

Eschatological Poetics: The Rules of Iconic Extension

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HERE I PURSUE the question of what role—if any—imagination can play with respect to theology. This is not only a modern issue, as can be seen in, for example: Origen's entertaining questions beyond what is probative in the teaching of the Church, such as the question of universal salvation; the risky explorations of Eckhart in his vernacular German sermons when it comes to God, creation, Christ, self, and Mary, in which he suggests alternatives to the received tradition; and John of the Cross's improvisations on mystical theology offered in the *Ascent to Mount Carmel* and anagogic reading of Scripture presented in the *Dark Night* and the *Spiritual Canticles*. Still, the question of what role imagination can play in theology has become increasingly more urgent and reflective in the modern period, when the limitations of received tradition and reason in the construction of theology come under scrutiny and the notion of talent, and even that of genius, comes to be applied to theological construction. Obviously, Friedrich Schleiermacher is the central figure, but it is also true that this move was repeated in more modest ways by thinkers in the nineteenth century as different as Søren Kierkegaard and Johann Sebastian Drey,¹ and in

¹ John Thiel, who is one of the three main subjects of this essay, has provided the best account of the shift of authority from the churches to the individual theologians in the modern period based on the appeal to the creative or imaginative capacity of the theologian. See his *Imagination and Authority: Theological Authorship in the Modern Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991). Thiel's specific interest is in confessional theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, and accordingly, there is no discussion of Kierkegaard, who considers himself

the twentieth century by theologians as different as Paul Tillich, David Tracy, Sergei Bulgakov, and Hans Urs von Balthasar.² The very different theological styles of these thinkers, and specifically their very different use of imagination and the authority they accord it, is a fascinating area

for the most part to be a “kind of poet.” However, he does discuss Friedrich Schleiermacher (see *Imagination and Authority*, 33–62) and Johann Sebastian Drey (see 63–96) in some detail.

- ² Paul Tillich is significantly dependent on German romanticism and idealism for his view of symbol that undergirds his entire theology. Of course, symbol, which is irreducible to concept, is correlative of imagination considered as productive, rather than re-productive. As is well-known, for Tillich also, symbols are also crucial in the formation and preservation of culture, and it is also through reference to the priority of symbols that Tillich constructs a non-confessional theological identity. David Tracy, who is significantly influenced by Tillich, but even more by Paul Ricoeur’s explorations of the symbolic on the one hand, and hermeneutic theory on the other, famously typifies Catholicism as the “analogical imagination.” The choice of words is apt: the point is not simply that, in contrast to Protestant theology, Catholic theologians proceed more under the banner of “both–and,” rather than “either–or,” but rather also that the horizon of the “both–and” is not itself a conclusion, but already projected beforehand. Unlike Tillich and Tracy, Bulgakov does not underscore the relation between art and religion as a means of legitimating imagination in theology. Nor does he appeal to the notion of imagination. Instead, on the basis of the need to penetrate deeply in the biblical grounds of faith, which requires an openness to more experimental modern religious thought, especially that of Soloviev and ultimately Schelling, throughout his work, Bulgakov performs an imagination, and nowhere better than in his eschatological speculations in *Bride of the Lamb*, which has the Book of Revelation as its governing text. Bulgakov goes to the side of or underneath the Orthodox tradition by opening up and contemplating the biblical symbols in their depth of reflection and their intricate interrelations. The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar famously elaborates a theological aesthetics, *Herrlichkeit*, over 3,000 pages, based on the analogy between beauty and divine glory. In this respect, his thought bears an analogy to that of Tillich and Tracy, even if, in the end, unlike these two theologians, there is no sense in which extra-scriptural beauty proves foundational to his theology. At the same time, the exercise of imagination is not confined to *Herrlichkeit*. Balthasar is persuaded that all genuine retrieval of Christian thought and practices involves more than reproduction. And it should be pointed out that in the second part of his trilogy, not only is there once again a productive analogy between the non-theological and theological spheres, this time between drama and reflection and Christian reflection on the Cross and its ultimate meaning, but it is also very much like what we find in Bulgakov’s reflection on “last things,” as discussed in Balthasar’s *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5 (*The Last Act*), which is influenced in its turn in a deep way by the emergent priority of the Book of Revelation (see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4 [*The Action*]).

of research, although it will not directly be pursued in this article. Here I would like to deal more narrowly with the role imagination plays in Catholic theological reflection on “last things” and, more specifically, in Catholic theology’s articulation of postmortem existence.

A number of things need to be said about the overall horizon of this article. First, the main authors I deal with here, both contemporary and traditional, are Catholic. Second, for ecumenical reasons, the article will focus exclusively on heaven. I have basically put aside (without prejudice) the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, which is not shared by the other Christian confessions, and although a doctrine of hell is found in all confessions, I put the representation of hell in parenthesis on the grounds that, in all confessions, there exist minority reports questioning its reality. Third, while I do not put Catholic doctrine of the intermediate state entirely in brackets,³ I treat it in a highly qualified way: insofar as it looks forward to the resurrected body.⁴ Fourth, and finally, the overall horizon of the article is contemporary and the criteria of adequacy when it comes to representation are not exclusively dependent on the representations generated in the premodern Catholic tradition, even if these representations prove to be both useful and orienting.

One major feature of this study is a critical examination of two Catholic thinkers, John Thiel and Paul Griffiths,⁵ who have provided two very different accounts of heaven. Both are aware of the current anemia when it comes to the representation of the blessed state, and both suggest that the doctrinal under-determination in evidence

³ Arguably, still the best contemporary defense of the Catholic account of the intermediate state is that of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in *Eschatology, Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988). Since death involves the separation of the soul from the body, it is the soul that finds itself in a state of punishment or bliss before the eschaton and the final judgment.

⁴ While both Augustine and Aquinas very much supported the doctrine of the intermediate state, it also should be recalled that they were by no means Platonists. The soul was separated from its body, but it is the ensouled body or corporeal soul that will experience bliss or torment. It is a central aspect of the Christian grammar of the afterlife to speak of the resurrected body. This is a point made with considerable power, eloquence, and sophistication by Brian D. Robinette in *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence* (New York: Crossroad, 2009).

⁵ John Thiel, *Icons of Hope: The “Last Things” in Catholic Imagination* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); Paul J. Griffiths, *Decreation: the Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

opens up the space for responsible symbolic or iconic extension beyond the received tradition. Neither is willing to take the convenient out of substituting the kingdom of God for heaven⁶ and then proceeding to interpret the kingdom in terms of the transmogrification of the individual or society and/or the transmutation of the cosmos. But only the first part of this study focuses on what I am calling “eschatological poetics” in its modern Catholic forms, meaning forms of theology that involve an iconic extension of and beyond the standard Christian eschatology. In discussing these very different forms of eschatology, I will examine whether and how these eschatologies complement, supplement, or replace influential representations within the broader Christian tradition, whether there are rules for iconic extension, and whether the rules are biased toward either continuity or discontinuity. I will also attempt to isolate as much as possible the assumptions about the negative states of existence that heaven putatively overcomes and those positive states it enhances and puts into the order of “forever.” While I commend each in turn and recommend certain aspects of each of these eschatologies, as I see it, there are three main issues: (1) the degree of fidelity to the broad theological tradition and not simply an isolated part of it; (2) the need of greater balance between discontinuity and continuity in iconic or symbolic extension; and (3) the need for a richer phenomenology of human existence in terms of its positives and negatives that decisively influences imaginative projection of the afterlife.

It is with these issues in modern eschatological poetics in mind that I will turn in the second part of the article to Dante’s depiction of heaven in the *Paradiso* as being a significant part of the solution to the problems evident in Thiel and Griffiths. The *Paradiso* is not only a literary exercise in which Dante the poet tries to outdo depictions of paradise by classic Latin authors, just as he had tried to outbid them when he provided the architecture and the basic characteristics of the

⁶ A good example of this strategy is provided in Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. M. Kohl (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), and *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996). Although Moltmann does not express skepticism with regard to the afterlife, neither does he spend any time analyzing it. He is dependent to a significant extent on the Marxist Ernst Bloch, whose three-volume *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* exerted extraordinary influence on his thought. It might be noted that, throughout his famous *Eschatology*, Ratzinger criticizes this substitution (58–59). The point is important enough for him to repeat it in *Spe Salvi*, §§31–32 and 44.

denizens of hell. The *Paradiso* is also a text in which Dante's representation of heaven self-consciously operates in terms of the theological constraints of the Catholic tradition while bringing to full capacity its representational resources by putting into circulation biblical and non-biblical images and by manufacturing images from the frequent guesses that attended Catholic confessions of the afterlife. In light of my criticisms of Thiel and Griffiths, I want to argue that, in the *Paradiso*, Dante provides not only a classic example of iconic extension but also an eschatological poetics superior to those of Thiel and Griffiths in terms of: (1) its understanding of the plural nature of the Catholic tradition, and thus its capacity to use it; (2) its masterful balance between continuity and discontinuity in iconic extension; and (3) its much greater insight regarding the negatives and positives of the pre-eschatological situation that allows a richer canvas of both individual and community in the eschatological state.

The Return of Imagination in Contemporary Eschatology: John Thiel and Paul Griffiths

With respect to the *eschata* relative to other theological topics, the call on imagination is exaggerated since the *eschata* are fully rendered in neither Scripture nor the theological tradition and, correspondingly, their depiction is more vague and their hold on belief more tenuous. The call for imagination is arguably the most memorable aspect of Hans Küng's otherwise forgettable *Eternal Life*,⁷ which, on the one hand, has a somewhat chilling effect on the status of the symbols generated and, on the other, seems to suggest that symbols generated outside the Church enjoy the same kind of pertinence as those generated within. Still, Küng is intellectually honest enough to speak to the afterlife from which "no traveler returns," as Shakespeare puts it, and does not take the easy way out of ambiguating between the kingdom being either an intra-historical or post-historical state. He differs in some relevantly positive ways, therefore, from the process of theologian Paul Fiddes, who, in his book *The Promised End*, makes the most concerted appeal to the necessity of imagination when it comes to rendering the *eschata* and suggests that it is literature, rather than theology or philosophy, that best exemplifies imagination in the modern period.⁸

⁷ Hans Küng, *Eternal Life: Life after Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1985), 3–6.

⁸ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

Fiddes proves capacious as he enlists Shakespeare (ch. 3), Doris Lessing (ch. 4), T. S. Eliot (ch. 5), Virginia Woolf (ch. 5), and Samuel Beckett (ch. 6) in his articulation of an eschatology that is communitarian and life-enhancing, but only indeterminate at best about the blessed state in the afterlife. In *The Promised End*, the ecstasies of Thomas Traherne and the kairotic moments of the *Four Quartets* are not sorted out from participation in the relations between Trinitarian persons (ch. 9), which participation is in turn ambiguous since it is not clear whether such participation is a feature of postmortem existence or simply a privileged moment in time.

In *Icons of Hope*, Thiel responds to the pastoral need in the Catholic Church to imagine or re-imagine the *eschata*, the basic premise being the dominance of mere notional assent accorded to the afterlife. Thiel makes it clear the requirement of imagination is a requirement of the Church as Church and that the task cannot be subcontracted out to literature or the arts. Nothing he says, however, suggests that artistic depiction, whether in literature, painting, music, or film, cannot be taken on board by the Church, although all images about the afterlife require critical vetting if they are to become part of the Church's theological, and specifically eschatological, poetics. Even more than did Küng, Thiel thinks that the root cause for what is nothing less than a representational crisis regarding the afterlife is to be found in the Church's commitment to a Kantian epistemology that proscribes categorical speech about the state of human existence in the afterlife.⁹ Thiel might perhaps have been advised to make a distinction between the current social imagination, which appears to behave in

⁹ In the first chapter of *Icons of Hope*, Thiel essentially puts the blame on Kant's prohibition of extrapolating from our space-time-determined experience to God, who lies outside by definition. Thiel might have also—but did not in fact—mentioned Kant's pre-critical dismissal of visionary eschatologists such as Lavater and Swedenborg. His specific interest is in how Kant's strictures against speculation in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as well as his strictures in the *Critique of Practical Reason* as to how we are to talk ascetically regarding the afterlife, is taken up in Catholic theology, especially in the very influential theology of Karl Rahner (*Icons of Hope*, 6–12). Thiel focuses in particular on Rahner's famous essay "The Hermeneutic of Eschatological Assertions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. K. Smith (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 323–46. In this essay, Rahner clearly demonstrates a distinct bias against the visionary, or what Thiel refers to as the "sacramental," and the worries are pastoral as well as epistemological. In addition, Rahner expressed the same worries in other essays from this period, such as "Question of the Future" (1969), which launches an attack against vision and apocalyptic.

the proscriptive pattern he describes, and the kind of philosophical arguments used by Kant in the latter half of the eighteenth century to the effect that knowledge in the strict sense is not possible with regard to this sphere. Even by his own standards, Kant was over-determined on this particular point. As is well-known, in his critical period, Kant did not encourage such speculation, even if he came to renege on his own asceticism by suggesting in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that postmortem existence would be forwarded as a postulate and that, in addition, it would necessarily evince progress. However, it is worth mentioning that before the period of the three Critiques we find a polemical Kant lambasting esotericists such as Lavatar and Swedenborg,¹⁰ who, in his view, pretend to have had visionary access to heaven and the epistemic capacity to speak in minute detail to its constitutive properties and arrangements. Whatever the need for greater genealogical subtlety on this point, since it is obvious that most Catholics have not read Kant, in any event, it is important for Thiel that breaking down the Kantian barrier does not mean that just any imaginative projection will suffice. Kant's embargo against iconic extension is wrong only because it is absolutist. Epistemic limitation is real in the area of eschatology,¹¹ and scruple in representation is a must. This scruple is satisfied in what I have named "rules of iconic extension," in which all representation must pay heed simultaneously to both continuity and discontinuity between the eschatological and pre-eschatological state. The foundational rule, according to Thiel, is that for Christians, the afterlife is a state of embodied existence,¹² even if it is difficult to imagine what the resurrected body looks like—beyond the formality of being incorruptible—vis-à-vis the mortal bodies that decompose at death. With respect to resurrection, there is, then, continuity and discontinuity with respect to the earthly perishable body. To have a resuscitated body would speak too much to continuity; to have no body or to be a hologram is too little.

Interestingly, as Thiel states his "embodiment" rule with regard to heaven, he seems to depart from the standard Augustinian escha-

¹⁰ Kant does this in *Träume eines Geistersehers* (1766). In terms of philosophical style, this text (whose title translates as "dream of a spirit seer") is quite different from just about everything else Kant wrote, and especially what he wrote in his critical period. It is essentially an exposé of Lavater and Swedenborg as charlatans.

¹¹ Thiel, *Icons of Hope*, 21.

¹² Thiel, *Icons of Hope*, 17.

tology of the intermediate state—defended most ably by Ratzinger in his classic *Eschatology*—although, despite this, Thiel does hold on to a principled distinction between individual and general resurrection.¹³ Now, Thiel may or may not be critical of Dante here, whose depiction of heaven parlays the classical Augustinian–Thomistic envisioning of the intermediate state. Even if he was being critical, the difference between Dante and his own recommendation can be alleviated by drawing attention to the fact that Dante, like Augustine and Aquinas, believed that embodiment is constitutive of human identity and that the final heavenly state involves the resurrected body, the *soma pneumatikon* of 1 Corinthians. Thiel, however, is almost certainly being critical of Dante's iconic extension into the afterlife of the beatific vision of God as being constitutive of the blessed state.¹⁴ In making this extension, Dante renders fully what both Augustine and Aquinas had previously sketched, thereby providing a classic example of eschatological poetics. The grounds of Thiel's objections are hardly unusual: the iconic extension of beatific vision is too individualistic and too static and fails to do sufficient justice to the communitarian and dynamic nature of human existence. Thiel might be saying no more than that the Western depiction of the heavenly state is unbalanced and could be modified to also render community in its perfection, as well as an ordered and regulated dynamism to which human beings aspire. It is far more likely, however, that he is being unilateral and that individuality and rest are not goods he puts on the same level as community and dynamism. *Icons of Hope* provides no excavating of the Augustinian or Dantesque reasons that the individual person's vision of the triune God and Christ are irradicable goods in a situation in which a human being is inscribed in family, tribe, army, and Church and that all of these provide incentives for sin and can lead to deformation. In addition, Thiel simply has no ear for the pathos of Augustine's longing for rest against the backdrop of his perception of the restlessness and aimlessness and of the pre-eschatological embodied self.

Thiel's swerve from Western theological poetics at a very formal level suggests the familiar Eastern Christian option of a more communitarian and ecstatic experience in heaven. Substantively, however, this is not the route that he takes. Instead, he prefers the imaginative

¹³ Thiel, *Icons of Hope*, 31.

¹⁴ Thiel, *Icons of Hope*, 34–35.

model of the modern Reformed theologian Jonathan Edwards.¹⁵ Here the state of beings in heaven is both active and communitarian, and one because the other:¹⁶ each and all are involved in the business of mutual enhancing and community formation that, among other things, will involve repentance and mutual forgiveness. Thiel makes it clear in and through his historical analysis of purgatory in chapter 3 that he is not prepared to endorse purgatory as one of the eschatological states.¹⁷ Not only does this suggest that Thiel does not feel the constraining power of Catholic doctrine,¹⁸ but the discounting of purgatory also has the unintended consequence of heaven itself taking on a purgatorial form. As *Icons of Hope* elaborates this particular choice, it approaches at the very least the kind of position that John Hick elaborated under the form of “Irenaean theodicy,”¹⁹ even

¹⁵ Thiel, *Icons of Hope*, 33–37. Although Thiel does not make anything of it, it should be pointed out that Edwards is one of the few theologians in modernity who operates in an aesthetic key, and he is singular in the Reformed tradition. It is revealing that in texts where Edwards is performing an iconic extension, the overall theological frame is that of God’s beauty.

¹⁶ The emphasis on activity is perhaps the primary reason why Thiel characterizes Edwards’s model of heaven as “ethical,” although it is true that acts of mutual forgiveness might also be cast as “ethical,” even if, in some sense, they transcend it.

¹⁷ Thiel, *Icons of Hope*, 57–106.

¹⁸ Although he is very much an ecclesial theologian, in chapter 3 Thiel very much deconstructs the doctrine of purgatory. His argument is essentially twofold: (1) this is not a doctrine promulgated at the first seven councils; (2) one can supply a sociological explanation as to its promulgation at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). Thiel’s analysis depends heavily on the sociological analysis of Jacques Le Goff. See *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), in which Le Goff argues that changing social conditions in the twelfth century, in which social relations complexified and the perceptions of virtues and vices shifted, led to a less absolutist division between the good and the damned. While Le Goff’s book is undoubtedly instructive and useful, it could be argued that Thiel makes it far too foundational for his argument. There are two main problems with Le Goff’s analysis: (1) his relativization of any and all material prior to the twelfth century that would indicate something of a *longue durée* in the popular religious tradition; (2) his ignoring of the theological problem of the absolutization of two states in the afterlife (heaven and hell) in Augustine and the theological problem of squaring the mercy and justice of God to which it leads and that sooner or later has to be addressed. What is the postmortem fate of the vast population of mediocre Christians, and also perhaps of the saintly who have fallen and the reprobate who appear to have converted?

¹⁹ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper, 1966).

if this labeling is confused, since Irenaeus did not speak to existential, noetic, and ontic development in heaven, and even in spite of the fact that, indeed, most of what Hick writes in *Evil and the God of Love* recalls the Kant of the Second Critique.²⁰ Although it is not difficult to impute to Thiel, at some level, the Kant-like theodicy requirement of the squaring of divine justice and mercy,²¹ more to the fore in this text is Thiel's perception of privileged moments of mutual understanding and community and privileged moments in human existence of the display of energy, as these can and should be plotted against the backdrop of common human experiences of fragmentation and existence in its tendency to move toward entropy. These imbricating experiences give impetus to Thiel's particular iconic extension, which, depending on whether one emphasizes the positive or negative experiences, is more nearly continuous or discontinuous: continuous—although, in any event, hyperbolic—if the emphasis falls on epiphanies; discontinuous if it falls on either actual experiences of evil or the quotidian state in which community is at best notional and where the equilibrium within self and society is more nearly entropic than dynamic. By and large, epiphanies seem to be in the foreground in *Icons of Hope*. This is just the reverse of the emphasis in his *God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering*.

One of the most salient aspects of Thiel's poetic extension is the relative marginality of Christ and the triune God, although this is significantly more true of the triune God than it is of Christ.²² It is an abiding part of the theologies of both East and West that relations in this life between ourselves and others need to be threaded through our relation to Christ, and through Christ, with the triune God. It is comprehensible that Christians might puzzle and even worry about some expressions of the absolute secondariness of human relations,

²⁰ So-called "Irenaean theodicy" is defined by progress in the afterlife, or what Hick calls "soul making." Given both the claim that progress is possible in the afterlife and the individualistic conception of the acquired perfection, it is not unfair to associate Hick with Kant.

²¹ See John Thiel, *God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1971). This is not to say that Thiel is structurally dependent on Kant, but he does affirm the Kantian question, which, it so happens, is also Job's question.

²² It is not clear whether Thiel's concern about the individualism of the beatific vision leads him to marginalize the Trinity, since the triune God is the object of the vision. To be fair to Thiel, he is considerably more forthcoming about Christ, whose resurrection is the grounds of our own (*Icons of Hope*, 41–52).

such as the kind that might either be enshrined in or be extrapolated from Augustine's famous *uti-frui* distinction. Yet it is an ingredient in both Eastern and Western theology that the primary relation of the community, as well the primary relation for each individual, is with God: if not in this life, then in the next, God is experienced, enjoyed, known, and loved in an incomparably intense, satisfying, and imperturbable manner. One might easily imagine that the secondariness of human being in its individual or communitarian state is exacerbated in the afterlife. Yet it might also be the case that heaven is heaven precisely because the love of God and the love of neighbor are no longer contrastive in any way and have come to be absolutely complementary. As we shall see later, perhaps this is one of the ways in which the poetic extension of Dante goes beyond that of Augustine, even if the correction is internal to the Christian theological tradition. In contrast, Thiel's view in which God is something of an "idle wheel"—to invoke the hoary locution of Wittgenstein—represents a massive overcorrection, first in a Christological direction, but secondly and ultimately in an anthropological one.²³

The second of the two contemporary texts on which I want to comment is Paul Griffiths's experimental *Decreation*. This is a text that not only effectively embodies rules of iconic extension after the manner of *Icons of Hope*, but self-consciously reflects on them.²⁴ Griffiths speaks to the double context of poetic extension, the doctrinal and the speculative.²⁵ By "doctrinal," Griffiths means what the Church—that is, the Roman Catholic Church—teaches about the *eschata* in general and heaven in particular,²⁶ and by "speculative," he denotes an individual intelligence operating in a projective and imaginative mode.²⁷ Formally, then, what the Church teaches on the

²³ Thiel, *Icons of Hope*, 40.

²⁴ Griffiths is clear that he is engaging in a thought experiment in which definition of the *eschata* is crucial. In *Decreation*, the central concept of *novissimum* is generated in and through an absolute contrast with what can be found in pre-eschatological state.

²⁵ Griffiths, *Decreation*, ix, 35.

²⁶ Griffiths has a fairly expansive view of "doctrinal." It includes the thought of magisterial thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas on the double creation of angels and humans and the double fall (*Decreation*, 55–57).

²⁷ *Decreation*, 37. Griffiths admits here: "The work done here is mostly speculative, but always, in intention at least, in accord with and in response to the content of Christian doctrine about the last things." Paradoxically, his book, while more doctrinal than Thiel's, is less ecclesial. His is a thought experiment for its own sake.

eschata sets constraints on the theologian. In contrast to Thiel, who undermines the Catholic doctrine of purgatory and is silent on the doctrine of hell, Griffiths happily embraces the full gamut of Catholic constraints.²⁸ But, as a matter of fact, he points out that, with respect to the *eschata*, Church doctrine is relatively under-determined, and so the scope for speculation, or as I have been calling it, iconic extension, is considerable. His book has considerably more range than Thiel's: hell is admitted into discussion,²⁹ as are the prospect of annihilation³⁰ and the question of whether creatures other than angels and humans can become denizens of heaven.³¹ Because of the requirement of poetic extension beyond formulated doctrine, Griffiths concedes that the status of what he has to say is hypothetical rather than categorical, and thus enjoys persuasive rather than juridical authority.

Like Thiel, Griffiths insists that the minimum degree of continuity between the pre-eschatological and the eschatological state for human beings is that they are embodied.³² For Griffiths, this is an ineluctable Christian belief. For him, serving as a starting point rather than a result, this assumption is calculated to block any number of other projections into the afterlife, such as the state of being a disembodied mind or being alive in the memory of a personal God or some pan-cosmic consciousness. While Griffiths realizes that the belief is the fruit of interpretation of Scripture, in which 1 Corinthians is crucial, is asserted by the early Church Fathers in their opposition to spiritualizing views of the afterlife, and is pivotal in Augustine and Aquinas, the recording and interpreting of this long history is not a burden he takes on. Nonetheless, for the most part, the operative logic in *Decreation* is that of discontinuity. This is indicated by the text's pivotal concept of *novissimum* to define "last things." Lexically, *novissimum* is novelty in superlative or absolute form. Materially, *novissima* eschatological states, and the eschatological state of heaven in particular, cannot be extrapolated from some positive state of

²⁸ My point here is formal. Griffiths also seems to give up on the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. He stipulates: "There is no intermediate category between glorious and inglorious last things" (*Decreation*, 10).

²⁹ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 241–50 (no. 25).

³⁰ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 191–213 (no. 23).

³¹ *Decreation*, 273–312 (nos. 28–30). Griffiths specific question is whether animals and plants are possible features of postmortem existence. He answers with a qualified "yes."

³² For Griffiths, this is an invariant lexical item of a Christian eschatological grammar. See *Decreation*, 4.

pre-eschatological existence. Now, to come clean, this is probably a narrower definition than Griffiths intends, since, in principle, the radical otherness implied in the notion of *novissimum* does not distinguish between extrapolating from the positive and extrapolating from negative experiences in the pre-eschatological state. I think that there are good reasons for accepting the narrower rather than broader, but obviously more formal, definition. Arguably, Griffiths tips us off to this asymmetry when he uses as an epigraph the following passage from Wallace Stevens's famous "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": "Among time's images, there is not one / Of this present, the venerable mask above / the dilapidations of dilapidations." The place where one can see the narrower definition most clearly in operation, however, is when Griffiths argues against *epektasis*.³³

While Griffiths could have attempted to warrant the denial of *epektasis* on grounds of doctrine, since Western Christianity by and large has not accepted "eternal becoming" in the afterlife, this is not what he does. Rather, he thinks it can be rejected in terms of a persuasive use of speculation or poetic extension. From a "logical" point of view, "eternal becoming" is not viable as an eschatological extrapolation. Now, the only reason why this is so is that Griffiths has already determined that the kind of stasis, here "repetitive stasis,"³⁴ is not characteristic of pre-eschatological human existence. What, then, are the presumed characteristics of human existence in the pre-eschatological state? Given his Augustinian pedigree, it is hardly being wildly speculative to suggest that Griffiths largely accepts Augustine's account of the structural restlessness of the self that takes the forms of curiosity and concupiscence, which are, in turn, characterized by instability and insatiability. With this as phenomenological ground-zero, it makes sense that in heaven there would be no trace of such kinetic features, since heaven is the overcoming of all negative features of existence. Thus, the notion or symbol of *epektasis* that seems to assume some of these kinetic features, even if the kinesis is coherent and the motion ordered toward the incomprehensible triune divine, would be excluded. It cannot be doubted, therefore, that the logic of discontinuity in *Decreation* resolves itself on crucial occasions into the logic of contrast. This is not a problem in itself, for at least one dimension of all poetic extension is contrast. For such contrast not to function as a narrowing, however, a full rendering of the

³³ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 25–27 (no. 6).

³⁴ Griffiths, *Decreation*, 21–23 (no. 5).

existential situation in the pre-eschatological state is required. And here Griffiths Augustinian-inspired phenomenology—incidentally a phenomenology authorized by no less than the early Heidegger³⁵—fails, or at the very least requires a supplement.

There are two vistas in and through which we can come upon such a supplement. The first is by looking at texts from other thinkers in the Christian tradition who isolate other features of human existence as dominant, and thus prepare us for a different account of the eschatological state that would represent the overcoming of existential states deemed to be systemic and to be pathological in significant respects. The second involves looking more carefully at Augustine with a view to seeing whether he has been short-changed when he is read univocally as having insisted on stasis in the afterlife and never to have provided notice of other states of existence necessarily overcome in the afterlife and/or positive experiences or states, merely episodic in this life, that can be extrapolated into the heavenly state, where they both are enhanced and become constitutional.

When speaking of *epektasis*, it is impossible not to recur to the Greek theologian Gregory of Nyssa, who is more responsible than any other for the view of human existence characterized in the next life as “eternal becoming.” Given that *The Life of Moses* provides the most extensive account of the “stretching” requisite to the infinity of God, whether in the next life or this,³⁶ it should come as no surprise that it is in this text that Nyssa gives a phenomenological account

³⁵ The notes from Heidegger's 1921 lecture course on Augustine, which attempts to sift what is phenomenologically retrievable in Augustine's thought from what is not, are presented in “Augustinus und der Neuplatonismus,” in *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, ed. Claudius Strube, Gesamtausgabe 60 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1995). In his lectures, Heidegger underscores that Augustinian “restlessness,” especially as presented in the *Confessions*, is an important philosophical discovery. He complains, however, that Augustine is insufficiently radical in that restlessness is ordered toward its overcoming in rest. According to Heidegger, the constraining power of Neoplatonism proves vitiating.

³⁶ Although they have very different theological agendas and theological methods, both Michel Barnes and David Bentley Hart feature *epektasis* in their accounts of Nyssa's conception of God: Michael Barnes, *Power of God: Dynamis in Gregory of Nyssa* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001); David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2004), part 2. I agree that the triune God is constitutive for the understanding of *epektasis*, but I simply want to underscore that it is a desired existential state and one constitutively blocked in a life marked by sin.

of the human condition that provides the essential motivation for considering the afterlife contrastively. The key discussion is to be found in book 2. There Nyssa uses the image of a human being trying to make his/her way in a sand dune, which, of course, turns out to be frustratingly impossible:

He is like those who toil endlessly as they climb uphill in sand:
Even though they take long steps, their footing in the sand
always slips downhill, so that, although there is much motion,
no progress results from it.³⁷

This experience serves as a background condition for imagining the next life as a kind of constant stretching toward the triune God. Against the phenomenological backdrop of empty motion and retarded development, to underscore rest and the constancy of the vision of God in the eschatological state would come across as an unwelcome repetition, and thus more nearly like hell than heaven, perhaps the kind of hell of claustrophobia and catatonia that Samuel Beckett routinely presents in plays such as *Endgame*. Thus, Nyssa, too, avails himself of a logic of contrast to project what the state of human existence in heaven is to be like, but the dominant phenomenon of the pre-eschatological state of human existence to which he attends is the opposite of that attended to and prioritized by Augustine. Now, in making this case, I do not mean to suggest that the ontological surplus character of the triune God as infinite and infinitely incomprehensible does not play an important role in Nyssa's making his case for *epektasis*,³⁸ but at the very least, this kind of metaphysical consideration is reinforced by the phenomenological analysis of the human situation for which one can project constitutive relief in the afterlife.

I turn now to the second supplement, the one supplied in Augustine's texts themselves. It is fair to say that in major texts by August-

³⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.244, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). Now, it is true that Nyssa frames the passage Christologically and insists that movement is possible if, and only if, feet are set on "the rock of Christ." Still, no matter how ultimately contextualized, it is obvious that Nyssa is suggesting that lack of progress is an invariant feature of the human condition.

³⁸ Without underscoring the distinction between the pre-eschatological and eschatological domains, both Barnes and Hart rightly grasp that it is the superlative reality of the triune God that causes the stretching of human knowing (as loving) that will never issue in full comprehension.

tine such as the *Confessions*, *De Trinitate*, and *The City of God*, rest and (by association) peace are the required cure for the restlessness and agonism of a life beset from within by lust and from without by hazard and uncontrollable forces. As it is taken up in both theology (Aquinas) and literature (Dante), Augustine's iconic extension becomes the one favored in the Catholic tradition. There is good reason, then, why Griffiths, whose poetic extensions are based on this tradition and who is also an eminent scholar of Augustine,³⁹ could suppose that Augustine offers the Western alternative to the Eastern Christian view of *epektasis*. Still, even if we ought to accept the above view as the majority report, there are good reasons to ask the question of whether Augustine himself ever suggested otherwise. One has to answer this question in the affirmative. In his sermons, Augustine sometimes sounds more like Nyssa than he does like the desperate lover of rest and peace of many of his better-known texts, as he strikes the note of a human being in the next life being carried everlastingly deeper into the mystery of God. Again, one might explain Augustine's entertaining dynamism in the next life after the fashion of the common explanation of Nyssa's embrace of *epektasis*: the ontological constitution of the triune God as infinite demands it. Contrariwise, one could conjecture that, even if only peripherally, Augustine also grasps the human spirit in its mode of *acedia*, and thus, when the logic is functioning as the logic of contrast, a figuration of more dynamic existence is permitted. That such a minority report exists in Augustine is first suggested by Erich Przywara in his famous anthology of Augustine's work in the 1930s.⁴⁰ Przywara marks those statements in the sermons in which Augustine is thinking dynamically of entering into the mystery of God,⁴¹ Augustinian

³⁹ Two of the many examples of how important Augustine is for Griffiths are *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), and *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

⁴⁰ Przywara's German text published in 1934 was called *Augustinus: Die Gestalt als Gefüge*. An English translation appeared within two years from Sheed and Ward. For a reprint, see *An Augustinian Synthesis*, arranged by Erich Przywara, trans. C. C. Martindale with introduction (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).

⁴¹ Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014). Augustine is a central figure in Przywara's classic 1932 text. Redolent of the Augustine anthology that he provided a few years before the publication of *Analogia Entis*, Przywara underscores Augustine's contribution

statements that are also underscored by Balthasar, who is, of course, also no stranger to the work of Gregory of Nyssa, while at the same time being no hater of the beatific vision.

Thus far, we have been talking only about the logic of contrast that is the specific substantive form of Griffiths's more formal logic of discontinuity. What about the logic of hyperbole, the exaggeration of those features into the eschatological state that we experience episodically in this life, such as a sense of divine mystery or divine presence or a sense of communion with other human beings? Surely, there are also two logics of iconic extension in operation here. Could they be crossing each other? And is it not possible to say that while images generated by each of the logics can be in tension with each other, they can also prove to be complementary and mutually reinforcing? Surely Nyssa's reading of Moses's ineffable experience of the divine in Exodus 33 as a perfection repeated in the Christian mystic inclines him in the direction of its higher-order repetition in the next life. This could likewise be true with Augustine, who also insists on the experience in this life of the mystery of God, although the register of becoming in the afterlife is considerably more mute. In light especially of the supposed East–West divide on this issue, perhaps it should be marked how the philosophical and theological anthropology of transcendental Thomism in its wide varieties of forms, from Maréchal and Rousselot to Rahner and Lonergan,⁴² also prepares the way in Roman Catholicism to seriously qualify the standard Catholic iconography of the beatific vision, given that this dynamism toward the true, the good, and the beautiful is so definitional of human being that it necessarily will be prolonged and amplified in the next life.

toward a *reduction in mysterium* by recurring to Augustine's use of Ps 130:11 ("so that he who is to be found is to be sought, he is hidden") (*Analogia Entis*, 176–77, 183, 231–32).

⁴² Let me take Rahner as exemplary here. It is not difficult to infer from Rahner's earliest work concerning the intrinsic dynamism of the human spirit and his concomitant renouncing of Heidegger's finitism that his phenomenological description of the created subject is transferrable into the eschatological state. Later essays gathered into *Theological Investigations* seem to strengthen the argument. A good example is Rahner's essay on "Hiddenness of God," in which the dynamism of the intellect is regarded as the subjective correlative of the inexhaustible reality of God that is invariant between the pre-eschatological and eschatological states. The connection between Rahner and Nyssa is clear here, but if I have got Augustine right, the connection between Rahner and Augustine is also fairly close.

The Necessity of Dante's Eschatological Poetics

On the basis of my critical reading of Thiel's and Griffiths's contemporary exhibitions of Catholic eschatological poetics, I suggest a return to Dante's *Paradiso*.⁴³ On the surface, this is an odd suggestion, and the obstacles to its useful theological deployment are considerable. The first major problem is that the genre of the *Paradiso*, as with the genre of the *Divina commedia* in general, is poetry. Poetry is not theology, and poetry and theology often have different subject matters and have different obligations. In general, whatever its particular subject matter, whether Christ, Church, or the *eschata*, theology operates with a limited number of forms: hermeneutic, discursive-argumentative, hortatory, and doxological. Theology usually does not take the form of *terza rima*, nor does it find itself obliged to draw attention to image and felicity of language with delight more nearly in view than truth. Nor does theology usually take on the responsibility of inserting its production in a literary history, demonstrating a command of classical literature while attempting also—and Harold Bloom is right here—not only to make room for novel production but to outdo previous epics with respect to the importance of theme and beauty of language. Dante is completely self-conscious regarding the latter, and is as convinced of the truth of the classical Neoplatonic aesthetic theory of splendor and measure as he is that beauty is a transcendental. And with respect to theme, the *Divina commedia* is the story of salvation that applies to everyone, not simply to the heroes of Greek states and Rome. Moreover, this form of salvation is both real and eternal; it transcends as well as subverts ephemeral human glory, all too subject to fragile human memory, which, as Plato espied at the very beginning of philosophy, is salvation in name only. The point here is that while Dante's outbidding of classical literature in the order of representation definitely involves Christianity, it can also be seen to have a measure of independence from his prioritization of it. Moreover, the literary framing in which an alive "hero" visits Hades, Tartarus, or the Elysian fields and comes to experience and describe the particular geographies of the lands of the dead and the correlative existential states belongs to a literary cornucopia that is more than a little unlike anything that had been intended in the theological field in its Western trajectory from Augustine to Aquinas.

There is, then, no reason to deny the presence of a poetic eschatology in the *Divina commedia* in general and in the *Paradiso* in particular,

⁴³ Although others are more poetic, the preferred translation of the *Paradiso* is by Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2007).

and every reason to accept the analytic distinction between a poetic eschatology and an eschatological poetics in principle. The question is whether, in the *Paradiso* (and in the *Divina commedia* in general), the one excludes the other. Or does the text, rather, demand a double reading, best understood when seen to offer both a poetic eschatology and an eschatological poetics? A perfectly good reading of the *Divina commedia* is that it is a literary extravaganza in which Dante tests his literary prowess in image, narrative verisimilitude, and scope against contemporary authors, but even more importantly against the entire classical tradition, and Virgil in particular. Nonetheless, it is evident that another reading is not only possible, but necessary, what I have been calling an eschatological poetics. An eschatological poetics can be defined as consisting of complex iconic extension into the postmortem states of human being. A general condition for such extension is that the *eschata* are doctrinally under-determined, and that at times there is a felt pressure for a poetics that marshals all the resources of the biblical, popular, and theological tradition to make the extension. As Dante enacts his iconic extension, he has from theology the schema of the medieval Latin, post-Augustinian ordinance of the three eschatological states of heaven, purgatory, and hell, but not a great deal more. While this reading is now essentially ignored by the Dante guild, which in principle admits only of a poetic eschatology, for much of the history of reception of Dante's classic, the second reading was presupposed. Questioning the *Divina commedia* as a theological text is a modern phenomenon, depending, as T. S. Eliot suggested, on the emergence of the idea or prescription of literature as autonomous. Of course, Eliot, no less than Dorothy Sayers and C. S. Lewis, was alive to the anachronistic projection of this hardly self-evident "truth" of poetry back onto a late medieval text. I think that there is good reason to accept the genius of the *Divina commedia*, especially the *Paradiso*, as an essential part of Dante's epic is that it manages to be two different things at once: it serves as an example of a poetic eschatology, casting projections on the afterlife within the ordinance of poetry and its obligations, while also serving as an example of an eschatological poetics, and thereby extending the reach of theology.

Without denying that the *Divina commedia* should be read as a literary masterpiece in general and as a masterpiece of poetic eschatology in particular, the focus here is on Dante's masterpiece to the extent to which it articulates an eschatological poetics. In the case of the *Paradiso*, the specific claim is that Dante energizes the entire Western

Christian tradition of reflection on the heavenly state by reference to canonic or non-apocalyptic apocalypses in which there is not only the prospect of an extraordinary vision that overcomes the general biblical reserve about the afterlife but also the trope of an otherworldly journey⁴⁴ and that he does so by taking seriously the popular Christian tradition of seeing beyond the grave and by putting into play and greatly developing the more nervous extrapolations of the magisterial theological tradition, hedged with apophatic clauses, in which notions of beatific vision of the triune God, absolute peace and communion, and the realization of absolute joy and delight are prominent. Now, keeping in mind that the key in which I read the *Paradiso* is a key in which denizens of heaven are seen not so much as shades or phantoms of their prior embodied lives as they are anticipations of their fully resurrected states, I think we can say that the persuasiveness of Dante's eschatological poetics depends on both the amplitude of the iconic extension displayed in the *Paradiso* and the complementarity of the logics of continuity and discontinuity Dante deploys.

With regard to amplitude, heaven has both an individual and a communal register. In its individual register, heaven involves a mode of knowing in which everything that was a matter of faith in the earthly life, whether creation (cantos 2 and 29), the fall (cantos 7 and 19), the Incarnation (canto 33), salvation through Christ (cantos 7 and 14), or the triune God (cantos 10, 13, 14, and 33), is now a matter of knowing. Moreover, this form of knowing is not a form of discursive knowledge, which preserves the distance of subject and object (canto 11), but trans-discursive. Dante does not tire in the early cantos of specifying that, by contrast with its earthly modality, in the eschatological state, knowledge is experiential and intuitive and functions with the immediacy of sense (cantos 2 and 4). If Augustine and Aquinas are being called on to make this extrapolation plausible, as they undoubtedly are, then Dante's promiscuous deployment of the image of light and the illumination of intellect that it makes possible (canto 4) suggests that he is calling on the larger "catholic" tradition. Light supersaturates heaven (cantos 5, 7, 13, and 33, among others). Light is a biblical image for God, and especially a Johannine image. At the same time, it is the Christian Neoplatonic

⁴⁴ For a precise synoptic account of Dante's dependence on canonic and non-canonic apocalypses, see Ronald B. Herzma, "Dante and the Apocalypse," in *Irenic Apocalypse: Some Uses of Apocalyptic in Dante, Petrarch, and Rabelais*, ed. Dennis Costa (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1981), 398–413.

image par excellence, and its use in the *Paradiso* perhaps intimates the figure of Pseudo-Dionysius more than Augustine and Aquinas, although the image is to be found in both, and for the same biblical reasons. Moreover, to the extent to which one finds a particularly deep connection between light and the transcendental of beauty, whose reality is now as fully, if not more fully, disclosed than the transcendentals of goodness and truth, it is once again more than possible that Pseudo-Dionysius is more responsible than Aquinas and Augustine in Dante's continued reiteration of this point. Pseudo-Dionysius, a figure shared by Eastern and Western Christianity, receives something of an apotheosis in canto 33 when light, and thus beauty, is associated with the triune God. No less an authority on medieval aesthetic than Umberto Eco points out that Pseudo-Dionysius is both pivotal for the general aesthetic views of Bonaventure and Aquinas and crucial in its theological riveting in the Trinity, and in particular in Christ.⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, given Dante's own troubled life, peace is a determinate property of heaven (cantos 2 and 3), such that, when he speaks almost pleonastically of "heavenly peace" (canto 3), we are supposed to recognize that it is a state of being and relation greatly prized in this life because of its unavailability. As I have suggested elsewhere,⁴⁶ cantos 2 and 3 provide only the protocols of peace in the *Paradiso*, whereas cantos 11 and 12, in which we have the staging of Dominicans and Franciscans lavishing praise on each other, enact it. On the face of it, the doxological enactment seems trivial. Yet here Dante is concerned not only with painting an alternative to the violence in all sins that sunder the community, whether theft, murder, or lies, but also with suggesting the overcoming of the residual, socially acceptable rivalries of those who are more or less good and who self-consciously serve the Christian cause. Heaven means the removal of the last trace of rivalry that would put the actuality of communion at risk. The enactment of peace in heaven in the form of doxologies speaks also to the deepening and elevation of all interpersonal relations. There is a staircase of personal relations in heaven that Dante climbs, from his deep relation with Beatrice, in which he comes to appreciate her beyond his own desire as a medium of

⁴⁵ See Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 1–61.

⁴⁶ Cyril O'Regan, "The *Paradiso* and the Overcoming of Rivalry," forthcoming in *Dante, Mercy, and the Beauty of the Human Person*, ed. Leonard Delorenzo and Vittorio Montemaggi (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

grace and agape, through his relation to Mary, who is a higher order of mediation of this grace and solicitude, to the Trinity as the fountal source of unmerited divine love.

The above is just a sketch of the amplitude of the gifts of heaven, and I will put others into circulation on an as-needed basis when I turn to reflect on the two logics deployed by Dante in making his poetic extension. Even on the basis of the above sketch, however, I think we can say that heaven involves an enhancing of the threefold estate along three axes or dimensions: the personal, the communal, and the interpersonal as an intermediary between the two. This is important, since it was noticeable in our survey of contemporary Catholic attempts at eschatological poetics that there tended to be a contraction to either the communal or social dimension (Thiel) or the individual (Griffiths). While one can easily imagine how and why a contemporary theologian might want to balance these three dimensions in a different way than Dante, the Italian poet seems to be persuasive in insisting that Christian eschatological poetics demands a synthesis of all three.

With this, I turn to Dante's deployment of both logics, continuity and discontinuity, when it comes to iconic extension regarding heaven, as well as their principled complementarity, a mark of which is that each of the three dimensions of which we have spoken can be keyed as being continuous with moments of experienced grace and experiences of longing for what is not given in our fallen world. This is a key point. It illustrates, on the one hand, that Dante has a much richer phenomenology of human existence in operation than either Thiel or Griffiths and suggests, on the other, that the division according to a logic of continuity or a logic of discontinuity is more or less pragmatic: in every continuity, there is a measure of discontinuity; in every discontinuity, a measure of continuity. This should be kept in mind throughout my discussion of continuities and discontinuities. I will begin with the exercise of the logic of continuity in the *Paradiso*, but before reflecting on what Dante might highlight as continuities between the earthly and heavenly states, one should remember that Dante underscores the miracle of his being brought before death to the other side and draws attention time and again to the inadequacy of all language, even when stretched most violently, with regard to the new reality.

Now, one fundamental continuity between this life and the next is embodiment. While this runs in the face of the very obvious "intermediate-state" eschatology deployed by Dante, I wish to underscore

that he takes as a given that the final state of the heavenly departed is corporeal. Another obvious continuity is the exclamation point heaven seems to give to the “spiritual senses,” modes of apprehension connected with the senses that actually transcend the sensory apparatus. It is evident that Dante is not thinking that the spiritual senses are mere metaphor when he speaks of deep spiritual seeing (cantos 7 and 14), hearing (canto 7), and tasting (canto 10). In Dante’s perceptual economy, seeing is supereminent. It is extremely interesting, then, that he seems to sanction a kind of synesthesia between seeing and hearing (canto 7), perhaps suggesting also that music is a central part of the tissue of heaven and that chorale hymning is emblematic. This is good news and invites us to listen to Mozart (*The Magic Flute*), as wells the entire range of Oliver Messiaen’s music intimating the “other than time.”⁴⁷ To be fair to Griffiths, he more than occasionally suggests that he has a sense of this, but he usually fails to make much of it, given the dominance of the logic of contrast in his enormously civilized book.

Of course, the most salient continuity between this life and the next in the *Paradiso* is human love. It is Dante’s love for Beatrice in all its ambiguity, and the responsive love of Beatrice in the heavenly realm, that makes possible Dante’s journey into the afterworld. Dante recognizes that human *eros* is ambiguous in direction: it can draw in and down, as witnessed in the case of Paulo and Francesca, or draw upward, as happens in his own case with the assistance of grace. In heaven, human love is affirmed as a good, but only a love sublimated and purged of traces of the acquisitive is concordant with heaven. Crucially, however, just as in the case of the three dimensions of the heavenly state we previously discussed, discontinuity is associated with continuity: if we admit the resurrected body as the final state, then, as imperishable, such a body, strictly speaking, is unimaginable; if we think of the spiritual senses continuing their operation in heaven, the level of operation and the synesthetic component is such as almost to involve a *metabasis eis allos genos*; and a fully agapeic love is notional for humanity in the earthly state, despite the model of

⁴⁷ It is somewhat ironic that the leading authority on Olivier-Eugène-Prosper-Charles Messiaen (1905–1992) is also named Paul Griffiths, although this one is a musicologist and historian of music. See his *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009). Messiaen’s music is religious through and through. Among his many pieces dealing with a breakthrough to the beyond are an opera on Saint Francis (1975) and pieces on the colors of the celestial city (1966) and the resurrection of the dead (1964).

Christ, and so, despite purification and sublimation, a gap is traversed in the heavenly state.

Perhaps something similar can be said with respect to features of heaven in which the note of discontinuity is struck. There are a number of obvious discontinuities between the earthly and heavenly states. First, there is the overcoming of distraction such that a complete focus of the self and the community on the triune God is not only possible but actual. Stillness, focus, and permanence are constitutive properties of the beatific vision. One could think of this contrast as being one of the many victories of Augustine's eschatology in Dante's masterpiece. Second, heaven is doxological all the way through in a way that pre-eschatological existence is not. It is not simply that there is much ingratitude in this life, but that a fundamental characteristic of human existence is the reluctance to praise and celebrate the gifts so prodigally given to oneself and others. One could think of Griffiths in his highly doxological construction of heaven as supporting this feature as discontinuous.⁴⁸ Third, there seems to be discontinuity between the great White Rose at the center of heaven and the Eucharist it so obviously recalls, as if what merely has temporal value simply gives way to a reality whose value is eternal. Still, it seems evident that just as the continuity was by no means pure in the three cases that illustrated continuity, so neither is the discontinuity pure in these three cases that illustrate discontinuity. Starting from the bottom, while the White Rose can be understood to replace the Eucharist, it can also be seen to be its translation into a heavenly idiom. Similarly, there is plentiful illustration of doxology on earth in liturgy, prayer, and reading of the Psalms, even if not all of it is sincere and spiritually effective. In addition, gratitude finds more than occasional illustration in disposition, action, and voice in this life. Thus, the transformation is not only transformation *from* but also translation *of* a phenomenon that is patchy and haphazard into universality and permanence. And finally, Dante well recognizes that the attention and focus on the triune God is anticipated in the monastic and contemplative forms of existence in this life. The mystical aspects of Augustine, Aquinas, and, above all, Bonaventure would make no sense unless it were supposed that the true purpose of mystical experience is that it anticipates and, thereby, validates what properly belongs to the next life.

⁴⁸ This is an important point made throughout *Decreation*, but see in particular no. 6 (Repetitive Stasis) and no. 16 (Time Healed: Liturgy, Systole, and Fold).

It would seem, then, that, in the case of all the features that constitute iconic extension into the afterlife, both the logic of continuity and that of discontinuity apply. I would like to end this article by complicating matters further. The test case is the vision of the triune God in heaven that, as we pointed out, illustrates both continuity and discontinuity with our earthly state of existence. For purposes of making the point, I left unqualified the presumed stillness of the beatific vision. For Roman Catholic readers, as well as non-Catholic readers, such a reading seems the only proper one and confirms Dante's dependence on the Augustinian tradition for this point, which is, in effect, coextensive with the Latin tradition. Now, the beatific vision in the *Paradiso* serves as the pivot for other phenomena, such as doxology, that Griffiths suggests qualify rather than subvert stasis.⁴⁹ The beatific vision as rendered in canto 33, however, is far more paradoxical than it is usually taken to be. The vision of God in the afterlife is a vision of a perichoretic Trinity that is infinite motion, in which the circle is invoked both to reinforce infinity and to avoid the notion of the measureless that moves in the mode of the *et cetera*. To see is to experience the ecstasy of being absorbed in the infinite love and delight of the Trinitarian persons, an ecstasy, motion, and delight that will last forever. The image of the Trinitarian dance qualifies the received picture of the beatific vision considerably. It suggests that the experience of the Trinity may well be more nearly the experience of the *coincidentia oppositorum* of movement and rest, each in their perfection and each infinitely qualitatively superior to the earthly forms of motion and rest, as well as their contrastive relation to each other. Now, one way to think of what Dante has achieved is that he has managed—albeit in terms of the Western Christian tradition—to synthesize Eastern and Western Christian emphases on participation in the triune God in the afterlife. Another way is to suggest that Dante's genius is to manage to join major and minor Augustinian chords, the emphasis upon rest and stillness of his major texts with the emphasis upon dynamism occasionally struck in his sermons and his elucidations of the Psalms. Nor should we think that this correction is mere whimsy without phenomenological justification. The paralysis of which Nyssa speaks, and which Augustine at least occasionally supposes, needs to be overcome in heaven, just as the experienced perfection of moments of real progress need to be absolutized. **N&V**

⁴⁹ *Decreation*, no. 6.