

**WORKING DRAFT OF**  
Dante & Phenomenology:  
A Literature Review and Call to Scholars  
**FOR BOSTON THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY**

**Please review pages 2-45 and feel free to scan the rest.**

**Thank you!**

Aaron B. Daniels, PhD

Research Fellow

Psychology & the Other

Senior Lecturer, Psychology

Curry College

Milton, Massachusetts

aaron\_daniels@msn.com

10/25/2018

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**Abstract**

This chapter summarizes literature that views Dante’s work phenomenologically with the goal of encouraging further scholarship. A casual psychology informs many interpretations of Dante’s works, but few authors utilize formal psychological viewpoints, let alone phenomenological perspectives. This study begins with a summary of Dante’s two major poetic works followed by the contributions of Saints Aquinas, Francis, and Augustine to Dante’s perspectives. It next addresses definitions of phenomenology and compares them to Dante’s project. The examination turns to Dante’s role as a father to the Renaissance and its humanism. Shifting to the literature, this chapter summarizes major works by Harrison, Took, and Asay, overtly linking phenomenology to Dante. Next, the review presents the contributions of Franke. The review proceeds to those articles and chapters that make the link between Dante and phenomenology. Major themes emerge. Dante’s scholarship predates the modern era’s materialism and divided academic disciplines. Thus, his work may present a sort of proto-phenomenology in which he strives to create a language and art adequate to describe experience itself—or perhaps, more precisely, describing the experience of meaning-making. Slipping neither to objective nor subjective assumptions, Dante offers an alternative and transformative path. Dante’s work also demands that readers attend to their own experiences of encountering his work. Therefore, readers must necessarily become phenomenologists of their own experience. Finally, if Dante can be seen as a sort of phenomenologist, then the provenance for phenomenology may be extended as far back as Augustine of Hippo, especially relating to his ideas of presence.

This project grows out of an observation Helen Luke makes in her insightful analytic psychological text, *From Dark Woods to White Rose: Journey and Transformation in Dante’s Divine Comedy* (1975). She presents the famous opening lines to Canto I of the *Inferno*.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura

Che la diritta via era smarrita (p. 4)

Luke offers Dorothy Sayers’ translation:

Midway this way of life we’re bound upon,

I woke to find myself in a dark wood,

Where the right road was wholly lost and gone. (p. 4)

Canto I serves as an introduction to the *Commedia*'s three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Moreover, this opening image in the Dark Woods frames much of the poem's purpose. To deepen the portent, Luke offers a nuance to one Italian word that opens new possibilities, not emphasized in Sayers' version:

For Dante does not say, "*mi ritrovai in una selva oscura*"—he says, "*per una selva oscura*"—and although it is perfectly correct to translate *per* as "in," the more usual and basic meaning of the word *per* is nevertheless "through" and not simply "in." (p. 4)

Luke extends this issue of translation to emphasize that this very darkness, lostness, and confusion is what brings the shock that awakens. One reflexively 'comes to' or 'recovers oneself'—*mi ritrovai*—through the process, *through* the experience itself in its often-baffling specificity.

Luke's (1975) Jungian metaphor easily translates into the phenomenological. Phenomenology demands that one remain focused on experience itself and avoid the seductions of facile seemingly-objective explanations if those explanations distance oneself from the immediacy of the phenomenon. This same phenomenological fealty to experience also demands one not slip into sentimental or flowery archsubjectivity as this reflexivity can just as easily betray the truth of an unfolding phenomenon. As this chapter hopes to show, this tension and eventual transcendence of the subject/object split mark both the phenomenological discipline and Dante's pilgrimage.

At the heart of this inquiry is a question bridging Dante's pre-modern era to the postmodern questions phenomenology cultivates. That is, can the *per* by which Dante came to

himself in those dark woods not also be the ‘very way in which’ in Heidegger’s variously translated definition of phenomenology from *Being and Time* (1927). Found on page 34 of the original, Heidegger asks that the phenomenologist let ‘that which shows itself from itself be seen *in the very way in which* it shows itself from itself.’

This chapter strives to provide a foundation from which scholars can advance the study of the relationship between Dante and phenomenology—both viewing Dante’s work phenomenologically, but also, perhaps more importantly, seeing Dante as a proto-phenomenologist. Throughout the scholarly literature from both psychological and literary perspectives, many authors seek to hear Dante’s own voice rather than begin with formulaic and symbolic interpretations. In their works, three interlinked and simultaneous themes emerge.

- 1) Dante seeks to give voice to some sort of lived reality—even when that voice must appeal to supernatural landscapes;
- 2) In doing this he wrestles with his own growth and development;
- 3) Thus, he progressively strives to create language and forms adequate to describe the experience of his own contentious meaning-making.

On all three accounts, a phenomenological approach seems especially fecund. Searching scholarly databases, however, shows just a few hundreds of items explicitly linking Dante and psychology in general. Narrowing the search to any specific school of psychology yields less than 100 hits. Sharpening the focus even more to phenomenology garners only a dozen sources that make an explicit link to Dante. Why is this?

Interpretations of Dante’s works are quite popular with depth psychologists at cocktail parties. Moreover, psychological sensibilities also loosely color Dantean literary scholarship—whether biographical to the Florentine or diagnostic of his landscapes. Examinations of Dante in

the depth tradition are often components of much larger works, but only a few psychodynamic authors offer book length examinations of the *Commedia*, let alone his other works. Luke's (1975) provocative work is, by the author's own admission, a sketch—a lifetime in the making but also a call to future scholars to continue her work.

When psychoanalytic psychologists address Dante, they too-often struggle to let Dante speak for himself. Instead they apply reductionistic psychoanalyses, such as Shaw's approach in "A Pathway to Spirituality" from 2005, wherein he compares the spirituality of Wordsworth to Dante. Shaw decides that Dante has mother issues, is in denial about death, and has created Beatrice as a sort of spiritual teddy bear.

This chapter seeks to see Dante's work with new eyes and to gain some sense of the eyes by which Dante saw. 1) The examination begins by giving a sketch of Dante's two major poetic and biographic works, the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*. 2) It then describes three Roman Catholic Saints—Francis, Aquinas, and Augustine—who inform not only Dante's theology, but his ontology and phenomenology as well. 3) By addressing varying currents within phenomenology and parallels to Dante's project, the discussion turns to what a proto-phenomenology might look like, concluding with a comment on poetics as phenomenology. 4) The examination next turns to Dante's role as a father to the Renaissance and its humanism with necessary questions about the values of modernism. 5) To begin the fuller review of literature, this study summarizes three major works (Harrison, 1988; Took, 2002; Asay, 2014) overtly linking phenomenology to Dante and those sources responding to these works. 6) The works of Franke come next. His examinations of Dante often present hermeneutics as phenomenology in the course of examining larger philosophical, literary, and theological questions. 7) The review of literature proceeds to those few articles and chapters that make the link between the Florentine

and phenomenology. 8) In its conclusion, this review offers a series of provisional themes meant to call scholars to look to Dante's poetics as a proto-phenomenology and his poetry as a rich source of phenomenological reality.

### **An Overview of Dante's Two Major Poetic Works**

Dante has two major poetic works, *La Vita Nuova*—the New Life—and the *Commedia*—the so-called Divine Comedy. As we shall see, each work describes, in its own way, Dante's progressive struggles to give voice to what is most real and true. Each work also ends at a frontier of the Ineffable.

In the *Vita Nuova*, published in 1295, a young Dante gives sketches of his remembrances of his childhood, adolescent, and young adult encounters with the incomparable Beatrice and his response to her death when she was 25. Between these moments, Dante recalls vivid visions that instruct him in his journey of faith, art, and love. The work follows a *prosimetrum* form, alternating between poetic experiments and prose explanations. Through this rhythm, Dante wrestles with how to create a poetic sensibility and form that remain true to both his experiences and his longings.

The Dante of this work feels two competing pulls. On the one hand is the desire to import and adapt the Troubadours' fevered love and layered theological references into a poetic form and language. In fact, Dante and his contemporaries do just that with, as Dante later labels it in *Purgatorio's* Canto 24, the *Dolce Stil Novo*—the 'sweet new style'—of which the *Vita Nuova* is an important development. Written in the vernacular language of the time and region, the style looks inward for the nature of experience while also embedding layers of reference and allusion. The pull that competes with these poetic aspirations is perhaps less soul-wrenching, but equally seductive. It is the call of natural philosophy. Dante is an apt pupil and a voracious learner and

could easily lose himself in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Nevertheless, by the end of the *Vita Nuova*, he realizes he must undertake a great pilgrimage to grow in his expressive capacity and transcend such divisions. At the end of the work, in *La Vita Nuova*, XLII, he expresses his realization that his current understanding, expressive capacity, and very way of life are not adequate to the call of his Beatrice: “After this sonnet there appeared to me a marvelous vision in which I saw things which made me decide to write no more of this blessed one until I could do so more worthily” (Reynolds translation, p. 99).

In many ways, the culmination of Dante’s ontological and epistemological pilgrimage, begun at the end of the *Vita Nuova*, find expression in the *Commedia*. That is, the ‘New Life’ of the earlier work begins with the realization of the necessity of a greater journey. The *Commedia*, completed in 1320, is Dante’s crowning achievement. From the dark woods entered at the beginning of this chapter, Dante fails in his attempt to bootstrap his way out of his midlife morass. Thus, the great Roman poet Virgil manifests to guide Dante into the depths of a Hell most symbolized by stuckness. Then, on a Mountain of Purgatory that is a proportionate global convexity to Hell’s concavity, Dante undertakes voluntary sufferings to prepare himself for his ascent through the progressive sublimities of Paradise. Guided now by Beatrice instead of Virgil, each circle of Heaven becomes vaster and more all-embracing until the very end when, looking at the farthest frontier, Dante paradoxically sees the center—the Cosmic Rose. Here, Dante audaciously suspects he sees something of the human form, but again confronts an ultimate ineffability. In the final canto, *Paradiso*, XXXIII he describes this last intuited image:

130    Within itself and in its coloring  
       Seemed to be painted with our human likeness  
       So that my eyes were wholly focused on it.

As the geometer who sets himself  
To square the circle and who cannot find,  
135 For all his thought, the principle he needs,

Just so was I on seeing this new vision  
I wanted to see how our image fuses  
Into the circle and finds its place in it,

Yet my wings were not meant for such a flight —  
140 Except that then my mind was struck by lightning  
Through which my longing was at last fulfilled.

Here powers failed my high imagination:  
But by now my desire and will were turned,  
Like a balanced wheel rotated evenly,

145 By the Love that moves the sun and the other stars. (tr. J. F. Cotter)

### **Three Saints**

Many readers of the Florentine find that Medieval history and especially theology create profound barriers to engaging with his greatest poem. Moreover, by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards, Dante's epistemology seems to blithely shift between disciplines of philosophy, poetic theory, science, rhetoric, astronomy, political theory, history, soteriology, theology, and many others.

Today, our various academic silos divide against each other. But for Dante, these divisions are not so palpable nor insurmountable.

Dante's writing represents an invitation to a way of meaning-making that defies the categorical thinking that dominates scholarship today. His writing also invites the reader to become steeped in his inspirations. The landscapes of the *Commedia* are a realized theology. Thus, although it represents a contentious issue between scholars such as Harrison and Franke discussed below, issues of faith, religion, and theology are integral to understanding Dante.

Three of Dante's theological inspirations make a theocentric—and also a life-affirming—case that brings the reader more fully into the Presence of the Divine. This section examines them in reverse chronological order to allow the provenance of these surprisingly radical ideas to deepen.

Closest in time to Dante is Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Although Dante did not live to see Aquinas canonized in 1323, his writings already exercised an outsized influence during Dante's life. Drawing upon his reclaiming of Aristotle, Aquinas offers a structure of human experience rooted in common but irrational emotions, such as love, sorrow, and anger. He calls these the passions. These passions can be taken up in different ways and require the exercise of the intellect to direct. The influence of Thomistic theology on Dante is most visible in the repeated structure of the whole *Commedia*. The passions that are perverted in the stuckness of *Inferno*, become the longing of the voluntary sufferings in *Purgatorio*, which are refined to the sublime transcendences of *Paradiso*. Dante's audacity reaches a fevered pitch at the end of *Paradiso* when he offers what Aquinas would call the 'Beatific Vision.' Aquinas places the Beatific Vision as the goal of human existence, but one that can only be achieved after death.

At its heart, all experiences contain an invitation to the Divine. In Thomistic theology, experience does not necessarily negate or obscure the Divine impulse. Rather, a fundamental virtuous structure permeates all phenomena and becomes available to those who hearken to the yearning that is the call to the Divine.

A further step back into the Medieval yields Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181-1226). The lived world of Francis is brimming over with God's creations singing praise and adoration of Divine love. Only sin deafens humans to this chorus. Francis holds for Dante the promise that, seen and loved aright, our seemingly fallen world may become known as Paradise. Thus, at the top of the mountain of Purgatory, in Canto XXVII, Dante steps through the final purgation, a wall of searing flames, and sees Paradise on earth. The fires through which Dante passes are the flames of the angel's sword barring Adam and Eve from Eden. Dante's struggles up Purgatory's slopes, which teach him to loose his clutching dependence on vice, have finally liberated him to accept God's Grace. Only then can he see again his beloved Beatrice. Franciscan spirituality embraces Christ's humanity. It is a profoundly incarnational epistemology in which, known aright, life-as-lived can open the wonder of God's gratuitous creation. In this way, Dante's pilgrimage has been one of coming back to the place he began—his life—and seeing it as if for the first time. In a sense, a Franciscan spirituality is far less dependent on an afterlife. It offers the hope of True Life. That is to say, our experiences contain within them an invitation to a God-centered participation in His creation.

Preceding these towering figures in Christianity is Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Of particular interest is Augustine's idea of *Presence*. Augustine contends that any effort to assert being is a reflection, moreover a hunger, for what is only true of God. For Aquinas, we cannot 'know' being, we can only lean closer to or further from it. Asay in his 2014 dissertation,

discussed below, makes the specific connection that Dante is addressing Augustine and the Presence for which we long. Asay takes the further step of stating that Dante's Augustinian project is a phenomenology—an existential phenomenology, in fact. Thus, in Asay's work, Augustine's 'greater being' as we lean closer to the reality of God's Presence becomes Heidegger's engaged and fulsome authenticity; and Augustine's 'lesser being' becomes empty and nihilistic inauthenticity.

### **(Proto)Phenomenology**

'Phenomenology' takes on many meanings depending on the author's discipline. The term existed before Husserl—for instance, Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* from 1807. And, although some intriguing essays discuss Hegel's phenomenology and Dante (cf. Dobbins & Fuss (1982) "The Silhouette of Dante in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit"; and Shannon (1998) "The Journey of the Mind of God to Us: Hegel's Ladder and Harris's Graduate Seminars"), that phenomenology is unique to Hegel.

Adding another grove to these dark woods, 'phenomenology' in the hands of some Dante scholars takes on any number of idiosyncratic meanings. Such is the case with Trovato in 1990 who, in an effort to show how Dante moved beyond what he calls a mere 'phenomenology' to 'integral realism,' actually makes—if you ignore the terminology—a wonderful case for how Dante expresses a very sophisticated phenomenology. Trovato presents this same Dante for whom theological and philosophical divisions are irrelevant and inauthentic. This is a Dante who offers an intentional reality, where sacred ideas embody. One can arguably see Trovato making the case for Dante's proto-phenomenology; but the subsequent Renaissance forces of emerging modernity muffled the call for an art and science of experience until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For the purposes of this discussion, ‘phenomenology’ can mean several interlinked things. 1) First, it is a critical philosophy challenging both materialist approaches to the human condition as well as those forces that seek to divide a human science from other disciplines. 2) It is also a seminal qualitative research methodology growing out of these philosophical considerations. 3) It is a theoretical ground for several clinical approaches that value both engaging the client’s—and practitioner’s—lived worlds and the nature of the co-constituted experience in the consulting room between the therapist and client. 4) It is finally also an emerging current in theological discourse. The following discussion of these branches of the phenomenological tree provides more than background for this current chapter. This context is essential for understanding some of the more contentious debates surrounding interpretation of Dante and the theoretical stances advocated for by those authors discussing him.

Arguably, the original impulse of phenomenology as a distinct approach if not discipline is as a critical philosophy. As summarized by Moran & Mooney in 2002 in their canon-defining work, the movement grew out of Brentano, was created by Husserl, was redirected by Heidegger, perhaps peaked with Merleau-Ponty, and faced ongoing revision through Ricour, Derrida, and others. From its beginning, this movement reacted against examining humans with a materialist, natural scientific epistemology and thus ignoring human experience itself. This leads to the second expression of phenomenology as a core qualitative method.

Husserl, often cited as phenomenology’s founder, gave voice to the impulse to reject a materialist approach to the human condition and moved to a qualitative methodology. He wanted to create a discrete discipline adequate to the challenges of describing the structures of consciousness. His ideas evolve across his writings and many of the conflicts regarding

interpretation of Husserl's intentions and phenomenology arise from attempting to generalize his whole project rather than addressing discrete writings and phases of his thought.

As much as Husserl's oft-repeated axiom calls for a return to "the things themselves!", his relationship to materialism is contentious at best. His famous *epoché*—a bracketing aside of the natural attitude of belief in these material things—seeks to cast light on the natural flow of consciousness relating to the things rather than the physical and physiological processes at work in sensation and perception. Husserl does not deny matter so much as seek to focus on the nature of experience too-easily overshadowed by matter's assumed existence. Heidegger takes up Husserl's call to 'the things themselves,' but seeks to emphasize where the attention ought to be cast in his definition of phenomenology cited above. 'The very way in which' things show forth must be carefully interrogated in an authentic phenomenological project.

Husserl never completed his project of phenomenology and successive generations took up his call in often-idiosyncratic ways. Nevertheless, the profusion of approaches that may loosely call themselves 'phenomenology' share this modest assertion that describing the nature of human experience itself is a worthy undertaking—one that arguably can be done in a rigorous and scientific fashion, albeit firmly and unapologetically qualitative in its method.

Phenomenology remains an important part of Continental Philosophy's discourse. And given the attention that phenomenology receives from postmodern authors such as Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, and others, a reader could be forgiven for imagining phenomenology to be a branch of philosophy. Nevertheless, phenomenologists are responsible for creating rigorous qualitative research methodologies and serve as inspiration for methods widely used in anthropology, sociology, and other human sciences—with psychology, certainly in proportions, being the least of which. Whether the researchers analyze subject protocols following the

structure of the Giorgi, Fisher, and von Eckartsberg method of phenomenological reduction, refine their themes pursuing a grounded theory research project, or track their shifting sense of self in participatory action research, they are applying and developing core ideas of the wider phenomenological mission. At its heart is the question: how do we best give voice to human experience in ways that reveal what is too-easily covered over by quantitative methodology?

The third current of phenomenology grew out of these first two expressions. Across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, phenomenology also powerfully influenced clinical psychological practice. Boss, Frankl, Perls, May, Yalom, and others all rely on the power of the clinical encounter as a phenomenon worthy of primary attention. Existential themes vary in their emphasis by these and other authors; nevertheless, the nature of the practice itself relies much more on phenomenological sensibilities. Though existential psychotherapies may bear strong resemblances to more psychodynamic approaches, the phenomenological fealty to the *how* over the *what* guides the existential-phenomenological practitioner to a greater extent than any post-Freudian. Nevertheless, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this process-focus had come to inform many psychodynamic practitioners.

A fourth important current in phenomenology has coalesced toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: a religious, and typically Christian phenomenology. In many ways this emergence is more of a coming together of currents implicit from the foundation of phenomenology. Heidegger and others are often responding to Augustine, and the contributions of the Duquesne University current of phenomenological thought is strongly inflected by the work of the school's Spiritan Brothers. Moreover, authors such as Hans Jonas (1903-1993) and John Macquarrie (1919-2007) integrated existential phenomenology with theological themes. Nonetheless, with writers such as Michel Henry (1922-2002) and Jean-Luc Marion, theological threads have come

to create a whole-cloth phenomenological theology. In this perspective, the phenomenological investigation of experience leads to a frontier of theological revelation. Complementarily, other researchers shift to an examination of currents within theology which are best understood phenomenologically. Liberated from the dualism materialism inevitably foists upon theology, phenomenology offers these theologians clearer access to the ground of being. Several authors addressing Dante's work phenomenologically come to theological conclusions, perhaps most explicitly William Franke. This chapter addresses his work examining this theological convergence in phenomenology below.

Given these four currents in phenomenology, it merits asking what is Dante's phenomenology? Is it descriptive of experience? If so, what experience? For Robert Pogue Harrison in *The Body of Beatrice* (1988), described below, it is a phenomenology of our longing for the raw stuff of experience. In Franke's many chapters and essays on the topic, however, Dante presents a phenomenology of the hermeneutic meaning-making that is itself the substance of experience. As will become clear later, Franke eventually accuses Harrison of a naïveté regarding phenomenology and materialism. His accusations echo back to ambivalences in Husserl's fundamental project. Both Harrison and Franke agree that Dante is posed with the same struggles as phenomenologists. Through the practice of poetry, Dante gives voice to what may not be accessible to the arts and sciences of today when they stand divided against each other. Dante's pre-modern era may provide the phenomenologist with privileged access to a moment before these divisions became insurmountable.

If Dante does offer the reader access to an important perspective, it is in large part because he predates cultural, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual divisions which structure today's modern world. As outlined above in the first current within phenomenology, in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century, the fear that psychology and other human sciences would become purely materialistic, natural scientific undertakings drove early phenomenologists. In the quest for ‘objective’ measures of mental phenomena, psychology—outside of the psychodynamic tradition—rapidly took on quantitative approaches that ignored the vagaries of human experience in favor of physiological or neurocognitive processes, or observable behavior. Phenomenologists sought to establish another theoretical and research tradition to complement if not counter these reductionist trends. If they were to avoid the reductionistic betrayal of human experience, phenomenologists would have to reconceive of some of the essential building blocks of the philosophy of science. This would necessitate an examination of history.

Setting aside those phenomenologists that trace the philosophic malfeasance back to Aristotle, many phenomenological theorists came to indict the flowering of modernity in the Enlightenment and especially Descartes’ dualism. Although Victorian-era materialists may have wanted to approach humans with the same parsimony as a biologist addressing a mollusk, they clearly inherited their paradigm from an earlier source. Descartes’ famous meditations surely begin with a perfectly phenomenological grounding in questioning the nature of experience. Nevertheless, Descartes eventually proffers a map which divides ‘mind’ from God from *res extensa*—the stuff of the material world. Whether or not Descartes is to receive credit or blame for the division of the academic disciplines and sciences, he certainly gives voice to a critical epistemological schism.

However, even if one concedes Descartes’ divisions, each of these domains necessarily demands fundamentally different methods for addressing them appropriately. Theology and the natural sciences will become estranged from each other in large part because they cannot agree on what constitutes ‘evidence.’ Hence, the challenges of a subject as mercurial as mind arguably

ought to necessitate a development of a methodology adequate to the task. But the seductions of certainty offered by the natural sciences and their approach to this *res extensa* proved too strong and, in efforts to understand experience, came to blot it out. Natural science methods have, today, become the dominant paradigm for addressing any subject scientifically—whether things, humans, or God. In fact, ‘empiricism,’ ‘rigorous,’ and ‘science’ have become synonymous with a materialist epistemology to such an extent that phenomenologists’ efforts to claim these terms are often only acknowledged within their own ranks.

Thus, if the hegemony of materialism can find its paternity in the budding modernity of the post-Renaissance Enlightenment, might not Dante’s historical position offer an important perspective on a pre-modern epistemology? Cultivating the soil from which the Renaissance grew, Dante, as presented by Trovato in his 1990 article, still exists before the Renaissance and is thus unencumbered by modernity and its fracturing of *philosophia* into discrete disciplines. God, mind, and matter are not inexorably divided for Dante nor the saints that inspired him. One can even read the greater arc of the *Commedia* as a synchronization if not rectification of them.

In a 1977 article, Silverman links Dante to a moment and movement that undoes our habitual separation of philosophy from experience. Summarizing a course taught by Merleau-Ponty, Silverman emphasizes that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology ultimately leads to the dissolution of philosophy, moving firmly into the realm of experience itself. “Living, expressing, and acting are philosophy at work, philosophy negating itself as separate philosophy” (p. 223). Silverman observes that Merleau-Ponty’s goal is not a disembodied intellectual exercise so common to the Western philosophical canon:

What appears is philosophy that has denied its theoretical stance in order to be its greatest achievement. This dialectical phenomenology is a non-philosophy,—thought become the

texture of an inter-human world of experience—the world of Dante, Shakespeare, and Beethoven, but also of the common man. (p. 223)

### **Dante's Poetics as Phenomenology**

As much as the case for Dante as a proto-phenomenologist may cast a new light on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century debates regarding materialism, a question of semantics bears mentioning. In a conversation (2017) with Dante scholar Peter S. Hawkins, he noted that much of what this chapter and others may present as a proto-phenomenology in the Florentine's works, would in the 14<sup>th</sup> century be seen as simply 'poetics.' It is, after all, painfully anachronistic to speak of a pre-Renaissance 'phenomenology.' There was no need for a phenomenology, per se, because *philosophia* has not yet been irreparably dismembered. The necessity of phenomenology's critical stance toward addressing and treating humans with a natural scientific epistemology is, arguably, five centuries away. And yet, Dante struggles in the *Vita Nuova* with the charms of philosophy versus the fervid yearning of poetry. Thus, one may, in Dante, see someone who chose a different path—a path devoted to pursuing lived experiences to the edges of expression—but chose it on the very cusp of an era in which so many others would not.

Nevertheless, if Dante is indeed an advocate of this integrated lived world, what is the reader to make of the frequent citations of him as a grandfather of modern humanism?

### **Dante, Humanism, and the Renaissance**

Can one realistically put Dante forth as a counterpoint to modernism? Is he not a humanist—a Renaissance Man before his time? He gives himself and his experiences a central place in all his works. However, so too does Augustine in his 4<sup>th</sup> century *Confessions*. Dante's audacity may indeed be critical to the later establishment of the humanism of the Renaissance and later Enlightenment. Certainly, the Florentine's reclaiming of Classical literature and philosophy

informs these movements. Nevertheless, if by ‘humanism’ one refers to a philosophy appropriating Protagoras’ ‘man is the measure of all things,’ then the theocentric Augustinian, Franciscan, and Thomistic currents in Dante are too strong to make him that sort of humanist.

In his *Body of Beatrice*, Harrison (1988), whose work receives attention below, places the provenance for humanism later. Harrison looks to the next generation, soaked in Dante’s rhetoric and poetry, to find a true origin of 14<sup>th</sup> century humanism. Harrison sees Petrarch, with(out) his absent muse Laura, facing the same longing as Dante. However, Harrison’s Petrarch is in a static swoon of elegy, not a realization of the temporal unfolding of being that Harrison credits to Dante. Focusing almost exclusively on his subjective versus phenomenological experiences, Harrison states that Petrarch is much more a father of a modernity lost in the eternal present of lament. Harrison insinuates but does not pursue the idea that Petrarch laments more than his absent Laura. His lamentation may be a prophetic call heralding a nihilism so familiar as to be invisible to the denizens of the modern world. Petrarch may be lamenting a God as well as objects that seem in perpetual retreat from his inward gaze.

In his *Dante’s Phenomenology of Being* (2000), also discussed below, Took concurs with the separation of Dante’s discourse from modernity. In the latter part of his work, Took addresses Dante’s use of language relative to the definition of being. Took is clear that Dante is neither existential nor postmodern in his understanding of language, yet the crisis of meaning to which Dante speaks in his mid-career works bears striking parallels to today’s postmodern conditions. Dante, however, can evade the vagaries of the postmodern groundlessness, by fealty to his pilgrimage of faith.

In his earlier works, Dante grapples with remaining true to experience itself. He could tip easily into the arch-subjectivism of the lyric genre he inherited. He could also find himself

pursuing the pleasures of academic studies, especially in the emerging natural sciences. Dante wavers, but ultimately commits to a much harder path—becoming lost in neither the pining yet pedantic literary conventions of his contemporaries nor the sterile seductions of secular study as embodied by the Donna Gentile. This Gentle or Noble Woman is in one sense the embodiment of *philosophia*, the sweet pleasures of study. Near the end of *La Vita Nuova*, she first appears in a window above a Dante disconsolate from the death of Beatrice. But, as Harrison (1988) notes, she is only a reflection. For Harrison, the moment Dante can see himself via the gaze of the Donna Gentile is key. Harrison describes “a visual specularity whereby the self returns to itself through the image of the other in a reflective medium, in this case a window” (p. 115). She “is pure reflection, framed in a window as a mirror, stripped of otherness” (p. 116). This is the Donna Gentile who could seduce Dante into purely rational investigations of the natural world, abandoning his yearning for a language to describe experience itself. Is not this abandonment of experience, from which Dante ultimately turns away, the mark of modernity’s materialism that the phenomenologists seek to indict? Is not conversely the solipsism of Petrarch also the endless regression so familiar to postmodern scholars? In the end, either path quickly leads to recursive nothingness.

Further discussing these snares of rationalism, De Monticelli (2000) cites a critical impasse where this formerly-reassuring rationality—great achievement of the ego—betrays Dante. De Monticelli’s article is notable for the clinical, historical, philosophical, theological, and literary elements skillfully woven together in her presentation. Dante’s potentially fatal moment occurs in the *Inferno*, across Cantos VIII and IX, at the very gates of Hell’s inner metropolis of Dis.

To this point, Dante and Virgil have successfully navigated any impasses the demons and denizens of hell have concocted for them. When demons block their way, the Italians declare themselves to be on a divine mission, or invoke the Will of God, or other verbal shibboleths. But now, the demons will have none of it and the Furies mount the ramparts. They call for the Gorgon, Medusa, to come out and petrify the Italian pilgrims where they stand. Neither Virgil nor Dante can talk or think their way out of this impasse and through the gates of Dis. Virgil demands Dante cover his eyes, and then further adds his hands to shield them in impotent terror. The passage in Canto IX begins with Virgil warning Dante:

‘Turn your back and keep your eyes shut,  
for if the Gorgon head appears and should you see it,  
60 all chance for your return above is lost.’

While my master spoke he turned me round  
and, still not trusting to my hands,  
covered my face with his hands also.

Oh you who have sound intellects,  
65 consider the teaching that is hidden  
behind the veil of these strange verses. (Hollander & Hollander translation)

Neither of the poets can explain away the inscrutable, terrifying gaze of the Medusa threatening from the battlements. And De Monticelli (2000) sagely notes that Dante’s aside to the reader singles out those of *li’ntelletti sani*—sound or sane intellects—to hearken to his implicit message. This message indicts those very intellects upon which the comment’s audience rely. In

the face of this rationally insurmountable challenge, only an angel, God's Grace, swiftly racing to the hellgates can overcome the dire threat of Medusa's paralyzingly nihilistic wrath from Dis's walls. The angel is indignant and, after effortlessly opening the gates with a wand, chastises the demons. The pilgrimage of faith will not continue on the previously sure feet of the intellect, but on a path set by a far greater Will.

Thus, as DiMonticelli (2000) warns her readers, Dante clearly discovers that empty rationalism will not carry the day—will not allow the true pilgrimage to continue. Matter divorced from the inherent intentionality of a lived world will freeze one into a stasis of helpless certainties. So too will endless self-reference stall, regardless of how poetic. Neither objectivity nor subjectivity offer a path forward. Therefore, Dante rejects these empty pursuits for the rich engagement of the pilgrimage. With this commitment, the Beatrice of *Commedia* can transform from the distant romantic ideal of a youthful Dante's *Vita Nuova* as well as the self-satisfied comprehensiveness of the Donna Gentile. In the *Commedia*, Dante embraces with a mature ardor the poet's journey of describing rather than labeling experience. Though he may face the same questions as the modern or postmodern seeker, Dante's faith carries him through the paralysis of self-enthralment and describes an intentional, lived world that defies and transcends the nihilism of our current era.

Dante offers phenomenology a rich inheritance and mission. Neither the dead convictions of materialism, nor the subjectivism of the arts can give voice to the nature of human experience. A path that transforms the researcher is, in fact, the message here. One cannot separate oneself from one's investigations and hope to be true to oneself and one's research.

With this foundation of Dante preceding much of the entrapping positivism of the modern era as well as the subjectivist swoon of postmodernity, this essay now turns to the book-length works addressing the Florentine and phenomenology.

### **The Major Texts**

Three major works explicitly link Dante and phenomenology: Harrison's *The Body of Beatrice* (1988); Took's *Dante's Phenomenology of Being* (2000); and Asay's doctoral dissertation, *The Phenomenology of Frames in Chaucer, Dante and Boccaccio* (2014).

#### ***The Body of Beatrice***

Harrison's *The Body of Beatrice* (1988)—a re-working of his doctoral dissertation from 1984—takes a loosely phenomenological approach, akin to the poetics of Bachelard, and focuses on the *Vita Nuova*, in which a young Dante searches for a language adequate to his yearning and experience. As sketched above, in Harrison's gloss of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante, through a series of visions, reaches a threshold of ineffability, and must undertake a pilgrimage to discover a means of growing in his expressive ability—to essentially transform himself to be present to that which lies beyond his youthful ken. In so doing, he reaches sublime expression well after the events of the *Vita Nuova* at the end of *Paradiso*, again facing a frontier of ineffability; but a far more rarefied and ontologically radical one.

Harrison's (1988) phenomenology seeks to “restore to the [*Vita Nuova*] its strangeness, its remoteness, its thought-provoking quality” (p. 1) in the face of Dante's own in-text interpretations as well as the centuries of critical scholarship. Nevertheless, Harrison's reluctance to deal directly with phenomenological sources can prove frustrating for scholars. In an interview with de Bruyn (2009), Harrison admits to being steeped in Heidegger and provides rich descriptions of a method that values literature as “a phenomenon *par excellence*” (p. 193).

Harrison sees literature as a wise philosophy and notes its ability to inform the reader of “how much of the phenomenon remains enveloped in shadows” (p. 193). Yet, despite these later expressions, the influence of phenomenologists remains almost entirely implicit in *The Body of Beatrice* (1988). Harrison portrays the Dante of the *Vita Nuova* as a phenomenologist striving to create a method to portray lived experience most authentically—a phenomenological poetics. But, Harrison only makes his phenomenology explicit in the aforementioned interview and a 1990 article he wrote to respond to critics’ desire for an explanation of his avowed methodology in *The Body of Beatrice*.

In the *The Body of Beatrice*, Harrison (1988) makes the archly existential assertion that the *Vita Nuova* marks Dante’s discovery of time—through the presence and death of Beatrice and through Dante’s shift in tone, tense, and project over the course of the work. Harrison wants to show “the projective if not the prophetic character of being in time, which attends upon the future as the ultimate source of ‘meaning’” (p. 94).

Harrison’s work (1988) rests on Dante’s first enigmatic dream—the ‘Marvelous Vision’—in which a newly smitten adolescent Dante dreams of Beatrice’s nude body draped in a sanguine cloth. Harrison believes that this vision is central to everything that will happen in the rest of the *Vita Nuova* and later. Thus, he makes the phenomenological move to the hermeneutics of the vision itself, resisting the dismissive tone of a Freudian interpretation of pubescent libido. Rather than a phantasm or mere projection, the intermediary of the sanguine cloth asserts Beatrice’s very real corporeality. Only the specificity of the experience, not a distancing symbolic interpretation, will yield reality. The crimson cloth is, for Harrison, the sacramental substantiation of Beatrice—her phenomenality. “All other oneiric images and events become refractions off the cloth... Its accessibility only through a phenomenal veil binds Dante’s new

life to the aesthetic order, binds it, in short, to a quest for revelation through the poetic enterprise” (p. 28). At this point in his text, Harrison makes it clear that we all yearn for—and may ignorantly assume the reality of—the object; but we are exiled from its reality. A genuine phenomenology must start from this epistemological truth, leaving us to wrangle with the representations and interpretations that constitute our experiences.

Harrison (1988) seems to exercise a type of imaginal epoché, seeing Dante as bracketing away “anything like a real world outside the poet’s imagination” (p. 52). Yet, this lived world, known through imagination, now becomes the proper place for love and transcendence. Dante’s world is one of embodiment. Beatrice’s reality, “both body and image” (p. 53), exceeds mere fantasy. Harrison sees her reality, her radical alterity overflowing any containment. Thus, the “unrefinable dimension of her otherness... keeps Dante moving” (p. 53). That is, only Beatrice’s inscrutable alterity foils the seduction by the purely rational—represented by the aforementioned *Donna Gentile*. With this shift, Harrison challenges his readers’ assumptions. Beatrice’s body exists beyond Dante’s experience, beyond his interpretations, and beyond the visions. Is Harrison asserting a transcendent alterity that drives our expressive—phenomenological—journey? Is this an un-cited reference to Augustine’s *Presence*? Or is Harrison attempting to address the enigma of matter’s seeming-reality in the face of the seeming-primacy of phenomenology? Harrison’s writing remains ambivalent on these questions.

Beatrice’s death, some seven years after the Marvelous Vision, devastates Dante; but before he can fully fall into the consolations of natural philosophy offered by the ‘Gentle Lady,’ Dante witnesses pilgrims seeking the Veil of Veronica—a ‘true image,’ as ‘Veronica’ etymologically implies, of Christ. Dante then has a ‘Miraculous Vision’—not the earlier Marvelous Vision with the crimson drape. As quoted above, he does not recount this new

miraculous vision because he *cannot* recount this vision. Harrison explains that Dante must revise what he thought was his project. In this revision Dante not only changes his future but rewrites his past. Harrison sees this as an awakening to a 'Christian existentiality' (p. 132). Thus, by the end of the work, Dante creates the whole sheet New Life of the book's title. Beatrice's crimson veil has become the fabric of the book itself.

Harrison's *The Body of Beatrice* (1988) is the first full-length examination of phenomenological themes in any of Dante's work. The critical response to the work is mixed but leans toward the positive (cf. Ward, 1992; Wetherbee, 1991). Most agree how beautifully and poetically written the work is. Several reviewers note a thinness of citations (e.g., Tambling, 1991). Franke (1988), in his first review of *The Body of Beatrice*, while still completing his doctoral studies for which Harrison would be a reader, interprets Harrison's citational lacunae to be an issue of respectful silences. Given that Franke has since become known as an authority on apophatic spirituality, in which the unspoken, unspeakable, and ineffable are at stake, the critique is canny. Harrison's neglect of Christian scholarship particularly upsets the aforementioned Trovato (1990). Phillippy (1990) feels Harrison cherry-picked and stretched timelines to make his thesis fit. She also worries Harrison missed the problem of the male gaze, an issue which Wallace (1990) conversely feels Harrison ably navigates. Nevertheless, through all these reviews, the phenomenological perspective in which Harrison claims to sit receives scant notice.

Within the first few years of publication, perhaps the most substantial criticism of Harrison's work comes from Stillinger (1990). Stillinger ultimately finds the work provocative and important but is left wondering on what ground Harrison ultimately means to stand regarding Beatrice as Dante's inspiration. Like Phillippy (1990), Stillinger (1990) worries about Harrison's

failure to address the male gaze. His greatest criticism also contains fascinating praise: Stillinger feels Harrison displays much of the same ambivalence in his work as does Dante.

*The Body of Beatrice* is a meditation on the relations between writers and their objects, and it is haunted, like the *Vita Nuova*, by a vision of unproblematic vision: the lover's fixed gaze, the critic's extended close reading. Yet the *claim* to unproblematic vision can obscure, as in this title, the very object of vision. Such an eclipse seems to inspire, in both books, writing that is by turns feverishly speculative and eloquently incisive. *The Body of Beatrice* is valuable for its paradoxes, for its thoughtful playfulness with academic forms, and for its perceptive close readings; if its vision of truth is less satisfying, it is at least true to the fixations of the *Vita Nuova*. (p. 404)

A far more full-throated criticism of Harrison's phenomenology comes later from Franke (2011), but will receive attention with Franke's works below.

### ***Dante's phenomenology of being***

The second major work is Took's *Dante's phenomenology of being* (2000), a masterful synthesis of existential phenomenology and Scholastic theology. Took offers a structure-of-being rooted in the nature of experience itself. He makes a powerful case for the recovery of Christian Scholasticism and the examination of Dante as far more than poet and moralist, but an important philosopher for all times.

Took's (2000) work is a dense, narrated outline exercising an existential phenomenological distillation of Dante's perspectives in the *Commedia*. Fundamentally, the work grows out of an existential phenomenological application—by way of Gadamer and Heidegger—of Augustine's idea of greater and lesser being, paralleled to authentic versus

inauthentic being. Falling into things is to fall away from God, dangerously near to but never fully into nothingness. In short, ethics, theology, and ontology are indistinguishable.

Like Asay (2014) in his dissertation discussed below, Took (2000) places central importance on Dante not dissolving into the mystic numinous. Harrison (1988) implies this point as well in *The body of Beatrice*. For Took (2000), Dante is always firmly *there* in his specificity—transformed, but always human in his existence. This includes, importantly, that alterity never dissolves. Again, the relationship to otherness transforms, matures, and becomes fuller, but alterity remains to the very furthest frontiers of Paradise. And this encounter with otherness becomes the communion and the heart of Dante’s ongoing engagement with his topic, his reader, and himself.

The thereness to which Took (2000) speaks is not a naïve access to a transcendent here-and-now. Took carefully structures how being stretches ahead of itself in teleology, beside itself in self-scrutiny, and many other configurations. As Took states, the Poet is committed to, “the description and dramatization of being under the aspect of its manifestness, of the forms-under-which it ‘gives’ itself to the mind as knowing” (p. viii). Although Harrison (DeBruyn, 2009) may proclaim a deep affinity to Heidegger, Took (2000) is far closer to the Bavarian philosopher’s early existential-phenomenological works in his enterprise and presentation.

### ***The phenomenology of frames in Chaucer, Dante and Boccaccio***

The third major work linking Dante and phenomenology is Asay’s 2014 dissertation. To guide his examination of Medieval authors—Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer—Asay chooses the idea of frame narratives. These are grounding narratives that create a space for stories within stories. In these tales, the telling itself is at issue. Asay states “the framed word acts both to push us out of the frame into our own temporality and to draw us into fictional times and spaces” (p. iv).

Without using the term, Asay courts the imaginal, noting how we become more aware of the fiction-making in our own lives when facing these narratives-within-narratives.

From Husserl and Fink to Heidegger to Bergson and to Levinas, Asay (2014) uses the genealogy of 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology to interrogate the Augustinian idea of *Presence*—that is, the present moment, the presence of the object, and the very idea of present-ness. For Asay, we all find ourselves negotiating “relationships to a presence from which [we] have always already slid away” (p. 29). Rather than placing alterity in people’s encounters in the lived world, Asay places otherness in the “presence that refuses their approach even as it hurtles them into historical being” (p. 30).

Asay’s (2014) real goal is to give the reader fresh eyes to read Augustine and Medieval mystics who saw God as Presence. Bridging 1700 years or more of philosophy, Asay notes that the methodology to approach presence must be tangential since, although human subjects are always responding to presence, they cannot actually perceive it. Therefore, cutting through all his 20<sup>th</sup> century references is this same pervasive enduring inability to know time and being in their truth because of human’s “normal intellectual habits” (p. 37). Appealing to Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius’s sense of presence, Asay sees yearning permeating our lives. Those who seek this presence “progressively record the poignancy of the presence that is other to themselves” (p. 42). Asay, thus, sets up Dante’s own struggles throughout his writings, especially with the language of exiles and pilgrims.

Asay’s (2014) thesis is that his Medieval subjects, but especially Dante, create narratives which embody the otherwise abstruse discourses of Medieval mystics and theologians. By creating these framed stories, he sees these authors admitting, “the inescapability of lived existence, and they work to locate transcendence within that existence rather than outside it” (p.

56). Asay sees an “incarnational poetics” (p. 56) in which Dante’s audacity becomes critical. By spatializing Paradise, Asay feels Dante “reintegrated time and presence” (p. 60).

Presence is lodged within every significant experience, just beyond the horizon... we only approach that horizon, however, when we fall under the erotic spell presented to us by some object in the physical world—in Dante’s case, his beloved, Beatrice. (pp. 61-62)

Dante’s goal is to extend this ‘erotic spell’ to every object, making them mirrors of the divine. God is no longer opposed to matter. Rather, matter comes to tell the stories by which “we approach the infinite generativity of presence” (p. 64). When every object can be intentional, Asay says one achieves “[t]he beatific vision” (p. 64) in which the specificity, the uniqueness of every experience, every object unfurls in an endless drive to the horizons of being. Thus, in Dante, “Sin became salvation; the tendency of objects, in and for themselves, to absorb our attention became the means by which we transcended our limited perception of them to glimpse the horizon of the divine” (p. 65). In Asay one can see themes from both Augustine, most explicitly, but also Francis. Through attending to the call within the world, that is God’s creation, one can come into more abundant life. Again, this is not some dissolution into the divine; but a call to the lived world in its specificity, in its instantiation. And if this is true of Dante’s searing transcendent visions in Paradise, it is also true of the sufferings of Hell. Asay notes how the *contrapasso*—the perversely appropriate punishments in the *Inferno*—are powerful expression of the world the characters narrated for themselves (p. 81).

Through all of his interpretations, Asay (2014) keeps a firm grip on the central role of language—of poesis—in this project. “The same presence [Dante] encounters [in Paradise] is available in any space when we hold the aesthetics of language in constant tension with its meaning” (p. 88). And the holding of this tension then leads to the realization of any identity as

secondary: who I take myself up to be is a sediment from the presence-longing solution of experience. Asay concludes that Dante “recognizes poetry as what it always was: a representation, which fundamentally assumes the absence of whatever it represents” (p. 108). For Asay, this pilgrimage of conversion—Dante’s journey—is how the soul progressively attunes itself to presence.

### **The Contributions of Franke**

Although Harrison’s *Body of Beatrice* (1988) may have inaugurated the full-voiced examination of Dante from a phenomenological perspective, Harrison’s scholarship has since moved on to other areas of study. Like John Took, William Franke is among the world’s leading Dante scholars who read Dante’s works as existential and phenomenological discourses. Rooted in theology and apophatic spirituality, Franke’s works go well beyond the Florentine and seamlessly integrate Continental, Scholastic, theological, and hermeneutic/phenomenological themes together. Franke, however, continues to return to Dante as a central focus or aspect of his ongoing publications. His 1991 dissertation *Dante’s divinatory hermeneutic: Towards a poetics of religious revelation*, for which Robert Pogue Harrison was a reader, sets the tone for many of his subsequent works.

If one loosens the definition of phenomenology, the researcher would face the satisfying task of reading much of Franke’s total output over the last 25 or more years to understand the nuances of his examination of Dante’s phenomenology. As can be seen in one of his most recent books, *The Revelation of Imagination* (2015), in his discussion of Augustine, Franke is weaving themes of the acts of writing and reading, stretching toward the ineffable, and memory and interiority in a way that deeply indicts the convenience of separate academic disciplines and speaks to a phenomenology of revelation. Perhaps the most important point is that, for Franke,

meaning-making is primary, if not originary. That is, he transcends the subject/object split as well as the matter/mind debate by refocusing his reader on hermeneutics. Outside of phenomenological and imaginal circles this shift is likely inconceivable; but Franke consistently presents a vision of experience as the process of meaning-making. Franke's stance speaks to a powerful current within the world of phenomenological literature. Nevertheless, although he makes frequent reference to hermeneutics in a way that the reader might profitably see as a species of phenomenology, he does make discrete and specific references to phenomenology in some of his discussions of Dante. Thus, for the purposes of this chapter, the focus will remain on the explicit references to Dante and phenomenology.

***Dante's interpretive journey (1996).***

The idea that a reciprocal illumination can exist between Dante and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, Heidegger and Gadamer for instance, is core to Franke's 1996 text. Franke furthermore asserts that the specificity of Dante's historicity—often criticized as curtailing any claim to transcendence—is the very means, perhaps the only means, by which Dante can achieve any stretching toward transcendence. He explains that,

Dante presents the supreme and absolute truth of Christianity, which his poem would propound, in a way that makes it indissociable from the story of his own individual search and journey. The way of understanding put in practice in Dante's work, as in all works of interpretation, consists in finding oneself in the midst of what is to be understood and so understanding oneself and it in relation to each other. (p. 4)

In a toothsome appendix (pp. 113-118) Franke (1996) establishes his *bona fides* as an existential-phenomenologist. In the preceding chapter, Franke had established that the hermeneutic project pervades the entirety of Dante's *Commedia*. Like DeMonticelli (2000),

Franke (1996) analyzes *Inferno*, Canto IX and its direct address to those of ‘sound intellects’ as a key moment in Dante’s hermeneutic project. Thus, in this appendix, Franke begins by noting that the hermeneutic stance to apply to Dante’s work is not a cypher, explanation, or mere allegory; rather it “consists in disclosing, literally unveiling, something that can be seen, some phenomena” (p. 113). Franke states that this is Dante’s hermeneutics. Franke does not contrast this hermeneutic phenomenology to the primacy of perception; rather, he challenges, in concert with his reading of Meleau-Ponty, the idea that perception is ever naïve. We see, embody, and live our understandings. Thus, Dante challenges us to see aright so we may live and understand aright. In undoing ‘common-sense’ or unexamined assumptions that constitute our experience, Dante brings us to the heart of phenomenology all the more adamantly.

Meditating on Dante’s frequent and nuanced use of the verb ‘to appear,’ Franke (1996) sees a shift from 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology, which equated phenomena to mere appearance, to Heidegger’s early work in which what is hidden by appearance becomes constitutive of that very appearance. More pointedly, Franke clearly explains that to discuss phenomena is to discuss being. Heidegger asserts that being itself is that which we have in question, but it is a profoundly anxiety-provoking question. Thus, inauthentic but temporarily distracting projects that cover over that there ever was a question dominate most of our lives most of the time. These distractions and misdirection are at stake in our taking up of our experience. The phenomena, and thus the question of our being, become obscured by our seizing upon the objects of our perception. Thus, Franke emphasizes that the difficult hermeneutic work of uncovering becomes essential. This is the very phenomenology in which he views Dante partaking. Being itself is the revelation, it is the showing itself from itself. Ironically, the ‘things themselves,’ if unexamined in the very way in which they show themselves, obscure being and showing. Being is lost and

the very question of being considered pointless or tautological when such seemingly-obvious objects of inquiry distract our attention.

Franke's (1996) phenomenology puts meaning at stake. Being shows itself to be the meaning-making and the meaning. And, therefore, Franke is able to smoothly bridge a phenomenology rooted in ontology—the being of beings—to the 'presencing' or Presence of Augustine. That is, one recovers the wonder and awe when being no longer sits as a banal, Cartesian *res extensa*, but a vibrant ongoing and unfolding taking-up-the-question-of-being—which is each person's state of being. Thus, being-there or being-in-the world, Heidegger's *dasein*, can only be encountered in its specificity. And, in our specificity, each of us provisionally, hermeneutically takes up our own being; which, in our constant provisionality, is inherent to being itself—understanding, interpreting, revising.

Thus, Franke (1996) can read Dante's audacious move of inserting himself into cosmic matters as less a matter of narcissism and more an elevation of the ontological to the primary matter of human expression. The specific human life is not only worthy of such elevated discourse, not only demands it, but life is, moreover—whether overtly acknowledged or not—these very efforts of expression and understanding.

Literality, Franke (1996) states, distances us from the real questions behind the seeming reality of things. Franke reclaims Husserl's epoché, the bracketing of the natural attitude. The natural attitude that assumes the being of things can now be seen as an abstraction that distracts one from the abiding reality of the question of being. Instead, the epoché enables a new, more authentic perspective. "[B]y giving up our preconceived notions about what is real we can become consciously participant in the actual self-revelation and realization of Being" (p. 116).

This is not essentialism. Being is not a destination nor an object. Thus, one must speak in terms of revelation and not discovery. In this way, the stuff of experience precedes any subject or object—terms that are derivative of various stances by which we take up phenomena.

The breakthrough of phenomenology is enacted in a primordial way by Dante's project of writing a poem whose fiction is that it is not a fiction... But this turns it immediately into a sort of reality, the reality of what shows itself. (Franke, 1996, p. 116)

And if being is not to be a thing among things discovered, then it also cannot be some code or further reference to another more abiding truth.

The phenomena has a reality of its own independent of what it signifies, and this reality is fully manifest in it... the phenomena is the open manifestation of Being... What is transformed in phenomenology and, I propose, in Dante's gnoseological method and presuppositions are the relations between immanence and transcendence of what is known as real or true with respect to the phenomena that manifest it... Similarly, if Dante claims in the world of his poem to reveal the true world of Christian faith, not only to comment upon Christian revelation but to mediate it more directly, to make it occur historically, then the Christian truth must be capable of being manifest immanently within the phenomenon that the Divine Comedy is or can become in reading. (p. 117)

In establishing this link, Franke firmly makes the phenomenology of reading itself the event. The reader's understanding, the demand that the reader make sense in his or her own way in the face of Dante's work, is not accidental. Franke makes a case for an existential *Lectio Divina*. Franke contends that Dante cuts close enough to the existential-phenomenological project that the reader cannot avoid this hermeneutic taking-up.

Dante's hermeneutic injunction, even with its didactic accent, by exhorting the reader to *look* at some phenomenon even while a superficial looking is exactly the danger hermeneusis must avoid, illustrates what amounts to a "phenomenological" type of hermeneusis... What Heidegger and Dante both urge us to see is not any new object or field of objects, but rather the meaning and truth of what we already see objectively, and ultimately the meaning of Being. This truth reveals itself within the horizon of a specific temporality that for Dante is constitutive of Christian conversion. (p. 118)

This topic of Christian conversion occupies the next chapter which contains an application (1996, pp. 138-139) of Franke's existential-phenomenology to Dante's first struggle in the *Inferno*. Lost in the dark woods, Dante wants to gain some perspective and hopes to see the sun to get his bearings. He sets to climbing a hill but is quickly thwarted by three fearsome beasts—a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. Interpreters often gloss these creatures as historical references of Dante's time or representations of his own vices. Franke, however, sets to the expression and the experience Dante offers his readers. In particular, he notes the interwoven themes of appearances and temporarily. Franke sees in Dante's failure to achieve the hilltop an expression of an inauthentic entrapment in objects and the inevitable anxiety of this stance. One's temporality becomes a futile exercise in miserliness trying to grasp fleeting time and deceptive objects, constantly leaning further away from being.

**"Dante's 'New Life' and the New Testament: An essay on the hermeneutics of revelation" (2011).**

To begin his essay, Franke (2011) places Harrison's *Body of Beatrice* (1988) as a founding text that,

raises speculation on the meaning of Dante's prosimetric masterpiece to a level of reflection where it can become philosophically and religiously relevant for us today. I find *The Body of Beatrice's* argumentation profound and compelling, as well as exquisite, yet I am not persuaded by its conclusions. (Franke, 2011, p. 338)

Franke then spends the rest of his essay carefully establishing links in his chain of logic whereby poetry becomes primary. The radical nature of his thesis only becomes fully apparent by the end.

Franke (2011) introduces an emerging stream of biblical exegesis in which core poems—e.g., “*The Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, *Nunc dimittas*, and the *Pater Noster*” (p. 340) but also Hebrew Bible sources such as Moses' or Deborah's song, the Psalms, as well as the prophets—can be viewed as core or Urtexts from which the Bible's prose narratives spun. That is, the early Christian church first organized around these often-ecstatic poems and their revelatory nature and celebrated them liturgically. The stories, the theology, and the dogma came later and are, thus, secondary. Franke shifts to the reader of the Gospels and prepares his reader for the argument regarding Dante's New Life. “The gospels are really about a miracle of faith within the lives of individuals in the Christian community, and only as such is the outward ‘history’ they tell susceptible to being comprehended” (p. 343). For those interested in the nuances of this radical revision of the Bible's provenance, Franke offers compelling evidence and hints at arguments to be found expanded in his later works. For the purposes of this examination, the key point is that the idea of the primacy of poetry supplants unmediated experience or even perception. Poetry expresses, induces, and is an awareness of a flow of experience too easily masked behind explanations rife with unexamined assumptions.

In his reading of Harrison (1988), Franke (2011) sees the explanatory and narrative elements of Dante's prosimetrum form elevated above the lyric poems. In this move, Harrison

(1988) would introduce the teleological and temporal elements so critical to his existential argument. Franke (2011), however, questions if the interspersed prose of the *Vita Nuova* truly achieve this end. For Franke, Dante is narrating a conversion story rooted in the experience of revelation. Thus, explanations are a sediment only relevant in its capacity to point back to the revelation—the poetry itself. Although Dante would not have been aware of the radical stream of Biblical exegesis Franke outlines, Franke is clear that the approach to faith, liturgy, and the Bible indigenous to Dante’s world was one of revelation, not static explanation.

Thus, Beatrice is a revelation of Christ. Undoubtedly, Christological implications permeate Dante’s work; but Franke (2011) goes further. ‘The Event’—the revelation—is the irruption from which our meaning-making tumbles away. Beatrice cannot become a Christ if Jesus as Christ is not first known through the searing poetry that Franke posits as the core of Christian scripture. Who Jesus *is* comes before who Jesus *was*. Conveying the shift from the historical to the phenomenological, Franke explains:

A chronicle of facts alone about this person could not reveal the person’s extraordinary significance. The ‘biographical’ narratives subsequently elaborated are keyed to texts which do not state facts but convey, figuratively and lyrically, the meaning of a new life... This existentially verified, lived miracle, which is the presupposition for beginning the story, is first cast into a symbolic form ‘lyrically’ felt to embody and communicate this new and heightened life. Transposing this figural/lyrical core into a dimension of narrative, the book begins, then, with a miracle story, such as the annunciation of the angel to Mary or the apparition of Beatrice to Dante. (p. 344)

Franke goes so far as to speculate that Dante’s prose explanations may even be fanciful and, regardless, they are secondary to the lyric or revelation.

Franke's (2011) argument profoundly parallels both his phenomenological sympathies as well as his devotion to apophatic spirituality. Poetry records the sounds we make in the face of the inexpressible—the revelation. The ineffable surrounds, undergirds, indicts, and stretches our experience. Thus, the Gospels and the *Vita Nuova* stand on the same ground:

The *Vita nuova* and the gospel are both predicated on a common assumption that there is a subjective dimension of experience in which alone the deep reality and meaning of history or of a life-history, or even of just an event, can be perceived. Such meaning, in both cases, declared itself to memory and could be adequately represented only by a form of witness which projected an inner experience of miracle into the idiosyncratic diction of poetic language. Dante's acute awareness of this irreducibly subjective and personal aspect of the advent of divinity and salvation shows clearly in his constant recourse to categories of dream, vision, and imagination in relating every one of Beatrice's epiphanies. (p. 347)

Franke asserts that Dante clearly demonstrates this commitment in his ongoing use of the verb 'to appear' throughout his works. For Franke, the objective reality that one has subjective experience forms an existential ground. This assertion is also synonymous with phenomenological reality. The reader could be forgiven for thinking of Jung's repeated use of the phrase 'objective psyche.'

With this ground laid, Franke (2011) can assert his objections to specific conclusions in Harrison's work (1988). In particular, Franke notes, "All this talk of appearance might induce us to make a distinction, as Robert Harrison does, between the phenomenal and the noumenal. But against this, I submit that Dante's language has not an epistemological but rather a hermeneutic import" (p. 349). Meaning-making exists in the matrix of each person's existential condition,

whether in, for instance, its indeterminacy, mortality, or confrontations with its edges of knowability. Thus, the ‘thing in itself’ that is supposed to exist beyond or before perception—as implied by the term ‘noumenal’—is actually part of the wrestling with meaning-making. For Franke, as discussed at the outset of this section, hermeneutics is phenomenology. Our meaning-making is our experience. Therefore, Franke expresses concern that Harrison posits being beyond meaning-making—an argument that cuts to the heart of Heidegger’s existential-phenomenology.

What then does Franke (2011) do with the objects of discussion? What of Husserl’s ‘things themselves’? Franke’s answer appeals to Augustine’s *Presence*, stating “we are in a universe governed by a central transcendent Signified which turns everything else into signifiers of itself” (p. 352). Because Franke sees Harrison bracketing off the religious elements of Dante’s *New Life*, this theocentric ontology will, necessarily, be problematic for Harrison. The ‘thing in itself’ for Harrison (1988) is in the title of his work—it is Beatrice’s body perpetually veiled. Franke (2011) repositions the encounter and asks the reader to consider the very ‘presence-ing’ of that body, even to the extent that the reader may wonder if Franke would consider the real referent to be the Body of Christ. Franke admits that reintegrating a discourse of faith into Dante scholarship does not accord with well-established currents in Dantology, noting,

I think Harrison’s biases are likely to be shared more generally among American Dante scholars and literary critics than my own. Nevertheless, the hermeneutics of faith should not be lost sight of in the interpretation of an author for whom a religious faith was paramount, as it ostensibly was for Dante – and even if this were only ostensibly so. (p. 354)

If Dante is to be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it will not be in a discourse sterilized of its religious elements.

In accord with Harrison (1988), Franke concurs that the experience of reading must be approached ontologically—how one reads and is changed in the reading will rest on existential grounds. Therefore, the meaning-making of the reader is an existential act addressing a work whose ground is fundamentally existential.

I agree with Harrison that we must understand Dante's representations ontologically, but this is not because of what they *represent*, purportedly a real woman, but rather because of what they are: artifacts of an existential-poetic act. Dante's experience of a real woman, if that is what it was, comes to light in literature. (p. 354)

Franke's point is provocative. In his view, Harrison (1988) seeks to express the experience to which the writing refers. Franke (2011) seeks to remind us that all of Dante's works—and Franke's essay—are literature and expression itself. The expressing is the primary function—one of meaning-making.

Franke (2011) becomes more pointed in his critique. He questions if one can honestly speak of the 'primacy of perception'—hearkening to Merleau-Ponty's work of the same name—without ignoring the entanglement of subjectivities and objectivities in which meaning evolves.

Thus, Franke summarizes,

the meaning of human existence can never simply be perceived; it must rather be decided and enacted. Understanding revelation in existential terms need not stop with the primacy of perception, as Harrison would have it, but leads on to the risk and decision of interpretation, such as it has been lived and relived by believers in all ages. (pp. 355-356)

The theological is not an addition for Franke. In its yearning, questioning, indeterminacy, and lived convictions, the theological stance is the fullest expression of the flow of experience.

Franke (2011) repeatedly challenges his reader to consider what one actually beholds in reading—entirely appropriate for reading an author like Dante who wrestles with seeing. What the reader beholds is writing that is a making of meaning. This text challenges readers to assess their own meaning-making. Regardless of what the text may refer to, the text itself is a making and remaking of meaning—the same process in which the reader engages. As Dante begins the *Vita Nuova*, he refers the reader to the ‘book of his memory,’ not a discerning review of documentary evidence and differing accounts of his life. Franke states, “in some sense the ‘original’ event must equally be considered to be writing itself – a sort of incarnation of the Word in Dante’s individual existence” (p. 356). Thus, a more fundamental moment—an event, the Event—is at stake in Franke’s reading of Dante. This event fractally pervades Dante’s, Franke’s, and readers’ experience—“it consists in the verbalization of experience or being” (p. 357).

Franke (2011) sees that Dante dodges the endless hall of self-referential mirrors—text about text about text...—by remaining firmly oriented toward transcendence. For Dante, these are the expanding frontiers of ineffability. Franke sees Dante preceding the inveigling morass of Cartesian subjectivity and thus able to attest to the inescapable encounter with alterity. Though Franke reads Harrison (1988) to raise these issues, Franke (2011) remains dissatisfied with the answers offered. Instead, Franke returns to Dante’s religious context.

Not knowing the other as an object of perception but relating through the word to an otherness that cannot be directly perceived is the way of transcendence proper to Dante’s

Christian medieval culture based especially on the technique of *lectio divinis* – the meditative and interpretive reading of sacred texts. (p. 358)

Repeatedly, Franke offers the privileged pre-modern grounding for Dante as a foil to not only his successors, but Harrison's (1988) interpretations. Franke (2011) places the revelation firmly within the pages of the *Vita Nuova* rather than deferring it to the future, as he characterizes Harrison (1988) doing. The ecstasy of the lyric is the means of this revelation.

Agreeing with Harrison (1988), Franke (2011) sees profound teleological elements and for him, in his re-claiming of the Christian content, they are equally eschatological and existential. Beatrice's absence presents the same dilemma as does Christ's after the Resurrection and Ascension. But it is only in Christ's absence that the longing for his Presence becomes the foundation of faith. Thus, Franke remains adamant that one ought not to reach too far beyond the bounds of the *Vita Nuova* to understand the revelation.

Finally, Franke (2011) challenges his reader to break down overly-convenient disciplinary and scholarly objectivity. He demands his reader come to terms with how life is lived when he states,

We can decide to believe what the text witnesses to and thereby risk losing our scholarly objectivity – or we can decide to bracket such religious conviction and decision. But in either case our decision will radically determine the text as we encounter it and the possibilities of understanding and self-understanding that the text holds out to us. (p. 359)

And in doing so, Franke places Dante as a prophet and visionary of what Franke places at the core of Christianity.

That transcendent divinity should condescend to reveal itself in incarnate form was the germ and genius of the religion for which Dante became an ideologue and propagandist – not to say a prophet, which would be to espouse his biases and my own. (p. 359)

Thus, the fullest phenomenology is revelation—always and already. Religious discourse, setting aside political and cultural appropriations, contains an invitation to take up the meaning-making that is the stuff of experience in such a way as to free one to see the light shining at the limits of common understanding—the scintillating frontiers that are the ground of being.

For Franke (2011), whether in the Hebrew or Christian Bibles or the texts of the Florentine, the poetic is primary. Thus, the event, the revelation implicit in all phenomena, is a poetic one. Franke states it bluntly that, “poetic figuration derives from existential reality” (p. 361). The fullest meaning will not be found in explanation. Meaning is meaning-making and Franke reads the lyric poetry of the *Vita Nuova* as so profoundly rooted in life as to effect a transformation of the genre and the reader.

### **“Dante studies after the theological turn”**

In a 2018 essay for the *Oxford Critical Theory Review*, Franke addresses the return of a theological lens by which to examine Dante. Of course, the theology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not the theology of Dante’s era. The theological shift to which Franke speaks leads him to review several important works defining new shared territory between theology and literary theory relative to the Florentine. Of note for this current chapter is Franke’s citation of the work of French philosopher Janicaud (1937-2002) in which phenomenology and theology find shared discourse. Franke also uses this essay to praise the work of Webb, who examines the implications of Dante’s challenging stance regarding personhood in *Paradiso*. Franke notes that,

Webb unobtrusively works some of the weightiest traditions of thinking about persons, as well as some of the newer knowledge from the cognitive psychology and neurosciences, into her probes of Dante's incomparable phenomenological exploration of the experience of being a person. (p. 3)

That is, in the face of the seductive anti-gravity of theological abstractions, Dante's humanity endures and transforms through his fealty to phenomenological description.

### **Conclusion to Franke's Contributions**

In personal communications (2018) Franke has revealed that his current project imagines what a modernity growing out of Dante would have looked like instead of his contemporary Duns Scotus. Scotus offers a 'univocal' being that enables access to all subjects through what would become the scientific world view. Franke notes that the 'crisis of representation' plagued both men, but Dante's 'emphasis on ineffability' offers edges to rationality and being that modernity's materialism cannot acknowledge. Thus, Franke extends this current chapter's thesis of Dante as a protophenomenologist to a complete provenance of an alternative epistemology and ontology.

Franke courts the imaginal frequently in his writings, but his is not a Jungian nor Hillmanian legacy. The primacy of theology cuts through all his works and a particular type of theophany is the ground of being he offers his reader.

With the major works that narrate the encounter between Dante and phenomenology summarized, this essay now turns to individual chapters and articles.

### **Articles linking Dante and Phenomenology**

This section chronologically presents articles, essays, and book chapters that circumscribe phenomenological elements in the creation, intention, and reading of Dante's works.

### **“The Vita nuova and Richard of St. Victor's Phenomenology of Vision”**

Perhaps the earliest work to link the two topics is a 1974 article by Nolan. The examination centers on a moment in the *Vita Nuova* when the Lord of Love appears to Dante and asks Dante to put aside all simulacra—a word most associated with false idols in Biblical and theological literature. Dante is to go deeper into experience rather than merely recount or symbolically interpret. The Lord mournfully follows with a description of how Dante must necessarily dwell at the circumference of the circle while the Lord is the center. Nolan interprets this as a foreshadowing of Dante's ascension into *Paradiso*; however, a reader could be forgiven for also reading this as instructions for Dante to dwell more fully with his current experience and leave metaphysical abstractions for those who dwell in heavenly realms.

Nolan (1974) draws upon the mystical phenomenology of Richard of St. Victor, who died in 1173, to create a strongly theological gloss of Dante's early work, placing it much more with Medieval religious works than love poetry. Nolan tracks the development of Dante's 'seeing'—both externally and internally—in the work. Contemporary to Hillman's earliest publications, Nolan's essay bears a strongly imaginal/archetypal perspective, perhaps best placing it with Corbin's examinations of Sufism. Nevertheless, Nolan is in the Singletonian school of Dante interpretation—that is Christian symbolist—and tends to deal in carnal versus higher love dichotomies rather than a transformation of love that would be truer to Augustinian and Thomistic theology.

Nolan (1974) challenges her modern readers to decide what to do with mystic visionaries: are they psychotic? hyperbolic? or, as Nolan suggests, must the sincere interpreter move to a phenomenology that renders the accounts 'true.' Nolan sees a clear phenomenology thriving in Medieval mystics. Thus, Nolan tracks the transformation of Dante's visions from Beatrice's

crimson drape to the ineffable frontier at the end of the work. She portrays the visions as ‘sacramental’—a word that, for her, is synonymous with phenomenological—that is, true to a lived world.

### **“Medieval Studies after Derrida after Heidegger”**

The next work to contain phenomenological insights into Dante is a chapter by Shoaf from 1989 that arguably presents the case for the reading of Dante as a phenomenological experience of meaning-making. Significantly, Shoaf begins his essay with a vector of Heidegger’s thought that others do not emphasize in their discussions of Dante; but, with which Franke would clearly concur in his multiple writings especially in emphasizing the primacy of poetry (2011). Drawing from Heidegger’s *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Shoaf quotes, “It is in words and language that things first come into being and are” (p. 9). The primacy of language, of signification, a move so instinctual to postmodern thinkers, takes on fresh significance when considering Dante’s quest to create expression in the face of the ineffable. Nevertheless, as Shoaf notes, although Dante’s literary world overflows with interrelationships much as the postmodern condition leaves the subject today; unlike today, Providence guides Dante’s world. Regardless, in both eras, Shoaf finds Heidegger, “and, in particular, his instruments, especially useful just because they seek the “relation of all relations” or language” (p. 10).

In order to begin his quest to liberate Dante from doctrinaire interpretations, Shoaf (1989) extensively quotes from the “Epistle to Can Grande.” Regardless of debates of authorship, the work is popularly attributed to Dante and it serves as an introduction and interpretive guide to the *Commedia*, and the *Paradiso* in particular. Shoaf quotes Dante: “It should be understood that there is not just a single sense in this work: it might rather be called polysemous, that is, having

several senses” (p. 13). Even Dante’s various levels of analysis create frictions and contrasts to one another in what Shoaf poses as a parallel to Derrida’s *différance*.

Shoaf’s (1989) most abiding point is a re-focus on the experience of reading as a primary act. To read is to be made and to make. Reading is not an exercise in uncovering a unified intention, but a play of possibility—veiling and unveiling. Thus, the very experience of reading becomes a phenomenon—becomes *the* phenomena. Shoaf states:

And yet, if we attend carefully to what Dante has written, we can see, I think, how this fullness of Scripture “is” emptiness (Derrida would write this “is” *sous rature* [“under erasure”]); the extra-literal meanings clearly are to be occupied, filled, by each reader, with himself; and to be so occupied, they must, just as clearly, in some sense, be empty—to be so applicable to a given individual’s discrete, historical situation, these meanings must be full only in such a way as to be empty. So also with the extra-literal meaning of Dante’s poem itself: it is empty as full insofar as each of us can insert himself into the articulations of rewards and punishments—find himself or herself in a type that is also an individual. In both cases, in short, and to make the crucial point, to read the text is to write it, is to write oneself into it and ultimately after it. Every reading of these texts, every medieval reading, is a supplementary writing of the texts. And what fullness there is does not obtain without its answering emptiness. (p. 14)

In reading, one is also, thus, being written by the text as one also writes it. One becomes a story, a poem—in accord with Asay’s (2014) observations regarding frame narratives. Finally, Shoaf (1989) even goes so far as to link—in Caputo-like fashion—mystical emptying to postmodern deconstruction.

Just as frontiers of ineffability structure Harrison's (1988) readings, Shoaf (1989) calls his readers to encounter emptying and emptiness in order that the play of meaning may remain fresh and vital. Shoaf states, "It is to disseminate anew possibilities of perceived relations in texts or words whose usage has hardened their fictionality or metaphoricity into a pseudo-proper, a meaningless, meaningfulness" (p. 15). In this way, Shoaf advocates, without using the word, an epoché around previous interpretations.

Traditional readings, for Shoaf (1989), block any real meaning, since meaning is always personal and must involve a simultaneous emptying and filling. Like DeMonticelli (2000) seeing her as a figure of rigid rationalism, Shoaf (1989) cites that becoming locked into interpretive paradigms becomes the curse of Medusa appearing on the ramparts of Dis. Shoaf observes that,

In Dante, Medusa is a figure of literalism, of the letter that kills (2 Cor 3:6), and correspondingly, of a kind of reading which insists on the letter and resists figuration, that reading which refuses to lift the veil of, indeed, if need be, to rend the veil, to see underneath. (p. 16)

Shoaf beautifully illustrates through an extended metaphor from Canto XXIV of the *Inferno* how allowing the text to unfold without the reader rigidly clutching interpretive biases is critical.

1     In that part of the young year when the sun  
       begins to warm its locks beneath Aquarius  
       and nights grow shorter, equaling the days,  
  
       when hoarfrost mimes the image of his white  
  
 5     sister upon the ground—but not for long,  
       because the pen he uses is not sharp—

the farmer who is short of fodder rises  
and looks and sees the fields all white, at which  
he slaps his thigh, turns back into the house,

10 and here and there complains like some poor wretch  
who doesn't know what can be done, and then  
goes out again and gathers up new hope

on seeing that the world has changed its face  
in so few hours, and he takes his staff

15 and hurries out his flock of sheep to pasture. (Mandelbaum translation)

Dante's pen, frost's pen, the farmer, the farmer's misinterpretation of frost as snow in Dante's simile, and the reader all participate in a complex and transformative dance of shifting interpretations. Shoaf opines that Dante himself advocates for this very practice. This awareness of shifts in meaning-making is, of course, entirely authentic to phenomenology, although Shoaf does not use that word. Shoaf further bolsters this emptying of text and reader by citing Augustine's realization that readers of the bible may find very real truths not intended by the scripture. Shoaf quotes Augustine stating, "I should prefer to write it in such a way that a reader could find re-echoed in my words whatever truths he was able to apprehend" (p. 23). Shoaf summarizes his point with the axiom that "we humans come to truth only by wandering. For Derrida such wandering consists in detours. For Augustine, it is pilgrimaging, to the Truth who is no one's private property" (p. 23).

This essay (Shoaf, 1989), overarchingly, establishes that approaching Dante with postmodern sensibilities is not an imposition, but an—ironically, given Shoaf’s resistance to historical perspectives—historically authentic approach. Contained within Shoaf’s postmodern approach is a sense that an existential phenomenological perspective on Dante is not only viable but vital. Shoaf advocates not the certainties of modern inquiry, but the uncertainties of a postmodern reading and establishes the paternity of this freedom in Dante’s own works. Moreover, Shoaf asserts that the origins of this approach might well be seen more broadly as native to the medieval approach to literature.

**“On Vivacity: The Difference between Daydreaming and Imagining-Under-Authorial-Instruction”**

In 1995 Scarry published an article that seeks to discuss authors’ approaches to creating absorbing descriptions of spaces. Scarry roots her discussion in the observation that one’s own imaginations are too often quite fleeting and undeveloped, yet an author can create remarkably vivid settings for a reader. This vivacity is, however, far from universal in writing. Thus, Scarry enters into an archly phenomenological discussion of how layers, both literal and figurative, can enhance the experience of vivacity. The sunlight cast through a scrim onto an opposite wall can fix a space in a way in which a description of that wall unto itself could never do. The reader of Scarry’s essay might easily move to the crimson veil around Beatrice in *Vita Nuova*. And, although the text of the article itself has nothing directly to do with Dante, in an endnote Scarry discusses a personal correspondence with the poet Robert Pinsky, known in this context for his 1995 translation of *The Inferno*:

Robert Pinsky observes that Dante’s *Inferno* may be "a supreme example of one kind of surface passing over another, one made more solid or opaque by the sliding." ... Pinsky

calls attention to the many passages in which the ability of a physical body to displace material stones or ground is contrasted with the inability of a shade to do so. "Hell itself (and its inhabitants) is one great scrim passing over a more solid reality. Or the reverse, apparent material reality is really a scrim of transparent illusion passing over the more solid moral reality underneath". (p. 24)

Thus, Scarry's phenomenology of imagined spaces gives way to a metaphoric interpretation of the imaginal as a foundation for 'reality.' This layering of possibilities speaks to both the challenges many readers face when first encountering the *Commedia* and also the richness of the many returns to this 'polysemous' text. Dante's premodern perspective may actually turn the habitual materialism of modernity into a primacy of the imaginal that renders various derivative materialities.

### **"Fenomenologia do maravilhoso na literatura italiana"**

In a broad-reaching essay from 2011 with profuse references, Ardissimo and Scarini strike a distinctly imaginal tone without ever referencing authors from that tradition. The authors' work rests on the paradox that the fantastical in literature often seeks to speak more clearly to "dimensions of daily life and the ordinary" (p. 4) than do non-fiction or 'realistic fiction.' The authors emphasize that Dante's work stands on a fealty to everyday experience. Thus, they state, "Beatrice is, therefore, the prodigy, or the supernatural event that enters the daily life of Dante to reveal to him an unexpected dimension of existence" (p. 4). Therefore, the power of the story overcomes and transcends the stagnation of labels and pedantry of metaphysics. Ardissimo and Scarini state, "With Beatrice, Dante solves the contradiction between carnal love and spiritual love, love for Beatrice is never contrary to love for God" (p. 5). In this, the authors clearly declare that Dante identifies "Beatrice with Christ" (p. 5)—a transcendent, incarnate figure

whose reality irrupts into human lives. The parallels to Asay's 2014 dissertation and several pieces of Franke's works are strong as Ardissimo and Scarini present an intentional lived world best known through fantastical fictions. An argument some might take up against a phenomenological approach to Dante is to ask how stories rife with dreams, visions, and fantastical landscapes could be considered 'phenomenological'? Ardissimo and Scarini's essay offers a powerful reply.

### **“Body and World in Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze”**

Shores' article from 2012 rests in the most formal philosophical definition of 'phenomenology' placing it in the minority of the literature. In it, Shores pits Merleau-Ponty's canonical insistence on the unity and wholeness of experience against Deleuze's predictable emphasis on discontinuity and disruption. Shores dedicates most of the article to summarizing the integrative nature of Merleau-Ponty's project. This includes an emphasis on foreshadowing and expectation. In contrast, experience, for Deleuze as read by Shores, ought to be understood best as those elements that precisely do not fit and thus create decomposition. Shores notes, challenging a tenant of Merleau-Ponty, that neither the body nor embodied experience are adequate to hold together phenomena. Shores cites Deleuze's use of an episode from the *Inferno* to explain. In this episode, from Canto VI of the *Inferno*, Dante is surrounded by the writhing bodies of the gluttonous.

I am in the third circle, filled with cold,  
unending, heavy, and accursed rain;  
its measure and its kind are never changed.

come streaking down across the shadowed air;  
the earth, as it receives that shower, stinks.

Over the souls of those submerged beneath  
that mess, is an outlandish, vicious beast,  
15 his three throats barking, doglike: Cerberus.

His eyes are bloodred; greasy, black, his beard;  
his belly bulges, and his hands are claws;  
his talons tear and flay and rend the shades.

That downpour makes the sinners howl like dogs;  
20 they use one of their sides to screen the other—  
those miserable wretches turn and turn. (Mandelbaum translation)

Shores explains Deleuze's reading:

Rain droplets are pelting a damned soul, disrupting the composition of his skin at that location and thereby sending shock waves of decompositional forces throughout the rest of his body. Yet, to maintain his constitution, the soul turns up a new side of his body that is more able to sustain the affections. He is aware of how the rain affects him, and he thus knows how to self-affectively alter himself so to maintain his differential contact with it. Our active self-affection and adaptive interaction with the world around us is what Deleuze here calls "rhythm." (p. 203)

Shores offers further examples from Deleuze of this rhythm, for instance in the swimmer's disruption upon encountering a powerful wave. Where and what is a body that is shot through with such vectors of power? A further example comes in the mutual disruptions and alterations of two musicians improvising with each other. One can perhaps hear the echoes of that mysticism Caputo believes rests apophatically within many postmodern theorists' works as not even human bodies or souls can maintain a continuity. Thus, what can be the shredding tortures of hell, in Deleuze's example, could become the ineffable mystical blaze of Paradise.

To state it more succinctly, challenging the synesthetic holism of Merleau-Ponty, Shores (2012) characterizes Deleuze's idea of sensation as a decompositional rhythm in which disruption is what truly constitutes experience. Disruption, difference, discontinuity—these are what construct the wave of phenomena that humans blithely distort into consistent identity in Shores' gloss of Deleuze. At the same time, this Deleuze is not advocating for a physiological explanation—this is a 'body without organs.' Shores summarizes a vision in which Merleau-Ponty's synesthesia does not reign because there is no synthesis—solely 'waves of disruption' ripple through a space that will only temporarily distinguish its organ of experience but soon dissolve.

Nevertheless, the stance Shores (2012) presents from Deleuze may be more of an internecine innovation than a wholesale impugnation of Merleau-Ponty's legacy. Shores concludes:

Merleau-Ponty's theory better accounts for the ongoing constitution of phenomenal objects, the familiar things in the world around us, while Deleuze's theory better explains the intensity of any given moment of phenomenal experience. Thus, although Deleuze's model in many fundamental ways contraposes Merleau-Ponty's model, we need not

regard it as a critique of phenomenology itself, but rather as a useful contribution to phenomenology's pool of theoretical ideas. (p. 207)

With these opposing visions, might the reader not be encountering contrasting modes of lived experience? The *Inferno* undoubtedly offers ample evidence of disintegrating forces staved off only temporarily by defiance, pride, contentious story-telling to cement one's legacy in the living world, and all the other vice-ridden strategies that bolster the brittle self in hell. What then can one make of the voluntary and intentional suffering of *Purgatorio*? Is the disruption a welcome purgation of hell's inauthentic fixations? And, moreover, in *Paradiso*, the reader witnesses epic syntheses of mounting cosmic forces. Yet, here Dante still maintains some I-Thou even unto the face of the Divine, though his expressive capacities finally fail in earnest.

Although Shores (2012) remains firmly within the discourses of 20<sup>th</sup> century Continental Philosophy, Asay's (2014) radical interpolation of Augustine's ideas of presence come to mind as well in this discussion. This presence defies one's ability to capture, yet creates and drives the ability to fervently desire to reach it through one's own ontology and expression. Does Merleau-Ponty's perspective rely on a more unified self than Augustine could endorse? Alternately, do Deleuze's discontinuities bespeak a presence that is other to the assumed subjects and objects of everyday experience?

Shores' (2012) essay offers, arguably, more potential for a traditionally phenomenological analysis of the *Commedia*, even though the Dante connection is secondary and brief. The shift is more than hermeneutic, in that the phenomenologies themselves shift rather than merely the interpretive lenses. Shores' essay offers a provocative invitation for future scholars.

### **A Note of Thanks**

This chapter could not have been undertaken nor completed without the generous support of many scholars, colleagues, and friends. Professor Peter Hawkins' unparalleled insight and warmth has been incredibly helpful. In the research phase, the staff of Curry College's Levin Library under the wise leadership of Garrett Eastman and, in particular, Librarian Kimberly Doorley have been indispensable. David Goodman of Boston College and Donald Wallenfang of Walsh University both provided excellent guidance at key moments. Finally, as always, my deepest gratitude to Laura Daniels for her love, support, and honesty.

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