THREE IN ONE: THE TRINITY AS A THEME IN *THE DIVINE COMEDY* AND *PARADISE LOST*

I believe in one God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
And of all things visible and invisible:
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
Begotten of his Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
Very God of very God,
Begotten, not made,
Being of one substance with the Father . . .
And I believe in the Holy Ghost,
The Lord and giver of life,
Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son,
Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified . . .

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 must still, a millennium later, have been ringing in the ears of Dante as he plucked pen from ink bottle to begin the opening phrases of his sublime work—and in the ears of Milton, too, born three-and-a-half centuries and a Reformation further on. *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* reflect the writers' shared understanding of the Trinity and creedal emphasis on the Godhead's oneness of substance and threeness of persons expressed in love.

Form and Theme

The multivolume copy of *Divine Comedy* reposing on my bookshelf strikes me as symbolic even before I open the cover—a trinity in its very binding, with three books representing three places or conditions of the soul. Written in *terza rima*, it echoes with triplicate repetitions of words (e.g., "love . . . love . . . love," *Hell* V.100, 103,106) and triads of allegorical image and theme (e.g., three-headed Cerberus, *Hell* VI.13; three penitential steps of confession, contrition, and satisfaction before the Gate of Purgatory, *Purg.* IX.76-111). The entire *Comedy* is

built upon a numerical system featuring the sacred seven (e.g., seven cornices of Purgatory), the perfect ten (e.g., ten heavens of Paradise), and the Trinitarian three (e.g., three classes of sins [incontinence, violence, and fraud] represented by three animals [leopard, lion, and wolf], punishable in Hell's nine circles forming twenty-four divisions [multiples of three]). The cadence of the poetry, its flow of word and thought, and its form and shape all bring to mind the foreshadowing of the first words in Genesis ("In the beginning God created") with their reverberating, triune echoes heard again in the first words of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . ."

Dante forges this triunity with comprehensive consistency in *The Divine Comedy*, in a way more stylistically obvious than Milton in *Paradise Lost*. And yet Milton's handling of the same three-part doctrine within the two covers of one book is Trinitarian in its own way, if more Puritan in its plain and simple reading. With greater economy of speech and, of course, eschewing the excessive tradition of allegorical interpretation in use in the Catholicism of Dante's day, Milton's epic justification of "the ways of God to men" (I.26) stretches a wide enough canvas upon which to paint the doctrine of the Trinity.

In spite of stylistic differences, thematically both writers approach the unveiling of theology with a robust vigour. The church councils of the fourth century had crafted creeds that emphasized the one *ousios* (substance) and three *hypostaseis* (persons) of the Godhead; this was more than a side issue or literary device to either Dante or Milton, who both understood the foundational implications of the Trinity as a basic doctrine of God. Both were aware of the profound nature of the Trinitarian debates, Dante even naming the theologians who sparked the whole heresy: "Sabellius, too, and Arius—every fool that e'er distorted Scripture" (*Para.* XIII.127). Both employed the rich vocabulary characteristic of the Nicene Creed, their pages

laden with references to the substantial unity of God—the Father as Creator and Begetter; the Son as Begotten from eternity and the essence of light; the Holy Ghost as the Begetting, affiliated with loving action and procession.

Milton's Trinity

Milton's cohesive *Paradise Lost* effectively communicates his belief in the singularity of essence in the Godhead: "Beyond compare the Son of God was seen most glorious, in him all the Father shone substantially express'd . . . Love without end" III.139-42). The Son is described as "the filial Godhead" (VI.722), the image and expression of the Father in all things and the "Son of God, in whom the fullness dwells of love divine" (III.225). In the Son, the Father beholds the full resplendence of his own glory (V.720). The Son himself acknowledges to the Father that he is the "image of thee in all things" (VI.736). The Father calls the Son his equal (III.305-7), he who sits at the right hand of the Father's throne and is yet "imbosom'd" in the Paternal being (V.597). The Son's throne is not subordinate in position but "of high collateral glory" (X.86), and Christ is "Thron'd in highest bliss equal to God, and equally enjoying Godlike fruition [i.e., pleasure in possession]" (III.305-7). Surely Milton held to the singular and equal essence of God the Father and God the Son.

What of the Holy Spirit? Milton has the Father saying to the Son, "My overshadowing Spirit and might with thee I send along" to effect the creation of the universe (VII.165-7). The substance of the Godhead is love, which is the action of the Holy Spirit who proceeds out of the Father and the Son. Milton's Trinity displays common substance in the description of the Son "with Radiance crown'd of Majesty Divine, Sapience and Love Immense" (VII.194-6); for "Majesty" denotes the Father, "Sapience" is wisdom personified (possibly the wisdom of

Proverbs 8, a typological passage on the Christ), and "Love" belongs to the realm of the Spirit (though, of course, Milton sees all three persons as possessing all three attributes).

Paradise Lost promotes not only the unified substantial essence but also the multiplicity of the Godhead's persons; although of one substance, the Trinity is made up of three distinct individuals. Milton understands the Trinitarian doctrine of appropriation. That is, while God as one mutually interpenetrating and indwelling essence creates and redeems and sanctifies, yet each person of the Godhead claims a certain function—not to the exclusion of the others but in defining preference over them. God the Father is Creator, the Son is Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit is Sanctifier. Each function is assigned largely to one or another of the members of the Trinity, distinguishing between their persons. Exemplifying this distinction in *Paradise Lost*, Milton delegates Christ as the judge of sin (X.55-57); yet, reinforcing their union of nature, Milton shows the Father appointing the Son as Creator: "And thou, my Word, begotten Son, by thee this I perform, speak thou, and be it done" (VII.163-4).

Milton uses the literary element of dialogue to emphasize the distinction of the three persons within the unity of the Godhead. The interesting dynamic is seen at work in the councils in Heaven. For example, when the Father points out to the Son the raging adversary bound for earth (III.80ff), the Son praises the Father for his grace towards man (III.144ff), and this conversation between two people does not sound like one identity "talking to himself." Yet, when the Son leaves Heaven on his various missions of creation, redemption, or judgment, the dialogue becomes a monologue—that is, the verbal exchanges end when the Son embarks, all differentiation dropped: "Meanwhile the Son on his great Expedition now appear'd" (VII.193-4) a few lines later becomes "the King of Glory in his powerful Word and Spirit coming to create new Worlds" (VII.208-9). The Son is now called God, he speaks as God, and he is treated by the

other characters as God. The eternal operations of the Trinity being undivided, it is not the Son only who leaves Heaven but the complete Godhead who carries out the task at hand, as in creation (VII.205-9). Furthermore, Milton calls the Son by titles often commonly attributed to the Father: "mild Judge" (X.96, 118), "both Judge and Saviour" (X.209), "God" (X.90, 97, 101), and "Lord God" (X.163). When the Son reappears in Heaven, the distinction between the three persons is resumed .

The recounting of Satan's giving birth to Sin and Death (the three-part family of the "unholy trinity") is the most purely allegorical segment of *Paradise Lost*, and Milton's strongest picture of what God is *not* (II.645ff). In this gruesome and truth-revealing passage, Satan the father, who has unlovingly forgotten his family in a rejection of fellowship, is reminded of the begetting of the goddess Sin sprung out of his head, and the seduction that results in the "odious offspring" of Death—who in turn rapes and feeds upon her. In a mirror-image opposite of the heavenly Trinity, the substance of this inverse godhead lacks distinction, its form of interpenetration is based on lust, and its operation of hatred grossly mimics the one substance, the plurality in unity, and the mutual life-giving love of the Godhead.

Dante's Trinity

In comparison to Milton's explicit and immediate presentation, Dante's expression of the one *ousios* and the three *hypostaseis* takes up more space and follows a very different course in *The Divine Comedy*. The progression of the Trinity's shared substance and multiple persons becomes increasingly evident throughout Dante's journey, with most of the hard Trinitarian theology explicated in the third book and often employing the imagery of light.

At the outset of Dante's excursion, he still enjoys some divine light from the created order above ground (e.g., *Hell* I.13-21); Hell itself he finds to be a cold, unlit place far from God's presence. The deeper he enters into the spiral of the underworld, the less light and heat exist until, at the very center of the material world (in a platonic, hierarchical order), Hell's deep stillness and deathly, cold darkness mark the final state of the damned (*Hell* XXXII). The river of Cocytus, wept from the six eyes and down the triple chin of "the Emperor of the sorrowful realm" (*Hell* XXXIV.28, 52), flows "where sinners are preserved in ice" (*Hell* XXXII.117). Here at the center, the lost soul is feeding cannibalistically on other lost souls, a kind of sterile anti-community far from warmth and light, overseen by the three-faced domination of Satan in his horrible anti-trinity. Throughout the journey into Hell, Dante similarly foreshadows the Trinity by graphically portraying the triplets of sin. For example, Geryon's nature compounded of human, mammal, and reptile characteristics (*Hell* V.1-27) is discordant with the previous listing of God's Trinitarian attributes of "power, and the unsearchably high wisdom, and the primal love supernal" (*Hell* III.5-6), and bespeak the enemy's *lack* of power, wisdom, and love. Especially picturesque is the parody of the melding of several spirits whom Dante saw "change, re-change and interchange" (*Hell* XXV.142), in juxtaposition with his clear theological distinction between the persons of the Trinity. Both Trinitarian aspects of substance and person have been negatively reinforced in Dante's Hell.

As Dante moves on to the mount of Purgatory, the presence of light becomes somewhat more pervasive, symbolic of God's grace (*Purg.* VII.25-7), in contrast to the regions below "made sad by darkness" (*Purg.*VII.29). The daylight is now punctuated with periods of spiritual night in which no progress can be made "since none can climb by night" (*Purg.* VII.44). Dante turns the reader again to the Trinitarian theme with his address to the Father, the "most high

Jove," identifying him as the Son who was "once for our sins slain here upon the rood" (*Purg.* VI.118-9). The Greyhound is anticipated as Saviour from the wolf of sin: "When shall he come who'll hunt the brute away?" (*Purg.* XX.10-15). *Purgatory* furthers many aspects of Dante's plot (notably the relationship with Beatrice, who is almost a Christ figure and definitely a mediatory figure), but the picture of the Trinity—which most closely ties all three persons in a single essence—is made clearer in Dante's picture of the rational soul and its connection to the body (*Purg*. XXV). The threefold nature emerges: "the active virtue, now become a soul . . . showers from the begetter's heart" (*Purg*. XXV.52, 58-9); "then the First Mover turns to it . . . and inbreathes a rare New spirit [to] make one single soul complete, alive, and sensitive, and self-aware" (*Purg.* XXV.70-75). (Of course, Dante does not ever hint that man can *become* God and, instead, claims that "it never did befall man's nature, truly, to be what it was in those two persons [that is, through the Incarnation], and it never shall" [*Paradise* XIII.85-7]). Dante's analogy to the physical realm of God's triunity is furthered by his reference to a chemical action that combines several components into a single substance: "Think how the sun's warmth mingles in the vine with its moist sap, and turns to wine in it" (*Purg*. XXV.77-8). Although this explanation is applied to the development of the human soul (and, later, the shade), yet—since we are made in the image of God—this illustration replete with Trinitarian terminology could allude to God's nature as well. (The second book is *The Divine Comedy's* weakest reflection of three-in-oneness due to its predominant focus on the doctrine of Purgatory.)

Soon, however, Dante turns his attention again to the substance-persons theme of light, which shines with increasing radiance as the traveller leaves the Garden of Eden for Paradise and the pure presence of God. Discussing with Beatrice the markings on the moon, Dante wonders "how two dimensions in one space can bide, as must be, if two bodies interweave" (*Para.* II.38)

as a precursor to his explanation of the Incarnation, described as an act of love perfectly stamping "the clear Image of the Primal Worth" on flesh (*Para.* XIII.79-81). Dante's language becomes much more explicitly triune as he links the Father, Son, and Spirit together: "The uncreated Might which passeth speech, gazing on His Begotten with the Love that breathes Itself eternally from each" (*Para.* X.1-3). The Father's breathing (as he breathed life into the Scriptures [2 Tim. 3:16] and into man [Gen. 2:7]) shows relationship within the Trinity, with the self-existent, uncreated Father extending his substance into the eternal Son, which proceeds forth from the Son into the Spirit. (This indicates the importance Dante places on the Western view of the Nicene Creed and the theology of the *filio que* ["from the Son"] procession of the Holy Spirit.)

The linking of the Spirit with the action of love, and with light, is more fully developed by Dante's characterization of St. Thomas, who speaks of the Son as "the Idea that knows the Father's Love whereby It is begot" (*Para.* XIII.53-4); indeed, "the living Luminance [i.e., the Son] that flows forth from its Luminant [i.e., the Father]" cannot be separated from "the Love [i.e., the Spirit] that aye in-trines Those [i.e., the three]" who converge but are "Itself still one, eterne in permanence" (*Para.*XIII.55-60). How like the creedal tongue this sounds: "Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten . . . proceedeth." In similar language, Dante declares, "the One and Two and Three that there is King, and lives forever Three and Two and One" (*Para.* XIV.28-9), referring to the one Godhead, the two natures of Christ as divine and human, and the three persons of the Trinity.

As Dante moves closer to his destination, the Source of all light, he is quizzed by St. Thomas about his faith and delivers a quintessentially Trinitarian statement of belief: "The three eternal persons next I quote as tenet of my faith; so One and Trine that *are* and *is* their nature

both denote" (*Para.* XXIV.139-41). Thomas's examination shows that Dante views faith, hope, and love as the godly trio of theological virtues by which light is shed on man's dark soul, intellect alone being insufficient for his salvation. The understanding of this spiritual truth (i.e., the necessity of experiential application) is, for Dante, the "spark which, like a living flame," shines within him "like a star at dark" (*Para.* XXIV.142-7). As the heavenly chorus of light sings praise "to Father and to Son and to Holy Ghost" (*Para.* XXVII.1), Dante ascends into the Primum Mobile (the ninth circle) and, finally, to the Empyrean—the light-filled abode of God beyond space and time, where the Celestial Rose blooms as the eternal home of the saints. "That light supreme," which is "clear substance," shows Dante three spheres of three distinct colours that "occupied one space": like a rainbow and its reflection (Father and Son), the flame (of the Spirit) "breathed equally from each of the first pair" in a strong declaration of the substance, the persons, and the procession of the Trinity (*Para.* XXXIII.115-20). Dante beholds the triune God.

Conclusion

Dante and Milton both understood the creedal concepts of the singularity of essence, plurality of persons, and relationship of love within the Trinity that overflow in the actions of creation, redemption, and sanctification. Through mastery of literary technique, both writers' works effectively communicate their theology. We may have no Council of Nicea or Constantinople brewing today, and perhaps we need no Athanasius or Augustine or Calvin to champion the doctrinal truths hammered out aeons ago. But the allegories of Dante and Milton continue to interpret the Trinitarian doctrine so basic to our Christian faith.