Introduction
Dante, Poetry, Theology

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Dante’s “Commedia”: Theology as Poetry has its origins in an international conference of the same title, held in Robinson College, Cambridge, on December 12–14, 2003. The aim of the conference was to bring together theologians and Dante scholars to address two related questions suggested by our title. First, what are the theological implications of Dante’s poetic narrative? Second, what light do theological considerations throw on Dante’s poem as a literary text? We invited contributors to the conference to offer readings of the Commedia that either examine Dante’s poem as a theological enterprise or explore the intersection in Dante’s poem between theological and literary concerns.

When we set about organizing the conference, we were driven by a sense that theologians and dantisti had much to offer each other, and that opportunities for dialogue were much needed. We felt, on the one hand, that theological modes of inquiry could cast new light on Dante’s text; and, on the other, that a close and detailed engagement with Dante’s poetic voice might significantly enrich theological reflection. This sense of the potential value of dialogue between Dante studies and theology was confirmed by the conference, not only in the papers delivered but also in the formal and informal conversations that took place over the course of the conference; and, indeed, by the ways in which the papers originally presented and discussed have developed into the essays gathered in this volume.
The title of this volume makes the claim that theology is fully integrated with poetry in the *Commedia*. However, the notion of Dante’s “theology as poetry,” which the essays collected here variously explore, requires introduction. Most immediately, it is important to remind ourselves that for many of Dante’s readers—from the Middle Ages to the present—the idea of an intersection between theology and poetry in the *Commedia* has not been uncontroversial.\(^1\) In the context of modern Dante scholarship, for example, the frequently cited distinction by Benedetto Croce between *poesia* and *non-poesia* in the *Commedia*—as though the “nonpoetic” elements, including the theological, were an add-on, and an undesirable one at that, to the true lyrical and dramatic work of poetry—suggests a differentiation between form and content, between poetry and theology.\(^2\) More recent scholarship, however, has worked to remove such dichotomies. Critics as different as Erich Auerbach and Charles Singleton, in the mid-twentieth century, have provided an important foundation in moving beyond the tendency to denigrate the theological in Dante’s *Commedia*.\(^3\) Further vital possibilities have been opened up by the seminal works of other twentieth-century critics working in different traditions, such as Bruno Nardi, Étienne Gilson, and Kenelm Foster.\(^4\) Successive works of scholarship have shown, first, that Dante’s theology is intellectually dynamic and in many ways highly original; and, second, that the theological and the poetic are inextricably intertwined in his work.

The study of theological aspects of the *Commedia* continues to develop in richly varied ways. One of the clearest indications of this is in the wide range of theological sources and affinities which are being identified in Dante’s text (although Dante’s direct knowledge of individual texts is often difficult to prove). For example, Thomas Aquinas—once seen as the primary theological influence over the poet—now tends to be viewed as a vital but not necessarily dominant part of Dante’s intellectual formation.\(^5\) This is partly due to an increasing recognition of the poet’s engagement with broader Aristotelian strands in medieval thought.\(^6\) At the same time, scholarship continues to demonstrate the centrality of Christian Neoplatonism, and the importance of Franciscan as well as Dominican currents for Dante’s thought.\(^7\) In searching for sources and affinities, moreover, scholars have turned their attention not only to the content but also to the narrative and poetic form of Dante’s theological
discourse. It has been suggested, for example, that the *Commedia* can be read in relation to Augustinian frameworks of conversion and confession, or to the rhetorical and intellectual structures of medieval contemplative traditions. Most importantly, however, these various strands of scholarship suggest that Dante’s poem does not simply accumulate elements of different theological traditions, but offers an original conception of the possible active and constructive relationships between them. As perhaps best emblematized by the cantos of the Heaven of the Sun, Dante does not treat theological traditions and positions as static or isolated: he makes them dance.

Recent scholarship also continues to enrich our understanding of Dante’s use of his most important theological source: the Bible. Indeed, the status intended by Dante for the *Commedia* relative to scripture has represented one of the thorniest questions for readers of his poem. A distinction apparently made in the *Convivio* (the text that survives to us is, however, fragmentary) between the “allegory of the poets” and the “allegory of the theologians” suggests that, whereas scripture both contains allegorical meaning and is literally true, poetry can only signify allegorical meanings through fiction. The problem for readers of Dante is that the *Commedia* is packed with claims for its own literal veracity. It appears to demand, in short, to be read through the same interpretive modes usually reserved for scripture: as both historically true and as containing allegorical, typological truths—a claim also explicitly made for the poem in a letter famously purporting to be written by Dante. At the same time, however, the poem contains elements which seem to be self-consciously fictional. This apparent tension, long debated in Dante scholarship, continues to attract critical attention. The question of the importance of the Bible for Dante has also been revitalized by studies paying attention to the complex ways in which scripture was read in the Middle Ages and the impact these might have had on Dante’s work.

Other fruitful possibilities reside in the recognition that Dante’s theology can be understood not only in relation to theological and scriptural texts, but also in relation to the Word of God as it was seen to inform embodied experience and religious practice. An example of this is the increasing attention to Dante’s representation in the *Commedia* of liturgy, whereby biblical passages and other religious texts are enacted and encountered through meaningful performance. Another example is the
attention currently being paid to the theological aspects of Dante’s presentation of human embodiment. Scholars have shown that in the Commedia, theological reflection on questions such as the Incarnation, Transfiguration, and Resurrection is not carried out in purely speculative terms but is intimately linked in multiple ways with lived experience.15 A further important development is the exploration of the varied theological implications of the interpretive, ethical, and affective dynamic of the reader’s relationship to the poem.16

The relationship between Dante’s Commedia and its readers is also the focus of a prominent strand of scholarship that seeks to expose the textual strategies by which Dante constructs authority for his own work.17 Such discussions are rarely cast in ways that explicitly point to the theological implications of these strategies. This mode of criticism, however, need not be seen as contradicting the study of the theology of Dante’s text: a heightened awareness of the author’s poetic and narrative techniques can only enrich our understanding of the intersection between his poetics and theology. As some recent assessments of Dante’s work suggest, a full understanding of the theology of the Commedia ought to embrace, rather than deny, the means by which the text is carefully constructed as narrative and poetry.18 Indeed, the recognition of the integration of poetic practice and theological thought in the Commedia is central to the notion, suggested by the title of this volume, of Dante’s “theology as poetry.” Dante’s theology is not what underlies his narrative poem, nor what is contained within it: it is instead fully integrated with its poetic and narrative texture.

Such an understanding of the notion of “theology as poetry” clearly has implications for debates beyond the concerns of Dante scholarship, for example in literary criticism and theory and in intellectual and cultural history. Indeed, the question of the relationship between poetic and theological concerns provides a valuable context for thinking about any dialogue between Dante studies and theology. This is not to suggest that this question need be the only aspect of such a dialogue. While detailed engagement with the Commedia does not often find a place in theological studies, much in contemporary theology could both illuminate and be illuminated by reflection on Dante’s poem. Alongside discussions on the relationship between religion and literature,19 one could think, for instance, of debates in contemporary theology on the relationship between
God and world, between faith and reason, and between theology and ethical theory; or of debates on the nature of theology itself, on “mystical” theology, on liturgy, and on theological anthropology. All of these debates have profound resonances with concerns in Dante’s works.

Integrally related to all these fields of theological inquiry, and in many senses linking them together, is the specific question of the nature of theological language. What is it that human beings do when they speak about God? How does the way in which they conceive of such speech reflect and affect their understanding of the relationship between God and human beings? And how does all this, in turn, bear upon their understanding of the manner in which human beings use language more generally, in relating both to each other and to the world of which they are part? Concerns such as these are at the heart of reflection on what it might mean to read, and indeed do, theology as poetry. As such, they provide a valuable perspective from which to approach analysis of the theological nature of Dante’s poem.

Furthermore, in recent years there has been a growing interest in the nature of theological language as understood specifically in and through medieval texts and thought. Central to that interest are the ideas that medieval reflection on theological language reveals a particular understanding of the relationship between God, the world, and human beings; and that, in the light of this understanding, we may recognize the full value of the wide range of forms that theological language can take. This conception of the relationship between God, the world, and human beings is importantly characterized—not only in Christian but also in Jewish and Islamic traditions—by the fundamental notion that all that is, depends on God: the world is freely and lovingly created ex nihilo by a God who is not part of existence but who is the mystery in which all that exists originates, participates, and finds its goodness and meaning.

From this perspective, full comprehension of God lies beyond the grasp of human intellect and language, since the origin of all that is lies “beyond” being itself. To think otherwise would be to misunderstand the relationship between creature and Creator, between existence and the ground of existence. At the same time, human beings are seen as being made in the image and likeness of God, as free, intellectual creatures, whose very being is grounded by a direct and personal relationship with God and has its final end in perfect union with divine being itself. In
the light of this intimate relationship between divine and human existence, human beings are seen as being able to speak theologically in a meaningful and truthful way.

The question of the ways in which human beings can speak meaningfully and truthfully about God was, of course, extensively and variously debated in the Middle Ages. That said, there is a recognizable overall shape to medieval reasoning on the dynamics of theological language. For thinkers as different in theological temperament as Augustine, the Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory the Great, Bernard, Bonaventure, and Aquinas, it was fundamental that no matter what else one said about particular aspects of divine being, if one was not referring to the mystery at the ground of all existence, which brings everything into being out of nothing and sustains it; and if one was not referring to the truth and love in the image of which we are made, and in which lies the beginning and end of our being; then, one was simply not referring to God.

This understanding, which Dante shared, led medieval theologians frequently to reflect on the nature of theological language and on the measure and manner in which one might meaningfully speak of God. Such reflection appears in a variety of contexts, including sermons, commentaries on scripture, guides to contemplation, and theoretical treatises. And it took many forms: from consideration of the relationship between scriptural and all other religious language, to specific analysis of the names used by human beings to refer to God; from systematic discussions of the relationship between metaphysics and theology, to meditations on awareness of the pride that almost inevitably accompanies any attempt to speak about God. Common to all such reflection, however, and to medieval theology generally, is a strong sense that one’s idea of God and of the relationship between God, the world, and human beings might be expressed not only in what one says but also in the way one says it. Given the all-encompassing, uncircumscribable nature of God, meaningful speech about God must always do more than attempt simply to contain factual or propositional truths: it must also convey, through the manner in which it is articulated, something of the truth and wonder of one’s relationship with the mystery in which all truths reside.

Theologians continue to find this particular aspect of medieval thought fruitful for contemporary debates. One of the reasons is that it suggests ways of illuminating the relationship between theology and poetry. For example, one of the ways in which reflection on the nature of
theological language developed in the Middle Ages was in the elaboration of particular notions of metaphor and analogy; and these notions are seen by some contemporary theologians as offering philosophical and theological insights into the nature of poetry. David Burrell, for instance, taking Aquinas as a starting point, suggests that the idea that all beings exist by virtue of participating in divine being might lead, through notions of analogy and metaphor, to reflection on poetry’s theological value. As he puts it, if we think of God “as that One whose essence is identified with its very ‘to-be’ [esse],”

creation becomes that act whereby the One whose essence is to-be makes everything else to-be by participating in being. *Participation* remains a metaphor, so this cannot serve as an explanation in any ordinary sense. . . . For this One is indeed “beyond being” as we know beings. So our relation to this One who speaks the universe—“God says ‘be’ and it is”—cannot be on a par with our relation to any other thing. . . . Since God cannot be “other” in the sense in which other things are other, and God remains the very source of anything’s being, anything’s to-be is at once a participation in the very being of God and “more intimate to things than anything else” [*Summa Theologiae* I.8.i] . . . the unique character of the relation called “creation” . . . demands that we learn how to think the creator *not* as an item in the universe, but as its One free creator! That mode of thinking . . . will also demand that we appreciate how to employ language analogously. For this reason, a foray into metaphysics will require poetic sensibility as well, since all analogous speech—whether used of divinity or used to evaluate human situations, as in ethical discourse—will invariably display a touch of metaphor. So we are brought . . . to the threshold of poetry and art as we attempt to attune our minds and hearts to the wonder of creation.23

Not all medieval authors, of course, would have unambiguously accepted the value of poetry as a legitimate mode of theological expression. It is probably fair to say that, with the exception made for the poetry of scripture, most medieval theologians would have been skeptical about the idea that poetry might be as theologically valuable as other forms of discourse. This mistrust of poetry is frequently explicitly voiced in terms of the same kind of distinction that Dante appears to have made in the *Convivio* between scriptural and nonscriptural allegory. As our earlier comments on medieval views on theological language suggest, however,
this mistrust was not necessarily accompanied by skepticism about the value of reflecting on, and foregrounding as theologically significant, linguistic and rhetorical form. And this, from our contemporary perspective, might be taken as an invitation to bring literary and poetic questions to the heart of theological reflection. In this context, the *Commedia* has particular significance. For, as the essays in this volume illustrate, it is firmly rooted in the medieval tradition of reflection on the nature of theological language, and at the same time presents us with an unprecedented piece of sustained poetic experimentation, which appears to attempt to move beyond traditional theological assessments of the status and value of poetry. Understood in this way, Dante’s might be seen as one of the most original theological voices of the Middle Ages.

The essays in this volume provide a wide spectrum of possibilities for reflecting on the significance of that voice. In the first essay, Robin Kirk-patrick proposes that the theological value of Dante’s *Commedia* lies in the narrative and poetic forms it offers for the activity of theology, more than in any specific theological doctrine it might present. He suggests, moreover, that theological questions and modes of inquiry ought to play a vital role in literary critical approaches to the *Commedia*. The essay argues that the richness of Dante’s understanding of poetry, theology, and human personhood is most fully revealed by close readings of the *Commedia* that recognize the interdependency of literary and theological concerns. The question of the theological value of the narrative dynamics of the *Commedia* is also at the heart of the second essay, in which Peter S. Hawkins reflects on the relationship between theology and poetry through a detailed analysis of Dante’s presentation of the smile. The essay relates the narrative dynamics of Dante’s use of the smile both to Dante’s construction of his own theological authority in the *Commedia* and to the presence and development of representation of the smile in the artistic context of Dante’s day. Hawkins proposes that the smile might be seen as Dante’s distinctive way of revealing theological resources unique to poetry, and as Dante’s most original contribution to the Christian theological tradition. Also addressing the question of how the narrative poetry of the *Commedia* might be read as theology, Vittorio Montemaggi argues that the poetics of the text is grounded in a theological understanding of the nature of language. The essay proposes that, on the basis
of Dante’s theology of language as presented in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, the *Commedia* is shaped by an interplay of affirmative and apophatic modes of discourse, and that through such an interplay, language ultimately reveals itself to coincide with love. As a way of testing and refining these ideas, the essay offers a close reading of the theological significance of the figures of Ulysses and Ugolino.

With Piero Boitani’s essay, the volume’s exploration of the theological dimensions of Dante’s poetry turns to the specific question of the doctrine of creation. The essay first focuses on the theological significance of the metaphoric texture of the *Purgatorio’s* two discussions of the creation of the human soul, and then analyzes Dante’s metaphysical and theological account in the *Paradiso* of the creation of the universe. By showing how, in both cases, Dante’s conception of creation is linked to his poetic practice, Boitani presents a new evaluation of the *Commedia* as a uniquely rich and resonant moment in Western culture. Dante’s conception of creation is related in the following essay, by Matthew Treherne, to the liturgical performance presented in the *Commedia*. Drawing inspiration from contemporary theorists of liturgy, Treherne argues that in the *Commedia*, Dante presents liturgy in ways that relate it to personhood. By examining the changes from a penitential to a doxological mode, Treherne suggests that liturgical performance is, for Dante, bound up with a recovery of a proper understanding of the relationship between God and the world—a relationship which Dante presents, through a striking pattern of allusions and references, as sacramental. Consideration of the relationship between God and the world is also central to the next contribution, in which Oliver Davies argues that Dante’s presentation of materiality and human embodiment should be understood in the light of the doctrine of the Ascension; and that this recognition, in turn, ought to be at the heart of any attempt to read the *Commedia* as both theology and literature. Davies proposes that such reflection can lead us to a richer appreciation both of the way in which language, body, and world are for Dante inextricably linked, and to an enhanced sense of the bearing this might have on one’s understanding of how to read and engage with medieval texts. On this basis, the essay argues, reading Dante’s *Commedia* as both literature and theology can enhance our sense of the importance of doctrines that tend to be neglected in modern systematic theology, as well as of the particularly significant contribution of Dante’s poeticization of those doctrines to the work of the modern theologian.
In the next two essays, the volume focuses on a detailed consideration of the relationships of Dante’s poetry to the theological and religious tradition, with a particular focus on scriptural exegesis. Theresa Federici’s essay examines the significance of the figure of King David for the *Commedia*, specifically in connection with the strategies through which Dante gives authority to his authorial voice. Through a close reading of the references in the *Commedia* to Psalm 50 and Psalm 9, Federici details the ways in which David is presented in the poem in the dual role of penitent sinner and psalmist and relates this presentation to medieval biblical exegesis and conceptions of penitence. In the light of this analysis, the essay proposes, the figure of David appears as the primary model for Dante’s self-presentation, first as a penitent human being and then as a theological poet. Also focusing on medieval biblical exegesis, the essay by Paola Nasti analyzes Dante’s ecclesiology, and especially the way in which it finds poetic expression in the *Paradiso*. Nasti reads the *Commedia* in close comparison with traditional theological discussions of the Church and charity, thereby revealing the originality of Dante’s ecclesiological symbolism, and emphasizes especially the way Dante reshapes the image of the Bride from the Song of Songs in *Paradiso* 10–14. Dante, Nasti argues, thus offers a text that, specifically in its poetic texture, both remains firmly rooted in the theology of its day and opens up highly innovative theological perspectives.

The following contribution, by Douglas Hedley, brings the focus of the volume to the metaphysical aspects of Dante’s theological poetry, by offering detailed reflection on the theological value and implications of some of the central Neoplatonic aspects of the *Commedia*, especially the question of divine immanence. This reflection is primarily addressed to the ways in which Romantic thinkers found in Dante a source of theological inspiration. In turn, Hedley suggests, this opens up fruitful ways for Dante’s narrative poetry to contribute to contemporary thought on the imagination. Also concentrating on Dante’s metaphysics, Christian Moevs analyzes the repeated references in the *Commedia* to the image and notion of the “punto” [point], revealing its full literary, philosophical, and theological potential. By relating the *punto* to Dante’s presentation in the *Commedia* of the nature of truth and knowledge, Moevs’s essay offers a fresh account of Dante’s idea of the incarnational union between God, the cosmos, and human beings. On this basis, Moevs suggests that in Dante’s view the act of reading the *Commedia* can itself, if properly
undertaken, actively participate in the dynamics of that union. With a continued focus on the incarnational aspects of Dante’s thought, the final essay of the volume, by Denys Turner, considers Dante’s understanding of language alongside Aquinas’s and Eckhart’s notions of the limits of theological expression. By locating the *Commedia* in the context of specific medieval reflections on the nature of language about God, Turner reveals that Dante’s poetics are governed by engagement with fundamental questions of theological grammar. Thus, in its very nature as poetry, the *Commedia* is profoundly theological.

The essays gathered in this volume, then, suggest the rich variety of ways in which the question of theology as poetry might be explored in and through the *Commedia*. By bringing a variety of methodological perspectives to this question, and by drawing on the intellectual resources of both theology and Dante scholarship, they demonstrate the fruitfulness of the encounter between these disciplines. Some of the implications are assessed in the two afterwords with which the collection ends. In the first, John Took reflects on the conversation between Dante studies and theology in terms of a need for readings of the *Commedia* that pay serious attention to questions concerning the nature of human existence. In the second, David F. Ford reflects on the possibilities of learning from Dante something about what it means to do theology, and outlines seven ways in which reflection on Dante’s *Commedia* can contribute to the work of the modern theologian.

Our hope is that *Dante’s “Commedia”: Theology as Poetry* will provide an impetus for renewed attention to the intersection of theological and literary concerns in Dante’s poem. For not only does this volume make the claim that the *Commedia* presents us with “theology as poetry”; but, taken as a whole, it also suggests that the theological and literary significance of this claim is far-reaching.

**Notes**

1. The bibliography on Dante and theology is vast, dating back to the earliest commentaries on the *Commedia*; to provide references to every scholarly intervention in the debate would be far beyond the scope of an introduction such as this. The references in this introduction are intended to be indicative of particular lines of thought and suggest starting points for further reading, rather than being comprehensive. We have, where possible, given references to works
accessible in English. For useful general overviews, see Foster, “Teologia”; Ian-
nucci, “Theology”; Ryan, “The Theology of Dante”; A. N. Williams, “The The-
ology of the Comedy.” Curtius’s chapter, entitled “Poetry and Theology,” in his European Literature, 214–27, is a classic statement of the relationship between poetry and theology in Dante as seen in the Trecento. See also Lansing, Dante and Theology (vol. 4 of The Critical Complex).

2. Croce, La poesia di Dante.
3. Auerbach, “Figura” and “St Francis”; Singleton, Dante’s “Commedia” and Journey to Beatrice.
4. Nardi, Dante e la cultura medievale and Nel mondo di Dante; E. Gilson, Dante and Philosophy and Dante et Béatrice; Foster, The Two Dantes.
5. Foster, “Dante and St Thomas” and “Tommaso d’Aquino”; Mastro-
buono, Dante’s Journey.
6. Barański, “l’iter ideologico”; Boyde, Dante Philomyth and Philosopher; S. Gilson, Medieval Optics; Moews, Metaphysics of Dante’s “Comedy.”
7. Barański, “Dante’s Signs”; Havel, Dante and the Franciscans; Mazzotta, Dante’s Vision; Moews, Metaphysics of Dante’s “Comedy.”
8. Botterill, Dante and the Mystical Tradition; Freccero, Dante; Pertile, “A Desire of Paradise.”
9. Barblan, Dante e la Bibbia; Hawkins, Dante’s Testaments.
10. Conv. 2.1.
11. EC.
16. Franke, Dante’s Interpretive Journey; Lombardi, Syntax of Desire; Moews, Metaphysics of Dante’s “Comedy”; Raffa, Divine Dialectic.
17. Ascoli, Dante; Barolini, Undivine Comedy.
19. See, for example, Boyle, “The Idea of Christian Poetry” and Sacred and Secular Scriptures; Brown, Discipleship and Imagination; Hart, Trespass of the Sign; Quash, Theology and the Drama of History; Venard, Littérature et théologie and La langue de l’ineffable; Ward, Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory; R. Williams, Grace and Necessity.
20. See, for instance, Burrell, Knowing the Unknowable God and Faith and Freedom; O. Davies, The Creativity of God and Theology of Compassion; Hauerwas, Community of Character; Lash, Holiness, Speech and Silence; MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry; McCabe, God Matters; Milbank, Theology and Social Theory and Word Made Strange; Moevs, Metaphysics of Dante’s “Comedy”; Soskice, Metaphor and Religious Language; Turner, Faith, Reason and the Existence of God; R. Williams, On Christian Theology.

21. See, for example, Coakley, Religion and the Body; O. Davies and Turner, Silence and the Word; Ford, Self and Salvation and Christian Wisdom; Hedley, Living Forms of the Imagination; F. Kerr, Immortal Longings; Lash, The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’; McIntosh, Mystical Theology; Pattison, The End of Theology; Pickstock, After Writing; Sells, Mystical Languages of Unsaying; Soskice, The Kindness of God; Turner, Eros and Allegory and The Darkness of God; A. N. Williams, The Divine Sense.

22. See in particular the works by Burrell, Moevs, Pickstock, Sells, Soskice, and Turner listed above.