

Santo, santo, santo: Dante's Union of Prophet and Theophany in *Paradiso* 26

STEPHEN LITTLE

University of Notre Dame
stephen.m.a.little@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

*In *Paradiso* 26, St. John tells the blinded Dante that Beatrice's gaze has the power to restore his sight. Paradoxically, Beatrice's gaze does not directly heal the poet; rather, Dante sees anew when the blessed souls sing, Santo, santo, santo! These words and other clues in the canto evoke the biblical theophanies of Isaiah, Paul, and John. Dante's direct vision of God does not come for another seven cantos; why then does he allude to several theophanies at the significant moment when he regains his vision? Focusing on one source for the Santo verse—the Sanctus in the Mass—I propose that Dante does depict a theophany. He has a revelation of God—as the Mystical Body of Christ—and of himself as a member of it. Dante is united to his own theophany.*

Keywords: Dante; Divine Comedy; Theophany

*Sì com' io tacqui, un dolcissimo canto
risonò per lo cielo, e la mia donna
dicea con li altri: "Santo, santo, santo!"*

As soon as I was silent, the sweetest song
resounded through that heaven, and my lady
chanted with the others: 'Holy, holy, holy!'

(Dante *Paradiso*, 26.67–69)¹

This tercet marks the midpoint of *Paradiso* XXVI in Dante's *Comedy*. Dante-Pilgrim has arrived on the threshold of the *Primo Mobile*, the nexus between the created world and the Empyrean. He has been blind since the end of canto XXV, when he tried to see St. John's body with-

in the latter's covering of light. During the first half of canto XXVI, John questions him regarding Charity. At the end of his interrogation, Dante-Pilgrim hears Beatrice and the other souls present singing, "Holy, holy, holy!" [*Santo, santo, santo!*]. According to the general consensus among Dante scholars, these words allude to the biblical and liturgical phrase, *Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*, an *incipit* that also occurs in the Biblical books of Isaiah and the Apocalypse; in each of the latter, the *Sanctus* marks a theophany. By invoking the theophanies of the biblical prophets, Dante seems to suggest that he, too, has a prophetic vision at this point. However, the only figures around him are human souls, though of course God's presence is evident to the pilgrim; where, if anywhere, is Dante's theophany?

At stake in this question is how we understand Dante's self-presentation of his prophetic vocation. For he appears to invoke several theophanies of other prophets at this point. If therefore Dante-Poet's theophany differs from theirs, he is making an important point about his own nature as prophet; but if he alludes to their theophanies while leaving such a vision out at this point, he could be making a different point entirely.

As we have said, the healing follows immediately after Dante's *Sanctus*, a text with two biblical precedents, both of which mark theophanies. The first of these appears in the Old Testament, at the theophany of Isaiah. Just before Isaiah receives his prophetic commission, he sees two seraphim attending God in his temple, singing:

Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus, Deus exercituum; plena est omnis terra gloria ejus.

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of armies; full is all the earth with your glory. (Isa. 6:3)²

At this moment, the protagonist Isaiah exclaims:

Vae mihi, quia tacui, quia vir pollutus labiis ego sum

Woe is me, because I have held my peace; because I am a man of unclean lips (Isa. 6:5)

The words "for I have been silent" [*quia tacui*], which the Douey-Reims translates as "for I have held my peace," are evoked in Dante's phrase "As soon as I was silent" [*Si com' io tacqui*] which thus both

echoes and contrasts with Isaiah. Whereas Isaiah exclaims “for I have been silent” just after hearing the *Sanctus*, Dante-Poet writes “As soon as I was silent” just *before* the pilgrim hears the hymn. Isaiah breaks his silence and professes unclean lips, or speech, while Dante-Poet ends his speech and is applauded, by means of the *Sanctus*. Isaiah’s speech is only beginning; Dante’s is drawing to an end, and his silence calls attention at this moment to the fact that he has *not* been silent—he *has* spoken out. He has spoken prophetically.

Dante does not situate only himself in the theophanic scene from Isaiah; he does the same to Beatrice, drawing on an image in Isaiah’s account. After the latter confesses his silence and incapacity for pure speech, one of the seraphim approaches him:

*Et volavit ad me unus de seraphim, et in manu ejus calculus, quem
forcipe tulerat de altari, et tetigit os meum, et dixit:
Ecce tetigit hoc labia tua, et auferetur iniquitas tua, et peccatum tuum
mundabitur.*

And one of the seraphims flew to me, and in his hand was a live coal, which he had taken with the tongs off the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: Behold this hath touched thy lips, and thy iniquities shall be taken away, and thy sin shall be cleansed. (Isa. 6:6-7)

The seraph purifies Isaiah’s lips with the sacred coal from the altar of the Lord. In *Paradiso* XXVI, Beatrice serves a similar function. She had been sent to Dante from Heaven (back in the *Purgatorio*), and now, as St. John says, she has the power to heal Dante’s sight [*la virtù ch’ebbe la man d’Anania*]. And like the seraph healing Isaiah, she heals Dante-Pilgrim at the singing the *Sanctus*. Dante not only sets himself up as revelatory prophet in this scene, he also positions Beatrice in the role of angel, literally “one who is sent,” on the prophet’s behalf.

In Isaiah’s scene, there are actually two angels; it would be significant, therefore, if we were to find two angel-figures also in Dante’s account. Such seems to be the case if we consider the other biblical source for the *Sanctus*, the New Testament book of the Apocalypse, in which four angelic beings, called “living creatures” [*animalia*], sing before the throne of God in Heaven. The author of the Apocalypse writes:

et ecce sedes posita erat in caelo, et supra sedem sedens. ... Et in conspectu

sedis tamquam mare vitreum simile crystallo: et in medio sedis, et in circuitu sedis quatuor animalia plena oculis ante et retro. Et animal primum simile leoni, et secundum animal simile vitulo, et tertium animal habens faciem quasi hominis, et quartum animal simile aquile volanti. Et quatuor animalia, singula eorum habebant alas senas: et in circuitu, et intus plena sunt oculis: et requiem non habebant die ac nocte, dicentia: Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus omnipotens, qui erat, et qui est, et qui venturus est.

Behold, there was a throne set in heaven, and upon the throne one sitting. . . . And in the sight of the throne was, as it were, a sea of glass like to crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four living creatures, full of eyes before and behind. And the first living creature was like a lion: and the second living creature like a calf: and the third living creature, having the face, as it were, of a man: and the fourth living creature was like an eagle flying. And the four living creatures had each of them six wings: and round about and within they are full of eyes. And they rested not day and night, saying: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come. (Rev. 4:2, 4:6-8)

In the *Comedy*, Beatrice, John, and “the others” [*li altri*] take over the role of the “living creatures” as singers of the *Sanctus*. This is particularly significant in the case of John: by shifting him from the role of author/protagonist to that of singer of the *Sanctus*, Dante opens up the role of Apocalyptic protagonist—and theophanic prophet—for himself. Nor is this all; after John’s final question to the pilgrim, Dante-Poet records:

*Non fu latente la santa intenzione
de l'aguglia di Cristo, anzi m'accorsi
dove volea menar mia professione.*

The holy purpose of Christ’s Eagle was not hidden.
Indeed, I readily perceived the road
on which he set my declaration on its way. (26.52–54)

Dante terms John “the Eagle of Christ” [*l'aguglia di Cristo*], drawing attention to John’s link to the eagle in sacred art. The four “living creatures” entered Christian art early on as symbols for the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Initially, which creature was associ-

ated with which evangelist was somewhat variable; by Dante's time, though, the association of each creature with one of the four evangelists was well established. John's connection with the eagle, in particular, was historically one of the most stable (Jenner 1910, 100–102). As John-*qua*-living creature and eagle joins in the *Sanctus*, he links Dante's hymn back to its occurrence in Revelations—and Isaiah. He is the other primary angelic figure in Dante's scene.

Lest it appear that the theophanic nature of this scene is tenuously based only on Dante's use of the *Sanctus*, let us observe that Dante also evokes the theophany of Paul on the road to Damascus. At the end of *Paradiso* XXV, he tried to perceive the body of St. John the Evangelist—a body which, John tells him, is but earth back on Earth (25.118–124). However, John assures Dante-Pilgrim, at the beginning of canto XXVI, that his sight will be restored:

*“perché la donna che per questa dia
region ti conduce, ha ne lo sguardo
la virtù chebbe la man d’Anania.”*

“for the lady who guides you through
this holy place possesses in her glance
the power the hand of Ananias had.” (26.10–12)

“The hand of Ananias” [*la man d’Anania*] recalls the story of the conversion of St. Paul in Acts 15:1–28. On the road to Damascus, seeking to persecute the Church, Paul had a vision of Christ—once again, a theophany—that left him blind. He entered Damascus, where a Christian named Ananias laid hands on him and cured him. Paul then joined the Church and actively sought to spread his new faith. Beatrice's glance has the same power to cure blindness, and thus to designate Dante as a new Paul, a new prophet sent to convert his world. However, it is not her gaze alone that marks Dante's restoration of vision. Rather, the pilgrim's healing comes immediately upon hearing Beatrice and the other blessed souls cry out, “Holy, holy, holy!” Dante-Poet thus combines the *Sanctus* with the moment of healing that signifies Paul's entry into the Church and designation as a speaker of God's revelation—a prophet. In other words, Dante appropriates Paul's theophany and prophetic calling for his own at the same moment that he invokes those of Isaiah

and John of Patmos through the *Sanctus*. Dante appears to indicate quite strongly that this moment, marking a step in his development as prophet, draws on these three theophanic scenes from the Bible. Again we return to the question, where is Dante's own theophany?

A clue may be found in the stanza immediately preceding the one with Dante's *Sanctus*. This verse is the climax of Dante's responses to John concerning Charity, the theological virtue of Love. Remember that Dante believed John the protagonist of the Apocalypse to be the same as the author of the Johannine epistles, in which we read:

Carissimi, diligamus nos invicem: quia caritas ex Deo est. Et omnis qui diligit, ex Deo natus est, et cognoscit Deum. Qui non diligit, non novit Deum: quoniam Deus caritas est.

Dearly beloved, let us love one another: for charity is of God. And every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God: for God is charity. (1 John 4:7-8)

In this verse, God's essence is defined as love; but it is also something in which men can participate. Love is the locus of the union between God and Man. It is therefore significant that Dante's responses to John climax with the following declaration:

*Le fronde onde s'infronda tutto l'orto
de l'ortolano eterno, am' io cotanto
quanto da lui a lor di bene è porto.*

I love the leaves with which the garden
of the eternal Gardener is in leaf
in measure of the good He has bestowed on them. (26.64–66)

The theme in these verses is divine Love, both as flowing from God and as an act of man. This paradoxical love is the context of Dante's *Sanctus* and healing.

Let us see, then, if we can glean some insight from these verses. While it is obvious that the "eternal Gardener" [*l'ortolano eterno*] is God, Dante scholars still debate the nature of the garden and the leaves. Many commentators, as early as Jacopo della Lana and as late as Charles Singleton, understand "the garden" [*l'orto*] to be all of creation, and "the leaves" [*le fronde*] to be all creatures. To cite one exam-

ple, Singleton's commentary: "Dante is saying that he loves the various creatures of God's creation (the leaves of His garden) that make up the world, in proportion to the goodness which their Maker (the eternal Gardener) in His predestination has bestowed upon them" (Singleton 1970–1975, 26.64–66).³ This interpretation would have Dante expressing love for, in part, the old order of creation, that which has its origin in the old Adam, not the New Adam. So, too, for the similar view that interprets the leaves as all men, not simply those within the Church, though not necessarily all creatures.⁴ While there is in theory nothing wrong with loving the older creation—indeed, Dante does describe his love for it in line 58 and elsewhere—it seems odd that a discourse on divine Love, situated in a context of Dante's entrance into the new creation and becoming a new Adam, should climax with a look backwards, as it were, to the world being left behind.

Another group of commentators, however, interprets the "garden" as the Church Militant (the Christians still alive on Earth), and the "leaves" to be those humans who have been, in Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio's words, "touched by grace" [*toccati dalla grazia*]:

Le fronde onde s'infronda tutto l'orto dell'ortolano eterno, indica il prossimo, o, meglio, l'insieme dei cristiani redenti e in grazia di Dio. Le metafore nascono dall'immagine giovannea... : Dio è l'ortolano eterno, l'orto la Chiesa militante, già così indicata in Pd XII 72 e 104, le fronde non sono tutti gli uomini, ma, come è detto nel v. 66, gli uomini toccati dalla grazia.

"The leaves with which the whole garden of the eternal gardener is in leaf" indicate one's neighbor—or better, all Christians who are redeemed and in God's grace. The metaphors arise from the Johanne images... : God is the eternal gardener, the garden is the Church Militant (as indicated already in *Paradiso* XII.72 and 104), the leaves are not all men but, as said in verse 66, those men touched by grace. (Bosco and Reggio 1979, 26.64–66)⁵

Similarly, Emilio Pasquini and Antonio Quaglio explain that "[the] leaves [are] the souls who live in the garden (the Church Militant) that has been redeemed by the gardener, the 'vine-grower' of the Gospel [God the Father]" (Pasquini and Quaglio 1982).⁶ This view is defended by Bosco and Reggio based on the following passages from *Paradiso*

XII:

*Domenico fu detto; e io ne parlo
sì come de l'agricola che Cristo
elesse a l'orto suo per aiutarlo.*

He was called Dominic, and I shall speak of him
as that laborer chosen by Christ
to help Him dress and keep His garden. (12.70–72)

*Di lui [Domenico] si fecer poi diversi rivi
onde l'orto catolico si riga,
sì che i suoi arbuscelli stan più vivi.*

From him there sprang still other streams
from which the Catholic garden draws its moisture,
so that its saplings grow with greater vigor. (12.103–105)

In each of these cases, the garden appears to refer to the Church on Earth. In light of John 15, however, one could argue that the Mystical Body is so intimately united that, insofar as St. Dominic helped a part of the Church, he helped the whole. Perhaps this is demanding a greater consistency in Dante's use of "garden" than need be, however. In any event, Bosco and Reggio themselves also define the leaves as "men touched by grace," and not all men touched by grace happen to be still on Earth; some are in Purgatory, others in Heaven. "Garden" would then take on a wider sense in canto XXVI, with Dante-Pilgrim professing love for the entire Mystical Body of Christ.

This last possibility, that the garden is the Mystical Body of Christ, seems more consonant with the subtext of Dante's allusion, John 15.⁷ There the biblical author integrates the themes of charity and the union of all Christians in Christ. In his Last Supper discourse, Christ says,

*Ego sum vitis vera, et Pater meus agricola est. ... Ego sum vitis, vos
palmites: qui manet in me, et ego in eo, hic fert fructum multum, quia
sine me nihil potestis facere. ... Sicut dilexit me Pater, et ego dilexi vos.
Manete in dilectione mea.*

I am the vine: and my father is the husbandman. ... I am the vine: you
the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth
much fruit: for without me you can do nothing. ... As the Father hath

loved me, I also have loved you. Abide in my love.

(John 15:1, 15:5, 15:9)

The vine is Christ, the Father is the vine-grower, and the branches are Christians. A strict parallel with Dante's metaphor makes his garden equivalent to the vine, Christ; his leaves to the branches, Christians; and the Gardener to the vine-grower, God the Father. This would support the idea that Dante-Pilgrim's metaphor expresses the unity of all Christians in Christ, the unity of the Church that is the latter's Mystical Body. Moreover, both metaphors are contextualized in a discussion of love. What kind of love is the love in this Gospel passage? Not a love for all creatures, but for fellow Christians. In short, it is a command to love the other members of the mystical body of Christ.

There are additional reasons to prefer the garden-as-Mystical Body interpretation over the old creation one. Both John's and Dante's metaphors are contextualized in a discussion of love. In the former case, Christ describes not a love for all creatures, but for fellow Christians; he commands his followers to love the other members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Then, too, there is the parallel between Dante's metaphor and the Song of Songs, in which the bride is compared to a garden: "My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up" [*Hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus*] (Song of Songs, 4.12). In the Middle Ages, the bride/garden was interpreted as an image of the Church, the bride of Christ—and also his Mystical Body. It is not unthinkable that the Italian *orto* recalls the Latin *hortus* as an image of the Mystical Body.

One might object to the garden-*qua*-Mystical Body on the grounds that one could interpret Christ as the gardener, not the garden.⁸ Such critics point to the passage from the Song of Songs just mentioned and to John 20.15. In the gospel passage, Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ, but mistakes his identity: "She, thinking that it was the gardener..." [*Illa existimans quia hortulanus esset...*]. The similar terminology, *ortolano* and *hortulanus*, would suggest that Christ is the gardener of Dante as well as John. Fortunately, the two views of Christ—as garden and gardener—can be harmonized. For this purpose we can turn to St. Augustine's commentary on John 15:1-3, the passage that serves as Dante's precedent:

Numquid unum sunt agricola et vitis? Secundum hoc ergo vitis Christus, secundum quod ait: Pater maior me est; secundum autem id quod ait: Ego et Pater unum sumus, et ipse agricola est. ... Denique cum de Patre tamquam de agricola dixisset quod infructuosos palmites tollat, fructuosos autem purget ut plus afferant fructum, continuo etiam seipsum mundatorem palmitum ostendens: Iam vos, inquit, mundi estis propter sermonem quem locutus sum vobis. Ecce et ipse mundator est palmitum, quod est agricolae, non vitis officium, qui etiam palmites operarios suos fecit.

Are the vine-grower and the vine one? Christ is the vine according to the passage in which he says, "The Father is greater than me"; but then he says, "The Father and I are one," and he is the vine-grower. ... Finally when he says that the unfruitful branches are removed by the Father as by the vine-grower, but the fruitful are pruned that they may bear more fruit, immediately he also shows the purifier of the branches to be himself: "Now you," he says, "are clean because of the word which I spoke to you." See, he is the purifier of the branches, which is the office of the vine-grower and not the vine, who yet makes the branches his workers. (Augustine 1976, 2.4–9, 2.15–20)⁹

In other words, both the Father and the Son are the vine-grower, through their intimate union; and the Son is also the vine. The two interpretations of the garden metaphor, both finding support in Scripture, can thus be brought into harmony. Christ in union with God the Father is the "eternal gardener"; Christ in union with his Mystical Body is the "garden." Dante and the rest of the Mystical Body, rooted in Christ as the garden, are the "leaves" or "branches" [*fronde*]¹⁰—yet mystically also co-workers with Christ and the Father.

Thus, Dante's final answer to St. John becomes an expression of love for the Church, the mystical body of Christ. Since the only persons visible to him at this point are the saints, the members of the Mystical Body of Christ, could these somehow be the focus of his theophany? It is noteworthy that Dante replaces the biblical singers of the *Sanctus*, the angels, with the humans in the Mystical Body. Is there a precedent for the Mystical Body singing the *Sanctus*? Yes, within the context of the Mass. Until now, Dante scholarship has focused on the *Te Deum* hymn as the primary liturgical source for Dante's "Holy, holy, holy," as

in Kevin Brownlee's "Why the Angels Sing Italian" (1984); the *Sanctus* of the Mass has never before been used extensively to interpret these verses of the *Comedy*. Yet Dante follows the Mass exactly by putting the *Sanctus* in the mouths of humans instead of angels. In the Biblical texts in Isaiah and in the Apocalypse, it is angelic beings who sing the *Sanctus*, never humans; even in the *Te Deum*, the words "holy, holy, holy" are put in the mouths of angels—they are effectively quoted, not sung as direct speech on the part of men and women. Only in the Mass do we find human beings directly singing the *Sanctus*.

In the Mass, therefore, we find the key to Dante's missing theophany. The liturgy of the Mass unites the faithful in the Eucharist, the sacramental Body of Christ, for the very purpose of unifying them in the Mystical Body of Christ; thus the Mass is a fitting sub-text for Dante's scene. But the theme of the Mystical Body's unity also arises specifically from the Mass' *Sanctus* itself. For, as liturgical scholar Josef Jungmann notes in his book *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, the text of the Mass' *Sanctus* serves to remind the community of believers of two things (1986, 135). The first part of the *Sanctus*—"Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Hosts. Full are Heaven and Earth with your glory."¹⁰—recalls the theophanies of Isaiah and Revelation, and thus reminds the Christian that he or she participates in the liturgy of Heaven. But there is a second part—"Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest"—which recalls the words with which the crowds greeted Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. According to Jungmann, this second half reminds the Christian that he or she is destined for the Heavenly Jerusalem. The *Sanctus* in the Mass thus signifies that all Christians form part of a community that exists both on Earth and in Heaven—the mystical body of Christ.

That is the mode through which God manifests himself in Dante's theophanic moment. Dante uses the *Sanctus* of the Mass to create a theophany both similar to and yet different from those of Isaiah and John. As with the two biblical prophets, the *Sanctus* marks Dante-Pilgrim's vision of God. Unlike them, however, his theophany is of God revealed in the mystical body of Christ, the unity of all believers with and in God. The key consequence is that, as a member of the Church,

he is himself united to the mystical body; consequently, and also unlike the biblical theophanies, Dante is united to his own vision. He sees the divine, and yet in a mystical sense he is also divinized. United to Christ and his Church, Dante sees fulfilled in himself the *Sanctus*' promise of divine unity. He thus becomes a new kind of prophet, capable of perfectly communicating the divine reality which he has seen because he is united to it. Prophet and theophany, poet and revelation, are one.

Notes

1. All Dante quotes are from the *Paradiso*. Except where noted, I have used the Giorgio Petrocchi text and Robert and Jean Hollander's translation of the *Paradiso*, as available online at the Princeton Dante Project (<http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/>), and the Latin Vulgate with the Douay-Rheims translation for the Bible. See Works Cited for more information. As is usual when citing the *Comedy*, I have used the canto and verse numbers rather than page numbers.
2. My translation. See previous note and Works Cited for information on biblical texts used in this article.
3. All references to commentaries are given by the canto and verse of the *Paradiso* to which they refer. All commentaries used in this article are the versions available online through the Dartmouth Dante Project (<http://dante.dartmouth.edu/>). Commentaries are listed in the bibliography by commentator.
4. See also the following comments on this passage: Alighieri 1340–1342; Barbi and Casini 1921; Benvenuto da Imola 1375–80; *Codice cassinese* 1350–1375[?]; Daniello 1568; Lancia 1333; Mestica 1921–1922 (who includes not only all men but all “intelligent creatures”); Tozer 1901; Vellutello 1544.
5. My translation. The same position, or a similar one, is taken by Chimenz 1962; Gabriele 1525–1541; Giacalone 1968; Porena 1946–1948; Sapegno 1955–1957. (Tommaseo 1837 takes an equivalent view of the *orto* and *fronde*, but interprets the *ortolano* as Christ.)
6. “[Le] fronde [sono] le anime che vivono nell’orto (la Chiesa militante) redento dall’ortolano, l’«agricola» evangelico.”
7. Cf. Bosco and Reggio 1979, 26.64–66; Scartazzini 1900, 26.65; Singleton 1970–1975, 26.64–66.
8. As in the commentaries: Andreoli 1856; Francesco da Buti 1385–1395; Tom-

maseo 1837; Vellutello 1544.

9. My translation.

10. My translation.

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