BEATRICE "IS NOT A WOMAN": SYMBOLIC AND REALIST INTERPRETATIONS OF DANTE'S BEATRICE IN THE 1930S[1]

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This article reappraises contextually the controversy in the 1930s between Pierre Mandonnet and Étienne Gilson about the historical existence, and intended meanings, of Dante's Beatrice. First, it situates Mandonnet's symbolic interpretation of 1935 and Gilson's realist interpretation of 1939, in relation to the animated debates about Beatrice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second, it analyses Mandonnet's interpretation of Beatrice as the Christian supernatural order, and his specific hypothesis about Dante's (failed) clerical vocation. Third, it demonstrates that Gilson's realist interpretation, despite being universally acclaimed, is deeply flawed, and underpinned by his quixotic psychological theory about poets and their muses. Fourth, it provides a comparative critique of some specific points of contention. The reconstruction of this crucial, yet neglected, controversy in Dante's reception history may invite scholars to reinterrogate the realist consensus about Beatrice, and the preference for a "historical Beatrice," that has predominated in post-war Dante studies.

Keywords: Dante, Beatrice, Pierre Mandonnet, Étienne Gilson, 1930s, reception, *Vita Nuova*, *Commedia*

I. Mandonnet, Gilson, and the Quaestio Beatricis

Pierre Mandonnet (1858-1936) and Étienne Gilson (1884-1978), two formidable Thomists and historians of medieval thought, vehemently disagreed about Dante, and about Dante's Beatrice in

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particular.[2] Gilson's celebrated *Dante et la philosophie* (1939; translated into English as *Dante the Philosopher* in 1948) is, indeed, a full-length refutation of Mandonnet's *Dante le théologien* (1935):[3]

> I have had to […] select from the debatable interpretations of Dante's thought those which, if correct, would have implied indirectly that my own was radically wrong. In the forefront was the fundamental thesis upheld by Father Mandonnet in his *Dante le théologien*. Accordingly, the reader will find it discussed with an insistence which, I fear, will be to some unpleasing. And yet anyone who has read this book knows very well that all the parts hang together and that the closely-knit fabric of its reasoning must be unravelled stitch by stitch if it is not desired that a portion which yields in one direction should still be sustained by the countless threads that link it to the remainder.[4]

Although Gilson disagrees with Mandonnet's understanding of Dante's thought as a whole, seeking to unravel it "stich by stitch," he reserves particular attention, and hardly disguised sarcasm, for Mandonnet's symbolic interpretation of Beatrice. The whole first part of Gilson's *Dante et la philosophie* (over eighty pages in the English edition) is a refutation of Mandonnet's thesis about Beatrice in ten parts, the first eight of which criticise different aspects of Mandonnet's thesis in turn. However, although Gilson's realist interpretation of Beatrice certainly won the day, it is questionable whether any of the arguments he raised against Mandonnet would have convinced his adversary had he been able to mount a response,

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[2] Mandonnet and Gilson took opposing sides in the debates about the nature of Thomism in the 1920s and 1930s, and their disagreements about Dante's thought form part of these wider, and, historically, extremely significant controversies. On this broader context, see George Corbett, "Thomists at War: Pierre Mandonnet, Étienne Gilson, and the Contested Relationship between Aquinas's and Dante's Thought (1879-2021)," *Nova et Vetera* 20.4 (Fall 2022), 1053-96. Mandonnet published short articles on Dante throughout his academic life as well as the monograph, *Dante le théologien*, in 1935, shortly before his death on 4 January 1936. Gilson published various short articles on Dante's work, and the monograph *Dante et la philosophie* in 1939; Gilson's last published book – a collection of essays – was also on Dante: *Dante et Béatrice: Études dantesques* (1974).

[3] Étienne Gilson, *Dante et la philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 1939); Id., *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. by David Moore (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948); Pierre Mandonnet, *Dante le théologien: Introduction a l'intelligence de la vie, des oeuvres et de l'art de Dante Alighieri* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1935). With Patricia Kelly, I am producing the first English edition and translation of Mandonnet's *Dante the Theologian* (forthcoming in the *Studia Traditionis Theologiae* series with Brepols). In citing Mandonnet's text here, page numbers refer to the original 1935 edition, while English translations are, with grateful permission of Patricia Kelly, from our new edition and translation of the work.

[4] Gilson, *Dante*, ix.

like Dante's Farinata, from beyond the grave.[5] Mandonnet died in January 1936, after all, and so he did not have the right of reply to Gilson's book-length critique.

In a nutshell, Gilson accuses Mandonnet of falling into T.S. Eliot's Hamlet fallacy, whereby each critic ends up interpreting Shakespeare's protagonist in his own image; in the Dantean version of the fallacy, Dante becomes a cypher for the scholar, while Beatrice becomes a cypher for the object of each scholar's own affection.[6] Mandonnet thus seeks to interpret Dante as a cleric (who perhaps had, and lost, a clerical vocation) and as a Thomist theologian (whose clerical and theological vocation ultimately finds a new poetic outlet in the *Commedia*); a celibate scholar himself, Mandonnet could not fathom that Dante might have been in love with a real woman such as Beatrice Portinari, and Beatrice must consequently, for him, be purely symbolic, the Christian supernatural order.[7] Gilson could equally be accused, nonetheless, of falling into the same Dantean fallacy, substituting for the "poet's consciousness" his own late-Romantic and psychological theories.[8] The

[5] While Mandonnet's book was neglected, largely forgotten (except as mediated through Gilson's critique itself), and never translated into English, Gilson's "brilliant raid on Dante territory" (in the words of the influential English Dante scholar Kenelm Foster) became and remains a seminal and canonical study in the field (Kenelm Foster, "Dante Studies in England, 1921-1964," *Italian Studies* 20 (1965): 1-16 (3)). See, for example, Diana Glenn, *Dante's Reforming Mission and Women in the Comedy* (Leicester: Troubador, 2008). Referencing in the main text the "purely symbolic" interpretation (134), Glenn refers in the notes only to Gilson's refutation of Mandonnet (219n.29: "Mandonnet's claim that Beatrice is an abstraction is pilloried by Étienne Gilson.")

[6] T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood, Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber, 1997; first published 1920), 81-87.

[7] Gilson, *Dante*, 2: "This argument introduces us straight away to Father Mandonnet's method. A Thomistic theologian, he argues frankly as a Thomist, as if it were understood in advance that Dante himself could not have reasoned otherwise." See also *Ibid.*, 12, 37, and 282-88. Ironically, Mandonnet's depiction of Dante's failed clerical vocation more clearly parallels the life of Bruno Nardi (1884-1968) who, aged sixteen, became a Franciscan brother, assuming the name Brother Angelo. A year later, he left the religious life, having lost his vocation. Nonetheless, as becoming a secular priest was the only way open to him to pursue his desired studies in philosophy, he entered seminary in 1902, becoming a priest in 1907. After doctoral studies in Louvain and further study in Berlin, he left the priesthood in 1914, and married in 1921.

[8] The epigraph which prefaces Gilson's study is Michele Barbi's "golden rule" for Dantean interpretation: "Ciò che è fuori della coscienza del poeta a noi non può importare" (Gilson, *Dante*, v). See also *Ibid.,* 295: "What must we do to get out of the difficulty? We must return to the golden rule laid down by Signor Michele Barbi: 'The most important thing of all is to understand Dante's poetry.' This rule has a natural corollary, *viz.*: 'What lies outside the poet's consciousness cannot concern us.' In the present case, what idea is in the poet's consciousness? This – that Beatrice is the blessed spirit of a woman whom once he loved."

married layman Gilson interprets Dante as a scholar whose wife must bear with neglect due to her husband's incessant work which – worse still – is partly inspired by his extra-marital (although apparently unconsummated) Romantic infatuations and poetic muses; like Gilson, Dante is more of a "philosopher" than a theologian.[9] Moreover, Gilson's paradigmatic model for Dante's love for Beatrice and his *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia* is Wagner's love for Mathilde and his opera *Tristan und Isolde* (premiered in 1865, some six hundred years after Dante's birth): in both cases, these are real historical and erotic relationships sublimated into great art.[10] For Gilson, Beatrice is the "creation of an artist," subsequently "charged with religious symbolism," who nonetheless had a grounding in the historical reality of Dante's carnal love for Bice Portinari, the Florentine daughter of Folco Portinari.

The accusation of autobiographical and ideological prejudices informing scholarly approaches may also rebound on the wider debates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a whole, however neutrally the arguments were ostensibly presented. Gilson's own interpretation of Beatrice, and critique of Mandonnet, depends principally on (and essentially agrees with) Edward Moore's celebrated long essay on Beatrice of 1891 (reprinted in the second volume of *Studies in Dante* in 1899).[11] Like Gilson, Moore argues for the historical identity of Dante's Beatrice, his own study occasioned by the six-hundredth anniversary of Beatrice Portinari's death in 1890, an anniversary celebrated with much fanfare across Italy.[12] Despite these anniversary celebrations

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[9] *Ibid.,* 7. In response to Mandonnet's claim that "if love of Philosophy killed the love in Dante's soul for Beatrice, she cannot be a young Florentine girl or indeed another woman, but another science placed higher than Philosophy; otherwise we move into the realm of absurdity," Gilson responds "I do not know if it is absurd to think that love of philosophy may have killed the love in a man's heart for a woman: it would be necessary to consult the wives of philosophers on that point."

[10] See Étienne Gilson, *Choir of Muses*, trans. Maisie Ward (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2018), 85. With reference to Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Gilson considers that not only an artist but even a philosopher may make use of a woman as muse in this way (*Ibid.*, 110).

[11] Gilson, *Dante*, 2 n2: "For a comprehensive study of the principal interpretations of Beatrice, see Edward Moore's excellent work;" Edward Moore, "Beatrice," in Id., *Studies in Dante: First Series, with new introductory matter edited by Colin Hardie*, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), II, 79-151. Moore notes the "inability of [certain] nineteenth century authors to enter into the spirit or comprehend the modes of thought of the fourteenth century;" nonetheless, like Gilson, Moore frequently underlines the plausibility of his interpretation in relation to contemporary, nineteenth-century examples (see *Ibid.*, 115).

[12] Moore's essay begins: "The recent occurrence of the six-hundredth anniversary of the death of Beatrice, which took place, as Dante distinctly states in the *Vita Nuova*,

of her death, Moore is sanguine about the lack of evidence for the identification between Dante's Beatrice and Beatrice Portinari. Neither Dante nor the first commentators mention the family of Beatrice, and only "about forty years after Dante's death and seventy after that of Beatrice" does Boccaccio come forward "with the definitive statement that she was the daughter of Folco Portinari and the wife of Simone dei Bardi."[13] Although some subsequent fourteenth- and fifteenth-century commentators repeat this identification, they tend not to dwell on it (or on the literal significance of Beatrice in the *Commedia*), and they cannot be said to confirm it with further evidence.[14] On the contrary: "it rests, and no doubt now always must rest, on the sole and unsupported statement of Boccaccio, whatever value may be attached to that statement."[15] Moore concedes, moreover, that the reference to Beatrice Portinari in the commentary of Pietro Alighieri is almost certainly a subsequent addition or *rifacimento* after Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante*, and, consequently, "the alleged independent authority of Dante's son for the legend is lost, and we are left, as before, alone with Boccaccio."[16]

Moore's concession begs a series of questions. First and foremost, did Boccaccio have any grounds for asserting this

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on a certain day in June 1290, has for some time past imparted renewed activity to the controversy, never wholly dormant, who or what was Beatrice?" (Moore, "Beatrice," 80). In his edition of the *Vita Nuova*, Michele Scherillo notes that: "in una sdegnosa lettera contro le feste centenarie della Beatrice, datata da Roma 1 aprile 1890 e pubblicata nel *Resto del carlino*, al Carducci, antico credente nella realtà e storicità della Bice dantesca, scappò detto: 'Andate pur voialtri a sudare di accademico entusiasmo e processioni e banchetti per una Beatrice *che probabilmente derivò da un epiteto della poesisa cavalleresca*...Ponete il busto *d'un nome* nel mausoleo di Firenze; ma...'" (*La Vita Nuova di Dante*, ed. Michele Scherillo (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1911), 298n.2). The sceptical sentiment is perhaps ironically symbolised by a tomb erected to Beatrice in the church of Santa Margerita de' Cerchi, one of the Florentine churches suggested as a literal location of Dante's first vision of Beatrice. The tomb is empty.

[13] Moore, "Beatrice," 85.

[14] Thus, for example, only Benvenuto and the Anonymous Florentine mention Portinari by name. Following Boccaccio, Benvenuto da Imola notes that Dante sometimes refers to Beatrice in the historical and literal sense, albeit mostly she symbolises sacred theology (see Benvenuto da Imola, gloss to *Inf.* 2.52-54: "Sed quae est ista Beatrix? Ad hoc sciendum est quod ista Beatrix realiter et vere fuit mulier florentina magnae pulcritudinis, sed maximae honestatis [...] autor aliquando in suo opere capit Beatricem historice, aliquando vero, et ut plurimum, anagogice pro sacra theologia."). See also Moore, "Beatrice," 86n.1.

[15] *Ibid.,* 85.

[16] *Ibid.,* 150-51. Despite Moore's intervention in the debate, interpreters continued to cite Pietro's commentary as evidence for the identification with Beatrice Portinari (see, for example, John S. Caroll (1904), gloss to *Inf.* Intro.)

identification, or did he simply make it up, perhaps to endear himself to the Florentine Portinari, an important patron and relation?[17] Should we treat Boccaccio's Florentine commentary (c. 1373-75) with significantly more credence, in this respect, than Francesco da Buti's Pisan commentary a decade later (c. 1385-95), which playfully identifies Dante's Beatrice with Beatrice of Lorraine, whose sarcophagus was then in Pisa cathedral, and Dante's Mathilda with Matilda of Tuscany?[18] Why does the author of the Ottimo commento (1333), despite claiming to know Dante personally, not identify Beatrice as Beatrice Portinari, and why does he refer to Beatrice as a woman on only two occasions? Why, for Benvenuto da Imola (who follows Boccaccio), and for Francesco da Buti and the Ottimo commento (who do not), is the literal identification, whether with Bice Portinari, Beatrice of Lorraine, or "some woman Beatrice," largely incidental to their huge commentaries on the *Commedia*?[19] Why, despite some divergences across the early commentaries as to whether Dante's Beatrice did or did not exist as a real historical person, as well as some ambivalence as to who this might have been (with the majority following Boccaccio's identification with Bice Portinari), is there such a fundamental agreement in principle: namely, that what matters in interpreting the *Commedia* is Beatrice's symbolical meaning?[20] Moreover, what are the implications of this for Gilson's claim that to deny Beatrice's historicity is to "render the *Divine Comedy* incomprehensible and dry up the source of the very beauty which makes us read it?" or for contemporary Dante scholarship, in which much interpretative emphasis *is* customarily placed on Beatrice's historicity?[21]

Although the early commentaries show how some learned readers first interpreted Beatrice in the *Commedia*, we cannot similarly establish, except from brief mentions here and there, how

[17] Moore himself makes references to such connections between Boccaccio, the Bardi, and the Portinari families (see Moore, "Beatrice," 131n.3).

[18] Moore is happy to suggest campanilismo and patronage when it comes to Francesco da Buti's identification of Beatrice of Lorraine (c. 1020-1076), the mother of Countess Matilda (c. 1046-1115), who "died before 1116, and was buried in the cathedral of Pisa, and her sepulchre is with us to this day" (Francesco da Buti, gloss to *Purg.* 27.36).

[19] Thus da Buti is clear that Dante speaks of Beatrice "under a figure" and only "*as if* she were a woman, with whom he was enamoured in his childhood;" the intended sense is symbolical (see, for example, Francesco da Buti, gloss to *Purg.* 30.109-23).

[20] Thus, for example, Giovan Battista Gelli follows Boccaccio's identification of Beatrice Portinari in the *Vita Nuova*, but he adamantly insists that the Beatrice of the *Commedia* has nothing to do with the soul of Beatrice Portinari: only theology, he underlines, is the true Beatrice (Gelli, gloss to *Inf.* 2. 70-72).

[21] Gilson, *Dante*, 72.

early readers of the *Vita Nuova* (with the exception of Boccaccio) and early readers of the *Convivio* (with no exception) interpreted the figure of Beatrice in these works. The reception of the *Vita Nuova* is further complicated by Boccaccio's pivotal role in its copying, editing, and presentation. It appears that Dante had originally provided some glosses on the *Vita Nuova* which Boccaccio thought fit to remove as marginal and didactic.[22] Boccaccio's *Trattatello* downplays any allegorical significance and, instead, dramatizes a full-colour biographical novella of Dante's love for Beatrice Portinari from the skeleton reference points in the literal sense of the *Vita Nuova* itself. Boccaccio's *Trattatello* would accompany the work's first printed edition, the *editio princeps* of 1576, and frame its subsequent European reception, up until the nineteenth century and beyond.[23] A.M. Biscioni's eighteenth-century edition (1741) is the only exception to this trend, leaving to one side Gian Mario Filelfo's fifteenth-century *Vita Dantis Alighieri* (1468), which also opposes polemically the identification of Beatrice with a real woman, and Leonardo Bruni's earlier *Vita di Dante* (1436).[24] Biscioni emphasises that Boccaccio is a highly untrustworthy source, writing as a poet and not as a historian in his *Trattatello*; he prints the *Convivio* alongside the *Vita Nuova* as an authoritative auto-commentary to counter Boccaccio's interpretative monopoly on the *Vita Nuova* and on Dante's biography; and he seeks "to prove that Dante's account constitutes an allegorical fiction."[25]

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[22] Dario Del Puppo, "Text and Document in Dante's *Vita nova*," *Romanic Review* 112.1 (2021): 10-23 (15).

[23] In his *Trattatello*, Boccaccio interpreted the *Vita Nuova* as a poetic retelling of Dante's love for Beatrice Portinari, and does not provide, although he perhaps envisaged doing so (as Laura Banella suggests), a separate allegorical interpretation as well. See Laura Banella, *La "Vita nuova" del Boccaccio: Fortuna e tradizione* (Rome-Padua: Antenore, 2017).

[24] *Vita Dantis Alighierii a J. Mario Philepho scripta nunc primum ex codice Laurentiana in lucem edita et notis illustrata* (Dehli: Prinava Books: Classic Reprints, 2021; a reprint of the 1828 edition): "Sed ego aeque Beatricem, quam amasse fingitur Dantes, mulierem unquam fuisse opinor." See also Beatrice Arduini and Jelena Todorović, "Biscioni's Dante," *Textual Cultures* 14.1 (2021): 85-96.

[25] Noting examples of vain and clearly invented anecdotes in Boccaccio's account of Dante's life (Biscioni, "Prefazione," viii-viiii), Biscioni argues that Dante, in his prose commentary, explicitly seeks to protect his poetry from the kind of literal interpretation subsequently exemplified by Boccaccio, and from the false and shameful opinion about him that it propagated (*Ibid.*, xvi). Biscioni interprets the *Vita Nuova*, therefore, from the explicitly allegorical interpretative perspective of the *Convivio*; hence, there is no *volte face* as, for some scholars, between the *Convivio* and the *Vita Nuova* (on this issue, see also, for example, Luca Fiorentini, "Commentary (both by Dante and on Dante)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, ed. Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 79-

It seems, moreover, that the early reception of the *Convivio* was even more limited, with a small and exclusively Florentine reception in the first half of the fourteenth century.[26] Boccaccio references it in passing in his *Trattatello* but gives no evidence of having read it, and only one fourteenth-century commentary on the *Commedia*, the *Ottimo commento*, references the *Convivio* by name, and does so but once in an opening gloss (this reference, moreover, may be from a subsequent redaction).[27] Although Cristoforo Landino briefly references the *Convivio* and the *Vita Nuova* as extremely subtle allegories of philosophy and theology in his 1481 commentary on the *Commedia*,[28] it is only in the sixteenth century, following the Florentine edition of 1490 and the three Venetian editions in 1521, 1529, and 1531, that the *Convivio* and the *Commedia* began to be read alongside one another, as in the commentaries of Alessandro Vellutello (1544), Giovan Battista Gelli (1541-63), and Bernardino Daniello (1547-68).[29] There were nonetheless no new editions of the *Convivio* in the seventeenth century, the next edition being Biscioni's eighteenth-century edition of the *Convivio* mentioned above. In the nineteenth century, there were a number of new editions of the *Convivio*, including Matteo Romani's edition with chapter-by-chapter commentary (1862) in which, like Biscioni before him, he argues that Dante rules out and corrects in the *Convivio* any identification between Beatrice and a real woman.[30]

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88). For Biscioni, Beatrice is certainly not a real woman (Biscioni, "Prefazione," ix-xiii), and he catalogues the pervasive and preponderant influence of Boccaccio's *Trattatello* on the commentary tradition on Beatrice: "Dietro all' autorità del Boccaccio, per l'antichità ed eccellenza di quest' uomo stimabilissma, si sono lasciati portare gli altri più moderni scrittori." (*Ibid.*, vi).

[26] See, for example, Simon A. Gilson, "Reading the *Convivio* from Trecento Florence to Dante's Cinquecento Commentators," *Italian Studies* 64: 2 (2009): 266-95; and Luca Azzetta, "Nota sulla tradizione del *Convivio* nella Firenze di Coluccio Salutati," *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 63 (2017): 293-303.

[27] See Azzetta, 294: "È probabile dunque che Boccaccio non si chinò mai sulle pagine del testo filosofico, di cui ebbe invece qualche notizia: forse attraverso Villani, or forse grazie al Lancia."

[28] See Cristoforo Landino, gloss to *Inf.* Intro. Nota: "Scripse in lingua fiorentina in prosa el *Convivio* et la *Vita Nuova*. Scripse in versi molti sonetti et canzone, nelle quali è chosa maravigliosa che in materia amatoria, nella quale sfoghò ogni suo affecto, aggiugnessi sobtilissima allegoria repetita dell'intima philosophia et theologia, nella quale appare stupenda doctrina." See also Landino, gloss to *Purg.* 2.112-17.

[29] Vellutello interprets Beatrice exclusively according to her typological meaning; Gelli and Daniello, while referencing Dante's juvenile love for Beatrice Portinari (following Boccaccio), interpret Beatrice exclusively throughout the *Commedia* as sacred theology (Gelli, gloss to *Inf.* 2.70-72; Daniello, gloss to *Inf.* "Intro. Nota.")

[30] *Il Convito di Dante emandato da Matteo Romani* (Reggio: Davolio e Figlio, 1862); Romani had already published a three-volume commentary on the *Commedia*. See

Prior to the nineteenth century, therefore, commentators on the *Commedia* barely reference the *Vita Nuova* or the *Convivio* at all, and do not appear to have necessarily read these works, let alone studied then in any detail.[31] With few notable exceptions such as Biscioni, it is only in the nineteenth century that the question of Beatrice's historicity becomes a significant and persistent concern, and scholars seek to provide consistent interpretations of Beatrice across Dante's three autobiographical works. On the one hand, and coinciding with the emergence of secular and politicised studies of Dante, a literary distaste for allegory *tout court*, and, more widely, with the emphasis on historical criticism in Biblical Studies, we see a growing emphasis during the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century on the "literal," historical Beatrice.[32] On the other, and in explicit reaction to these developments, we witness some scholars, and particularly Catholic clerics such as Romani, insisting with renewed vigour on a symbolic interpretation of Beatrice. At the end of the nineteenth century, Moore's survey confirms that there was, at this time, a wide range of differing theories about Dante's Beatrice, with "every theory [having] its difficulties,"[33] and no

La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri spiegata al popolo da Matteo Romani, 3 vols (Reggio: Davolio e Figlio, 1858, 1859, 1860).

[31] Of the 1,435 references to the "Vita Nova" or the "Vita Nuova" recorded in the commentaries included in the Dartmouth Dante Project, only the first 36 (2.5%) are prior to the nineteenth century. These references are typically brief, with no detailed comparison between the passages in the former and latter works. The early commentators frequently dismiss Dante's *Vita Nuova* as juvenalia (see, for example, Benvenuto da Imola, gloss to *Purg*. 30.109-17). The Chiose Cagliaritane (c. 1370) interprets Dante's *Vita Nuova* as about a young girl called Beatrice; after her death, however, he assigned the name "Beatrice" to sacred scripture (Chiose Cagliaritane, gloss to *Purg*. 30.40).

[32] See, especially, Alison Milbank, "The Quest for the Historical Beatrice," in Eadem, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 102-16. Milbank situates what she sees as "the particularly British insistence on the historicity of Dante's Beatrice" in "Romantic aesthetics," "immanentist theology," and "empiricism," as well as in the context of the "publication of Darwin's work on natural selection, the findings of German biblical scholarship […] as well as the appearance of a variety of demythologised lives of Christ" (102). See also Nick Havely, *Dante's British Public: Readers and Texts, from the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 128-259; *Dante in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Nick Havely (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011); and Federica Coluzzi, *Dante Beyond Influence: Rethinking Reception in Victorian Literary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

[33] There was a proliferation of new theories about Beatrice in the nineteenth century. For example, Gabrielle Rossetti claimed that Beatrice Portinari was, in fact, divine wisdom incarnate (again) as a woman, the divine wisdom and the woman Dante loved being in fact ontologically identical, the two traditional senses (literal and allegorical) of Beatrice coinciding and inseparable (Gabriele Rossetti (1826-27), gloss to *Inf.* 2.70-72.)

scholarly consensus about Beatrice's historicity, a historicity which, he notes, "is denied, and nowadays very commonly denied."[34] Moore distinguishes what he perceives as the three main groups of theories or categories of interpretation: the symbolists, the idealists, and the realists. For the symbolists, Beatrice is an invented figure "under which something else is represented, the thing so represented being the sole reality," there being no historical basis for Beatrice, except (possibly) as having "suggested the *form* of the symbol, and possibly even the *name* finally attached to it;" crucially, "all the details concerning her [Beatrice] in the *Vita Nuova* are purely fictitious."[35] For the idealists, Beatrice is an "ideal woman" or "idea of womanhood," although there may be a basis in reality. For the realists, Dante refers to a specific historical woman, whether this be Beatrice Portinari or, as for the sub-category of "separatists," some other historical woman (whether known or not), who comes to signify (via Dante's allegory) Christian faith, the church, et al.[36]

Although surveying the history of symbolist readings, Moore concentrates on the attempt of the Jesuit scholar Gerhard Gietmann (1845-1912) to provide a purely allegorical reading of Beatrice in *Beatrice, Geist und Kern der Dante'schen Dichtungen* (1889). For Gietmann, Beatrice's greeting at her first meeting with Dante in the *Vita Nuova* refers to Dante's admission in his youth to "the novitiate of the Franciscan order, by which he thought himself at the time to have reached 'tutti i termini della beatitudine'" (*VN*, 3); the subsequent refusal of her greeting (*VN*, 10) indicates "Dante's alienation from Theology, through his alleged devotion to secular pursuits and profane Philosophy."[37] Deconstructing each of Gietmann's interpretations of the *Vita Nuova* in turn, Moore suggests that a literal interpretation is, in each case, more plausible. In addition, Moore defends positively the realist position, providing a series of seven arguments in favour of Bice Portinari: first, the validity of Boccaccio's sole authority; second, that an "allegory constructed without a basis of fact," as the symbolists maintain, is "an utter anachronism;" third, Dante's customary practice to

[34] Moore, "Beatrice," 81. Moore also notes that the "upholders of this [symbolist] theory [...] are a numerous, and, it would seem an increasing body" (84).
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] *Ibid.*, 82.
[37] *Ibid.*, 91-106. For Gietmann, "Dante's love for the daughter of Folco Portinari probably belongs to the number of those beautiful dreams which have been woven round the whole of the poet's life by the hands of his interpreters and biographers," and the "real subject of his poetry is nothing else than the *Ideal Church*, the 'bride,' or the 'Beloved,' of Scripture, as represented by Solomon, S. Paul and St. John" (cited in Moore, "Beatrice," 91).

allegorise historical persons, such as Cato of Utica or Virgil; fourth and sixth, the idealization or allegorization of an existing woman was a custom of the age, as Guido Cavalcanti's Giovanna or Petrarch's Laura vouchsafe; fifth, the "multitude of realistic details, purporting to be facts, recorded by Dante of Beatrice;" and, seventh, that Dante assigns Beatrice "a definite place in heaven [...] treating her as a soul among other human souls."[38]

Gietmann's symbolist interpretation of Beatrice (in 1889) and Moore's rebuttal and realist interpretation (in 1891) parallel Mandonnet's symbolist interpretation (in 1935) and Gilson's rebuttal and realist interpretation (in 1939). As is evident even from Moore's survey, they formed part of a debate about the *status Beatricis* which was anything but resolved.[39] Indeed, when Mandonnet's *Dante le théologien* was published in 1935, although an early reviewer resented Mandonnet's dismissal of a historical Beatrice, he also noted that there was "nothing new in that" *per se*. What the reviewer found novel, instead, was Mandonnet's theory of *Dante clericus*.[40] Even here, though, as the example of Gietmann alone underlines, Mandonnet was treading familiar ground, albeit he saw in Dante's pursuit of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* a failed clerical rather than, more specifically, a failed Franciscan vocation. What is instead remarkable is that, since Mandonnet and Gilson, the symbolical interpretation of Beatrice has disappeared from scholarly view altogether, while the realist view has become the, seemingly unquestioned, post-war scholarly consensus. In relation to the reception history as a whole, and the wider lively debate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in particular, let us now reappraise constructively Mandonnet's symbolic interpretation and Gilson's realist interpretation in turn.

II. Mandonnet's Symbolic Interpretation of Dante's Beatrice

Mandonnet follows the lead of scholars such as Biscioni in the eighteenth century, and Romani in the nineteenth century, in

[38] For the seven positive arguments, see Moore, "Beatrice," 129-42.

[39] As Moore acknowledged, "we are very far from pretending that all is clear and straightforward on the Realist theory [....] Dante has so written that no one, either near his own time or for six hundred years since, has ever been able to give one clear and consistent explanation of his meaning." (Ibid., 146).

[40] See Richard Kehoe, O.P., "Review of *Dante le théologien* by Pierre Mandonnet," *New Blackfriars* 17.194 (May 1936): 394-400. See also E.F., "Review," of *Dante le théologien*, in *Divus Thomas* 40 (1937), 302-03: "tesi che, in tutto o in parte, non sono nuove e sono già state giudicate, ma che il P. Mandonnet ha ripresentato con particolari e dilucidazioni ulteriori."

interpreting the *Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio*. As Mandonnet underlines, Dante himself recognised that his early poems had "some degree of obscurity" such that "to many their beauty was more pleasing than their goodness." With regard to the three *canzoni* included in the *Convivio*, Dante's prose commentary is "the light that renders visible every shade of their meaning;" excusing himself from infamy, (the inference, as in Boccaccio's *Trattatello*, that he is referring to women), Dante reveals his poems' true meaning "hidden beneath the figure of allegory."[41] In approaching the *Vita Nuova*, Mandonnet envisages his core interpretative task as similarly to discover, and render visible, this true sense hidden under the poetic allegories there presented, a task he recognises to be anything but straightforward.[42] For Mandonnet, Dante distinguishes the *Convivio* as a philosophical work from the *Vita Nuova* as a theological work by measuring life according to the natural (the four ages of man) and supernatural orders (according to the number nine) respectively.[43] Similarly, Mandonnet interprets the 8 month age gap between Dante and Beatrice as symbolic of, first, the beginning, at 8 months after conception, of Dante's natural obediential potency for the beatific vision with the infusion of his soul into his body (according to the philosophical order of the *Convivio*)[44] and, second, the actual ontological infusion of a "new life" in the Christian supernatural order begun at Dante's baptism, which Mandonnet speculates occurred around 8 months after his birth (the theological order of the *Vita Nuova*). The end (made possible by baptism) and the goal (to which all Christians strive) of the "new life" narrated in the *Vita Nuova* is, then, beatitude: the beatific vision.

Mandonnet argues that a realist, psychological explanation of the 8 month age gap between Dante and Beatrice is absurd: how could an 8-month Dante ("la mia persona pargola") feel "a new passion" ("una passione nova") on the day that Beatrice came into the world?[45] Instead, Mandonnet underlines the highly technical

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[41] See Mandonnet, *Dante*, 35; *Conv.* 1.1, 14-15.

[42] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 117.

[43] *Ibid.*, 70. Mandonnet follows uncritically Barbi's arbitrary but, by the 1920s, already canonized division of the text of the *Vita Nuova* into 42 paragraphs or chapters, and does not comment, therefore, on the further structural symbolism of the 31 poems and 31 divisions of the text (as in Guglielmo Gorni's subsequent edition).

[44] *Ibid.*, 68-69n.2 and 70n. 1.

[45] *Ibid.*, 67. Like Biscioni before him, Mandonnet links the opening of the *Vita Nuova* to this section of the canzone through the cross reference to the "book of my mind." See "Vita Nuova di Dante Alighieri," in Anton Maria Biscioni, *Delle Opere di Dante Alighieri*, vol. 2 (Venice: 1741), 5-6n. For Biscioni, as for Mandonnet, the prose of

language of the canzone "E' m'increscе": first, the term "mind" ("mente") indicates "that distinguished and most precious part of the soul which is deity;" second, the term "person" ("persona") registers the hypostasis of the human soul and body; third, the term "passion" indicates the subject, the person, as the patient (rather than agent) of the action, which receives sanctifying grace at baptism.[46] Mandonnet thereby concludes that "the day when his Lady came into the world is none other than the day when Dante received the sacrament of baptism, sanctifying grace, which made him a Christian and introduced him to participation in the supernatural order. In all of Dante's writings, Beatrice is, in her essential offices, the figure of this supernatural order."[47] As "the personification of the grace received at baptism," Beatrice is thereby "common to all Christians, and as such cannot signify a form exclusive to Dante."[48] Mandonnet underlines, in this respect, that Dante never states – in the *Vita Nuova* or in his other works – that Beatrice was from Florence (or from any other place), let alone that she was his near neighbour Beatrice Portinari.[49] He also emphasises that Dante never speaks to, or greets, Beatrice in her entire lifetime. After the "new passion" he experienced at 8 months when Beatrice first came into the world, Dante does not see her until he is aged 9 and then but once; when Dante is 18, Beatrice greets him for the

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the *Vita Nuova* does not represent a palinodic re-interpretation *after the event* of selected *canzoni*.

[46] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 81: "the person exists as soon as the soul is united to the body, hence the use of this word;" "the infusion of sanctifying grace into the human soul when it is produced for the first time through baptism."

[47] *Ibid.*, 78. This explains, for Mandonnet, the difference in age between Dante and Beatrice: "Dante was not baptized immediately after his birth, but he was not yet a year old. The same age gap separates Dante and Beatrice in this *Canzone* and in the *Vita Nuova*." In his commentary, Joachim Berthier claims that Florentine babies, except in the case of necessity, were only baptised in the Baptistery of San Giovanni, and only on one of two dates: Holy Saturday or the Saturday of Pentecost. As Dante was born on the 14th September 1265, he would not have been baptised, therefore, before 11th April, 1266 (Holy Saturday).

[48] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 84.

[49] *Ibid.*, 71-72n8: "Of course Dante never said or insinuated that Beatrice was Florentine, or from any other place; by doing so he would have imposed a characteristic of reality on a pure symbol and thus destroyed its conventional nature. This is so true that Dante, to make us understand, always speaks of the 'soppradetta cittade,' referring to the initial mention: ('la cittade ove la mia donna fue posta da l'altissimo sire.') Scherillo seems to be astonished by all this: 'una città que tuttavia non è mai nominate'." In the *Convivio*, of course, the "city" is the soul of a man, which different passions (like different factions in a city) seek to control, and over which obtain sovereignty.

very first time; she then greets him one more time, before refusing her greeting on the third occasion of their seeing each other.[50]

While Mandonnet considers that Beatrice and all Dante's other ladies are purely symbolic, his specific theory is that the poetic allegory of the *Vita Nuova* represents Dante's failed clerical vocation, a theory presented as a "hypothesis," albeit one "I personally consider to be true."[51] Having emphasised the interpretative difficulty of uncovering the doctrinal meanings of Dante's sighting of Beatrice aged 9 and her greeting 9 years later, Mandonnet suggests that the former represents the moment Dante began "to consider the life of a man of the cloth," while the latter – choreographed at precisely the 9th hour of the day (Trinitarian symbolism reflecting the supernatural order of the allegory) – represents "Dante's admission into the clerical state" aged 18.[52] In Beatrice's eyes, Dante perceives "all the terms of beatitude," and he resolves to leave all company behind and to enter the solitary place of his room (*VN* 3.2-3). As Mandonnet documents, those who had received the clerical tonsure in the thirteenth century could "return to the secular world;" he speculates, therefore, that Dante obtained the four minor orders (conferred simultaneously) following the tonsure, but stopped short at the point which would have required a definitive commitment (the subdiaconate). For Mandonnet, the performative action of taking a "step forward" in the liturgy of ordination (entailing an irrevocable commitment) is what Dante has in mind when he writes "I have placed my feet on those boundaries of life beyond which no one can go further and hope to return."[53] It is his decision not to take this step which, for Mandonnet, constitutes the end of Dante's clerical career, represented by the death of Beatrice.[54]

Although Mandonnet provides only an indicative reading of the *Vita Nuova* – it is a key and not a commentary – the broad contours of his *Dante clericus* hypothesis are clear.[55] During the

[50] Mandonnet, like Biscioni before him (Biscioni, "Prefazione," xii), underlines the difference between the events as represented by Boccaccio, and the sparsity of material referenced by Dante.
[51] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 12-13.
[52] Mandonnet rules out something common to the shared practices of Christian life: confirmation, for example, would not constitute a "new life" because supernatural grace had already been conferred on Dante at baptism; *Ibid.*, 84.
[53] *Ibid.*, 87.
[54] For Mandonnet, the precise date of Beatrice's death (8 June, 1290) may have been the day Dante definitively renounced his clerical state to the Church authorities or the date of his marriage, which bound him contractually to a secular state of life.
[55] *Ibid.*, 87.

seven years in the clerical state (1283-90), Dante neglected his theological studies (Lady Beatrice), and devoted himself more to philosophy and poetry, (the two ladies "of high bearing both older than himself," as "more ancient than Christian revelation," who come between himself and her).[56] Dante's physical illness represents his spiritual illness (the failure of his vocation); the ladies with dishevelled hair are the passions; the ladies with faces "strange and horrible to behold" are the vices; the death of Beatrice is a kind of spiritual death, the end of his clerical vocation.[57] The "young and gracious lady" at the grieving Dante's bedside is Lady Poetry; the other ladies are the philosophical sciences which offer him comfort.[58] Devoting himself to philosophical study reminds him, however, of theology, and ultimately leads him back to her. Although Dante can no longer pursue the religious life of the ecclesiastical state, he can "celebrate her, make it known, and make it practised."[59] It is this clericature from the outside that Dante announces at the close of the *Vita Nuova*: he is studying theology as diligently as he can in order to write of her (Lady Theology) what has never been written of any woman. This, then, is the seminal idea of the *Commedia*: through his poetry, Dante will sing of Christian theology and teach the way to beatitude.

In the *Commedia*, Dante's failure to climb the short way up the mountain – his lack of love (the *pes affectus*) holding him back from the path of holiness directed by his intellect (the *pes intellectus*), such that his "halted foot was always the lower" ("sì che 'l piè fermo era 'l più basso;" *Inf.* 2.120) – may allude specifically to the failure of his clerical vocation, an interpretation strengthened by glossing this passage with the Dominican Peraldus's treatise on sloth. Emphasising the metaphor of the *pes affectus* and the *pes intellectus*, and describing the religious life as a "vita nova," Peraldus notes how many propose or even vow to enter the religious life but then procrastinate from so doing.[60] As a remedy for his initial failure, Dante must take the long detour through Hell, the evil of the world (*Inferno* 3-34), returning again, as to his starting point,

[56] Mandonnet claims that, for Dante, poetry was a pastime, alongside his more serious study of philosophy and theology (*Ibid.*, 123-24).
[57] *Ibid.*, 121.
[58] Mandonnet identifies this passage with Dante's reading of Cicero and Boethius (as Dante records in the *Convivio*).
[59] *Ibid.*, 122.
[60] For a reading of this episode, in relation to Peraldus's *De vitiis*, see George Corbett, *Dante's Christian Ethics: Purgatory and Its Moral Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 158-162.

in *Purgatorio* 1-2. Mandonnet's clerical interpretation also adds considerable pathos to Dante's decision to place, as the first souls he encounters in heaven, those who lacked constancy in their religious vows and returned to the lay state, and to Dante's burning question as to whether one can merit salvation by making up for an unfulfilled vow with some other service (*Par.* 4.13-15). From this perspective, Dante's writing of the *Commedia* is the service he renders, fulfilling (as Mandonnet suggests) the role and mission of a cleric and preacher in glorifying God and teaching the way to salvation.[61]

Leaving aside his specific hypothesis of Dante's clerical vocation, Mandonnet's broader contention is that the realist scholarly focus on Beatrice's historicity has obscured from view, and led scholars to misunderstand fundamentally, Dante's intended meaning for her in the *Commedia* as in the *Vita Nuova*. In accordance with the principle of one-in-threeness (*unitrinisme*) which, Mandonnet avers, informs the *Commedia*, each of the poem's three main protagonists – Dante, Virgil, and Beatrice – has a general symbolic role: namely, as everyman, the natural order, and the supernatural order, while their symbolic role can be divided according to the three realms of human activity. With regard to the field of making (the *ratio factibilium*), Dante represents an apprentice poet; Virgil, the art of poetry; and Beatrice, the beauty of Christian revelation. In the moral realm (the *ratio agibilium*), Dante represents a sinner; Virgil, natural virtue; Beatrice, grace and the light of glory. In the sphere of speculative knowledge (the *ratio speculabilium*), Dante represents a student; Virgil, human wisdom; Beatrice, Christian faith and the light of glory. For Mandonnet, therefore, "everything we are told about Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia* relates to the beauty of Christian Revelation, which is her primary function. She expresses and reveals to humanity the beauty of God's masterpiece."[62] It was principally in order to

[61] This may be the meta-literary sense of Dante's very first words amongst the saved in his poem: that in going on this journey (metaphorically, in writing the *Commedia*), he will merit salvation: "per tornar altra volta / là dov'io son, fo io questo viaggio" (*Purg.* 2.91-92). See Codice cassinese, gloss to *Purg.* 2.91: "Quasi dicat propter compositionem poematis presentis Deus miserebitur mei et liberabor a perpetua dampnatione et revertar huc. hic dicit quod negligens fuit in mundo et tandem in fine suorum dierum opus composuit meritorium" (cited, with further discussion, in Corbett, *Dante's Christian Ethics*, 207).

[62] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 212-14 (214). Dante explicitly contrasts this divine beauty of God revealed in Scripture with natural beauty (including human beauty) and beautiful art (*Par.* 27.88-96); Mandonnet's reading, here, is in continuity with the early

represent the beauty of Christian revelation, in other words, that Dante depicted a beautiful lady, Beatrice, as its figure (its "bella menzogna"). Like a woman who may capture a man's gaze and desire with her beauty, so divine revelation may cause wonder and attract a man's soul by its beauty. Like the gaze and smile of a beautiful lady, the demonstrations and persuasions of Christian revelation are beautiful because when seen (when understood), they give delight (as in Aquinas's pithy formulation: *pulchrum est ut visum placet*). All the references to Beatrice's beauty in the poem are to be understood purely symbolically, therefore: Dante is speaking of the beauty of Divine revelation, the quality of Christianity arguably most obscured, or even ignored, by theologians (and Christians as a whole) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[63]

Christian revelation is beautiful but it also good and true. For Mandonnet, Dante's Beatrice likewise brings together symbolically the beauty, goodness, and truth of the Christian supernatural order.[64] In the moral order, Beatrice is grace, "by whose action the human soul is raised up to the supernatural order and may, through its virtuous actions, merit eternal life."[65] It is Beatrice who draws Dante lost in sin, acting first as prevenient grace, insofar as she sends Virgil (the natural order) to demonstrate to him the baseness of human vice in Hell (*Inf.* 2.70).[66] As Mandonnet comments, Dante's journey through Hell and Purgatory is a continuation of the effects of grace, "which produce remorse and contrition in him, finally resulting in the remission of sins."[67] As grace is given to the Church

commentators (*Ibid.*, 213n.1 and 213n.3; see also, for example, Pietro Alighieri (3), gloss to *Par.* 30.16-33; and Johannis de Serravalle, gloss to *Par.* 30.19-24.)

[63] See, especially, Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Foreword," in Idem, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis and ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 9-11 (9): "We here attempt to develop a Christian theology in the light of the third transcendental, that is to say: to complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful (*pulchrum*). The introduction will show how impoverished Christian thinking has been by the growing loss of this perspective which once so strongly informed theology."

[64] It is intriguing that, although Balthasar (1905-1988) does not interpret Dante's Beatrice as representing the beauty, goodness, and truth of the Christian faith, the whole project of his fifteen-volume trilogy is built upon the understanding of the Christian faith as beautiful (the seven volumes of *The Glory of the Lord*), good (the five volumes of the *Theo-Drama*), and true (the three volumes of the *Theo-Logic*). Von Balthasar turns to Dante as his first example of a "lay style of theology," but he does not reference Mandonnet's book (where he might have found the scope of his magisterial project in germinal form), although he clearly has read, and relied upon, Gilson's *Dante et la philosophie*.

[65] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 214-15.

[66] *Ibid.*

[67] *Ibid.*

Militant on earth (*in via*), while its consummation is bestowed on the Church Triumphant in heaven, so – in Dante's *Paradiso* – Beatrice is "no longer called grace, but rather the light of glory, *lumen gloriae*."[68] Even at the end of the poem, it is still Beatrice who, enlisting St Bernard, draws Dante to his final vision (*Par.* 31.65-66). The relationship between Dante-character and Beatrice thereby poetically figures the progressive workings of grace on the human soul, leading ultimately to beatitude.[69] In the speculative order, Beatrice is Christian faith and its object: divine revelation.[70] Outside Paradise, Beatrice represents Christian faith for man *in via*. In Paradise itself, Beatrice represents also the light of glory by which the natural power of the human intellect is raised to see God, the first truth, and all things in Him, and the human will "rests in the good grasped by our power to know and delights in it, in an act of love or fruitfulness which perfects beatitude."[71] The ascending spheres of *Paradiso* poetically depict, then, the action of faith and the light of glory on the human intellect, as Beatrice progressively pours out "the vision of the Deity into Dante's eyes."[72]

In interpreting the *Commedia*, Mandonnet underlines the importance of distinguishing between what, if anything (as in the case of Beatrice), is said of the three protagonists as historical individuals, and what is said of them in relation to their symbolic roles and their threefold offices. In other words, Mandonnet considers that certain passages may regard just the literal sense, while others regard just the symbolic sense (or one of the three-fold typological senses described above), while others regard both the literal and the typological senses. Although Dante and Virgil are clearly

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[68] *Ibid.*

[69] Aquinas compares the grace which we have in the present life to the seed of a tree, which contains within it the virtue, or power, of the whole tree; the grace of glory, then, is the tree itself, the final consummation and fruition of the first effects of grace in this life (*Ibid.* n.1).

[70] Mandonnet argues that, although commentators typically identify Beatrice symbolically with theology, this needs to be understood in a qualified way. Theology "brings together the truths of faith," symbolised by Beatrice, and "the truths of reason in an auxiliary role," symbolised by Virgil. Mandonnet suggests that it is Aquinas who pre-eminently represents the synthesis involved in the divine science of theology itself, noting in passing that, after Virgil (reason) and Beatrice (revelation), Aquinas (theology) is the guide to whom Dante affords most lines in the poem (*Ibid.*, 266).

[71] *Ibid.*, 216, and see also 216n.2.

[72] Mandonnet associates Beatrice's gaze with the effect of the light of glory on the intellect, while he associates her smile (in her eyes) with the effect of the light of glory in pouring love into the will. Just as, for Aquinas, the more the intellect participates in the light of glory, the more perfectly it sees God, so Beatrice's beauty increases as Dante ascends the heavenly spheres (*Par.* 21.7-9; Mandonnet, *Dante*, 216-17).

represented as historical individuals in the *Commedia*, Mandonnet insists that what is said of them is, at many points, only true in relation to one or more of their typological offices. In such cases, to interpret the passage in relation to Dante and Virgil as historical individuals leads to error, or even absurdity.[73] The early commentators interpret Beatrice in this way in the *Commedia*: although some (such as Benvenuto da Imola) refer to her briefly at a few points as an historical individual, for the great majority of their exegesis, they understand Dante to be speaking not of Beatrice as an historical individual *and* of her as symbol (the realist position) but, rather, *just* of her as symbol. What Mandonnet claims is that, whereas Dante sometimes refers to himself and Virgil in the poem as historical individuals, Dante *never* intends to refer to Beatrice as a historical individual, and that she is a pure fiction (like Boethius's Lady Philosophy), with only typological significance. Although at an extreme, Mandonnet's interpretative position is more in continuity with the early commentary tradition, therefore, than the claim, fostered by the "realists," that in the *Commedia* Dante always refers to Beatrice as a woman *and* as a symbol.

III. Gilson's Realist Interpretation of Dante's Beatrice

While Mandonnet sees Dante as a theologian, philosopher, and (distinctively medieval) poet, Gilson presents Dante as *neither* a theologian *nor* a philosopher properly speaking. Although one could derive "a course of medieval philosophy and theology from Dante's work, making of him a 'philosopher,'" to do so, Gilson avers, is to take away the essence of his poem, which is a work of art.[74] In *Dante et la philosophie*, Gilson is not principally setting Dante up *as a philosopher* in opposition to Mandonnet's presentation of Dante *as a theologian* (which is why David Moore's English rendering of Gilson's title as *Dante the Philosopher* is misleading); rather, Gilson is presenting Dante *as a poet* and, as such, sensitive to that lofty and uniquely poetic love for a woman which ordinary people cannot, from their own experience, comprehend.[75] Indeed,

[73] See, for example, *Ibid.*, 244-45.

[74] Gilson, *Dante et Béatrice: Études dantesques* (Paris: Vrin, 2015; first publ. 1974), 92-93n12.

[75] In his review of *Dante the Philosopher*, Colin Hardie makes a similar observation: "The translation is excellently done, except perhaps as regards the title. 'Dante the Philosopher' contains an implication that 'Dante et la philosophie' is careful to avoid, and it is clear enough that Dante's vocation was not philosophy, but poetry." (Colin Hardie, "Four English Books on Dante," *The Downside Review*, 67.4 (Oct. 1949),

Dante's love for Beatrice "should normally appear to us just as likely as it would be for us to write the two masterpieces [the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*] of which it was the inspiration."[76] For Gilson, "all the discussions that go on among scholars with regard to the reality or the unreality of Beatrice" have "at the very root" a "sentiment":

> The sentiment which underlies the arguments of Farther Mandonnet, O.P., is amazement at the fact that a sensible man, as Dante certainly was, could invent so many fables on account of a woman. This is not hard to understand. To an irreproachable churchman such as Father Mandonnet the significance of the clerical vocation was quite different from that of love. He therefore believed that in making Beatrice the object of a passion with which an intelligent man, in his right mind, could reasonably be inflamed he was merely explaining the *Vita Nuova*. […] Almost all purely symbolical interpretations of the figure of Beatrice presuppose an attitude of the same kind […] How could one believe that a sensible man could go hot and cold, swoon, almost die on account of a young girl, then on account of a woman, who never gave him the slightest hope and to whom apparently he never even tried to speak? Beatrice dies, Dante loves her still and exalts her to a loftier plane than ever. Dante marries and becomes the father of a family, but he still loves Beatrice. Whereupon we ask ourselves: Could *I* love a woman so intensely and so constantly in similar circumstances. The answer is "No." From which we at once conclude that Dante never loved any woman in this way either.[77]

What Gilson seeks to prove is that such a common sentiment, while understandable, is misplaced: although such a love is implausible for an ordinary person, it is not so for that highly extra-ordinary person, a poet. And Dante is – in Gilson's meaning of the term – a poet.

For Gilson, a poet is a priest, the world of art its own religion (outside the normal realm of morals), while "writers serving their art," unfettered by the mundane, are like "Christians serving their God."[78] This late-Romantic notion of the poet underpins Gilson's interpretation of the very opening of Dante's *Vita Nuova*: "Sooner or later the time comes when the words once heard by Dante sound in the heart of every artist: *Incipit vita nova*. From that hour he

420-36 (420). At the same time, Gilson clearly sees Dante as more of a philosopher than a theologian (see, for example, Gilson, *Dante et Béatrice*, 81n2); Gilson considers, though, that the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia* are principally poetical works, their truth evident, first and foremost, through their beauty (see also *Ibid.*, 116).

[76] Gilson, *Dante*, 288.

[77] *Ibid.*, 282.

[78] Gilson, *Choir of Muses*, 179-80.

puts off 'the old man' to follow that inward power which summons him to follow, giving him no reason."[79] Gilson asks, "Does creative work involve to some degree a renunciation of God?," and assures us that this question arises "even for the *Divina Commedia*."[80] For Gilson, therefore, Dante's *Vita Nuova* is not a work of theological poetry at all, but, simply, the work of a poet inspired by his muse: "the *Vita Nuova* certainly does not tell us of the downfall of a cleric or a theologian, but of the life of a young poet, and his love for his Muse, whom he celebrates, loses and finds again transfigured. So there is here no question of theology."[81] Gilson's peculiar interpretation of Guido Cavalcanti's sonnet "I' vegno il giorno a te 'nfinite volte" is, in this sense, revealing:

> The whole of this sonnet suggests rather that Guido is reproaching Dante for neglecting his talent, letting his genius sleep and consorting with undesirable people, for whom he would formally have had only contempt. […] I could quite readily picture Cavalcanti expressing disgust with a Dante who, instead of continuing to write, consorts with those untouchables, the clerics and the philosophers – a disgust something like that of the lettered nobleman for pedants.[82]

In similar vein, Gilson contrasts Dante's *Commedia*, as a work of art, with the *Roman de la Rose* "or other allegorical rubbish with its poverty of human stuff;" to confuse them, he adds, is to confuse "art with philology."[83]

In interpreting Dante, Gilson similarly distinguishes himself, as a cultured man of letters, from the scholarly pedants of his own day, who load "the pages of masterpieces" with "footnotes for the use of school boys."[84] Readers fail to understand Dante's love for Beatrice not only because they could not conceive of such a love

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[79] *Ibid.*

[80] *Ibid.*, 186.

[81] *Ibid.*, 82.

[82] *Ibid.*, 62n1. Whatever Guido Cavalcanti might have thought about Gilson's exclusion of him from the philosophers (and, indeed, of his alleged contempt for philosophers and clerics), we know that he was renowned as a philosopher *and* poet by his immediate contemporaries (See, for example, Enrico Fenzi, *La canzone d'amore di Guido Cavalcanti e i suoi antichi commenti* (Genoa: Il Melagolo, 1999)).

[83] *Ibid.*, 73. Gilson does not discuss Dante's contested authorship of the *Fiore*, but presumably he would have denied it outright (on the authorship issue, see, for example, *The Fiore in Context: Dante, France, Tuscany*, ed. Zygmunt G. Barański and Patrick Boyde (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996)). Gilson would also have been unimpressed, one assumes, by Brunetto Latini's *Il Tesoretto*, albeit another clear influence on the *Commedia* (see Julia Holloway Bolton, *Twice-Told Tales: Brunetto Latino and Dante Alighieri* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993)).

[84] Gilson, *Dante*, 283.

themselves but because – in interpreting Dante's works – they do so through the "professional outlook of so many historians and professors": "works of art, created by artists with artistic ends in view, inevitably end by becoming subjects of instruction, studied by professors with academic ends in view. The fact is obvious; its consequences are catastrophic."[85] Even if partly ironic, Gilson's disavowal of the historical method, when considering Dante's love for Beatrice, is striking.[86] Even more striking, though, is Gilson's remedy: twentieth-century psychology. Not only that but, noting that "few psychologists are artists, and artists who might be psychologists have better things to do than to analyse themselves," Gilson steps into the breach to provide what "of all the parts of a most complex subject […] is not the least obscure," contributing, namely, an original "psychology of the artist."[87] It is Gilson's novel (and, frankly, bizarre) "psychology of the artist," and not the historical method, which – in addition to his late-Romantic presuppositions about a poet – underpins his own realist interpretation of Dante's Beatrice.

Although Gilson touches on his "psychology of the artist" in his appendix to *Dante et la philosophie*, entitled "Of Poets and their Muses," he gives a fuller elaboration of his theory in *L'École des muses* (1951), translated by Maisie Ward as *Choir of Muses* (1953).[88] Gilson's thesis is predicated on his presumption that a great artist is, by definition, male: "If we accept Baudelaire's suggestion that a great artistic creator has an element of the bi-sexual, the fact still remains that he is by sex a male. Dante, Petrarch, Baudelaire, Wagner; and curiously enough, if one were considering what other names to add to these, none of them would be a woman's."[89] Gilson is not interested, then, in woman artists (whose "feminine genius" is only uncontested, he affirms, in letters, the "very femininity of which [nonetheless] places them in a different rank from the *Divina Commedia* and *Tristan*"), but with the "women who have inspired men to write."[90] Taking as his first example Dante's Beatrice, Gilson affirms that "love lives on a first vision – of which the lover seeks through every possible device to make the thrill eternal;"[91] this he does through a kind of

[85] *Ibid.* 283-84.
[86] See also *Ibid.*, ix.
[87] *Ibid.*, 284.
[88] Étienne Gilson, *L'École des Muses* (Paris: Vrin, 268); Idem, *Choir of Muses*, trans. Maisie Ward (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1953). References, as above, will be to the 2018 Cluny edition.
[89] Gilson, *Choir of Muses*, 170-71.
[90] *Ibid.*, 170-71; 4-5.
[91] *Ibid.*, 5.

sublimation of desire, and by making not the woman his object but, rather, the artwork, for which the woman is used as a kind of medium or midwife.[92]

Drawing on Freud and Jung, Gilson notes that "in the matter of Muses we are faced, it may be said, with a transference, quite classical in psychoanalysis, of libido itself directed towards art enjoyment."[93] Rejecting the reductive thesis that an artwork is merely a compensation for frustrated sexual desire, Gilson claims that the true artist both needs and seeks out a "carnal passion" while voluntarily restraining from its satisfaction.[94] Gilson relates this sublimation of desire to the "Greek love" of Plato's *Phaedrus*, albeit "Plato was thinking of boys" whereas "since Christianity has restored nature to its rights men have ceased to blush at being moved by women's beauty."[95] In both Greek love (for a boy) and Christian courtly love (for a woman), the whole point, for Gilson, is that (a man's) carnal love is "a matter to be shaped, a force to be made use of," and that this love is "an imperious summons to rise through things sensible to the intelligible."[96] Gilson avers that "our contemporaries who justify homosexuality by proclaiming it the source of great art are entirely mistaken" because "pederasty practised inspires no masterpieces."[97] Equally mistaken, in his view, are those who fail to see in a Christian man's carnal love for a woman the seed of his creative activity: "Make no mistake, the love of Dante for Beatrice, like the love of Petrarch for Laura, sprang up so strongly and rose so high only because an intense physical emotion was there to feed its roots. These are not loves of the mind alone but of the total human being."[98] While, for Freud, the lover so immerses himself in the beloved that she, his object, absorbs him (and his ego), for Gilson, both the poet-lover and the poet's beloved are absorbed into the poetry: "He absorbs his beloved even more completely

[92] *Ibid.*, 189: "Is it not enough splendour for anyone to be chosen as a necessary channel for a promised revelation? In this meaning the beloved is indeed 'the only woman' for her poet, because in her alone the Muse has taken flesh."
[93] *Ibid.*, 18.
[94] *Ibid.*
[95] *Ibid.*, 9.
[96] *Ibid.*, 9-10; 160-61.
[97] *Ibid.*, 9-10: "There is no relation between what the inspired love of Phaedrus is seeking, and whatever these men get out of their bleak fornicating."
[98] *Ibid.*, 12. For Gilson, the "very abnormality" of homosexual love makes it curiously more fitting, in Plato's context, as a spur to seek "a meaning outside the physical relationship," while – in Plato's time, according to Gilson – it never "occurred to anyone that love of a woman could be motivated by any other desire than natural physical pleasure." Only in the Christian Middle Ages, then, do we find a society in which "a woman could be the object of a spiritual love." (161).

than he lets himself be absorbed, for both are sacrificed to something quite other."[99]

This, then, is the "distinct variety of sentiment" that Gilson discerns in great poets, and first of all in Dante, and that is so far removed from the ordinary sentiments of a "sensible man" like Mandonnet:

> And yet we seem to discern here, in the cases of Dante and Petrarch, as it were a distinct variety of sentiment, in which love is identified with the creative activity of the artist to such a degree that it becomes scarcely possible to imagine the one without the other. Certainly the artist is a man. He can love as other men do, yield to the temptations of the most ordinary carnal desire, aspire to the order and peace that are lent to life by the mutual love of husband and wife, in short, be an artist and a man. But he can also love as an artist, because he needs some sort of emotion or passion for the liberation of his creative power, and this kind of love is most certainly no more dissociated from the flesh than other kinds, but it does not always need to be accompanied by carnal satisfaction and its lasting properties are often enhanced if this is denied it.[100]

According to Gilson, therefore, Dante's love is "a carnal love of which the object is not itself carnal and which is directed far less towards the beloved woman than towards the work which she inspires; in short, it is the poet's love for the woman whose presence liberates his genius and makes his song burst forth."[101] For Gilson, the "woman-muse" thus "beloved must have no personality of her own;" she cannot also be the man's wife; she is ideally remote and inaccessible; and she "does not always even share the desire she awakens."[102] While recognising that, in the *Commedia*, Beatrice also takes on a symbolic role, Gilson insists that Dante's love for her is always stimulated by his carnal love for her as a corporal woman.[103]

With the exception of Petrarch's love for Laura, all Gilson's other examples to substantiate his psychological theory are taken from the late eighteenth-century onwards, including the (female) muses of Goethe, Heine, and the Romantic literary critic Sainte-

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[99] *Ibid.*, 17. While a saint may perceive "all beauty as a reflection of the divine beauty," Dante who "was not a saint, but […] a Christian artist of prodigious power" incarnates his carnal "emotions in his works" (Gilson, *Dante*, 71).
[100] Gilson, *Choir of Muses*, 284. See also *Ibid.*, 57.
[101] *Ibid.*, 60.
[102] *Ibid.*, 17; 6; 7; Gilson, *Dante*, 287; and Gilson, *Choir of Muses*, 14.
[103] *Ibid.*, 69-70.

Beuve.[104] Gilson's favoured test case for his theory, though, is Wagner's Tristan: "Mathilde was too intelligent to be deceived by Wagner's most frenzied transports. It was not she whom he loved, even in *Tristan*, it was *Tristan* he loved in her."[105] Gilson unproblematically applies his psychological theory of the artist and his muse across the centuries from Dante to Wagner and back again: "it is probable that the great creative artists resemble one another closely enough, in spite of the centuries that separate them, for us to be able to generalise from particular cases":[106]

> That, if Richard Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonk had sated their passion, we should only have one more item in the life of Wagner, and no *Tristan* in his work, is scarcely a hypothesis. What is a hypothesis, but by no means an impossible one, is that in the case of Richard Wagner the artist raised between the man and his desire the obstacle that was necessary for the birth of *Tristan*. That Beatrice, a real woman was to the poet that was Dante this inexhaustible source of profound and stimulating emotion; that she enjoyed this singular privilege – which often astonishes the very women who possess it and sometimes embarrasses them – of liberating in him the flood of lyrical inspiration, is what Dante himself says in every chapter and almost every page of the *Vita Nuova*.[107]

Thus, for Gilson, "of the two women who appear in his life, Dante owes to one the inspiration from which his finest works spring: this is Beatrice, through and for whom Dante became a poet; he owes to the other the fact that he knew for a time the life of the domestic hearth in the love of man for woman and of a father for his children."[108]

Although Gilson accuses Mandonnet of the fallacy of presupposing "the very thesis which [he] is trying to prove," Gilson arguably does the same: Gilson's conviction that Beatrice "certainly is a real woman," and his peculiar psychological theory of the (male) artist and his (female) muse, are the lenses through which he interprets Dante's works and his biography.[109] Thus, given Gilson's theory, the poet Dante must have been not just a great lover but a

[104] Goethe (1749-1832), "she who was his muse was not the woman he married;" Heine (1797-1856), who "took Mathilde Mirat to wife, but Camille Selden, *The Fly*, inspired him with quite a different feeling;" Sainte-Beuve (1804-60)'s love for Adèle Hugo, the wife of the novelist, is another model for Gilson (Gilson, *Dante*, 69).
[105] Gilson, *Choir of Muses*, 169-170.
[106] Gilson, *Dante*, 285. See also *Ibid.*, 60.
[107] Gilson, *Dante*, 60.
[108] *Ibid.*, 61.
[109] *Ibid.*, 4-5.

great carnal lover, "passionate and even licentious."[110] For Gilson, Dante's licentiousness explains not only his love for Beatrice and for many other ladies, but also the "grave moral crisis" arising from the death of Beatrice in 1290, and confessed by Dante-character to Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise (*Purg.* 30). Dante's grave moral sin, Gilson avers, was his carnal lust and homoerotic relations with Forese Donati: "it is true that the poet acted thus, but no less true that he is ashamed of it."[111] The "life of debauchery with Forese" is "nothing more nor less than the starting-point of the *Divine Comedy*," the "selva oscura" from which he is saved by his corporeal love for Beatrice: "To tear himself away from the kind of places where the sonnets to Forese Donati would be written, Dante had no course open to him but to return to Beatrice."[112] Gilson continues "the woman beloved of the poet was one of the blessed, and he had to love her henceforth as one of the blessed. This is very precisely what Dante did, and the very existence of the *Divine Comedy* is proof of it."[113]

Beatrice thereby saved Dante's "work and his soul at one stroke."[114] Beatrice saved the poet because Dante transmutes his erotic love for her into poetry: he loves, even more than the woman Beatrice herself, his literary works (the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*) which his love for her makes possible. Beatrice, in turn, becomes Dante's artistic "creation": although grounded in the historical reality of Beatrice Portinari, she is transfigured by the imagination of the poet.[115] Beatrice saved the poet's soul because, in loving her beyond the grave, Dante seeks to join her in heaven. To do so, Dante had to leave his life of shameful homoerotic lust with Forese, and – with the corporeal image of the woman Beatrice ever

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[110] *Ibid.*, 284n2.

[111] *Ibid.*, 63-64: "What, then, had they been to each other? The Franciscan Serravalle explains to us in Latin which it is better not to translate: *Nam ipsi fuerunt socii in rebus aliquibus lascivis, quas fecerunt invicem et insimul* […] even if we do not interpret it in the extreme sense – which we cannot deny, moreover, that it suggests – Dante's sentence cannot mean that the relations between the two friends were honorable."

[112] *Ibid.*, 64-65; 71. See also *Ibid.*, 80: "Dante is not unaware of what he would first have to confess and expiate at this meeting [with Beatrice]. To find out, he had only to ask himself how, each time he felt that he was beneath her gaze, the associate of Forese Donati faced the soul of Beatrice."

[113] *Ibid.*, 71.

[114] *Ibid.*

[115] *Ibid.*, 53: "Beatrice was born of the genius of Dante, not of the marriage of Folco Portinari and Cilia Caponsacchi […] Beatrice Portinari is a historical personage whose shadow discreetly accompanies the eternally living Beatrice whom Dante alone has created."

before his eyes – follow the path of Christian penance and virtue that would lead him to her. For Gilson, therefore, Dante's love for Beatrice, like his competing love for Forese, was sexual, and he sees nothing problematic with Dante intentionally cultivating (and celebrating) this carnal love, whether for a young girl of nine, for a married woman, or for a dead woman (whom he knows to be his own mediating saint in heaven due to a "personal revelation.")[116]

IV. Mandonnet's Beatrice and Gilson's Beatrice: A Comparative Critique

Mandonnet and Gilson present us with two radically opposed (and mutually incompatible) accounts of Dante's biography and his autobiographical works, the *Vita Nuova*, *Convivio*, and *Commedia*. Reviewers of *Dante et la philosophie* resolved this opposition by siding straightforwardly with Gilson, characterising Mandonnet's theory as a "groundless delusion," justly subjected to Gilson's "inexorably accurate destruction."[117] Gilson "pulverises *Dante le théologien*," Kenelm Foster approvingly notes, with the candour of the child "in Hans Anderson's tale about the Emperor's new clothes," not that, he adds, "anyone in Italy took Mandonnet's book very seriously anyhow."[118] It is not clear, however, whether such reviewers had actually read Mandonnet's book, or whether they simply accepted Gilson's polemical presentation of Mandonnet's arguments at face value. Even before Gilson published *Dante et la philosophie* in 1939, Marie-Humbert Vicaire, O.P. (1906-1993) – Mandonnet's student and successor as Professor of the History of the Church at the University of Fribourg – lamented in 1937 the immediate reception of his master's work:

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[116] *Ibid.*, 71.

[117] C.C.J. Webb, "Review," of *Dante the Philosopher*, in *Philosophy* 24.91 (October 1940): 360-62; J.E. Shaw, "Review," of *Dante et la philosophie*, in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 10.1 (October 1940): 113-119 (113). For Helmet Hatzfield, to cite another typical example, Mandonnet's and Gilson's books serve to verify the "contrast between the obsolete and the 'revived' Catholic Dante scholarship" (Helmet Hatzfied, "Review," of *Dante the Philosopher*, in *Renascence* 2.1 (Fall 1949/1950): 58a-60a).

[118] Kenelm Foster, "Review of *Dante the Philosopher*," in *Blackfriars* 30.350 (May 1949): 232-34. In 1937, however, the French Biblical scholar Marie-Joseph Lagrange, O.P. (1855-1938) took his confrère's argument seriously enough to devote, the year before his own death, a long review article (25 pages) to its refutation, drawing on the prior arguments of Berthier, and anticipating many of Gilson's subsequent critiques (M.J. Lagrange, "La Réalisme et le Symbolisme de Dante," *Revue Biblique* 46.4 (1 October, 1937): 481-505).

> if Fr Mandonnet had lived long enough to witness the effect of his book, without doubt, he would have been not a little disappointed […] Unfortunately, we have in our midst, mostly historians of Dante who, even when they might know a little theology, are not historians with regard to the theological ground which influences the author. Thus Fr. Mandonnet hardly expects to be understood by these "specialists."[119]

Vicaire notes that "with about four or five exceptions," most critics, due to their "sentimental and Romantic" prejudices, only focused on "the question dealing with the real or symbolic existence of Beatrice."[120] Defending Mandonnet's interpretation of the *Vita Nuova* as "a modest confession in an entirely symbolic manner," Vicaire would have presumably seen in Gilson's subsequent account yet another iteration of "realistic disclosures and romantic sensibility." As Gilson's own reviewers largely accepted his judgments uncritically, let us reappraise, in this fourth section, the validity of Gilson's critiques of Mandonnet's interpretation of Beatrice, as well as the plausibility of his own.[121]

As we have seen, Mandonnet's governing approach to Dante's Beatrice is historical and theological: he is convinced that to understand Dante's works requires historical proficiency, a contextual apparatus, and an appropriate hermeneutic method. By contrast, Gilson's approach is psychological and literary: he claims that while scholars typically get Dante wrong about Beatrice, his contemporary "cultured reader," with "sufficiently elevated literary tastes, but no special erudition and no particular historical

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[119] Marie-Humbert Vicaire, "Review of *Dante le théologien*," in *The New Scholasticism* 11.3 (July 1937): 280-84.

[120] *Ibid.*

[121] In addition to the reviews cited above, see also, for example, Giles Zaramella, "Review of *Dante the Philosopher*," in *The New Scholasticism* 25.4 (1951): 480-84 (481): "In this work Gilson is like a wise restorer of medieval and classical edifices; he tears down baroque superstructures added by sacrilegious hands and shows the original make-up in all the purity and clarity of its classic lines. [Gilson gives us] Beatrice's historico-artistic figure in a masterly synthesis;" and J.H. Whitfield, "Review of *Dante et la philosophie*," *MLR*, 41.3 (July 1946): 334-35 (334): "M. Gilson is reacting (very sanely and courteously) against the theories of Père Mandonnet […] No one can fail to admire the skill with which Père Mandonnet is removed from any claim to speak for Dante." For Colin Hardie, "M. Gilson's *Dante et la philosophie* must be given pride of place as the greatest contribution of recent years to Dante studies," and he "applauds" Gilson's refutation of Mandonnet and his conclusion that "Beatrice was a real woman;" nonetheless, Hardie wishes for "more positive reasons for insisting that Beatrice is not a symbol" as a corrective to "the rationalist and intellectualist tradition of Italian Dantists who imagine a Dante believing in salvation by philosophy and theology and not by faith in historical persons" (see Hardie, "Four English Books," 420-21).

proficiency," who nonetheless "surrenders himself to the genius of the poet," is "in little danger of being deceived as to the meaning of this radiant figure."[122] The problem with Gilson's general approach is evident when he critiques Mandonnet on points of textual detail. Thus, for example, Mandonnet argues that Dante cross-references in the *Commedia* the beginning and the end of his clerical vocation represented in the *Vita Nuova*. When Lucia says to Beatrice "Quei che t'amò tanto, che uscì per te de la volgare schiera" (*Inf.* 2.104-05) this, like *Vita Nuova* 3.2, represents Dante's leaving the secular state (*militia saecularis*) of the laity for the religious life (*militia spiritualis*), a separation from the world implied in 2 Timothy 2.4: "Nemo militans Deo, implicat se negotiis saecularibus" [those in God's army must not be involved in the affairs of the world]. For Mandonnet, a realist interpretation of this passage is implausible: Dante could hardly be said to have left the "volgare schiera" by falling in love with a woman, given that "*amor omnibus idem*."[123] By contrast, Gilson ridicules Mandonnet's reading of "schiera" as "*militia*" for two reasons: first, that he does not find this reading in his dictionary and, second, that Dante uses this term to refer to the group of poets in limbo (*Inf.* 4.101-02), and this group is clearly not a *militia*.[124] However, had Gilson taken the trouble to consult a historical dictionary of the Italian language, or considered the early reception of *Inferno* 4, he would have found that "schiera" in the fourteenth century could mean, as Mandonnet maintained, *militia* and that it was glossed as such by at least one of Dante's early commentators.[125]

Gilson claims, moreover, that Mandonnet's "learned deductions" are very far from Dante's intention, while "we are very close to Dante" in following his realist approach.[126] Nonetheless, Gilson's

[122] Gilson, *Dante*, 51.

[123] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 96. Of the early commentators, only Boccaccio gives a "realist" interpretation in terms of the conventions of courtly love. The other commentators interpret this as Dante leaving the secular sciences, as well as his vices, to follow God and theology; "Beatrice, loda de Dio vera," reflects the sense of "theology" as "praise of God."

[124] Gilson, *Dante*, 31: "The first Italian dictionary consulted has given me as the meaning of *schiera*: line, group, band, row. There is no mention of 'militia';" Ibid., 32: "Is this a 'militia?' It is not clear in what sense such a group would be one."

[125] See "sciera s.f.", in *Tesoro della lingua Italian delle Origini*, http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO/); Benvenuto, gloss to *Inf.* 4.101-02: "loro schiera, idest societate ordinate et armata stilis suis, quibus dimicabant."

[126] Gilson, *Dante*, 81. While Mandonnet puts forward his interpretations with varying degrees of plausibility, Gilson repeatedly affirms his certainty that his own interpretation of Beatrice is that of Dante (see, for example, *Dante*, 54: "To regard Beatrice as

mocking critique of, for example, Mandonnet's interpretation of number symbolism is, in essence, a critique of number symbolism itself (and thus, surely, of Dante).[127] Similarly, Gilson ridicules Mandonnet's interpretation of the cord (*Inf.* 16.109-11): "To tell the truth, all this seems to me the most extraordinary story of belts that has ever been told."[128] And yet, this is to ridicule not just Mandonnet but the commentary tradition on this passage as a whole. While most early commentators allegorically interpret the "cord" as a symbol of fraud by which Dante, in his youth, sought to seduce women, Mandonnet proffers an adaption of a significant, albeit still minority, interpretation that the "cord" refers to Dante's entry, in his youth, to the Franciscan order. Having established that the leopard symbolises the pleasures of the flesh (the *concupiscentia carnis*), Mandonnnet argues that the cord is the clerical cord, the "symbol of ecclesiastical celibacy, to which [Dante] had provisionally committed himself by entering the clerical state;" this is how, in his youth, he had tried to entrap the leopard.[129] As the experience of the clerical state was fraught with difficulty, Virgil, symbol of wisdom and reason, commands Dante to undo the cord, and leave the rule of innocence (implied by the clerical state) behind. Virgil then uses this image of innocence (for nothing is more chaste than a child) to conjure up Geryon, the monster of fraud, who seeks to take advantage of the simplicity and uprightness of others. Gilson's highly rhetorical critique amounts to a distaste not just for Mandonnet's (historically and linguistically valid) interpretation, but for learned and allegorical interpretations *tout court*.

Furthermore, rather than providing any new historical or philological evidence, Gilson predominantly states as a corrective what Mandonnet had already considered as an alternative, but erroneous, interpretation in formulating his own. Thus, for example,

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a real woman is certainly to understand her as Dante has intended that she should be understood and to defer to his intention;" see also *Ibid.*, 57.)

[127] *Ibid.*, 16-21. While considering Mandonnet's symbolic interpretation as in error, the French historian Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny revealingly acknowledges that Dante would have taken Mandonnet's theories more seriously than us moderns, Gilson included (see M.D'Alverny, "Review of *Dante et la philosophie*," *Études de philosophie médiévale* 102 (1941), 235-37 (236)).

[128] Gilson, *Dante*, 31-36 (35).

[129] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 102. Mandonnet cites Durandus's liturgical commentary on the cord ("cingulum continentiam significat;"), as well as the liturgy of the mass, where the priest ties the cincture around his waist, while reciting the words: "Praecinge me, Domine, cingulo puritatis, et extingue in lumbis meis humorem libidinis, ut maneat in me virtus continentiae et castitatis." On historical-philological grounds, Mandonnet rules out more specific identifications of the cord with particular religious orders, whether it be the Franciscans, Dominicans, or another penitential order.

Gilson affirms that Mandonnet's "hypothesis is formally contradicted by the evidence of Giovanni Villani: 'Questo fue grande letterato quasi in ogni scientia, tutto fosse laico.'" And yet, Mandonnet adopts this very source as further circumstantial evidence *in favour of* his hypothesis that Dante had been a cleric: for Mandonnet, Villani's portrait is of a disdainful scholar who could hardly converse with laymen ("non bene sapeva converssare co' laici"); despite marrying (and leaving the clerical state), Dante appears as a "disorientated cleric in the midst of the world."[130] For Mandonnet, Dante's political theories about the Roman Empire of the German kings, and the imperial utopianism expressed in *De monarchia*, are similarly those of an old-school cleric, and not of a political pragmatist, in touch with the social, economic, and political transformations of his time; his lecturing in Verona (the *Questio de acqua et terra*) suggests that, in exile, he resumed the teaching office of the cleric, open to him as separated from his wife; while his self-identification in exile, as a cleric, is further suggested by his use of the phrase, "*Nos autem cui mundus est patria, velut piscibus aequor*" (*DVE* 1.2.4), for only "clergy belonged to Christendom and were at home everywhere."[131]

Finally, Gilson exaggerates Mandonnet's novelty in order to dismiss it: "the entirely new Beatrice;" "if Father Mandonnet is right, no one hitherto has ever understood the character of Beatrice."[132] However, as we have seen, a purely symbolic Beatrice was anything but "new," and Mandonnet circumscribes his "originality" to his particular hypothesis of Dante's clerical career in the *Vita Nuova*. This is important because the majority of Gilson's arguments refer generically to all purely symbolical interpretations of Beatrice, and only one of Gilson's arguments is new.[133] Thus, for example, Gilson presents as incontestable evidence for Beatrice's reality the *Commedia*'s references to her "belle membra" scattered

[130] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 105-06.
[131] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 106-07; *Ibid.*, 108 and 24n.4; *Ibid.*, 108.
[132] Gilson, *Dante*, 1-3 (but see, also, *Ibid.*, 2n1).
[133] Gilson's only original argument is that, for Dante unlike for Aquinas, there are, in fact, two beatitudes. This argument, however, is fallacious on two counts: first, because Mandonnet clearly identifies Beatrice with a man's supernatural destiny (and, for Dante, there is only one beatitude in this sense) and, second, because Aquinas's and Dante's views on the two ends of man are not, in fact, necessarily divergent, as Gilson makes out. On this question, see Corbett, "Thomists at War," 1082-92; and Patrick Gardner, "Thomas and Dante on the *Duo Ultima Hominis*," *The Thomist* 75.3 (2011): 415-59.

on earth (*Purg*. 31.49-51).[134] However, like many of the poem's early commentators, Mandonnet would respond to such instances with the poetic principle of verisimilitude: for the purposes of the fiction, Dante treats Beatrice *as if she were a woman*, but this does not mean that *she is a woman* (just as Dante describes with verisimilitude the peculiar region of Ante-Purgatory, but this does not mean that such an eschatological region *actually exists*): the truth, in these two cases, is solely that which is signified through the fiction.[135] Rather than providing new and incontestable evidence for Beatrice Portinari, Gilson is simply giving a *realist* rather than a *symbolical* interpretation of the passages in question.

It seems to me unlikely, therefore, that Mandonnet would have been convinced by Gilson's critique; moreover, like Vicaire, he would presumably have seen Gilson's own account of Dante's love for Beatrice Portinari as a variety (albeit a rather strange one) of realist accounts in general. In *Dante le théologien*, Mandonnet is dismissive of such attempts, following Boccaccio, to flesh out from the skeleton account of the *Vita Nuova* "a platonic love affair between juveniles": "realists understand this without any malice to be that, as a child, Dante was seduced by the beauty and perfection of a young Florentine girl of his age," and "they explain that there is nothing improbable, after all, about a child of nine, particularly a precocious child, falling in love."[136] If, according to the realist

[134] Gilson, *Dante*, 55. See also *Ibid*., 72-73. For Gilson, although Beatrice clearly takes on a symbolic role, Dante's love for her is always stimulated by his carnal love for her as a corporal woman (69-70). Even in the Earthly Paradise, therefore, when Beatrice reproaches Dante for "his failure to understand […] the vanity of earthly things […] it is precisely there that she recalls to him the dazzling beauty of the body that the poet formerly loved, those 'fair limbs' the sight of which, in his eyes, nothing in nature or in art could replace." (70).

[135] Thus, for example, Matteo Romani interprets Beatrice's "belle membra" scattered *on earth* as the natural demonstrations and persuasions of theology (i.e. philosophical arguments), to be contrasted with the arguments ex fide *from heaven* (in line with a standard early interpretation of "'l poema sacro / al quale ha posto mano *e cielo e terra*;" *Par*. 25.1-2). See Romani, II, 537-40: "Essendo la Teologia la scienza che più di tutte ti dilettava, certamente tu dovevi con essa levarti *dalla terra al cielo*, dale dimonstrazioni naturali alle divine" (538); "d'aver lasciata la scienza divina per la mondana" (540). On the poetic fiction of Dante's Ante-Purgatory, see George Corbett, "The Invention of Ante-Purgatory: Sluggards and Excommunicates in Dante's 'Hopeful Limbo' (*Purgatorio* I-IX)," *Le Tre Corone* 10 (2023): 41-65.

[136] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 72. Biscioni makes much the same point: "è inverisimile, che Beatrice fosse donna vera. E primieramente, perchè è fuori d' ogni probabilità, che Dante s'innamorasse così fortemente in età di nove anni, d'una fanciulletta, che ne aveva soli otto: e che questo amore tenacemente durasse in lui per tutto lo spazio della sua vita" (Biscioni, "Prefazione," xi). Gilson finds nothing problematic about reading the *Vita Nuova* as a straight-forward realist narrative, explaining Dante's love for Beatrice, once again, through a nineteenth-century example: Leo Tolstoy's love for a

interpretation, Dante stopped loving (platonically) a young Florentine girl, there is nothing morally reproachable about this. Moreover, it is absurd that Beatrice apparently "dumped the young Dante to marry Simone de' Bardi, and then, weeping, reproaches Dante, legitimately married" or that, some 23 years after the fading of this love (which, Mandonnet notes, consisted "in saying not a word to his idol over 9 years, and during that time receiving 2 distant greetings"), Dante would still be infatuated with her. As a literal love affair, this is strange psychology indeed, and it is hardly applicable to Dante, especially given his reference to the transience of human love in the absence of the loved one (*Purg*. 8.76-78 would apply, Mandonnet notes, to men as well as to women).[137] Nor, for Mandonnet, is Dante's love for Beatrice explained with reference to courtly love poetry, "an abusive, even sterile use" of the figure of the Lady of one's thoughts Dante inherited from the goliards and the troubadours, most of whom were learned "clerics or clerics who had returned to lay life."[138]

There are also a series of further dubious assumptions underpinning Gilson's literal interpretation of Beatrice. First, Gilson interprets Dante's love of Beatrice only through subsequent literary examples. However, neither the probable existence of Petrarch's Laura nor the certain existence of Wagner's Mathilde proves the existence of Dante's Beatrice.[139] Second, like realist interpreters as a whole, Gilson presents Dante as, effectively, a liar, deliberately re-interpreting his poems *after the event* in the prosimetrum of the *Vita Nuova* and, again, in the *Convivio*. Third, while Mandonnet maintains that Dante, like any other Christian sinner, is redeemed by the Christian supernatural order (which itself draws on the natural order), Gilson argues that Dante, peculiarly to himself, could

nine year old girl Sonia Kolochine, recounted in his letters (Gilson, *Dante et Béatrice*, 13; and *Ibid*., 107n.3). In Nabokov's *Lolita*, of course, the protagonist, a paedophile, cites Dante's supposed love for Beatrice aged nine as an inspiration: "Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine" (see Julian W. Connolly, *A Reader's Guide to Nabokov's "Lolita"* (Academic Studies Press, 2009), 32-33).

[137] Mandonnet notes that Dante did not seem to have an exaggerated idea about the quality of love in women in general (Mandonnet, *Dante*, 90-92).

[138] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 171; Gilson, *Dante*. 57: "Dante loved Beatrice primarily as a chivalrous poet of his time loved a Lady of his time." For a discussion of prevailing theories of courtly love in 1930s Europe, with particular attention to C.S. Lewis's celebrated *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936), see Luisa Passerini, *L'Europa e l'amore: Immaginario e politica fra le due Guerre* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1999), 197-230.

[139] The situation is, of course, more ambiguous than Gilson makes out. See, for example, J.B. Trapp, "Petrarch's Laura: The Portraiture of an Imaginary Beloved," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtault Institues*, 64 (2001), 55-192.

only be redeemed by the soul of one individual woman whom he "knew from personal and unquestionable revelation [to be] in heaven."[140] Dante's alleged canonization of Beatrice Portinari would be, at best, heterodox; the further claim that Dante does not seek "the intercession of great saints, men and women, of the whole Church," but only of "his own saint" Beatrice is confuted, not least, by his "morning and evening" prayers to Mary (*Par.* 23.88-90).[141] Fourth, while Mandonnet considers anachronistic the "realist" attempt to explain away Dante's explicitly symbolical statements about Beatrice – as "the immediate product of the Trinity, whose life is directed by the number nine, 'so beloved by her'"– as symptoms of a mind "tangled up in scholasticism,"[142] Gilson claims that such statements are "perfectly appropriate for a Christian soul, and especially for a Christian soul in Paradise."[143] However, Gilson fails to distinguish between speaking of a person, and speaking of a person in some respect; whatever their supernatural dignity *qua* baptised, all Christians, for Dante, are sinners.

Above all, while Gilson critiques Mandonnet's "amazement" that "a sensible man, as Dante certainly was, could invent so many fables on account of a woman," Gilson appears equally incredulous that Dante, a poet, might have loved, and sung of, God. Although, for Gilson, "the fullest well-spring of delight is man's love of woman," this could hardly have been the view of Dante.[144] The fullest well-spring of St Francis's delight, according to Dante, was not a woman but Lady Poverty. For St Dominic, it was Lady Faith. Dante depicts these saints, and their companions in heaven, as in love with God. Are we to suppose, as Gilson implies, that Dante believed that such love of God gives man less delight than the love of a woman? Gilson avers, moreover, that it is "hard to understand how an artist can have found the accents of Dante to sing of the passion with which such [abstract] objects could inspire him."[145] And yet, even leaving aside the question of Beatrice, Dante does

[140] For Gilson, what "Dante here asks us to understand and to admit is precisely that, on the strength of the love that he bore her, Beatrice is exclusively marked out to be his intercessor with God. If God can win him back, it will be through her, and it is surely because Dante loves her still that God sends her to him. This man Dante will undoubtedly follow her, though he would follow no one else!" (Gilson, *Dante*, 79).
[141] *Ibid.*, 13.
[142] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 72. Biscioni likewise comments that "molte cose, le quali si dicono di lei nell'opere di Dante, e qui spezialmente nella Vita Nova [...] non si possono verificare di corporea sustanza" (Biscioni, "Prefazione," xiii).
[143] Gilson, *Dante*, 74-77.
[144] Gilson, *Choir of Muses*, 166.
[145] Gilson, *Dante*, 54.

sing of his love for wisdom (and even Gilson acknowledges that Dante's Lady Philosophy, like that of Boethius, is not a woman). Moreover, Gilson's claims that women are incapable of great art, and that "one does not expect to meet sanctity on the highways of art," are demonstrably untrue.[146] There are plenty of artists (male and female) for whom there is no evidence that their artistic creations were dependent upon that "inexhaustible well-spring of delight," "the love of a poet for a woman."[147] Most significantly, perhaps, while many twentieth-century commentators understood the *Song of Songs*, the greatest love poetry in the Bible, to be inspired by a (male) poet's love for a woman, their medieval counterparts interpreted it to be inspired by God's love for the human soul, a love expressed through the language of erotic love. In all these respects, one cannot but wonder whether Gilson, like other late-Romantic "men of letters," is not stuck in the confusion of Dante's second circle, providing, like Francesca, an interpretation *in malo*.[148]

In drawing Mandonnet out of Gilson's shadow, I have sought – in this article – to rebalance the controversy about Dante's Beatrice between these two major historians of medieval thought. I have set out and explained Mandonnet's rationale for his purely symbolic interpretation of Beatrice, as well as providing a necessary and long overdue critique of Gilson's rationale for his opposing, realist interpretation. If, in doing so, I have acted more as a witness for Mandonnet's defence than for that of Gilson, this is, in my view, a somewhat necessary readjustment, given the strongly biased and one-sided scholarly reception of their respective accounts heretofore. As we have seen, while Gilson's *Dante et la philosophie* (1939) met with largely uncritical and unquestioning acclaim, Mandonnet's *Dante le théologien* (1935), if not ignored altogether, has typically been viewed solely as the implicit object of Gilson's polemical rebuttal. Of significant interest in itself, the controversy

[146] For Gilson, there is but one exception, Fra Angelico (1395-1455): "no single name comes to mind except Fra Angelico." Gilson insinuates that the Church "hesitates to name him *santo*" because he was "so fully a painter." Gilson died four years before Fr Angelico was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 3 October 1982. A theologian-poet himself, Pope Saint John Paul II proclaimed Fr Angelico the patron saint of Catholic artists on 18 February 1984. Unlike Gilson, John Paul II did find "sanctity on the highways of art."

[147] Gilson, *Choir of Muses*, 166. Gilson intones "the well-worn saying springs into one's mind – 'Woman, summer everlasting! Woman, immortal spring.'" (169).

[148] On Francesca's interpretation *in malo* of the *Song of Songs*, see, for example, Corbett, *Dante's Christian Ethics*, 41n.64.

between Mandonnet and Gilson in the 1930s is arguably a watershed moment in the reception history of Dante's Beatrice. It effectively closes a period during which multiple, and mutually incompatible, interpretations of Dante's Beatrice coexisted, with no clear prospect that the realist approach would prevail. It also ushers in the post-war realist consensus, a consensus reflected, for example, in the entries for "Beatrice" in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (1970) and the *Dante Encylopedia* (2000): Beatrice refers to a historical person – Beatrice Portinari (1266-1290) – who comes to signify Christian theology, faith, grace, et al.[149] This realist assumption, in turn, underlies post-war scholarship on central tenets of Dante's thought and works, including the relationship between sexual desire and love of God;[150] the theology of the incarnation and of personal encounter,[151] and much feminist criticism that emphasises the (apparent) fact that Dante makes a woman the voice of theology in Paradise.[152] Revisiting the arguments and rationale, as well as the

[149] Aldo Vallone, "Beatrice," in *Enciclopedia dantesca* [*ED*], 6 vols (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970–78), I, 542–51 (546–51); Joan M. Ferrante, "Beatrice," in *The Dante Encyclopedia* [*DE*], ed. Richard Lansing (New York: Routledge, 2000), 89–95. See also, for example, Domenico De Robertis, "Identità di Beatrice," and Francesco Mazzoni, "Il 'trascendentale' dimenticato," in *Omaggio a Beatrice (1290-1990)*, ed. Rudy Abardo (Florence: Le Lettere, 1997), 11-21 (11) and 93-132 (103).

[150] See, for example, Teodolinda T. Barolini, "Beyond (Courtly) Dualism: Thinking about Gender in Dante's Lyrics," in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. Barolini and Storey (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 65–89; Olivia Holmes, *Dante's Two Beloveds*: *Ethics and Erotics in the "Divine Comedy"* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008); Tristan Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption: Eros, Salvation, Vernacular Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Elena Lombardi, *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine and the Modistae* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007; Eadem, *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2012); Regina F. Psaki, "Dante's Redeemed Eroticism," *Lectura Dantis*, 18–19 (1996), 12–19; Eadem, "The Sexual Body in Dante's Celestial Paradise," in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Jan S. Emerson (London/New York: Routledge, 2013), 47-61; Pamela Williams, *From Human to Divine Love* (Leicester: Troubador Publishing, 2007).

[151] See, for example, Robin Kirkpatrick, *Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, trans. and ed. with comm. 3 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006-2007) and, especially, Vittorio Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's "Commedia" as Theology" Divinity Realized in Human Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[152] See, especially, J. M. Ferrante, *Woman As Image in Medieval Literature: From the Twelfth Century to Dante* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975); Eadem, *Dante's Beatrice: Priest of an Androgynous God* (Binghampton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992). Ferrante explores the implications of Dante giving "the office of major theologian in his heaven to someone whose sex would have shocked virtually all of the doctors of the church there" (Ferrante, *Dante's Beatrice*, 195-96). See also, more recently, Abigail Rowson, "Kaleidoscopic Beatrice: Through the Theologians, as a Theologian," *Italian Studies* 76.1 (2021): 18-

particular motivations and alleged projections, that underpin the contested interpretations of Dante's Beatrice in the 1930s may challenge scholars, I hope, to reinterrogate their equivalents in Beatrice's post-war and, indeed, contemporary reception.

With regard to Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*, the question of hermeneutic approach represents the fundamental parting of ways in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (whatever interpretations are given of specific passages or points of detail). For those interpreting according to the allegory of the poets, such as Mandonnet, the literal sense is a fiction, and the intended sense is what is signified through it: "to seek to take the fiction for the truth, the peel for the fruit [...] is to misinterpret fundamentally Dante's thought and to prevent oneself a priori from understanding the whole allegorical part of his writings."[153] By contrast, for scholars such as Gilson and Singleton, the *Vita Nuova* is not an allegory at all, but Dante's account of his love for the young woman Beatrice Portinari, a love which leads him to God.[154] The key hermeneutical issue, therefore, is whether the *Vita Nuova* is, or is not, written according to the allegory of the poets: if so, the meaning is hidden behind the fiction, and it is not surprising if, in certain parts of the text, it is difficult to pierce the veil (especially if the poems were originally addressed to a small, elite, and highly educated readership);[155] if not, then it is a re-telling, albeit swathed in mystical

31. Building on the work of Ferrante and Montemaggi especially, Rowson concludes: "I suggest that instead of Beatrice merely standing for theology *personified*, in the relationship with Dante, theology becomes, instead, *personalised*, requiring a person-to-person realisation." (30).

[153] Mandonnet, *Dante*, 32. For Biscioni too, Dante makes this clear in his commentary, as at *VN*, 25.1-10 (see Biscioni, "Prefazione," xv-xvi: "Dunque Dante in quest' opera attese solamente alla figura, cioè all'allegoria; non facendo alcuna menzione del senso istorico, ma dimostrando bensì premura grande, ch'ella per allegorico senso interpretata ne fosse, siccome era di ragione.")

[154] Charles S. Singleton, *An Essay on the "Vita Nuova"* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1949). If, as Auerbach suggests, Singleton overcomes in this book the "absurd struggle between realists and allegorists," it can only be in denying that there is an allegory at all (Erich Auerbach, "Review," of Charles S. Singleton, *Essay on the "Vita Nuova"*, in *Comparative Literature* 2, no. 4 [1950]: 373-75).

[155] See Jelena Todorović, *Dante and the Dynamics of Textual Exchange: Authorship, Manuscript Culture, and the Making of the 'Vita Nuova'* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 3: "In terms of the question of the *Vita Nova*'s audience is concerned, the book itself […] seems to suggest that it indeed was not meant to be disseminated outside of the coterie of poets around Dante. Furthermore, the fact that we have no proof that the *Vita Nova* even circulated before 1308 supports a thesis that its intended audience can be identified as this small circle of poets, with the 'fedeli d'amore' who understand Dante's poetry, the 'cor' gentili' and 'alm[e] pres[e].' Dante produced the *Vita Nova* neither as a poetic collection nor as a circulating 'book' as we think of it today."

language, of Dante's love for a woman Beatrice (and such literal readers understandably lose patience, as does Gilson, with allegorical interpretations). Whatever one might think of Mandonnet's specific hypothesis that the *Vita Nuova* represents symbolically the narrative of Dante's failed clerical vocation, the hermeneutical issue remains.[156]

Mandonnet's broader claim that, in the *Commedia*, Beatrice should *always* be interpreted solely according to her typological functions, and *never* as a historical individual, is arguably in greater continuity with the interpretative tradition as a whole than the "realist" insistence that Beatrice in the *Commedia* is *always* both a historical individual and a symbol. In relation to the reception history of Dante's Beatrice, indeed, Moore's sharp distinction between three main interpretative approaches to Beatrice – the "symbolist," the "idealist," and the "realist" – is misleading. Instead, it is more appropriate to envisage an interpretative continuum, with Mandonnet's exclusively symbolist approach at one extreme (Dante's Beatrice is not a woman in any of his writings) and Gilson's realist approach at the other (Dante refers to Beatrice as solely a woman in the *Vita Nuova* and as a woman *and* a symbol in the *Commedia*). Prior to the nineteenth century, commentators typically adopt either an exclusively symbolical interpretation of Beatrice in the *Commedia* (Dante does not refer to Beatrice as a woman in the *Commedia*, even though he may have done so in his earlier work, the *Vita Nuova*) or a predominantly symbolical interpretation (although Dante refers to Beatrice literally as a historical person in a few passages of the *Commedia*, for the most part he refers only to her symbolic function), while avoiding a dogmatically realist approach, an approach which emerges only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with a broader insistence on the literal sense of

[156] There are, of course, alternative symbolical readings of Dante's early biography (as recounted in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*). See, for example, Romani, II, 'Commentary on Purgatorio 33-33: "I sustained Dante for some time with the beauty of my face, from the age of 9 to 25 (and God gifted Dante with huge graces, both natural and supernatural), showing him the demonstrations of natural religion (that is her 'occhi giovinetti'); however, when – at the beginning of her second age – i.e. aged 26 she 'died,' that is she went to heaven, he disdained her, and followed others. This, on an allegorical level, is when the divine science moves to arguments from faith (which have their principles *not on earth* but *in heaven*). In his arrogance, he wanted to be free in his philosophising, and not accept arguments from faith, and hence he followed – not Beatrice – but Lady Philosophy (la donna gentile)." Romani's nineteenth-century interpretation follows that, for example, of Francesco da Buti (see Francesco da Buti, gloss to *Purg.* 30.109-23).

the poem as a whole.[157] Where we situate ourselves on this symbolic-realist spectrum of interpretation is decisive for our understanding of the objects of Dante's love, and of the very subject and themes of his works.

In the majority of modern Dante scholarship (as well as in most modern editions of, and introductions to, his works), Dante's love for the woman Beatrice Portinari is presented to readers as a historical fact. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, this identification was considered as a contested matter of interpretation, and I am not aware of any subsequent historical or philological evidence which would merit the subsequent change of perspective. Nonetheless, the question is not just whether or not one identifies Dante's Beatrice with a particular woman Beatrice Portinari, but of how one interprets Beatrice's function in the *Vita Nuova*, *Convivio*, and *Commedia*. Thus, for example, although Joachim Berthier, Mandonnet's Dominican colleague, accepted the historical identification between Dante's Beatrice and Bice Portinari, (the clinching piece of evidence for Berthier was the testimony of Dante's son Pietro, the result, in fact, of a later redaction by another hand), Berthier is not a "realist" in either Moore's or Gilson's understanding of the term. For Berthier, in the *Commedia*, Beatrice's historical referent no longer applies; rather she is merely a sign, and what is signified is the supernatural knowledge of God through faith; Dante does not *literally* make a woman the voice of theology in *Paradiso*, but depicts *symbolically* his love for the divine science through the poetic figure (the "beautiful lie") of his love for a woman.[158] This is entirely different to the view of Gilson that Dante loved a woman Beatrice and only God through, or exclusively because of, her. Gilson's view, indeed, has much more in common with Charles Williams' romantic theology (or theology of romantic love), according to which we may see God in and through a particular beloved, just as Dante allegedly sees God in and through Beatrice Portinari.[159] Williams' "affirmatory way"

[157] For a reception history, and critique, of the predominance of a "literal" interpretation of Dante's *Commedia* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see George Corbett, "Interpreting Dante's *Commedia*: Competing Perspectives," *Bibliotheca Dantesca*, 4 (2021), 1-32.

[158] Joachim Berthier, O.P. (1848-1924) was Mandonnet's colleague at the University of Fribourg from 1891. Berthier translated the *Commedia* into French (1924; reprinted, with introduction by Ruedi Imbach, in 2018), and provided a partial commentary in Italian on the poem (1892-97).

[159] Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943).

led Hans Urs Von Balthasar, in turn, to see in Dante a "new, third theology", an "existential theology":[160]

> for the first time in Christian theology, the theme of individual, personal and fateful love […] The thoroughly earthly love of the *Vita Nuova* is carried as far as the heights of Heaven; indeed, it is extolled as the motive power for the whole journey through the hereafter. The love, which began on earth between two human beings, is not denied, is not bypassed in the journey to God: it is not, as was always, naturally enough, hitherto the case, sacrificed on the altar of the classical *via negativa*; no, it is carried right up to the throne of God, however transformed and purified. This is utterly unprecedented in the history of Christian theology.[161]

Variations on this realist view of Dante's love for Beatrice – popularised in wider culture, for example, by Dorothy Sayers's Penguin translation of the *Commedia* and related essays – persist in the mainstream of modern Dante criticism.[162] What the early commentators, let alone Dante himself, might have made of such characterisations of his love, and of such claims for his theological novelty, remains very much open to question, in my view, and subject, therefore, to further historical interrogation and critical debate.

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[160] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Dante," in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics III: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986; first pub. 1962), 9-104 (32): "As Charles Williams rightly saw, [Dante's love for Beatrice] transcends the whole neo-Platonic scheme of *via positiva, negativa, eminentiae*;" *Ibid.*, 10; *Ibid.*, "scholastic theology by a layman into existential theology" (85).

[161] Balthasar, "Dante," 31.

[162] *Dante The Divine Comedy I: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), 67-68: "Beatrice remains in the *story* what she was in real life: the Florentine girl whom Dante loved from the first moment that he saw her, and in whom he seemed (as is sometimes the case with lovers) to see Heaven's glory walking the earth bodily […] she was thus in fact the vehicle of the glory – the earthly vessel in which the divine experience was carried […] Beatrice thus represents for every man that person – or, more generally, that experience of the Not-Self – which, by arousing his adoring love, has become for him the God-bearing image, the revelation of the presence of God." Sayers' immensely popular translation is dedicated, revealingly in this respect, "to the dead master of the affirmations Charles Williams." See also Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Beatrician Vision in Dante and Other Poets," and "Charles Williams: A Poet's Critic," in *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 45-68 and 69-90; and Eadem, "The Poetry of the Image in Dante and Charles Williams," in *Further Papers on Dante* (London: Methuen & Co., 1957), 183-204.