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

\(^{3}\) E. Aroux, *Dante, Hérétique, Révolutionnaire et Socialiste; Révélations d’un Catholique sur le Moyen Âge*, (Paris: J. Renouard, 1854).
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

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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). The second step will examine Dante’s understanding of his *Commedia* as a “Poema Sacro.” 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.” 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

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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.”

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.” 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

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Pamela Davidson, The Poetic Imagination of Vyacheslav Ivanov. A Russian Symbolist’s
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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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

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12 Anderson, Dante. pp. 54-55.  
14 Anderson, Dante. p. 80.  
15 Anderson, Dante. p. 31.  
16 Anderson, Dante. p. 32.  
17 Anderson, Dante. p. 81.
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

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18 Anderson, Dante, p. 58.
20 Massimo Cacciari, Massimo Cacciari racconta Dante e la Divina Commedia at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Llvv6g2M4l8 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

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21 θεουργία = divine work LSJ The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon at http://www.tlg.ucl.ac.uk/slj/#eid=49658&context=search accessed 24.09.2013
invocation of the natural power of the cosmos and provided “a philosophic rationale for the performance of these rites.” 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.

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.”

Iamblichus distinguished different types of soul, and different kinds of rites correspond to each type of soul. However, the ritual of theurgy operated basically with synthémata and symbola, signatures and symbols. 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

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24 Shaw, Theurgy. pp. 4-5.
25 Shaw, Theurgy. p. 5.
27 Iamblichus, On the Mysteries. 149.-17
established and thereby recognition and trust were confirmed. 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*. The aim of the theurgist was then to activate ritually the *sympatheia* present in the symbols with the help of the so-called *telestiké*. 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. 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-moving god, and with the all-sustaining intellectual and adorning power of the cosmos, and with that which leads up to the intelligible

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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.”

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. 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”. 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.”

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

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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

38 Majercik, Chaldean Oracles. pp. 1, 2.
Majercik, Chaldean Oracles. p. 3.
40 Majercik, Chaldean Oracles. p. 3.
particular on the transcendence of the Highest God”.\footnote{Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. p. 5.} In the \textit{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.\footnote{Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 7.} 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 is virginity”.\footnote{Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Frr. 50, 51.} 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.”\footnote{Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 56.} Furthermore, in the \textit{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.”\footnote{Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 1,2.} According to the \textit{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.\footnote{Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 37, 40, 78.} Heaven has been constructed as a round figure, with the seven planets, placing the earth in the middle surrounded by a settlement of
stars, which have no error, and produce celestial melodies.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{sympatheia}.\textsuperscript{50} The souls descending from the Father can avoid the influence of destiny by conceiving the works of the Father (theurgy).\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{52} Nature, suspended from the great Hecate, rules both world and works, and also persuades us that demons are pure.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{54} The soul should accomplish works of piety, and should not look down but rise up again, seeking paradise, joining action to sacred speech.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{47} Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 57-71.
\textsuperscript{48} Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 67, 108.
\textsuperscript{49} Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 96.
\textsuperscript{50} Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 39, 42, 43.
\textsuperscript{51} Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 153.
\textsuperscript{52} Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 105, 134.
\textsuperscript{53} Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 70, 88.
\textsuperscript{54} Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 135.
\textsuperscript{55} Majercik, \textit{Chaldean Oracles}. Fr. 128, 163,164, 165.
\textsuperscript{56} Majercik, \textit{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.\(^5^7\) 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.”\(^5^8\) 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.”\(^5^9\) Last but not least, the soteriological role of catharsis, intended as purification of the soul from corrupted


\(^{58}\) Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*. Fr.163.


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-Dionysus 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.” 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 Asclepiogeneia, the daughter of Plutarch.” Proclus’ theurgy did not differ significantly from that of Iamblichus, as he used, like Iamblichus, material objects as symbols to establish,

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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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{64} Thus, the simple reading of theurgic verses was already considered a part of a theurgic invocation.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Parmenides}, and which basically consisted of naming what the One is not.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{63} Burns, \textit{Proclus}.p. 117.
\textsuperscript{64} Burns, \textit{Proclus}. pp.117, 118.
\textsuperscript{65} Burns, \textit{Proclus}.p. 119.
\textsuperscript{66} Burns, \textit{Proclus}.p. 120.
\textsuperscript{67} Burns, \textit{Proclus}.p. 120.
\textsuperscript{68} Burns, \textit{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. 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.” Nevertheless, even if there is no direct documented evidence that Dionysius read De Mysteriis, Burns demonstrates a clear influence of Proclus on Dionysius’s theory of theurgy. 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.”

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,

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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. 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.” Finally, Burns concludes that “…Pseudo-Dionysius found the Iamblicho-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.”

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.

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.

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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 Love

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. 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. 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. As William Anderson suggests, it is relevant at this point to introduce an episode in Dante’s life which can be

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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:
(Vasto: Società editrice Anelli & Manzitti, 1890)
80 Valli, Il linguaggio segreto. p. 12, for Perez see:
considered as the starting point of the esoteric interpretation of Dante: the second meeting with Beatrice.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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 (\textit{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.”\textsuperscript{84}

(10)\textit{A ciascun'alma presa e gentil corenel cui cospetto ven lo dir} \hspace{1cm} (10) To every captive soul and loving heart to whom these words I have

\textsuperscript{81} Anderson, \textit{Dante}. p. 76.
presente, in ciò che mi rescrivan suo composed are sent for your
parvente, salute in lor segnor, cioè elucidation in reply, greetings I bring
Amore.
for your sweet lord’s sake, Love.

(11) Già eran quasi che atterzate (11) The first three hours, the hours
l’ore of the time of shining stars, were
del tempo che onne s tella n’è coming to an end, when suddenly
lucente, quando m’apparve Amor Love appeared before me (to
subitamente, cui essenza membrar remember how he really was appalls
mi dà orrore.
me).

(12) Allegro mi sembrava Amor (12) Joyous, Love seemed to me,
tenendo meo core in mano, e ne le holding my heart within his hand,
braccia avea madonna involta in un and in his arms he had my lady,
drappo dormendo. Poi la svegliava, e loosely wrapped in folds, asleep. He
d’esto core ardendo lei paventosa woke her then, and gently fed to her
umilmente pascea: appresso gir lo the burning heart; she ate it, terrified.
ne vedea piangendo. 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, Cantarini, *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. Furthermore, the style developed by these poets became famous under the name of Dolce Stil Novo, a name given by Dante in the Commedia:

Ma dì s’i’ 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. His poem Donna me prega ("A lady bids me...") was considered later by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) as "a supreme Neoplatonic statement of love." Furthermore Ficino, in his El Libro d’amore (The Book of Love), in a passage titled “Ove si conchiude tutte le cose decite con la opinione di Guido Cavalcanti philosopho” (Where we conclude all things that have been said with the opinion of the

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87 Canfarini, L’esoterismo di Dante at min 08:20
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 artificiosamente chiuse ne’ sua versi.”

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

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\(^92\) Anderson, *Dante*. p. 84.

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

Tre donne intorno al cor mi son venute, e seggonsi di fore; ché dentro siede Amore, lo quale è in segnoria de la mia vita. Tanto son belle e di tanta vertute, che 'l possente segnore, 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.

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.”

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

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95 Anderson, *Dante.* p. 84.
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:

E la regina del cielo, ond’io ardò
And Heaven’s queen, for whom I

 tutto d’amor, ne farà ogne 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.”

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 poïêtikos*) 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

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96 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.\textsuperscript{99}

In addition, Valli’s conclusions from his extensive investigation on the \textit{fedeli d’amore} are listed as: 1) The poetry of the \textit{fedeli d’amore}, in particular that of Dante, is written in a secret coded language; 2) All the women of the \textit{dolce stil novo} represent only one woman which is “Sapienza santa”, holy Wisdom; 3) Dante’s \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{100}

Furthermore, Dante himself reminds the readers of the \textit{Commedia} that:\textsuperscript{101}

\begin{verbatim}
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.
\end{verbatim}

At this stage, for the purposes of the dissertation, it can be said that the scholarly literature on the \textit{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

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{99} Valli, \textit{Il linguaggio segreto}. pp. 93-94.
  \item \textsuperscript{100} Valli, \textit{Il linguaggio segreto}. pp. 24-25.
\end{itemize}
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, non puoi fallire a glorioso porto, se ben m’accorsi ne la vita bella; e s’io non fossi sì per tempo morto, veggendo il cielo a te così benigno,

And he to me: “If you pursue your star, you cannot fail to reach a splendid harbor, if in fair life, I judged you properly; and if I had not died too soon for this, on seeing Heaven was so kind to you,

I should have helped sustain you in your work.

"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

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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 Montepertì (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:

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that Brunetto Latini was in Arras first and then Paris”.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Tesoretto} text also shows the influence of the \textit{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 \textit{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).”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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


\textsuperscript{111}Julia Bolton Holloway, \textit{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


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. 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 Anticludianus 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.

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 feroare 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


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”. 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.”

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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*. 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.”

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...
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


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


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.


“(20) Ad evidentiam itaque dicendorum sciem aut quid istius operis non est simplex sensus, ymo dicitur 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 analogicus.

(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”.

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(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.”

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

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(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: si 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 degli 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 utilitade 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 sponse una scrittura, la quale ancora [che sia vera] eziando nel senso litterale, per le cose significate significa delle superne cose dell'etternal 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 a vegna 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”.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{134} Aquinas’ anagogical sense relating to eternal glory shows no trace of freedom, whereas

\textsuperscript{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
\textsuperscript{133} 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

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, Epistle 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:

(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) 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.

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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’,

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

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.

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

The aim of the whole and of the part

multiplex, scilicet propinquus et remotus; might [be] manifold; as, for instance,
sed, omissa subtili investigatione, immediate and remote. But leaving aside
dicendum est breviter quod finis totius et any minute examination of this question, it
partis est removere viventes in hac vita de may be stated briefly that the aim of the
statu miserie et perducere ad statum whole and of the part is to remove those
felicitatis. living in this life from a state of misery, and
to bring them to a state of happiness.

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.\(^{138}\)

\[\text{Nam si in aliquo loco vel passu pertractatur ad modum speculativi negotii, hoc non est gratia speculativi negotii, sed gratia operis; quia, ut ait Phylosophus in secundo Metaphysicorum, «ad aliquid et nunc speculantur practici aliquando».}\]

(41) For if in certain parts or passages the treatment is after the manner of speculative philosophy, that is not for the sake of speculation, but for a practical purpose; since, as the Philosopher [Aristotle] says in the second book of the *Metaphysics*: ‘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

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

E Dïonisio con tanto disio a contemplar questi ordini si mise, che li nomò e distinse com’io. And Dionysius, with much longing, set himself to contemplate these orders: he 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

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¹⁴⁰ 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.
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.”

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.” Dante was clearly influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius’ concept of light, as the Letter to Can Grande states:

Propter quod patet quod omnis essentia et
virtus procedat a prima, et intelligentie
inferiores recipiant quasi a radiante, et
reddant radios superiors ad suum inferius
ad modum speculorum. Quod satis aperte
tangere videtur Dionysius de Celesti
Hierarchia loquens.

(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 On the Celestial Hierarchy.

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. In addition, Barsella demonstrates that the Dionysian

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146 Majercik, Chaldean oracles. Fr. 8, 39.
147 Barsella, In the light. p.37.
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.”

It is relevant now to show how Dante presents, through Beatrice, the angelic hierarchies in his *Commedia*:  

E poi che le parole sue restaro, And when her words were done, even as non altrimenti ferro disfavilla incandescent iron will shower sparks, so che bolle, come i cerchi sfavillaro. did those circles sparkle; and each spark L’incendio suo seguiva ogne scintilla; circled with its flaming ring sparks that ed eran tante, che 'l numero loro were more in number than the sum one più che 'l doppiar de li scacchi s’inmilla. reaches doubling in succession each 

Io sentiva osannar di coro in coro I heard "Hosanna" sung, from choir to al punto fisso che li tiene a li ubi, choir to that fixed Point which holds and e terrà sempre, ne’ quai sempre fuoro. always shall hold them to where they have forever been. And she who saw my mind's perplexities said: “The first circles have E quella che vedëa i pensier dubi displayed to you the Seraphim and ne la mia mente, disse: "I cerchi primi Cherubim. t’ hanno mostrato Serafi e Cherubi. Così veloci seguono i suoi vimi, They follow the ties of love with such per somigliarsi al punto quanto ponno; rapidity because they are as like the Point e posson quanto a veder son soblimi. as creatures can be, a power dependent Quelli altri amori che 'ntorno li vonno, on their vision. Those other loves that si chiaman Troni del divino aspetto, circle round them are called Thrones of per che 'l primo ternaro terminonno; the divine aspect, because they

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e dei saper che tutti hanno diletto
quanto la sua veduta si profonda
nel vero in che si queta ogne 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 melodie, che suonano in tree
ordini di letizia onde s'interna.
In essa gerarcia son l'altre dee:
prima Dominazioni, e poi Virtudi;
l'ordine terzo di Podestadi èe.
Poscia ne' due penultiemi tripudi
Principati e Arcangeli si girano;
l'ultimo è tutto d'Angelici ludi.

Questi ordini di sù tutti s'ammirano,
e di giù vincon si, 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

The role of imitation, as the dissertation has showed, is a fundamental aspect in the theurgy of Dionysius.\textsuperscript{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”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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 (\textit{cataphatic}) theology, and an ascending movement corresponded to negative (\textit{apophatic}) theology.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{155} The connection between Dionysius’ Christian adaptation of theurgy and Dante’s \textit{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

\textsuperscript{152} Burns, \textit{Proclus}. p. 126.
\textsuperscript{153} Barsella, \textit{In the light}. p.57.
\textsuperscript{154} Barsella, \textit{In the light}. p.57.
\textsuperscript{155} Barsella, \textit{In the light}. p. 57.
Him, while the names of the hierarchies help to understand their position and their function. 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.”

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. 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

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156 Sbacchi *La presenza*, p.XX.
See also Shaw, *Theurgy*. p. 179.
our language."\textsuperscript{159} The second point is that Dante used the term \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{161} For Barsella, “even Dante’s poem is enlightened participation and imitation”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Commedia} (among other passages) as:\textsuperscript{163}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{159} Sbacchi \textit{La presenza}. p. XXI-XXII. My translation.\\
\textsuperscript{160} Sbacchi \textit{La presenza}. p. XXII\\
\textsuperscript{161} Barsella, \textit{In the light}. p. 58.\\
\textsuperscript{162} Barsella, \textit{In the light}. p. 58.\\
\end{flushright}
O somma luce che tanto ti levi O Highest Light, You, raised so far above
da' concetti mortali, a la mia mente the minds of mortals, to my memory give
ripresta un poco di quel che parevi, back something of Your epiphany, and
e fa la lingua mia tanto possente, make my tongue so powerful that I may
ch'una favilla sol de la tua gloria leave to people of the future one gleam of
possà lasciare a la futura gente the glory that is Yours

This becomes a component of Dante’s main aim, “quod finis totius et partis est
removere viventes 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
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. 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 ἢ θεουργία συγκεφαλαίωσις”, as “Et est theologiae divina operatio, consummatio.” The practice of translating the word theurgy as divine work can often be found even today (in translating from Greek to Italian, Scanzzoso uses the words opera divina). 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

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Johannes, Scotus Eriugena, Libri Sancti Dionysii Areopagite, quos Ioannes lerugenæa transfudit de Graeco in latinum, jubente ac postulante rege Carolo Ludovici Imperatoris filio at http://www.binetti.ru/collectio/theologia/areopag/ecol.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,

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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


see also Anderson, *Dante*. pp. 127-132.


Cuccia, *Il pensiero*. p. 77


Love, Heaven and a divine female power interacting in his life as divine agencies. 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. 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. 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

179 Majercik, Chaldean oracles. Fr. 39, 42, 43.
range of human powers, something almost in the nature of a divine gift. 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

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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 per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova, pensando, quel principio ond'elli indige, tal era io a quella vista nova: veder voleva come si convenne l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova; ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne: se non che la mia mente fu percossa da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne. As the geometer intently seeks to square the circle, but he cannot reach, through thought on thought, the principle he needs, so I searched that strange sight: I wished to see the way in which our human effigy suited the circle and found place in it and my own wings were far too weak for that. But then my mind was struck by light that flashed and, with this light, received what it had asked.

A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa; ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle, si come rota ch'igualmente è mossa, l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle. Here force failed my high fantasy; but my desire and will were moved already-like a wheel revolving uniformly by the Love that 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*

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).\textsuperscript{182}

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

Dante:

\begin{align*}
\text{Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita} & \quad \text{When I had journeyed half of our life's way, I found myself within a dark forest, for} \\
\text{mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,} & \quad \text{I had lost the path that does not stray. Ah,} \\
\text{ché la diritta via era smarrita.} & \quad \text{it is hard to speak of what it was, that} \\
\text{Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura} & \quad \text{savage forest, dense and difficult, which} \\
\text{esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte} & \quad \text{even in recall renews my fear:} \\
\text{che nel pensier rinova la paura!} & \quad \text{Brunetto Latini:} \\
\end{align*}

Brunetto Latini:

\begin{align*}
\text{e io, in tal corrotto} & \quad \text{And I, in such anguish,} \\
\text{pensando a capo chino,} & \quad \text{Think with dead downcast,} \\
\text{perdei il gran cammino,} & \quad \text{Lost the great highway,} \\
\text{e tenni a la traversa} & \quad \text{And took the crossroad} \\
\text{d'una selva diversa.} & \quad \text{Through a strange wood . . .} \\
\end{align*}

\textsuperscript{182} Dante, Alighieri, \textit{Epistole} XIII.39 Princeton Dante Project, translated by Paget Toynbee at \url{http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/epistole.html} accessed 26.08.2013
\textsuperscript{183} Dante, Alighieri, \textit{Commedia, Inferno I.1-6}, Società Dantesca Italiana, at \url{http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR} accessed 19.08.2013
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.\footnote{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} Dante must take another way around the beasts and strategically cut off their nourishment.\footnote{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} 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:\footnote{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}

(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.

(25) Si vero accipiatur opus allegorice,
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.”

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. This is what

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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.\(^{189}\)

\begin{verbatim}
 e canterò di quel secondo regno
dove l'umano spirito si purga
di salire al ciel diventa degno.
Ma qui la morta poesi resurga,
o sante Muse, poi che vostro sono;
e qui Caliopè alquanto surga,
seguitando il mio canto con quel suono
di cui le Piche misere sentiro
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
 and what I sing will be that second  
down the human soul is  
becoming worthy of  
resurrect from dead; and may Calliope rise  
with that music whose power struck the
\end{verbatim}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
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.  

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*.  

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

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190 Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Purgatorio*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at
191 Dante, Alighieri, *Commedia, Purgatorio I.91 and IX.112*, Società Dantesca Italiana, at
with the gods. 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”. 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.”

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. 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

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192 Iamblichus, On the Mysteries. 38.8-10.
193 Majercik, Chaldean Oracles. Fr. 52
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 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-moving 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."\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{poema sacro}. In addition, the dissertation has indicated the interpretation of Dante’s \textit{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

\textsuperscript{196}Iamblichus, \textit{On the Mysteries}. 292.4-14.
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. 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. This represented Guénon’s main argument against Valli: only an initiate could truly understand Dante’s work. 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.” 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”. Furthermore, Guénon defines pure metaphysics as “not pagan or Christian, it is universal.” According to Guénon, pure metaphysics is also present in Dante’s work and is not an effect of a superficial syncretism. 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

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the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century known as Russian Symbolism, in particular its “second wave”.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Inferno} and \textit{Purgatorio}, the story of the soul’s journey through hell toward reunion with Beatrice who serves as a figure for Sophia.”\textsuperscript{206} The second element is the very definite artistic function of the Symbolist’s myth of theurgy.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{209} One of the most intriguing Symbolists’ documents is Bely’s essay \textit{On Theurgy}, which emphasizes his belief in the theurgic nature of musical and poetic symbols and their capacity to modify the perception of reality.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{211} Pamela Davidson, commenting on Ivanov’s poem \textit{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,

\textsuperscript{206} Pyman, \textit{A History}. p. 285.
\textsuperscript{207} Pyman, \textit{A History}. p. 185.
\textsuperscript{209} Morrison, \textit{Russian Opera}, p. 116.
\textsuperscript{210} Morrison, \textit{Russian Opera}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{211} Pyman, \textit{A History}. p. 185, 187.
defined in theurgic terms." In addition, according to Davidson, Ivanov regarded Dante as the main exponent of his spiritual ideals. 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”. 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. For Helleman, recognizing Solovyov’s success in his efforts as a theurgic poet, he “was able to make Sophia come alive”. 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. Finally, Solovyov’s receptions of Dante’s Beatrice led the Russian Symbolists to consider Dante as a poet of Sophia.

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.

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213 Davidson, The Poetic immagination. p. 34.
214 Davidson, The Poetic immagination. p. 54.
216 Helleman Solovyov’s Sophia. P. 318.
218 Davidson, The Poetic immagination. 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 removere 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.
10. Bibliography

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