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Review of In the Light of the Angels: Angelology and Cosmology in Dante's Divina Commedia

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Susanna Barsella. *In the Light of the Angels: Angelology and Cosmology in Dante's Divina Commedia*.

Biblioteca dell'Archivum Romanicum Serie 1; Storia, letteratura, paleografia 370. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2010. xvi + 212 pp. €23. ISBN: 978-88-222-5974-5.

This volume analyzes the theme of angelology in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, assigning the angels a central meaning in the interpretation of the poem's structure and poetics. The study underscores the meaning of angels as links between human and divine, and, at the same time, moves them from a marginal position in the poem, where they had been placed by earlier scholars, to a central role in the text. Specifically, Dante's innovative approach to angelology unfolds as an "angelic mirror" and places the pilgrim's universal return to God in the liminality of dialectics — a dialectics in which the eternal and the ideological define the architecture of the *Commedia*.

Throughout many passages of the poem, Susanna Barsella examines Dante's philosophical and theological representation of the angels, presenting them in the four chapters of her monograph as mirrors of divine love. Chapter 1, dedicated to the historical medieval debate on angels in relation to Dante's *Comedy*, discusses the philosophical issues of angelic nature and operations, and the solutions Dante sought in defining the role that angels played in his poem. In particular, in the *Comedy* the poet fuses the Greek-Arab understanding of angelic intelligence with that of Pseudo-Dionysius, and reconciles the Aristotelian metaphysical foundation of his poem, conceiving an angelology within the Christological perspective of mediation.

In chapter 2, after a review of Dionysian metaphysics, the author addresses the complexity of Dante's angelology in the *Comedy*, in particular their function as heavenly movers. More specifically, she examines how Dante, in adopting and adapting the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition in his epic, filters the Areopagite's angelology through both Aquinas's and Bonaventure's Scholastic theology, a theology in which angels are collaborators in Christ's redemptive work. Moreover,

the poet, in developing his own approach to the angelic spheres, also follows Gregory the Great's angelology, which is centered on the expediency of angelic operations. In other words, Dante, in adapting diverse forms of the current angelology of his time, strengthens the ontological relationship between contemplative and active functions in his *Comedy*. According to Barsella, the novelty of the angelic spheres in the *Comedy* rests in the poet's capacity to combine these two functions whose outcome is the role of the angels as chronocrators. Thus, Dante's angelology, based on the triumphant Christ who reigns over time, delineates cognitive and active moments as temporally inseparable.

Barsella's second chapter poses the problem of Dionysius's strict hierarchical angelology, a hierarchy that stressed angelic intermediation and diminished the central role of the Incarnation. Her third chapter investigates how Dante's reinterpretation of the Pseudo-Dionysian concepts of light, hierarchy, merit, and angelic mirroring action relocates the angels as movers of the celestial spheres within the eschatological perspective of the poem. Furthermore, in exploring the relation between angelology and cosmology in the *Comedy*, she posits the function of the angels as mirrors who do not create but forward formal principles onto the stars. Dante's poetics follows the theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who integrated the systems of the laws of Aristotelian causality into the theology of the Church Fathers, that of the non-systematic biblical cosmology as defined in their hexaemeral literature, a belief in which the stars and planets had the power to plan the path of individual and universal history. Therefore, Dante's angelology, in transforming the angelic function of mirrors from a symbolic and metaphorical function into a concrete material one, provides a new way of understanding the role of angels in medieval cosmology.

The concluding chapter addresses how angels are not only movers of celestial spheres but are also laborious bees that pollinate wisdom on the celestial rose and mediate the path toward salvation. From *Inferno* to *Paradise*, angels contribute to the eschatological meaning of the *Comedy*. First, in analyzing the role of the angels in *Paradise*, Barsella draws a parallel between angels and blessed souls and determines that the poet attributes angelic tasks to non-angelic characters. Specifically, Dante follows Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, in which the saint argues that although human beings cannot by nature be part of the angelic orders, they can be similar to the angels by the gift of grace. He also follows Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Four Books of Sentences* 2, where the Seraphic Saint states that an affinity between angels and human beings exists, and is present in God's plan as revealed by the Incarnation. Secondly, the chapter concentrates on the role angels play in *Purgatory* and how their function unites gifts and Beatitudes in order to manifest the Holy Spirit as the ordering principle of expiation. The third part of the chapter studies the heavenly messenger of *Inferno* 9, an angel that recalls the role of Mercury as a divine instrument. Here Dante transforms the classical god into Angelic Intelligence so that he may incorporate the classical tradition and its medieval exegesis into his own allegorical and hermeneutical writing. The last part of the chapter analyzes Beatrice's main function. She, like the angel, performs

illuminating actions and assists Dante in seeing beyond the physical, indeed helping him enter the metaphysical world.

In conclusion, Susanna Barsella's important and innovative study of angelology and cosmology in Dante's *Comedy* provides a comprehensive analysis of the rhetorical structures inherent in the poet's writing. She places Dante's epic in the theological and philosophical debates of the thirteenth century on the nature of angelic intelligence, and offers a new perspective on how to understand the complexity of his writing. It should be read by all scholars whose interests lie in medieval studies.

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