metaphysics is also present in Dante's work and is not an effect of a superficial syncretism.²⁰⁴ However, even though Guénon implicitly agrees with Dante's experience of initiation, he doesn't relate Dante's work explicitly to theurgy.

To find an explicit reference relating Dante's work to theurgy, this paper will have to look at an intellectual and artistic movement which developed between

¹⁹⁸ Luigi Valli, *Il Segrato della Croce e dell' Aquila nella Divina Commedia*, (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1922).

¹⁹⁹ Valli, *Il linguaggio*. p. 665.

²⁰⁰ Valli, *Il linguaggio*. p. 665.

²⁰¹ Guénon, *l'esotérisme*. p. 6. my translation. "Pour nous, ce ne peut être qu'un sens proprement initiatique, métaphysique en son essence, et auquel se rattachant de multiples données qui, sans être toutes d'ordre purement métaphysique, présentant un caractère également ésotérique."

²⁰² Guénon, *l'esotérisme*. p. 7. my translation "La métaphysique pure n'est ni païenne, ni chrétienne, elle est universelle"

²⁰³ Guénon, *l'esotérisme*. p. 7.

²⁰⁴ Guénon, *l'esotérisme*. p. 7.

the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century known as Russian Symbolism, in particular its “second wave”.²⁰⁵ Only a few elements of Russian Symbolism concerned with the topic of the dissertation will be outlined. The first element is, as Pyman reports, Russian Symbolism’s central myth “of the spiritual journey, the pilgrimage... and most especially Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, the story of the soul’s journey through hell toward reunion with Beatrice who serves as a figure for Sophia.”²⁰⁶ The second element is the very definite artistic function of the Symbolist’s myth of theurgy.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, the usage of the term theurgy in Russian Symbolism, according to Morrison, refers “to the god-like capabilities of the Symbolists, their ability to transform artistic creation into religious creation.”²⁰⁸ Even more, for the Symbolists Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) and Andrej Bely (1880-1934), also according to Morrison, “the goal of all artistic activity was theurgy.”²⁰⁹ One of the most intriguing Symbolists’ documents is Bely’s essay *On Theurgy*, which emphasizes his belief in the theurgic nature of musical and poetic symbols and their capacity to modify the perception of reality.²¹⁰ For Russian Symbolist Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949), art was a temple or sacred grove of the spirit, and poetry should be hierophantic, incantatory, and solemn.²¹¹ Pamela Davidson, commenting on Ivanov’s poem *Infancy*, states: “It informs the purpose of man’s life, the meaning of earthly love, the course of history, viewed as teleological process, and the mission of art,

²⁰⁵ Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). p. 183.

²⁰⁶ Pyman, *A History*. p. 285.

²⁰⁷ Pyman, *A History*. p. 185.

²⁰⁸ Simon Alexander Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). p. 8.

²⁰⁹ Morrison, *Russian Opera*, p. 116.

²¹⁰ Morrison, *Russian Opera*, p. 7.

²¹¹ Pyman, *A History*. p. 185, 187.

defined in theurgic terms.”²¹² In addition, according to Davidson, Ivanov regarded Dante as the main exponent of his spiritual ideals.²¹³ As a last example of the reception of Dante’s work by the Russian Symbolists as theurgic art is Solovyov’s idea of Sophia as “God’s body, the matter of Deity permeated by the principle of divine unity”.²¹⁴ Furthermore, for Solovyov, the poet’s theurgic mission was to incarnate Sophia into material reality according to an eschatological vision of the divine presence in humanity and in the created world.²¹⁵ For Helleman, recognizing Solovyov’s success in his efforts as a theurgic poet, he “was able to make Sophia come alive”.²¹⁶ In addition, according to Davidson, Solovyov found a reflection of his ideas about Sophia in the cult of the Virgin Mary and in particular its connection with Dante’s love of Beatrice.²¹⁷ Finally, Solovyov’s receptions of Dante’s Beatrice led the Russian Symbolists to consider Dante as a poet of Sophia.²¹⁸

9. Conclusion

This dissertation has proposed an esoteric interpretation of Dante’s cosmological journey, discussing the hypothesis that the *Commedia* was designed as a theurgic act. In its first part, the paper has offered a general overview of Dante’s time emphasizing the cultural, political and religious atmosphere in Florence and in Europe. Furthermore, Dante’s practical language reflecting his engagement with the conflicts of his time has been preliminarily interpreted as capable of depicting symbols as leading agents towards the aim of a spiritual advancement.

²¹² Davidson, *The Poetic imagination*. p. 6.

²¹³ Davidson, *The Poetic imagination*. p. 34.

²¹⁴ Davidson, *The Poetic imagination*. p. 54.

²¹⁵ Wendy Helleman, E. Slesinski Robert, *Solovyov's Sophia as a nineteenth-century Russian appropriation of Dante's Beatrice* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010). p. 317.

²¹⁶ Helleman *Solovyov's Sophia*. P. 318.

²¹⁷ Davidson, *The Poetic imagination*. p. 63.

²¹⁸ Davidson, *The Poetic imagination*. p. 72.

After that, the dissertation has provided an outline of theurgy, emphasizing the theurgic tradition and its Christian's adaptation related to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. In this part, the dissertation has presented a first preliminary connection between sacred poetry and theurgy emphasizing Iamblichus' statement about the cathartic quality of comedy and tragedy, *the Chaldean oracles* as a collection of verse written in Homeric [hexameter] verse, and the substantial part that chants play within the theurgic rites. Furthermore, the dissertation has demonstrated that a cultural route of transmission of theurgy can be traced, from Iamblichus through Proclus to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Next, the dissertation has provided the arguments for the main hypothesis in five steps. The first step has discussed the evidence for Dante's esoteric affiliation, in which the evaluation of the scholarly literature on the *fedeli d'amore* has demonstrated that Dante's affiliation with this group can be considered plausible, and that the main elements of their doctrine are at least compatible with the ritualized verbal theurgy of Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius. Furthermore, this paper, emphasizing the influences of Guido Cavalcanti and of Brunetto Latini on Dante's work, has suggested that a cultural route of transmission between Dante and the East existed, and through which, at least orally, a specific theurgic knowledge may have reached Dante. In addition, the dissertation has also suggested that the cultural influence concerned with soteriological literature coming from France, in which sins, virtues, personified Love and a personified female Natura played a major role, may also have influenced Dante's work. In the second step, the enquiry into Dante's understanding of sacred art has shown that the double purpose of sacred Scripture as given by Gregory, was still influential and could also be applied to poetry. Furthermore, Dante's

understanding of sacred art, the dissertation has argued, is clearly expressed in his extension of Thomas' definitions of the four senses of meaning. The dissertation has emphasized in particular Dante's anagogical sense, in which he developed an explicit soteriological view and inserted the concept of freedom. The dissertation has posited that the difference that Dante made between a theologian and a poet is concerned with freedom, and is fundamental for an understanding of his poetry: the poet is free to seek freedom; the theologian is bound to seek laws. Furthermore, a poet can create new sacred texts; a theologian can only interpret the old ones. In addition, the dissertation has demonstrated that Dante considered his *Commedia* as sacred as the Sacred Scriptures, that it is concerned with catharsis, and that its practical purpose is explicitly soteriological for others. In the third step, the dissertation, reviewing the scholarly literature on the connection between Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Dante has demonstrated a clear influence on Dante's work, in particular the conception of light, apophaticism or negative theology, the mystic ascent to unification with God, the angelic hierarchies, the relevance of divine names and soteriology for others. Furthermore, the dissertation has demonstrated that Pseudo-Dionysius' influence on Dante's *Commedia* can be directly related to theurgy, at least through its aim of participating in the divine through imitation, intended as the highest point of the anagogical process. In the fourth step the dissertation has offered an interpretation of the *Commedia* as a theurgic act, suggesting that the meaning of the term theurgy as divine work can be related to Dante's term *poema sacro*. Furthermore, considering Dante's *Vita Nuova* as an autobiographical, initiatic report, the dissertation has interpreted the *Commedia* also as an autobiographical, initiatic report emphasizing Dante's poetic skills as

theurgic skills. These skills are: Dante's initial ability to symbolically depict and interpret his life as the way to leave his biographical hell; the intermediate ability to see and understand the symbolism of his life as an interaction with symbolic agencies leading to catharsis and as the content of Dante's biographical purgatory; and the final ability to reach an anagogical conjunction with god as the content of Dante's biographical paradise. Furthermore, the dissertation has indicated that Dante's biographical anagoge allowed Dante to reproduce the higher form of reality in symbolic mystic verses in the *Commedia* as imitation of the divine and as a way to reach the highest form of catharsis. Thus, Dante designed the *Commedia* to fulfil, through the anagogical sense (*si ad anagogicum, significatur exitus anime sancte ab huius corruptionis servitute ad eterne glorie libertate*), its aim of removing the living from a state of misery and bringing them to a state of bliss (*finis totius et partis est removeere viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitates*). In the fifth step, the question of whether Dante's cosmological journey may represent a kind of cosmological vehicle for the reader has been positively answered through the reception of Dante's work by the Russian Symbolist movement, in which Dante's work is clearly associated with their interpretation of art as a theurgic act. Finally, the plausibility of the dissertation's main hypothesis has been confirmed through consistent arguments and evidence, and thus can be seen as a contribution toward the academic discussion on the esoteric interpretation of Dante's *Commedia*.

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