2001

Active rest in Dante's "Purgatory"

Ellie I. Pojarska

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission

No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature: [Signature]

Date: 12/04/01

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
Active Rest in Dante’s *Purgatory*

By

Ellie Pojarska
B.A., University of Montana, 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

2001

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
A spiritual state, variously described as peace, tranquility, or rest constitutes one of the most striking similarities among religious records across cultures in ages. The following paper argues that we can recognize in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as a whole, and in *Purgatory* in particular, a paradoxical poetic representation of the attainment of this familiar consciousness of rest.

In the first section of the essay, I make a brief overview of the images of water and air which occur in *Purgatory*, and I explore the relation that these images bear to the notion of physical and spiritual rest in the context of the pilgrim’s journey. In the most general terms, I argue that these images reveal that by the time he climbs to the top of Purgatory, the pilgrim undergoes a spiritual transformation as a result of which he no longer has to alternate rest and work, because he finds rest in work and in effect erases the distinction between the two. Since little criticism of *Purgatory* has ever dealt with the subject of rest directly, I also make a brief overview of the relevant literary criticism, trying to place Dante’s poetic dramatization of active rest in the context of an overall reading of the poem.

In the second section, I survey some of the major theological and philosophical sources of Dante, and I explore the possible connections between his poetic notion of active rest and the theological and philosophical beliefs of six major thinkers whom he is known to have admired: St. Augustine, Richard of St. Victor, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Bonaventure, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Considering the familiar critical debate of whether Dante was more influenced by St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas, I argue that, at least as far the notion of rest is concerned, Dante appears to be far closer to Aquinas than to Augustine.
Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Images of Water &amp; Air in <em>Purgatory</em></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Active Rest and Dante’s Philosophical and Theological Sources</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Active Rest in Dante's *Purgatory*

In the chapter on Saintliness of his seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James writes that "'A paradise of inward tranquillity' seems to be faith's usual result; and it is easy, even without being religious one's self, to understand this" (245). Later, in the chapter on Mysticism of the same book, he remarks that, "We pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest" (347). The spiritual state which James describes, variously called peace, tranquillity, or rest, constitutes one of the most striking similarities among religious records across cultures and ages. References to this spiritual state occur in such diverse religious works as the Bhagavad Gita, where the Lord declares that "the yogin whose mind is controlled attains to the tranquillity whose furthest point is nirvana, and rests in me" (VI.15), the Kabbalah, where holiness is described as "the light of peace and a fierce boldness" (*Orot ha-Qodesh. 3:270*), and the seventeenth-century poem "The Pulley" by George Herbert, which depicts restlessness and the desire for rest as the primary forces behind religious sentiment. Although sometimes associated with mystical experiences, this state of rest signals a general transformation of the religious consciousness, where the sense of the presence of God increases, while the spiritual work required to maintain that sense relaxes and even disappears.

The following paper will argue that we can recognize in Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a whole, and in *Purgatory* in particular, a paradoxical poetic representation of the attainment of this familiar consciousness of rest. I will focus entirely on *Purgatory*, instead of both *Purgatory* and *Paradise*, because *Purgatory* is where the paradoxical synthesis between action and rest occurs, whereas *Paradise* assumes this synthesis as an inherent quality of the enlightened soul. In other words, *Purgatory* transforms the dynamic between activity and rest, and *Paradise* rests on the
assumption that this transformation has already occurred. In the first section of the essay, I will make a brief overview of the images of water and air which occur in *Purgatory*, and I will explore the relation that these images bear to the notion of physical and spiritual rest in the context of the pilgrim’s journey. In the most general terms, I will argue that these images reveal that by the time he climbs to the top of Purgatory, the pilgrim undergoes a spiritual transformation as a result of which he no longer alternates rest and work, because he finds rest in work and in effect erases the distinction between the two. Since little criticism of *Purgatory* has ever dealt with the subject of rest directly, I will also make a brief overview of the relevant literary criticism, trying to place Dante’s poetic dramatization of active rest in the context of an overall reading of the poem. In the second section, I will survey some of the major theological and philosophical sources of Dante, and I will explore the possible connections between his poetic notion of active rest and the theological and philosophical beliefs of six major thinkers whom he is known to have admired: St. Augustine, Richard of St. Victor, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Bonaventure, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Considering the familiar critical debate of whether Dante was more influenced by St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas, I will argue that, at least as far as the notion of rest is concerned, Dante appears to be far closer to Aquinas than to Augustine.
I

Images and Allegory

In Dante criticism, John Freccero is the most prominent among few critics who have explored extensively the role of non-historical images for the overall meaning of the *Divine Comedy*. Freccero's usual method of proceeding from specific lines, phrases, or images to larger conclusions about the entire poem is also the method of the present essay. As used in this essay, the term non-historical images refers to images which are not related to real places and personages, but which are merely literary inventions whose primary purpose is not readily apparent. Perhaps because non-historical images bear an ambiguous relationship to the much debated tools of allegory and allegorical interpretation (i.e., they may be seen as either partaking of or standing outside the allegory), and perhaps because images seem sometimes ornamental devices which move the narrative forward but do not deepen it, most critics refer to images only in passing, often to admire but rarely to analyze them. *Purgatory*, more than either of the other two canticles of the *Divine Comedy*, abounds in images which vividly recall the familiar worlds of both medieval and modern readers. One reason for the familiarity of these images is the fact that the Mount of Purgatory, unlike Hell and Paradise, bears a physical resemblance to the natural world of human beings—night and day alternate, stars stud the sky at night, and the landscape, although barren at times, often teems with pleasing sounds and colors. Even more importantly, Purgatory is the only place where the souls of the dead have not yet reached their final destination, and where, much as with the souls of living people, spiritual changes occur always with the passage of time and sometimes with the overcoming of distance. Since air and water traditionally connote motion (air as wind or flight, and water as river, rain, etc.), the poetic transformation through which these images come to signal rest will become important for interpreting the spiritual experiences of the Pilgrim.
Before considering the significance of specific images or the paradoxical concept of active rest, however, it is appropriate to attempt to define the significance of images in general for allegory both as a poetic device and as a tool of critical interpretation. During the last seven hundred years, the major critical debate over Dante’s allegory in the *Divine Comedy* has centered around two major “schools” of criticism: one which sees the poem as an “allegory of poets,” and another which insists on its being an “allegory of theologians.” Generally speaking, the major difference between the two kinds of allegory is that the first distinguishes two levels of meaning—literal and allegorical—whereas the second insists on four—historical, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Although “literal” and “historical” are often used interchangeably, the difference between the two matters, since “literal” refers to the “fictional” story of the allegory of poets, whereas “historical” refers to the actual events which the allegory of theologians recreates. Thus, while the allegory of poets creates an imagined story which conceals a hidden meaning, the allegory of theologians—strictly speaking—uses real events, which are thought to possess more than just a literal significance. For those who espouse the “poetic allegory” reading of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the poem itself is a complete fiction, which conceals only one level of “hidden meaning.” These critics often refer to Dante’s own brief exposition on the difference between the two kinds of allegory in the *Convivio* (II, i), where he states of this work—but not of the *Divine Comedy*—that inasmuch as his intention is “to follow here the customs of poets,” he will “take the allegorical sense after the manner which poets use” (73). Even though most critics agree that the *Convivio* does indeed

---

1 In the first chapters of Volume I of his seminal work, *Medieval Exegesis*, Henri de Lubac traces the origins of the “fourfold sense” of Scripture and argues, essentially, that for centuries exegesis (in the “fourfold sense”) had been equated with theology, and that “even if an organization of sacred knowledge like this remained mostly theoretical . . . the very idea is highly significant” (13). Dante no doubt was aware of the debates over scriptural reading that had informed the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries in particular, since in his letter to Can Grande he outlines the traditional four sense of “theological allegory” that have since become objects of debate with regard to his own poem.
follow the model of the allegory of poets, many contest the reasonableness of an application of Dante's comment on the Convivio to his later and more mature Divine Comedy.

The prominent critics in recent times who protest the "poetic allegory" interpretation, and insist on reading the poem as a "theological allegory," include Charles Singleton, Erich Auerbach, and Robert Hollander. All three of these scholars maintain that Dante himself gave us the clue to interpreting the poem in his famous letter to Can Grande, where he lays out a formula for reading the allegory of theologians as having a literal (or historical) sense, in addition to an allegorical, moral, and anagogical sense. Citing Exodus as an example, Dante distinguishes between the literal sense as an understanding of what historically happens in Scripture, the allegorical sense as an ability to see most events in Scripture as figures for other events that either precede or follow them, the moral sense as an admonition about what we should do in this life in order to gain salvation, and the anagogical sense as the gift to see in historical events foreshadowings of God's eternal glory. Significantly, however, even Dante seems to collapse the three "allegorical" senses into one, clearly separate from the historical sense, when he says that, "E benche questi significati mistici siano definiti con diversi nomi, generalmente si possono tutti definire allegorici, in quanto si differenziano dal significato letterale ossia storico" (Epistole 611). We will return to this remark a bit later.

In a marvelously cranky essay, "In Exitu Israel de Aegypto," Charles Singleton goes into painstaking detail in order to illustrate how the fourfold meaning outlined in the letter to Can Grande finds its way into Dante's poem through the specific image of the Exodus. Singleton's premise, the premise of several other critics who agree with him, is that ever since the Renaissance there has been a "trend to play down or exclude from attention the deeper Christian meanings of this great poem" (111). Robert Hollander, a similarly-minded critic, reviews the history of allegory in his informative book Allegory in Dante's Commedia, and by tracing the sources of Dante's
understanding of allegory to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine, shows that the hostility towards recognizing Dante's fourfold allegory owes itself to three major interpretive difficulties: that "contemporary literary men look at Dante through the conventions of allegory peculiar to the Renaissance and later times," which differ greatly from the theological foundations of allegory in Dante's time (17); that no secular writer, according to these critics, can write a fourfold allegory, because this is God's way of writing, but not man's; and that fourfold theological allegory is often confused with personification allegory, where, in a most simple-minded manner, Virgil becomes Reason and Beatrice Theology, as a result of which all other significances are submerged in these equations. Citing the work of both Singleton and Auerbach (in particular, Auerbach's writings on figura), Hollander argues convincingly against all three objections and concludes, as do those other two critics, that the Divine Comedy should be read as a fourfold allegory and that to do otherwise would be to do injustice to the poet; Dante believed, after all, that he could emulate God's style of writing.²

Although the above is an extreme oversimplification of the complex arguments regarding allegory, which does not even consider critics like Benedetto Croce who insist on separating the structure from the poetry of the Divine Comedy completely, it is perhaps a sufficient context in which to place a discussion of Dante's literary images. Regardless of whether or how much we accept a reading of the Divine Comedy as an allegory of theologians, looking at individual images presents the problem of either placing these images on a level with the allegory, and thus seeking to interpret them from two (historical and allegorical) or four (historica, allegorical, moral, and

² The urgency with which these critics argue for a disciplined reading of the Divine Comedy according to the four senses of theological allegory resembles strongly the anxiety of "spiritual men" of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, who, de Lubac says, feared that for the "dialecticians" who raised too many questions about Scripture "the study of the reading' comes decidedly before 'humility of heart,'" so that "the authority of the sacred text seems to give way to a human system of judgment" (62). If conceivable, a strict interpretation of the Divine Comedy according to the fourfold sense of "theological" allegory would humble the reader and consecrate the poem, by isolating both from the arbitrariness of human judgment.
anagogical) different perspectives, or else isolating them from the allegorical structure and thus claiming a more direct and less complex interpretation of their significance. Without discussing the issue in much detail, Hollander complicates this argument when he points out, as if in passing, that even in Scripture “some of the words of God are merely words” and “we are not concerned, for instance, with actual green bay trees, or with actual talents.” This parabolic speech, he says, “is employed exactly as philological [i.e., poetic] allegory is employed, only to make a meaning clear, to tell a moral lesson,” and it is “only that part of Scripture which is in the historical mode [that] may have fourfold meaning” (22). In a similar vein, Singleton claims of theological allegory that “it was generally agreed that while the first literal meaning would always be there, in verbis, the second or spiritual meaning was not always to be found in all the things and events that the words pointed to” (90). As Dante does in the latter part of his letter to Can Grande, Singleton here collapses the three senses of theological allegory to one single “spiritual meaning,” thus indicating the tenuous boundary in reading Dante between two and four levels of allegorical interpretation.

It is not the intent of the present essay to settle the debate about the nature of Dante’s allegory, but the discussion is relevant because awareness of the interpretive possibilities of allegory enriches our reading of the poetic imagery without necessarily limiting us to a “poetical” or “theological” interpretation of the poem. Even if we remain skeptical of attempts to read the whole poem as a theological allegory, we may still be justified in using the tools of theological allegory in order to understand a complex philosophical concept (and the images which represent it), such as that of active rest. More specifically, this means that fourfold allegory allows us to see active rest as both a moral and a spiritual quality, where twofold allegory would limit us to only a moral or only a spiritual interpretation of the concept. As will be shown in the close textual analysis which follows, this concept of active rest, created by images of air and water, bears the potential of describing not only a quality of the enlightened soul (anagogical), but also an essential
characteristic of the life of such a soul (moral). Thus, while maybe the images appear to make only a "moral point," it is a moral point which bridges spirituality and ethics. Moreover, the transformations of air and water appear to signal stages of the Pilgrim's journey, but since the journey is the central allegory\(^3\), the images which represent it are not likely to be mere words. Although it requires an interpretive leap to claim that because the journey itself is an allegorical figure, so are the poetic images which represent it, the claim holds water (so to speak), because the journey is wholly defined by the nature of the mountain, and the mountain in turn is defined by the presence of the natural elements in it. Since the Poet depends on the images which recall the natural elements in order to conceptualize the stages of the Pilgrim's journeys, the allegory of the journey is made more complete when the images are seen as partaking of that allegory.

*The Governing Image*

Although various images of water and air build up gradually to the idea that the final goal of the Pilgrim in Purgatory is a state of restful activity, where there is no distinction between work and rest, a composite image of both air and water brings up this idea at the very beginning of the second canto. This image, which subsequent images recall and amplify, is the image of the heavenly messenger, who appears to the Pilgrim and Virgil during their first hours in Ante-Purgatory.

Having found themselves on the shores of Purgatory, and having briefly met Cato who instructs Virgil to wash the face of the Pilgrim and gird him with a rush, the two travelers begin the second Canto by witnessing dawn as it rises over the horizon. Not incidentally, after a vivid description of the colorful magnificence of dawn, the poet's first words are:

```
We still were by the sea, like those who think
about the journey they will undertake,
```

---

\(^3\) As Fergusson perceptively notes, "All the journey-metaphors are based on the analogy, which the human mind finds very natural, between physical movement and the non-spatial action of the soul" (4).
who go in heart but in their body stay.

II, 10-12

To any careful reader of the poem, these lines strongly recall the very first lines of the first canto, in which, talking about his poetic enterprise, the poet says that now his “talent’s little vessel lifts her sail, / leaving behind herself a sea so cruel” (I, 2-3). The parallel between a spiritual journey and a journey over the sea is already familiar from the story of Ulysses in *Inferno*, but more important than this parallel here is the strong suggestion that even though they are leaving the “cruel” sea behind, Virgil and the Pilgrim are still undertaking a new journey that will be comparable to a journey over water.

The significance of water and traveling across water becomes even more pronounced when Dante describes in the second canto the dazzling vision of “a light that crossed the sea: so swift, there is no flight of bird to equal it” (17-18). Leaving the image of flight behind for just a moment, we notice also that as the light increases in both brightness and whiteness, and as Virgil commands the Pilgrim to bend his knees so that he can behold this minister of God, the words he uses in describing the angel create a most peculiar vision of a sailing bird:

See how much scorn he has for human means;
he’d have no other sail than his own wings
and use no oar between such distant shores.

II, 31-33

Going back now to the very first description of the angel as a light which no other flight can equal, it helps to consider Professor Singleton’s remarks that “the angel follows much the same course as that taken by Ulysses, whose journey was termed a ‘volo’ (Inf.XXVI, 125)”, but that “Ulysses took over five months to make the same journey, once he had reached the open sea (Inf.XXVI, 130-32), for he had merely ‘argomenti umani’ at his disposal” (Commentary, 28-29). In his essay on “The Prologue Scene,” John Freccero offers a memorably thoughtful analysis of the significance of Ulysses’ journey, and in particular of the parallel between the “oars” and “wings”
in Dante’s story and “the oarage of his wings” with which Virgil describes Daedalus’ flight in the *Aeneid*. Freccero’s interpretation of the connection in Dante between the flight of Daedalus (whose wings evoke Icarus) and that of Ulysses is that both represent the effort of the mind to reach God unaided by the heart, or the “philosophical presumption that is bound to end in failure” (*Poetics* 18). The importance of Freccero’s conclusion is underscored by the image of what the pilgrim in *Purgatory* calls “that bird divine,” which moves with the help of “wings” (*ali*) and needs no “oars” (*remi*) between such distant shores. As will be amply illustrated, the effortlessness with which the angel moves, and his contempt for human means, both contrast with Dante’s story of Ulysses as a failed journey and foreshadow the spiritual state of active rest which is the final goal of Purgatory. As he climbs up the mountain and cleanses his wrongful dispositions, the Pilgrim not only learns that such effortlessness is possible but acquires it gradually and becomes aware of it. Most importantly, his spiritual progress is continually signaled by images of journeying either by water or by air, so that by keeping in mind the “divine bird” we can follow the stages of that progress.

It is useful also to be reminded here that this episode of the heavenly messenger, and of his dropping the souls at the shore who all the while are singing “In Israel de Aegypto,” is the very passage to which Singleton and other critics most frequently refer in elucidating the “theological” nature of Dante’s allegory. In addition to the myriad Christian symbols which underlie the episode, it seems important that the Exodus from Egypt involved a sea passage, and that the purely sensual images in Dante’s poem--of a sailing bird on a boat which is so light that “nowhere did the water swallow it” (42)--set up a contrast between the suffering souls who have just arrived in Purgatory and the effortless sailing flight which is the goal of their journey. The bird also foreshadows the figure of Beatrice flying effortlessly through Paradise, with Dante clinging to her tightly.

*Other Images of Water*
Day One. As we enter Ante-Purgatory proper, on the First Spur with the Late-Repentant, one of the first of many practical questions which the Pilgrim asks and to which Virgil responds philosophically is how far they must still journey. Virgil's reply is so easily one of the most beautiful passages in *Purgatory* that it is worth quoting in full length:

This mountain's of such sort  
that climbing it is hardest at the start;  
but as we rise, the slope grows less unkind.  
Therefore, when this slope seems to you so gentle  
that climbing farther up will be as restful  
as traveling downstream by boat, you will  
be where this pathway ends, and there you can  
expect to put your weariness to rest.  
I say no more, and this I know as truth.  
IV, 88-96

This figurative description of the ease which will characterize the pilgrim's final goal—climbing which is as restful as floating downstream—is both an echo of the effortlessness of the divine bird, and a unique new image in itself. Here, in Virgil's firm articulation of the "truth," we have perhaps one of the greatest similes in all of literature, and one of the most precise articulations of the nature of the human spirit—a simple but profound conviction that once we overcome our wrongful dispositions, effort becomes enjoyable, and also, paradoxically, effortless. Significantly enough, Virgil does not say, "when you get to the top" or "when you rest at the top," but "when this slope seems to you so gentle," implying that climbing is not a process that will end in time, but a process that--while continuing--will be transformed by time into the opposite of what it was at its beginning.

In contrast to the strongly suggestive image in Virgil's words, which points to the journey over water as a figure for the successful purification of the spirit, the other two images of water during this first day in Ante-Purgatory recapture the destructiveness of water familiar from the first canto of *Inferno* ("the lake within my heart felt terror present," 21) and from the story of Ulysses.

---

4 "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30)
Towards the end of Canto V, we hear the story of Bounconte of Montefeltro, who was the son of a Ghibelline leader (Guido da Montefeltro, from *Inferno* XXVII), and who died at the Battle of Campaldino in 1289. To the Pilgrim’s query about what happened to his body when he died, Bounconte recounts how Satan, irate at God’s taking his soul “for just one tear” (106)—meaning for a mere gesture of contrition—gathered up vapors in the sky and caused a downpour which “rushed so swiftly toward the royal river / that nothing could contain its turbulence” (122-123). Bounconte’s body was never found, because it got buried under the debris of the flooding Arno, but the contrast which his story articulates is that between the power of “just one tear” and the impotence of violent physical destruction. The tear is an interesting and intimate image of water to keep in mind, since in the final episodes of *Purgatory* the tears which issue from his eyes become consummate figures for the Pilgrim’s transformation.

Shortly after the story of Bounconte, in the middle of Canto VI, the image of water recurs again when, meeting Sordello, who embraces Virgil as a fellow Mantuan, the Pilgrim exclaims: “Ah, abject Italy, you inn of sorrows, / you ship without a helmsman in harsh seas, / no queen of provinces but of bordellos!” (VI, 76-78). The exclamation is followed by a lyrical digression, in which the Pilgrim’s lament over the state of his country reveals that the image of a ship without a helmsman is a figure for Italy whose temporal (Empire) and spiritual (Church) powers are not properly divided. Like Bounconte, whose body is at the mercy of rushing water, the leaderless ship of Italy is at the mercy of the “harsh seas,” and it is worth noting how strongly this image recalls, while simultaneously contrasting with, the image of the angel’s boat: in the first boat the heavenly messenger directs the ship without the need for human means, while the second ship does not even have a helmsman. The ungoverned ship of Italy is thus a parody of the boat of the messenger of God and a parody, by implication, of the spiritual state which the Pilgrim is seeking to attain.
Day Two. During the second day, the images suggestive of destructive water or of failed sea-journeys gradually give way to more positive and hopeful connotations. In Canto X, having just gone through the Gate of Purgatory, the Pilgrim describes the narrow way up to the next terrace through the striking simile between rocks and waves:

Our upward path ran between cracked rocks;
they seemed to sway in one, then the other part,
just like a wave that flees, then doubles back.

X, 7-9

As Singleton remarks, regarding the lines following the above-quoted ones, the account of this climb through the narrow passageway reminds us that unlike Hell, where passage is “denied to none,” the way to Purgatory is fairly narrow, since being in Purgatory is being en route to Paradise (Commentary 199). The difficulty of this climb recalls also the climb to the First Spur in Canto IV (31-34), but more importantly, it looks forward to the description of the pause which Virgil and the Pilgrim make shortly before the end of their second day and right after their climb to the terrace of the Slothful. Here, in Canto XVII, passing beyond the image of sea-journeys as destructive, we hear for the first time of a boat touching an imagined shore:

We’d reached a point at which the upward stairs
no longer climbed, and we were halted there
just like a ship when it has touched the shore.

XVII, 76-78

The significance of the image is further enhanced when we consider that it occurs on the terrace of the Slothful, where, as Virgil explains only a few lines later, “the lazy oar plies harder” (87). The word “oar” (remo) recalls once again the heavenly angel, who uses “no oars between such distant shores,” and it looks back to a passage in Canto XII (still the second day), where, urging the Pilgrim to leave Oderisi behind, Virgil tells him that “here it’s fitting that with wings and oars each urge his boat along with all his force” (XII, 5-6). Even more importantly, Canto XVII is where
Virgil begins a discourse upon the nature of Purgatory’s seven sins, and where he says, regarding
the Good, that

Each apprehends confusedly a Good
in which the mind may rest, and longs for It.

XVII, 127-128

The importance of these lines for the philosophical underpinnings of the Divine Comedy lie far
beyond the power of the images of water to articulate it, but it is curious that a discourse on a topic
which is so central to the journey—the Good in which all things seek to rest—is preceded
repeatedly by images of water. Starting with Canto X, where their path up the mountain is
explicitly compared to the motions of a wave, and ending with Canto XVII, where they pause to
rest “just like a ship when it has touched the shore,” the laborious journey of the Pilgrim and Virgil
is at least implicitly compared to a journey over water. Unlike the first day, however, when water
is mostly presented in its destructive potential (except for Virgil’s prophetic articulation of their
final goal), the images during this second day begin to acquire positive connotations: and as the
images of water signal progress in their journey, so the figure of an imagined shore indicates the
promise of desired rest.

Day Three. These positive connotations become fully explicit in the single, but very
significant, image of water-journeying during the third day of the climb. At the very beginning of
Canto XXIV, walking along with Forese and the Gluttonous, Dante remarks that:

Our talking did not slow our pace, our pace
not slow our talking; but conversing, we
moved quickly, like a boat a fair wind drives.

XXIV, 1-3

The image is most striking for the obvious parallel it draws between the boat of the heavenly
messenger in Canto II, the boat floating downstream of which Virgil speaks in Canto IV, and the
boat which “a fair wind drives” on this penultimate terrace of the mountain. The image suggests
also a parallel with the above-referenced episode with Oderisi, where the Pilgrim needs his "wings and oars" because talking to another soul slows down his progress. But here, so much closer to the top, the Pilgrim delights in walking while talking, and it is a deliberate and very evocative poetic gesture to compare the ease of his movements to the ease of a boat sailing under a fair wind. Notably, the boat is "driven" by the wind, which not only contrasts with the earlier images of water as destructive, but already anticipates the figure of a gentle force, such as falling water carrying a boat downstream.

Images of Air

Day One. Like the images of water, those of air—either as wind or flight—also gradually change from connoting effort and danger to signaling ease and rest. They too recall the heavenly messenger whom we meet in Canto II, and whom Dante describes as a "divine bird," sailing without oars and using his own wings as his sails. In one of the most famous and most endearing moments of the poem, right at the very beginning of their stay in Purgatory, the Pilgrim and Virgil meet Casella, who is a musician and a friend of Dante's, known to have died some time before 1300. Surrounded on all sides by the souls who have accompanied him since their arrival on the angel's boat, Dante implores Casella to sing a song for them if a "new law" does not deny him "memory or practice of the songs of love" (106-108). When Casella complies with his request, and sings Dante's own poem "Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona," the Pilgrim and Virgil and all of their company listen for several moments in rapt attention. Their enjoyment is abruptly interrupted when Cato, whom they had met earlier in Canto I, comes chastising them for being "laggard spirits" and urges them up to the mountain "to cast off the slough" that will not let them see "God show himself" (122-123). As all of the souls begin to disperse immediately, Dante paints a beautifully convincing picture of their flight:

    Even as doves, assembled where they feed,
quietly gathering their grain or weeds,
forgetful of their customary strut,
will, if something appears that makes them fear,
immediately leave their food behind
because they are assailed by greater care;
so did I see that new-come company--
they left the song behind, turned toward the slope,
like those who go and yet do not know where.
And we were no less hasty in departure.

This extended simile has been frequently analyzed, and critics have repeatedly drawn parallels
between the image of doves here and the poignant description of Paolo and Francesca as doves
“summoned by desire” (Inf.V, 82-87). Perhaps the most thoughtful analysis of the passage is
found in John Freccero’s book, *Dante, The Poetics of Conversion*, where he notes that the “feeding
of birds might be considered a fitting emblem for the momentary satisfaction of desire that the
souls in fact experience here, feeding on the esca of Casella’s song” (190). Freccero remarks that
the image hearkens back to an image in Book III of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, which reveals
that “the sudden flight of doves which were temporarily queti cannot fail to signify the
momentary peace to be found in this life through philosophical study and the subsequent
realization of a further, transcendent goal” (192). The allusion to philosophical study recalls once
again the story of Ulysses, whose “mad flight” represents the folly of believing that reason alone
can bring about a union with God. For the purposes of our argument, it is crucial that before they
disperse, the doves are not flying, and that their flight at Cato’s reprimand signals the dissipation
of their temporary satisfaction. Cato’s chastisement signifies that this is not yet time for rest, and
that the sense of peace which the Pilgrim is feeling is only momentary and therefore unreal. This
brief satisfaction, which is an evanescent sense of rest, perhaps constitutes a necessary component
of his journey upwards, but the Pilgrim has yet to learn to recognize the difference between
temporary rest and the true rest which is the goal of his entire journey. The flight of the doves,
precipitated by a “greater care,” is thus a figure for the Pilgrim’s new realization that movement up
through the mountain of Purgatory will depend on finding the proper balance between work and rest. Virgil will further illuminate the nature of this balance in the next canto, where he insists that “foolish is he who hopes our intellect / can reach the end of that unending road” (III, 34-35), meaning that finding the proper balance between rest and work will depend on finding the proper things in which to rest.

Another image of flight in Purgatory, which already recalls the freedom of flight that the “divine bird” possesses, occurs as early as Canto IV, when during their hard ascent to the First Spur of Ante-Purgatory, Dante describes his efforts to keep up with Virgil thus:

San Leo can be climbed, one can descend
to Noli and ascend Cacume and
Bismantova with feet alone, but here
I had to fly: I mean with rapid wings
and pinions of immense desire
behind the guide who gave me hope and was my light.
IV, 25-30

The lightening of the pilgrim’s physical effort implicit in these lines is further emphasized through the image of flight during the Pilgrim’s first dream at the beginning of Canto IX, where Dante sees himself being swooped by an eagle with “golden pinions” which carries him to the “fire’s orbit” and burns with him there in an “imagined conflagration” (IX, 7-33). When he awakes, the Pilgrim discovers that in reality his dream was a kind of “divine” envisioning (18), because while he slept Lucia, the woman who called on Beatrice to call upon Virgil to come down and save Dante, had taken him up and carried him from Ante-Purgatory to Purgatory proper. Critics have repeatedly analyzed the symbolism of the eagle, but the most common and direct interpretation of its meaning is as simply a representation of Lucia in Dante’s unconscious mind, and of Lucia in turn as Illuminating Grace. For our purposes, it is important that flight in this instance signifies an ease of movement, so that the Pilgrim overcomes physical distance without even being very much physically aware of it. In a sense, it is a painful physical overcoming, since the Pilgrim dreams
that he is being burnt, but when he wakes up in Purgatory proper he is both rested and more confident about his journey (IX, 64-66).

Day Two. During the second day, air first appears in the figure of wind, when, speaking in the circle of the Prideful in Canto XI, Oderisi of Gubbio notes with chagrin:

Worldly renown is nothing other than
a breath of wind that blows now here, now there,
and changes name when it has changed its course.

XI.100-102

The comparison of worldly fame to a "breath of wind" is important to the Pilgrim because he admits that he is guilty of Pride (XIII, 136-138), but also because the contrast implicit in the comparison between actively flying and submitting to an external force parallels the similar contrast in the water imagery between the freedom to sail, which God's messenger possesses, and Buonconte's body, which is exposed to rushing water. Interestingly, a similar kind of contrast between the potential of flight to either destroy or liberate is suggested by an image of flight only a canto earlier, where "arrogant" "worms" are reprimanded by the poet for wanting to be angelic butterflies:

O Christians, arrogant, exhausted, wretched,
whose intellects are sick and cannot see,
who place your confidence in backward steps,
do you no know that we are worms and born
to form the angelic butterfly that soars,
without defenses, to confront his judgment?
Why does your mind presume to flight when you
are still like the imperfect grub, the worm
before it has attained its final form?

X. 121-129

This famous exhortation, along with the image which follows it of worldly renown in Canto XI, is curiously echoed in the words of the angel of God in Canto XII, who, just before he erases a P
from the forehead of the Pilgrim, makes a statement that binds the figures of flight and wind together:

> o humankind, born for the upward flight,  
> why are you driven back by wind so slight?  
> XII, 95-96

Another erasing of a P, only five cantos later, suggests that in the same way flight can signify both passive surrender and perfect control, wind, which Oderisi of Gubbio compares to the transience of fame, can also represent divine forgiveness. In Canto XVII, describing the erasing of a P, the poet says that:

> just as soon  
> as I was at the first step, I sensed something  
> much like the motion of a wing, and wind  
> that beat against my face, and words: "Beati pacifici, those free of evil anger!"  
> XVII, 64-69

Curiously, it is “the motion of a wing” that causes the wind which beats against the Pilgrim’s face, and here we can’t but think of the wing of the “divine bird,” which crosses enormous distances without the help of sails. This brief episode is important because, like the earlier erasing of a P, it ties flight (suggested by “wing”) and wind together, superbly demonstrating the way in which these two images can signify both the positive and the negative experiences of the Pilgrim; the movement from negative to positive, in turn, signals the spiritual transformations of the Pilgrim.

Day Three. Between the second and third day, another image of flight which suggests this transformation occurs in connection with a dream, but this time on the Fourth Terrace. In this dream, which is more complicated than the first, Dante is confronted by an ugly old woman who gradually changes into a seductive talking siren. As he looks at the siren, another, saintly woman arrives, who by questioning Virgil about the siren’s identity provokes him to rip open the clothes on her belly and thus to reveal her unendurable stench. When he wakes up deeply distressed, the
Pilgrim replies to Virgil's question about what is bothering him by saying that the new vision has “beguiled” him. Following Virgil’s explanation that the dream was prophetic of the nature of the sins to be purged on the next three terraces, which are the sins of excessive love of earthly goods, Dante says of himself with great relief:

Just like a falcon who at first looks down,
then, when the falconer has called, bends forward,
craving the food that’s ready for him there,
so I became—and so remained until,
through the cleft rock that lest one climb above,
I reached the point at which the circle starts.

XIX, 64-69

Professor Singleton has done a detailed analysis both of this passage and of the passage preceding it, in which Virgil advises Dante to “fasten” his eyes “upon the lure that’s spun / by the eternal King with His great spheres” (67-68). His conclusion is that in keeping with the first simile which implies that “the proper direction for us to look is up, even as it is the right direction for the upward flight of our love,” so now Dante’s desire to be up on the next terrace “can be compared to the falcon when it soars up, at the cry of the falconer, to take the quarry aloft” (Commentary, 456).

Unlike the first dream, where the actual passage upwards is compared to a flight, here the desire of the Pilgrim is itself his flight, which echoes the earlier passage from Canto IV (25-30).

Like the sense of flight which follows upon this second dream, two other images of flight help create the sense that the Pilgrim is moving closer to the freedom of movement which marks the messenger of God. Interestingly, because these images occur with regard to the Gluttonous and the Lustful in their respective circles, they relate to the image of the doves pecking at their food, which in turn recalls the great lovers of Inferno who are spoken of as doves “summoned by desire, / borne forward by their will” (V, 82-83). In Canto XXIV, walking along with Forese and the Gluttonous, Dante remarks that:

Even as birds that winter on the Nile
at times will slow and form a flock in air,
then speed their flight and form a file, so all
the people who were there moved much more swiftly, 
turning away their faces, hurrying 
their pace because of leanness and desire. 

XXIV, 64-69

Singleton relates this simile to a passage in Lucan, *Phars. V*, where cranes, and not just any birds, are said to move in a manner similar to that of Dante’s “birds that winter on the Nile.” Singleton contends that the figure of cranes “fits the situations with respect to the souls who first altered the order of their movement along the terrace, making a band as they paused to wonder at the living Dante, and now hurry on and go in file, like cranes” (*Commentary*, 572). Singleton’s note is particularly curious, because the figure of cranes appears in the other simile relevant to our argument, which occurs shortly after, in the circle of the Lustful (XXVI, 43-48). Here, in a poignant example of poetic contrapasso, the souls of the lustful meet only briefly before they separate, and the poet, having first compared their encounters to ants which “in their dark company, will touch their muzzles, each to each, perhaps to seek news of their fortunes and their journeyings” (34-36), then compares their separation to the disordered flight of cranes:

Then, just like cranes, of whom a part, to flee the sun, fly north to Riphean mountains, while the rest, to flee the frost, fly toward the sands, one group moves with—the other opposite—us;

XXVI, 43-46

Although Singleton does not relate this passage to the passage on birds in Canto XXIV (but relates it again to Lucan), he does note that “the only other simile of cranes used in the poem is that of *Inferno* V, 46-47, which is employed to describe the lustful of Hell”: he remarks, in addition, that “Dante’s improbable figure of the birds flying in opposite directions in migration is purely hypothetical, as is indicated by the verb ‘volassero’” (*Commentary*, 629). Although it might seem that by comparing their movements to the flight of birds, the poet is bringing out the contrast between the effortless movement of the divine bird and the disorganized flights of the gluttonous and the lustful, it seems equally significant that, unlike the doves in Canto II, the sinners in these
later cantos do not just strut around but actually fly. Though their movement might still seem rather disorganized, these sinners move without having to be told, and their pace is spurred by "leanness and desire," which are internal rather than external forces. Their movement is still different from the ease of the divine bird, but it is also far more purposeful than the doves' dalliance in Canto II. In that sense, flight in this later canto signifies a higher state of consciousness, where effort is self-motivated and movement energetic.

*Images of Water and Air in Earthly Paradise*

All of the above examples of images of water and air would be just interesting observations on Dante's poetic skill if they did not return to the image of the "divine bird" in the last several Cantos of *Purgatory*. Going back to the idea that the "divine bird" of Canto II combines images of flying and sailing (air and water), which foreshadow the effortless movement—or activity in rest—that is the final goal of the journey up the mountain, we can stipulate that if similar images recur in the final stage of *Purgatory*—Earthly Paradise—then the Pilgrim must have attained his goal. I would like to argue that such images do, indeed, occur.

In the first place, the poet describes Earthly Paradise through what he considers its two salient characteristics—"a gentle breeze, which did not seem to vary / within itself," striking at his brow "but with no greater force than a kind wind's" (XVIII, 7-9); and a "stream" where "all of the purest waters here on earth, / when matched against that stream, would seem to be touched by impurity" (28-30). Regarding the breeze, we learn that even though it makes the boughs incline, it does not "disturb the little birds upon the branches in the practice of their arts" (14-15), and as for the stream, Matelda later tells the Pilgrim that "it issues from a pure and changeless fountain, / which by the will of God regains as much / as, on two sides, it pours and it divides" (124-126). Notably, both of these images concern exclusively air and water, and the picture they draw of
Earthly Paradise is one where ceaseless activity is characterized by rest—the breeze blows but does not disturb, and the stream flows while staying "changeless."

Singleton does not note as interesting the images of the gentle breeze and the changeless stream in terms of the ideas of activity and rest, but he notes, regarding line 5 of Canto XXVIII—"advancing slowly, slowly"—that this is "something unusual, after all the haste of the journey to reach this place" (Commentary, 667), and then regarding line 22—"Now, though my steps were slow, I'd gone so far"—that "the going is now entirely without effort, after the long hard climb" (669). Singleton is correct to point out that going becomes effortless, but it is just as important to emphasize that the imagery through which this idea is conveyed is familiar from the beginning of the poem: this imagery, hearkening back to the divine messenger of Canto II, describes convincingly the new spiritual state of the Pilgrim, in which by overcoming all of his wrongful dispositions he transforms his own difficulty into pleasure.

Yet another powerful image in Earthly Paradise, composed of both air and water and therefore strongly recalling the "divine bird," is that of the Pilgrim crying in Cantos XXX and XXXI. In another memorable simile, Dante draws this moving picture of contrition:

Even as snow among the sap-filled trees
along the spine of Italy will freeze
when gripped by gusts of the Slavonian winds.
then, as it melts, will trickle through itself—that is, if winds breathe north from shade-less lands—
so I, before I'd heard the song of those
whose notes always accompany the notes of the eternal spheres, was without tears and sighs: but when I heard the sympathy for me within their gentle harmonies,
as if they'd said: "Lady, why shame him so?—
then did the ice that had restrained my heart become water and breath; and from my breast and through my lips and eyes they issued—anguished.

XXX, 85-99
As is immediately obvious, the governing images of the first half of this extended simile—ice (water) and wind (air)—become transformed to tears (water) and sobs (air), so that while water and air describe both the before and the after of this purifying gesture, their transformation (ice to water, and wind to sobs) indicates the crossing of a threshold. Although it may seem far-fetched to associate this episode with that of the divine messenger in Canto II, the connection is quite justified because the same imagery commands both episodes. The sudden breaking into tears, moreover, probably offers a glimpse into the process of learning to move effortlessly as a gradual process that consummates itself suddenly, meaning that the diminution of effort which the Pilgrim experiences throughout Purgatory turns in a single moment into the absence of any need for effort. We should think here of Statius, whose explanation of the earthquakes in Purgatory as motions of the mountain when “the will surprises soul into a change of dwelling place” (XXI, 61-63), suggests that, as with the breaking into tears of the Pilgrim, the final cleansing and freeing of the soul is a sudden and unexpected movement. The intensity of this movement, in addition to its suddenness, is further underscored in Canto XXXI, when, suffering under new rebukes from Beatrice, Dante describes his mounting tension and subsequent release with yet another detailed and effective simile:

Just as a crossbow that is drawn too taut
snaps both its cord and bow when it is shot,
and arrow meets its mark with feeble force,
so, caught beneath that heavy weight, I burst:
and I let tears and sighs pour forth; my voice
had lost its life along its passage out.

XXXI, 16-21

Singleton connects this passage to the simile of snow in Canto XXX (85-90), remarking that it “alludes to the literal sense of contritio as Thomas Aquinas represents it,” and quoting a passage from Aquinas in which the theologian says that “we speak of breaking when a thing is sundered into large parts, but of crushing or contrition when that which was in itself solid is reduced to
minute particles” (Commentary, 759). According to Singleton, the breaking up of ice in Canto XXX, the breaking of a crossbow here, and the uprooting of a sturdy oak later in verses 70-72 “all reflect the sense intended by Thomas Aquinas.” In terms of motion and rest, this “sense” is interesting because in each case it depicts contrition as a sudden and very intense act of movement, which by “crushing” reverses the nature of whatever is being crushed: and if we accept that water and air are images which detail the dynamic between activity and rest, then their reversal in the detailed simile of Canto XXX (85-99) is also a reversal in the Pilgrim’s understanding of activity and rest. Now that he can cry again, he can also rest in effort.  

Significantly, the image of the crossbow, which equally commands this episode, recurs in the very first canto of Paradiso, where, in the effort to explain that ineffable process of trasumanar, Beatrice compares the instinct of the soul to aim at its true goal (God) to “a stream that from a mountain height falls to its base” (I, 137-138). These words unmistakably echo Virgil’s simile at the beginning of Purgatory in Canto IV, where he compares the act of climbing the mountain to the ease of floating downstream.

One part of the discussion of rest which has been left out intentionally until this point concerns the role and significance of free will. Around the middle of their journey, in Canto XVIII, Virgil speaks at length about the intimate interconnection between desire, love, and will, all three of which appear also closely related to the concept of a soul at rest. According to Virgil, the response of a soul to a desire is a motion of the spirit (“moto spiritale”), which never rests “till the beloved thing has made it joyous” (XVIII, 33). The fulfillment of a desire is, strictly speaking, love, but Virgil is anxious to point out that not every love is, “in itself, praiseworthy”; our soul can respond to a

---

5 The strong connection between contrition—and its more specific element of compunction—and tears is well detailed by Benedicta Ward, who illustrates the double nature of compunction and the images which represent it by quoting from The Moralia on the Book of Job by St. Gregory: “A man has compunction of one kind when he is shaken with fear at his own wickedness, and of another when he looks up to the joys of heaven and is strengthened with a kind of hope and security. One emotion excites tears of pain and sorrow, the other tears of joy” (55). Dante’s Pilgrim, who for a time has not been able to cry, breaks out consecutively in what appear to be “tears of pain and sorrow” (XXX, 97-99) passing into “tears of joy” (XXXI, 19-21). He is both terrified and dazzled by the sight of Beatrice.
loved object by understanding its nature and thus moving in the direction of a correct desire, or else it can fall into error about the nature of the object and thus move towards a wrong desire. Free will is the power, "inborn that counsels, keeper of the threshold," which "garners and winnows good and evil longings" (XVIII, 61-66). Stated differently, free will is the power to choose to move in response to a desire, and love, when properly directed, is a state of rest after the beloved object has been reached. Will, in this scheme of things, is the driving force behind any movement of the soul.

The significance of this philosophical discourse by Virgil is further emphasized by the fact that his last words to the Pilgrim concern nothing other than free will; when the old poet reaches the limit of his understanding, he cautions the Pilgrim that his (the Pilgrim's) will is now "free, erect and whole—to act / against that will would be to err" (XXVII, 140-141). The implication of these words is that the will of the Pilgrim is not only "free," but also already turned in the right direction, so that going against it would require a conscious wrong-headed choice. In other words, the Pilgrim has reached a phase of his Purgatorial journey where his will is inclined to choose the right direction, and he has to choose not to choose correctly in order to fall into error from here on. As will be argued later, a similar analysis of the role of will--of the absence of the necessity to choose correctly, since the will is already prepared to choose well--occurs in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, where this state of the will is described as "rest in its activity." Rest in activity, when applied to free will and thus to ethics, indicates a consciousness in which moral choices do not exist, because the right choices already appear as the only possible alternatives.

It seems a fitting conclusion to all ruminations about water and air as they relate to activity and rest to quote the Pilgrim's own question right before he is made to drink of the waters of Eunoe:

O light, o glory of the human race,  
what water is this, flowing from one source  
and then becoming distant from itself?
XXXIII, 115-117

The image of a stream which flows from one source but then becomes distant from itself resembles greatly the process of thinking about spiritual work not only in terms of effort but also in terms of rest. The stream which divides into two but remains one is a fitting emblem for the mind which, after it has been purged, comes to see the two opposites—work and rest—as having ultimately the same source. And the Pilgrim is ready to ascend to Paradise when he has been dragged through one of the streams and made to drink of the other, so that can declare with a new kind of understanding:

From that most holy wave I now returned to Beatrice; remade, as new trees are renewed when they bring forth new boughs, I was pure and prepared to climb unto the stars.

XXXIII, 142-145
As the first half of this essay attempted to show, the rest which Dante's pilgrim attains during the journey through Purgatory is paradoxically described by the poem's imagery as effortless activity or active rest. Also, although it may seem that the imagery which represents this idea is only "parabolic speech," the idea—and hence, the imagery—contains the possibility of describing both a moral and a spiritual aspect of the Pilgrim's journey. Stated differently, the concept of active rest describes both the experience of spiritual effort becoming pleasure, and the possibility that this pleasure—or effortlessness, or ease—is a permanent quality of the life of an enlightened soul (whether in this life or the next). In Dante's major theological and philosophical sources, which will be reviewed shortly, the concept of rest appears almost always in one of two different discourses: in one, rest marks the apex of contemplation, which culminates in a union with God, and thus constitutes a fleeting but powerful spiritual experience; in the other, rest describes a particular quality of being, which is less intense but more permanent than the rest of contemplation, and thus constitutes a way of life. The latter, known as the contemplative life, exists solely in antithesis to the active life, so that by implication rest, which inheres in the contemplative life, is absent from the active life. For clarity, the first kind of rest will be termed spiritual (informing the act of contemplation), and the second moral (informing the life of contemplation).®

While the thinkers on whom Dante drew used different discourses when speaking about these two different kinds of rest, and always distinguished each notion of rest from either activity or the active life, Dante, I would like to argue, fused spiritual and moral rest through the power of poetic language; even more importantly, he eliminated the distinction between activity and rest, and thus...
imaginatively created a paradoxical synthesis which purely rational thought cannot ever reconcile—that we can be active while resting, or resting while being active. Because, as discussed earlier, the imagery of which the concept of active rest is built allows to be interpreted as having both moral and spiritual significance, we may feel completely justified in seeing moral and spiritual rest as simultaneously the same and different (i.e., they both belong to the allegorical level of the poem, but they may also constitute different levels of the allegory). If rest is active, however, and if active spiritual rest overlaps with active moral rest, then in most practical terms this would imply that the fruits of the act of contemplation somehow inform the content of an active life. In other words, latent in Dante's poem is the idea, which the following pages will explore, that spiritual rest amounts to moral rest, and that both are somehow active.

Dante read more thinkers than is prudent to summarize in such a short essay. Among those who influenced him most, however, St. Augustine, Richard of St. Victor, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Bonaventure, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas make up a fairly diverse representative tapestry of the types of philosophical mind and religious sensibility to which Dante the thinker and poet was attracted. Of those six, the two thinkers whose influence on Dante critics have most widely debated in the last thirty or forty years are St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Bergin summarizes his own moderate position on this critical debate when he notes that Dante "probably felt himself attracted to both the rational and mystically contemplative, as indeed most Christians do" (63). Juxtaposing the claims of outstanding proponents of the influence of Aquinas and Augustine on Dante, such as Paget Toynbee and Etienne Gilson respectively. Bergin concludes that "without the mystical element we should have had a very different Commedia; without Thomas we should have had none at all." (63).
Without presuming to know the full extent of this debate, I would like to suggest that as far as the
notion of rest is concerned, Dante seems closer to Aquinas than to Augustine. As an overview of
some of the writings of these two thinkers would suggest, Aquinas seems to have envisioned the
attainment of some spiritual and actual rest in the present life, whereas for Augustine rest was only
possible with death and the "eternal Sabbath." In fact, it seems conceivable to put Augustine and
Aquinas on two opposite ends of a continuum, with Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux, and
Richard of St. Victor in between. Starting with Augustine, we find poignant descriptions of the
restlessness of human life alongside comforting visions of the rest of the eternal kingdom: for the
other three contemplatives—Bonaventure, Bernard, and Richard—spiritual rest is imaginable in
the present life, but mainly through the act of contemplation and thus mainly through withdrawal
from the world; Aquinas, taking the spiritual rest of mystical contemplation a step further, and
drawing heavily on Aristotle, not only defines contemplation as a motion of the intellect, but also
explicitly recognizes this motion as the will's activity in rest. Moreover, although he explores the
distinctions between the active and the contemplative lives, Aquinas makes certain claims which
suggest that the two are closely and perhaps inextricably related. Thus, if the argument is true that
the notion of rest which we find in Dante's imagery relates spiritual to moral rest, and if Aquinas
not only envisions such rest as possible, but also examines its relationship to moral action, then
Dante is closer to Aquinas than to Augustine, for whom perfect rest is only possible with death.

---

7 Inevitably, in generalizing about a spiritual concept shared by Bonaventure, Bernard, and Richard, one
risks underestimating the degree to which their belonging to different religious orders entailed essential
differences in their attitudes toward the active and the contemplative life: while for Bernard and the
Cistercians the monastic life implied withdrawal from the world, the Regular Canons to which Victor
belonged paved the way for the Franciscans (Bonaventure) and the Dominicans (Aquinas), who, by
espousing the "apostolic" way of life, attempted a fusion between activity and contemplation. Although
he was surely aware of this historical context (as attested by the symbolic figures of Rachel and Leah in
Purgatory), Dante does not concern himself with the doctrinal battles surrounding contemplation and
activity. Accordingly, this essay relies on a close reading of the religious texts by which the Divine
Comedy may have been influenced, rather than on a strict historical interpretation of their respective
authors.
Before we move on to their individual visions of the prospect for human rest, it seems important to note that regardless of what they think about such rest, all of these thinkers agree on one very important and very central point: their description of God as always active but at rest, and thus their insistence that God combines contradictory qualities which rational thought has difficulty reconciling. The most straightforward descriptions of this kind simply accept the inadequacy of language to explain what is essentially ineffable. Thus, Augustine says in the *Confessions* that God is “always active always at rest” (I, 4, 4). or “ever working, ever resting” (XIII, 37. 52); Bonaventure, similarly, claims that God is “most active yet never moved” (*Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* VI, 5), and he quotes Boethius, whom we know Dante read, as saying that “while remaining unmoved, it imparts motion to all” (qtd. in Bonaventure, *Itinerarium* V, 8); Aristotle, whom Boethius seems to paraphrase, explains a bit more elaborately that “there is something which always moves the things that are in motion, and the first mover must itself be unmoved” (*Metaphysics* IV. 1012b).

Although Aristotle will be considered later in greater detail, it is essential to emphasize here that the concern of all these religious thinkers with describing God in terms of motion and rest seems to have its ultimate source in Aristotle. Much of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is devoted to exploring the questions of being, motion, and change, and a consequence of trying to explain God in all these terms is that God is seen as a “kind of substance to which neither movement nor destruction nor generation at all belongs” (*Metaphysics* IV. 1009a). In other words, God is supremely unchangeable but supremely actual, and to him belongs neither the ceaseless change nor the constant motion associated with the rest of his creation. Surprising as it may sound, Aristotle, the most rational of rational thinkers, seems to succumb to the apparent fact that God cannot be described through anything other than rational paradoxes. Hence, it is natural that thinkers of the Christian age should echo Aristotle’s concerns and paradoxes and, like Aristotle, should employ
concepts such as "change," "being," "actuality," "movement," and "rest," to describe the indescribable fact of God moving but at the same time resting. Bonaventure, for example, speaks of "pure act" and "change," when his underlying concern is whether God moves or rests: "It [God] is supremely immutable for the very reason that it is supremely actual, for to be supremely actual is to be pure act, and whatever is pure act cannot acquire anything new, nor can it lose anything it has; consequently, it cannot change" (Itinerarium V, 7). Augustine too, not commonly associated with Aristotle, not only reprimands in his Confessions "any giddy-minded person" whose displaced fantasy wanders off into imagining that God "should through measureless ages have been at rest before undertaking this huge task [of creation]" (XI, 13, 15), but also goes on to say to God that "you have made heaven and earth at the beginning without any distension in your activity" (XI, 31, 41). God, in other words, never went from resting to acting, because resting and acting with him are the same thing. God’s work, moreover, although marked by the Sabbath of repose, was of the same quality as rest itself: "After completing your exceedingly good works you rested on the seventh day, though you achieved them in repose" [italics mine] (XIII, 36, 51).

The significance of all these similar descriptions of God as simultaneously moving and resting, acting but not changing, is that they all echo and parallel what in Dante appears to be a description of the enlightened human soul. If the main argument of the present essay is correct, then Dante’s poetic achievement is quite innovative, because it describes the human soul in terms that preceding pagan and Christian thinkers seem to have applied almost exclusively to God. It is no small thing to claim that human beings can come close to the perfection which their supreme creator is believed to possess; nor is it a small thing to make that claim by using the power of poetic imagery to overcome the limitations of rational language and thought.
With Augustine, this description of God as "ever active, ever at rest" is the closest he comes to Dante's poetic representation of active rest. Although preoccupied with both rest and restlessness, Augustine spends much of two of his major works, Confessions and City of God, dealing with four main issues whose underlying premise seems to diverge greatly from that of Dante. Briefly summed up, these issues include: the restlessness of earthly human life, the labor required for daily living, the occasional respite from restlessness and labor, and the rest that is promised at the end of life.

Augustine's pictures of human restlessness are poetic in their poignancy. These descriptions are significant for understanding Dante because knowing what restlessness feels like helps us recognize and value rest. For Augustine, restlessness is a quality of the soul, which affects both the spiritual and the physical life of an individual. Although interested in its spiritual sources, Augustine's descriptions of this restlessness often represent its physical and bodily manifestations. For instance, speaking of the restlessness born of the soul's misguided effort to find repose in outward things, Augustine draws a sketch of human life, which masterfully blends the unrest of the soul and body:

Feverishly I thrashed about, sighed, wept and was troubled, and there was no repose for me nor any counsel. Within me I was carrying a tattered, bleeding soul that did not want me to carry it, yet I could find no place to lay it down. Not in pleasant countryside did it find rest, nor in shows and songs, nor in elaborate feasts, nor in the pleasures of the couch or bed, nor even in books and incantations. . For what I thought of was not you at all; an empty fantasy and my own error were my god. If I tried to lodge my soul in that, hoping that it might find rest there, it would slip through that insubstantial thing and fall back again on me, who had remained to myself an unhappy place where I could not live, but from which I could not escape. (Confessions IV. 7. 12)

Elsewhere, speaking of the "two movements of the heart," he defines the first as "the uncleanness of our own spirit, which like a flood-tide sweeps us down, in love with restless cares," and the other as "the holiness of your [God's] Spirit, which bears us upward in a love for peace beyond all care so that once our soul has crossed over those waters on which there is no reliance we may
reach all-surpassing rest” (XII, 7, 8). The phrase “in love with restless cares” deftly reveals Augustine’s shrewd psychological insight into the capacity of the human soul to will itself into loving the wrong objects: this phrase is an example not only of the kind of genuine self-knowledge of which Augustine appears to have been a master, but also of the type of self-willed and obstinate spiritual unrest which Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet overcome. Augustine’s *Confessions* abound in many other descriptions of spiritual unrest, which it would be futile to cite in greater detail. The important point, as regards a reading of Dante’s *Purgatory*, is that the rest which the pilgrim achieves at the mountain’s summit represents a triumph over the spiritual restlessness which Augustine describes in such minute psychological detail. With Dante’s pilgrim, this spiritual restlessness manifests itself (allegorically or literally) in the many changes of desire, will, and energy that he experiences during his journey through Inferno and Purgatory.

Closely related to but distinct from his understanding of restlessness is Augustine’s belief that “this life has been made a life of punishment for us” (*City* XXI, 15). Unlike the eternal rest which he envisions at the end of time, labor for Augustine defines the essence of earthly human life. Like restlessness, labor is depicted as physical or spiritual, but the first is a manifestation of the second, or else a vivid metaphor for it. Augustine uses, for example, a curious mixture of spiritual suggestion and physical imagery when he declares that, “This much is certain, Lord, that I am laboring over it, laboring over myself, and I have become for myself a land hard to till and of heavy sweat” (*Confessions* X, 25); there is also no telling what kind of labor he has in mind when, thinking of the life to come, he states that, “When at last I cling to you with my whole being there will be no more anguish or labor for me, and my life will be alive indeed, because filled with you” (*Confessions* X, 28, 39). Thus, although he keeps clear the distinction between work and rest, Augustine describes work in terms which imply that spiritual and physical labor overlap: Dante, for whom the distinction between work and rest disappears after the climb, also seems to use the
concepts of work and rest to refer to both the spiritual and physical aspects of human life. Unlike Dante, however, for whom rest of some kind appears possible in the present life, Augustine seems to hesitate in his belief that even some occasional respite is imaginable. While his question, "Is not human life on earth a time of testing without respite?" (*Confessions* X, 28, 39), implies a belief that this is indeed the case, an appeal to God, such as "O my God, you who lift up my lowliness, who are rest amid my labor" (*Confessions* XII, 26, 36) hints at the very different notion of God as the source of at least some momentary earthly rest.

Assuming that Augustine believed in momentary rest, it is important to point out that the nature of this rest is dramatically different from the rest which other contemplatives describe. To begin with, Augustine sees earthly rest as not even remotely comparable either in quality or in duration to the rest promised by the "eternal Sabbath." In fact, he mocks "all these philosophers" who "have wished, with amazing folly, to be happy here on earth and to achieve bliss by their own efforts" (*City* XIX, 4), and he declares that "peace here and now, whether the peace shared by all men or our own special possession, is such that it affords a solace for our wretchedness rather than the joy of blessedness" (*City* XIX, 27). Elsewhere, in the *Confessions*, Augustine emphasizes this deceptive nature of the vastly inferior rest on earth when he describes the sufferings of a contemplative spirit which has glimpsed God but failed to hold on to its brief vision; notably, Augustine speaks of this vision as "a little respite":

I find a little respite in you when I pour out my soul in rising above myself with a shout of joy and praise, the clamor of a pilgrim keeping festival. Yet still my soul is sad, because it slips back and becomes an abyss once more. or rather, it feels itself to be still in the depths. (*Confessions* XIII, 14, 15)

Besides its inferior quality and palpable brevity, Augustine is also concerned that this rest constitutes only a momentary triumph of the spirit over the body, but that the war against bodily

---

8 According to Freccero, the awareness of and concern about body and soul distinguishes the Christian spiritual struggle from the merely intellectual aspirations of the Platonist. Freccero notes that for Christian thinkers "the problem is not of the body as a purely physical impediment, but rather of the fallen and crippled will, shortcomings the Platonists had not considered" (*Poetics* 8)
desires is never truly over until death. In this respect, his notion of rest is vitally bound to a belief in the irreconcilable dichotomy between soul and body, where rest belongs only to the soul while war describes and rules the body. Again and again in the *City of God*, he expresses variously the same belief that “there is no perfect peace so long as command is exercised over the vicious propensities, because the battle is fraught with peril while those vices that resist are being reduced to submissions, while those which have been overcome are not yet triumphed over in peaceful security, but are repressed under a rule still troubled by anxieties” (XIX, 27). He speaks of earthly life as “this present warfare” (XXI, 15), in which “what we have to do is, with divine help, to employ our best efforts in the subjection of those desires to our will by refusing to consent to them” (XXII, 23); and his idea of the eternal kingdom represents an antithesis to the present life’s “warfare”: “in that kingdom, where we shall live for ever, with immortal bodies, there will be no battles to be fought, and no debts to be forgiven” (XXII, 23).

Augustine’s belief that perfect rest can be achieved only in the eternal kingdom constitutes the most marked difference between his thought and Dante’s poetic representation of the philosophical notion of active rest. For Augustine, it is not even a matter of dispute that the Supreme Good of the City of God is everlasting and perfect peace, which is not the peace through which men pass in their mortality, in their journey from birth to death, but that peace in which they remain in their immortal state, experiencing no adversity at all. (*City* XIX, 20)

Moreover, he associates the peace of the City of God with God’s rest on the seventh day of his creation, and, believing that “we are now in the sixth epoch,” Augustine claims that “after this present age God will rest, as it were, on the seventh day, and he will cause us, who are the seventh day, to find rest in him” (*City* XXII, 30). Augustine calls this final rest “the Sabbath of eternal life,” and prays to God to “give us the peace that is repose, the peace of the Sabbath, and the peace

---

9 This strong sense that sin inheres in the corporal body inevitably recalls St. Paul: “But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Romans 7:23): “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption” (1 Corinthians 15:50).
that knows no evening” (*Confessions* XIII, 35, 50). Stated in most simplified terms, and without any reference to the wider theological context of the debates about the meaning of God’s “rest,” this aspect of Augustine’s thought is important to keep in mind because it highlights the central difference between his belief that rest can be achieved only after death and what appears to be in Dante a poetic claim that rest is possible even in this life. Although Augustine masterfully depicts the restlessness which is the reason for Dante’s pilgrim to seek rest, and although he believes that some respite from human labor is occasionally possible, the overarching premise of two of his major works is that rest is impossible to achieve in a mortal body.

With the three other major contemplatives whom Dante is known to have read and admired—Richard of St. Victor, Bernard of Clairvaux, and St. Bonaventure—the impulse to chronicle spiritual restlessness is replaced by a desire to experience and describe the repose of contemplation. Although all three of these religious thinkers recognize both the desire for rest and the affliction of restlessness, their main concern is not so much to lament the restlessness as to transcend it through an act of contemplation. In this transcendence, which the contemplatives appear to have cultivated, the choice does not, as seems with Augustine, stand between restlessness and a suppression of that restlessness; to the contrary, the contemplatives seem to oppose restlessness to rest, believing that rest involves not merely the suppression of desires but their substitution by a different consciousness. In that new consciousness, marked by the ecstasy of vision, the contemplatives attain a sense of rest which to them appears to prefigure the rest of the “eternal Sabbath.”

As with Augustine, knowledge of the essential restlessness of the human spirit makes the contemplatives embrace rest as one of the most valuable rewards of the religious life. The strong desire for rest, and the belief that its attainment marks a truly enlightened spirit, is strongly felt in a question like that of St. Bernard: “Who is poorer in spirit than he who in the whole of his own
spirit finds no rest (Lk 11:24), nowhere to lay his head (Mt 8:20)?” (On Conversion VII). The same desire also informs St. Bonaventure’s firm conviction that “according to the original plan of nature, man was made fit for the repose of contemplation” (Itinerarium I, 7), meaning that if Adam and Eve had not sinned, we would still be in the Garden of Eden, resting. Besides a strong desire for it, the contemplatives frequently seem to define this rest as a freedom from what Richard of St. Victor succinctly calls “false pleasure” and “vain disquiet” (The Twelve Patriarchs XXXVII).

Not unlike Augustine, who seems always to battle one pleasure or another. Richard believes that “inner joy is for spiritual persons,” and “he who until now delights in the lowest things is especially unworthy of inner enjoyment, and he who is disquieted by vain fear is not able to fully enjoy spiritual sweetness” (Patriarchs XXXVII). Also echoing Augustine, St. Bernard similarly laments “he who when fleeing sweet peace delights in restless curiosity” (On Conversion VII), and, in a passage which directly calls to mind Augustine’s poignant description of the failure to find repose in outward things, Bernard writes:

If a man cannot be at peace until he has the highest and best, is it surprising that he is not content with inferior and worse things? It is folly and extreme madness always to be longing for things which cannot only never satisfy but cannot even blunt the appetite: however much you have of such things you still desire what you have not yet attained; you are always restlessly sighing after what is missing. When the wandering mind is always rushing about in empty effort among the various and deceptive delights of the world, it grows weary and remains dissatisfied. . For who can have everything? That little which a man obtains by all his effort, he possesses in fear. He does not know what he will lose and when. (On Loving God VII, 18)

As these brief passages illustrate, the contemplatives are in accord with St. Augustine in their recognition of the desire for rest born of the essential restlessness of the human spirit. Like Augustine, they also believe that some control of the improper carnal and intellectual desires might help push the soul in the direction of its final rest. Indeed, Richard of St. Victor is quite explicit when he states that “by abstinence or patience the flesh certainly is afflicted, but the soul is quieted, resulting in great peace and tranquillity” (Patriarchs XXI): although the “peace and tranquillity” are not yet the fruit of contemplation, since the comment refers to the birth of Gad and
Asher, who symbolize a sort of purgative stage of the soul's development, they foreshadow the real lasting rest which is the final goal of contemplation. Elsewhere, speaking of admittance to "that inner joy," meaning the joy of contemplation and thus the joy of rest, Richard advises that "he who desires or believes he is to be intoxicated by that cup of true sobriety ought to restrain the fluctuation of the heart and to gather together the movement of the affections and thoughts with a view to the longing for one true joy" (Patriarchs XXXVIII). Notably, Richard speaks of a gathering together of the "movement of the affections and thoughts," implying simultaneously that either the movement ceases, or else that it becomes uniform, and thus differs greatly from the disparate movement of various affections. This is a significant ambiguity, since it suggests that "true joy" may be a "gathered movement" and that movement perhaps equals rest, because joy is rest is movement. In an equally suggestive passage in his work The Triple Way, or Love Enkindled, St. Bonaventure speaks of the "purgative way" as leading to "tranquillity and peace," claiming, as Dante seems to do, that from purgation "proceeds an inner joy that makes our spirit ready to rise aloft," so that "this first [purgative] way originates in the sting of conscience, and terminates in a disposition of spiritual joy; it is pursued in pain, but consummated in love" (The Triple Way, or Love Enkindled I, A, 9). For all three of these mystics, then, unlike Augustine, purgation, abstinence, and self-control are not the only imaginable alternative to restlessness but a step on the way to overcoming it. Thus, the suppression of desires is not only a virtue in itself, but also a means towards a higher end.

Regarding this higher end, the contemplatives make a distinction, similar to Augustine's, between the rewards of the present life and the perfect rest of the eternal kingdom. Although all of them believe in the possibility of attaining the repose of earthly contemplation, they all also profess a strong faith in the superiority of the rest that is found only after death. Richard of St. Victor, for example, states that "the present delight of spiritual men, however much it grows, is found small
when compared to the joys of future life” (Patriarchs 37). Putting it in even more absolute terms, Bernard claims that “just as there is no rest this side of heaven, so on the other side nothing can disturb this rest” (On Loving God VI, 19): he also describes heaven as “fullness without disgust, insatiable curiosity which is not restless, an eternal and endless desire which knows no lack” (On Loving God XI, 33). Up to this point, then, the contemplatives differ very little from St. Augustine: they all recognize human nature as innately restless, they all seek rest as a reward of the religious life, and they all believe that, however good this rest on earth, it compares poorly to the rest of the eternal life.

Upon closer inspection, however, the descriptions by the contemplatives of the actual nature of the contemplative rest come much closer to Dante’s active rest than any passage on rest in Augustine. Even St. Bernard, who believes that “there is no rest this side of heaven,” in fact draws a sketch of the “wages of the soldiering of this life,” which strikingly recalls descriptions of the “other” side of heaven: “There a taste of the incomparable delights of love is enjoyed, and the mind, anointed with mercy and freed from the sharp thorns and briars by which it was one pricked (Is 10:17), rests happily with a clear conscience (Acts 23:1, 1 Tm 1:5)” (On Conversion XIII). Richard, for his part, speaks of the “quiet” soul of contemplation, which is “open to a completely new level of experience,” whose “still point” he compares to “both a mountain peak and the innermost part of the temple” (Mystical Ark IV, 23). The reference to a mountain peak immediately recalls Dante, whose pilgrim moves restfully along a mountain peak during the final hours of his stay in Purgatory. For Bonaventure also, the contemplative soul is “wholly alive, wholly fulfilled in its three faculties, wholly conformed to God, wholly united to Him, wholly reposed in Him” (The Breviloquium VII, 3), and this contemplative state represents the sixth of “six degrees,” which Bonaventure outlines as the progress of the soul “in the love of God”: defining the first five degrees as sensitivity, avidity, satiety, ebriety, and security, Bonaventure concludes that “the sixth
degree is true and full TRANQUILLITY," in which there is "such quiet and peace that the soul is, in a way, established in silence and as if asleep" (Triple Way II, D, 11). The reference to silence and sleep is interesting, because it parallels a statement by Grover A. Zinn in an introduction to the works of Richard of St. Victor, who says that "ecstasy can also be described as a 'sleep' of the soul," but "a sleep only externally" (43); elsewhere in the same essay, he also says of the contemplative act that, "It is nondiscursive and unified. It enjoys rather than uses. It rests rather than acts" (24). The analogy to sleep and the claim that contemplation "rests rather than acts" mark a difference between the rest of contemplation which the mystics describe and the active rest which Dante represents poetically. For the purposes of the present essay, however, these descriptions of rest by the contemplatives are of great significance, because they suggest that the rest promised by heaven is at least momentarily attainable in the present life.

Of these three contemplatives, Richard of St. Victor seems most noticeably close to Dante. More than the other two, Richard emphasizes not only the quality of rest of a soul in contemplation, but also the palpable absence of labor, work, or effort at the height of contemplation. Although he never describes this rest as movement without labor, Richard insists on the effortless nature of the contemplative experience. In his beautifully crafted work, The Twelve Patriarchs, Richard builds an elaborate personification allegory, which describes the ascent of the soul to the contemplative experience through the Biblical stories of the birth of Jacob's twelve children and the disciples' experience of Jesus' transfiguration; Jacob's story is entirely one of work, work toward a final rest and enjoyment after attaining Rachel. At one point in the story, Richard dwells at length on the allegorical significance of Issachar, who represents the "Joy of Interior Sweetness," and whom he calls "a strong ass, living between the boundaries." Offering a dramatic description of the type of soul which "through frequent ecstasy of mind" has "tasted beforehand the goods of everlasting
life," but which cannot "cast off the goods of this life," Richard articulates the dilemma of such a soul thus:

Therefore, he who lived between the boundaries almost but not completely abandoned this land of the dying. Almost but not completely he grasped that land of the living. And for that reason he lived between the boundaries. Daily he pressed forward to that land. Daily he slid back to this land. And in this way he remained between the boundaries. Issachar a strong ass, living between the boundaries; he saw rest that it was good, and the land that it was best. It says, he saw rest that it was good. Therefore rest is there, and rest is good. For it if were not there he certainly would not have seen it there. Peace is there, rest is there. Full peace, good rest; quiet peace, peaceful quiet. He saw rest that it was good, and the land that it was best. There is no labor in that land, but he cannot reach that land without labor. He labors on account of it, but he does not labor in it. (Patriarchs XXXIX)

It hardly needs pointing out that this moving passage contains all aspects of the notion of rest which we have encountered so far in Augustine and the other three contemplatives: the desire for rest, the restlessness born of the failure to renounce the present life, the conviction that such rest exists, and the need for effort in order to acquire it. As important as all these points, however, stands the idea that even though one "labors on account of it [the land of rest]," one "does not labor in it," which parallels the poetic claim of Dante that at the top of Purgatory there is no necessity for effort. Richard expresses the same notion even more eloquently when, trying to draw a distinction between thinking, meditation, and contemplation, he says that "thinking is without labor and fruit; in meditation there is labor with fruit; contemplation continues without labor but with fruit." (Mystical Ark I, 3). Later in the same work, he again articulates the same idea metaphorically when he suggests a parallel between Moses' stay on the mountain for six days, before his vision on the seventh, and the seven stages of the soul's mystical ascent to God; speaking of the "seventh day" of rest, he says that at this point "so much lifting up of the mind is changed into pleasure for the mind and is approached without any labor at all," the soul having arrived now in that "state of sublimity" where "it is finally at some time composed in supreme tranquillity so that it lays aside not only all care and anxiety but almost goes beyond the entire limit of the human ability to suffer." (Mystical Ark IV, 22). This last statement is crucial for a reading of Dante, because it not only reiterates the quality of effortlessness of a soul at rest, but also relates that effortlessness to life in
the corporeal body, and to the “care,” “anxiety,” and “suffering” which characterize the present life. If the argument that Dante’s poetic notion of rest achieves a synthesis between spirituality and ethics is correct, then this last quoted statement by Richard of St. Victor comes closest of anything so far to articulating a similar idea.

The relationship between the spiritual rest of the contemplative act and the practical freedom from “anxiety” which it achieves is underscored by the entire structure of The Twelve Patriarchs, which allegorizes the individual soul’s spiritual growth based on the familiar medieval typology of Rachel and Leah as symbols of the contemplative and active lives respectively. Chronicling the birth of Leah’s and Rachel’s children, as well as those of their two handmaids, Bala and Zelpha, Richard outlines a spiritual journey of the soul which begins with the virtues that discipline the will and ends with self-knowledge and mystical experiences. The significance of this elaborate analogy involving virtues both of the active and the contemplative lives is that, as Grover A. Zinn perceptively notes, Richard interprets the two women “not within a dialectic of engagement with and withdrawal from the world, but within a dialectic of the discipline of body and mind as virtues are acquired in one unified life that involves elements of both withdrawal and engagement in community”; indeed, Zinn claims, for Richard “the most perfect examples of ‘active’ engagement with others come not as part of the discipline of the self, but as the result of the transformation wrought in contemplation, especially in its ecstatic forms” (12). This notion that the contemplative life prepares for a more complete engagement with the world is also articulated by Aquinas, who, despite privileging the contemplative life, notes that each—the contemplative or the active—teaches us how better to live the other. For Dante and for the concept of rest, this interconnection between the active and the contemplative lives is crucial because his notion of active rest seems to achieve a perfect synthesis between the rest that marks contemplation and the more complete active life of which Richard speaks.
As this essay suggested earlier, it is possible to find some of the sources of Dante’s notion of active rest in the writings of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. It is a daunting task to survey the philosophical legacy of these two thinkers, hoping to find traces in it of the seemingly original concept of active rest. Still, without claiming to be exhaustive, a brief look at the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas illuminates possible avenues that might have led Dante from two of the most revered thinkers of his time to the figure of the enlightened soul, actively resting at the top of Purgatory. Aristotle, on whom Aquinas based much of his religious thought, seems to have provided for both Dante and Aquinas two very important clusters of ideas: one which concludes that movement is an “activity of what is imperfect,” and another which defines the human good as the “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.”

Regarding the first cluster of ideas, a brief overview of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* should be useful, if somewhat perfunctory. In this monumental work, one of the most important principles which Aristotle articulates is that “the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect” (1005b), which translates into a belief that “contradictory statements are not at the same time true” (1011b), or, with regard to actions, that “even if one has a rational wish or an appetite, to do two things or contrary things at the same time, one cannot do them” (1047a). Since Aristotle divides the world (things, actions, etc.) into two major categories—potentialities and actualities—the consequence of the above-mentioned principle is that “the same thing can be potentially at the same time two contraries, but it cannot actually.” meaning, for instance, that a person could be potentially asleep *and* awake, but in actuality they are only asleep *or* awake. Regarding the paradox of active rest, Aristotle’s principle then dictates that since rest is the opposite of movement, the two cannot be true of a person at the same time (but they *are* true of God): thus, a person is either acting or resting, but they cannot be acting and resting at the same
time. Since potentiality and actuality are two of the major metaphysical categories of Aristotle's thought, it seems rather significant to note that he associates actuality with movement—"for actuality in the strict sense is identified with movement" (1047a)—which implies that rest, which is the opposite of movement, is associated with potentiality. It is then equally important that when he tries to describe the relationship between potentiality and actuality within a single "thing" (being, action, etc.), Aristotle comes up with two seemingly self-contradictory statements: that "evidently potentiality and actuality are different" (1047a), but at the same time "each thing is a unity and the potential and actual are somehow one" (1045b).

Going back to the claim that "actuality in the strict sense is identified with movement," and the implied association of potentiality with rest, we are faced with the seeming paradox that movement and rest are different but the same. Aristotle himself seems to have been conscious of the paradox, since he articulates a distinction between movement and activity, which is crucial both for his ethics and for the later philosophical musings of Aquinas. Still in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states that "every movement is incomplete," illustrating his statement with the claim that "it is a different thing that is being moved and has been moved, but it is the same thing that at the same time has seen and is seeing, or is thinking and has thought"; the latter, Aristotle says, is an example of "actuality," while the former is an instance of "movement" (1049a). To a modern mind, the distinction between the two appears somewhat contrived and nebulous, since it seems to depend on the passivity or activity of the main agent rather than on the nature of "movement" or "actuality" itself. All the same, however, the main point of interest remains Aristotle's final conclusion, according to which "movement is thought to be an actuality, but incomplete which is hard to understand but capable of existing" (1066a). Quite as important as this claim that movement constitutes an incomplete actuality is another statement, found in *De Anima*, asserting that "movement is an activity of what is imperfect, activity in the unqualified sense, i.e. that of what
has been perfected, is different from movement" (431a). Regardless of its awkward syntax, this statement makes a succinct argument for a most important distinction between "activity" and "movement." Movement is succinctly defined as "an activity of what is imperfect," whereas a more perfect "activity in the unqualified sense" parallels the "actuality" with which movement as an "incomplete actuality" is contrasted in the Metaphysics. Although these seem like abstruse reasonings, far removed from the sensuous concreteness of the Divine Comedy, they are important for reading Dante's rest, since the distinction between movement and activity allows that, while movement is opposed to rest, activity might not be. Moreover, it may not be over-interpretation to suggest that while the pilgrim's journey up the mountain constitutes "movement" in Aristotelian terms, his rest at the top of Purgatory qualifies as Aristotelian "activity."

The significance for Aristotle himself of his distinction between activity and movement becomes apparent in his famous treatise on morality, Nicomachean Ethics. In that work, Aristotle defines the nature of happiness as an "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" (1098a), and he justifies this definition by claiming that, unlike other activities which are desirable for the sake of something else, the "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" is desirable in itself. Besides calling it an "activity," rather than a "movement," Aristotle also identifies this activity of the soul with the "contemplative activity," because, he says, "if happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtues; and this will be that of the best thing in us whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us" (1177a). Since reason is for Aristotle the most divine element in us, then activity of the soul in accordance with reason naturally constitutes happiness.

The seeming contradiction between the implied preference for the active life in the definition of happiness as "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue," and the professed belief at the end of the Nicomachean Ethics that the contemplative life is the best and highest, seems to have bothered
philosophers for centuries. Because Aristotle himself encourages thinking in dichotomies, readers have felt impelled to choose an interpretation of his work that privileges either the contemplative over the active life, or vice versa. It seems understandably hard to imagine that a thinker who declares that "the state of mind may exist without producing any good result but the activity cannot" (Ethics 1099a), should at the same time be asserting that "perfect happiness is contemplative activity" (1178b). Nevertheless, it does not seem impossible to imagine that maybe Aristotle never intended to describe the two lives as contradictory and that he did not envision them as of necessity mutually exclusive: either a life only of action or one only of contemplation. There is little evidence to support this claim, except the powerful fact that, pagan though he was, Aristotle believed that "there is something which always moves the things that are in motion, and the first mover must itself be unmoved" (Metaphysics 1012b). Even more importantly, when speaking of the ideal life of contemplation, he compares it to the life of the divine:

But such a life would be too high for man: for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue. If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. (Ethics 1177b)

Although he deems this life impossible or almost impossible to achieve by "man," Aristotle holds out the possibility that, "in so far as something divine is present in him," he can at least try to live the life that is "divine in comparison with human life." Notably, the characteristics he ascribes to this life, immediately preceding the quoted passage, are "self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness," and these are precisely the qualities that Dante's pilgrim appears to possess at the conclusion of his climb through Purgatory. As the final portion of this essay will attempt to show, the "divine life" which Aristotle extols is the life of the enlightened soul both in the writings of Aquinas and in the poetry of Dante. This life, already described as an unwearied activity by the pagan thinker, also contains the paradoxical potential for being active and restful at the same time.
Aquinas, whose thought is steeped in Aristotle, reiterates many of the latter's ideas, but places them in a religious context. For him, as for Aristotle, the distinction between "activity" and "change" or "movement" appears to have been of great significance; in fact, he uses the less abstract and more encompassing notion of "life" in order to describe any kind of "activity." physical or spiritual:

Although movement and change are what first draw our attention to life, enabling us to distinguish living things from non-living, the word life extends further: to every activity not externally caused, like willing and understanding and so on. And even the word movement gets applied to such activities, so that we talk of understanding as a movement of mind and willing as a movement of will. (IV Sent., 49.1, 1, 2, iii ad. 2)

Based on this definition of movement as various activities, such as "willing" or "understanding," he also articulates the Aristotelian concept of perfection as consisting in "activity." Unlike Aristotle, however, whose discussion of "activity" centers mainly around human ethics, Aquinas directly compares the potential for perfect human "activity" to the indisputable perfection which God possesses:

Now things are more like God the more actualized they are, and less like him the more they are potential, so that a thing's ultimate goal is what most actualizes them . . . Now in whichever of these ways we think of the ultimate goal of human perfection we have to regard it as a sort of activity. When we think of it in the way that applies to all creatures uniting with God, we see that activity actualizes the mere capability of acting, so that the ultimate perfection of things lies in their own perfect activity; and this is why we say things exist for the sake of their activity. And again when we think of it in the way that is peculiar to reasoning creatures uniting with God, ultimate human perfection also consists in activity; for a disposition to act only unites with its object when it actually acts. Bliss then must be a sort of activity. (IV Sent., 49.1, 1, 2, ii)

For the purposes of the present argument, this dense passage contains two very important ideas: first, that perfection consists in a thing's "own perfect activity," and second, that bliss, which describes the state of an enlightened soul, also "must be a sort of activity."

If a thing's perfection consists in its "own perfect activity," then surely it must be important that for Aquinas, as for Aristotle, the most perfect human activity is contemplation. Like Aristotle, Aquinas seems to consider it beyond any dispute that contemplation involves a motion of the intellect, which is as real as any external movement. Distinguishing it from exterior movement,
however, he says that "contemplation is indeed rest from exterior movement, none the less to contemplate is itself a motion of intellect" (ST II-2, 179, art.1, resp.), and elsewhere he states also that "the motions of the intelligible activities pertain to the repose of contemplation" (ST II-2, 179, art.6, resp.). In addition to equating contemplation and activity, Aquinas also believes that "every agent acts for an end," and thus "there must be something which, when had, brings the activity of the agent to rest" (CG 3, 2). In order to understand the meaning of this last statement, it is important to note that Aquinas views all activities, contemplation included, as movements of desire through the power of will in the direction of desired objects (Dante's "moto spiritale"). When an object is attained—such as truth, in the case of contemplation—happiness follows from the "repose of desire in a good that is held," and the "will of the person deserving it rests content with the recompense which is granted" (ST I-II, 4, art.1, resp.). If we remember the earlier discussion of Virgil's discourse upon will in Canto XVIII, it is clear that his theological source is Aquinas.

Will, which Augustine views as instrumental in the suppression of wayward desires, is also important for Aquinas, but less as an agent of control and more as a driving force in the direction of a final goal\(^\text{10}\). Aquinas defines the dual function of will—wanting the goal and resting in its possession—when he states that "we ascribe to will our first relationship to the goal, that of desiring to attain it, and our last, that of resting in it when already attained" (IV Sent., 49.1, 1, 1, ii). Interestingly, Aquinas also speaks of bliss—the ultimate goal—as "consisting in understanding," and he asserts that "the will's part in this—the resting in the goal which we call delight—is a sort of formal completion of the notion of bliss, supervening on the seeing of God that constitutes its

\(^{10}\) It is no doubt a gross generalization to claim that for Augustine the will is an instrument only for the suppression of desires, but even in moments when the will has facilitated communion with God, as in the episode where Augustine's mind attains to "That Which Is," the emphasis is on the failure of the will to hold on to the mind's vision: "but to keep my gaze there was beyond my strength. I was forced back through weakness and returned to my familiar surroundings" (VII, 17, 23): "for even though a person may be delighted with God's law as far as his inmost self is concerned, how is he to deal with that other law in his bodily members which strives against the law approved by his mind?" (VII, 21, 27)
substance” (*IV Sent.*, 49.1. 1. ii). Stated in plain words, bliss, which consists in understanding and thus represents the perfect activity of a rational mind, combines motion of the intellect with repose of the will. Were we to translate this into even more mundane terms, we find a definition of the enlightened human mind as one which understands everything but wills nothing—or else wills everything, so that in either case the will’s function is annulled. If this were all that we discover in Aquinas—a definition of contemplation as activity of the intellect but repose of the will—we would be quite justified in drawing a parallel between Aquinas’ philosophical concept of contemplation and Dante’s poetic notion of active rest. Surprisingly, however, Aquinas moves even closer to Dante, or rather, Dante appears even closer to Aquinas, when we read that the rest of the will with which Aquinas is concerned is actually an “activity.” In the following passage, Aquinas discusses the final “act of vision” which crowns contemplation, as well as the consequent delight, which is born of the will’s repose in the desired object:

But look into it carefully, and you cannot but conclude that happiness turns on the mind’s act of vision, not on the delight. Delight consists in a certain repose of the will, and this comes only because of the goodness of the thing which contents it. If, therefore, the will is at rest though actively loving, then this is because of the goodness in its loving. It is not that the will seeks good for the sake of its resting satisfied, for that would mean that the will’s own activity was its end, and we have established the contrary. Instead it seeks to find rest in its activity, because its activity means a good for it. Clearly, therefore, the capital point is the activity in which the will finds rest, and not the actual resting because of it. [emphasis mine] (*ST* i-2, 4. art.2, resp.)

The importance of this passage can hardly be overestimated. Here, in what purports to be a most rational analysis of the act of contemplation, we find the irrational paradox of the will being described as resting in its activity. Possible though it might be to get lost in the intricacies of religious terminology, it seems fairly clear that this passage deals with a recognizable psychological phenomenon. As spiritual people from all ages and religions have reported, it is possible for a human soul to be so transformed by a religious experience that as a consequence the boundaries of the self dissolve, and as understanding of the world expands infinitely, actions—
which are normally guided by the will—become easy, inevitable, and even necessary. The understanding grows, and will disappears, while "activity" does not cease, but rather becomes free of effort.

Although the above analysis fits perfectly with what appears to be Dante's analogous notion of active rest, it is important to be reminded that in the last quoted passage Aquinas speaks strictly of the act of contemplation. When it comes to the familiar debate about the active versus the contemplative lives, Aquinas' position is quite unequivocal. He firmly believes that "the contemplative life in itself is more excellent than the active" (ST II-2, 182, art.1, resp.), and that although the active life serves the contemplative by prescribing certain works, the contemplative is far better than the active life. Dante's polysemous allegory, on the other hand, holds out the possibility that the active rest which the imagery depicts describes not only the contemplative act but even life itself (whether contemplative or active): if this is the case, then Dante's poetic language would appear to imply that there is some way of channeling the active rest which is achieved in contemplation to the actual activities of an ethical and moral life. Surprisingly again, Aquinas suggests that such a reversal of the traditional belief that the active life prepares for the contemplative is possible, when he asserts that "a person progresses from the active to the contemplative way of life according to the order of generation, whereas his return to the active life from the contemplative is by way of direction, in that the active life is guided by the contemplative" (ST II-2, 182, art.4, resp.). While "order of generation" implies some natural sort of sequence, it is uncertain what "by way of direction" indicates; whatever the exact meaning of this phrase, however, it is significant that even though he holds the contemplative life as superior to the active, Aquinas conceives of a return from the contemplative to the active life, where the "active is guided by the contemplative." Applied to the idea of Dante's notion of active rest as describing not only the contemplative act, but also life itself, we then seem to have at least the possibility in Aquinas—
if not an explicit claim—that after achieving the repose of contemplation one can transfer the newly-acquired "active rest" to a new and more complete life of activity.

However obsessive in its textual analysis or abstract in its philosophical interpretation, the engagement with a literary work is always about life. Imaginative creations—poems, novels, paintings, films—assert their value by claiming something to which not only their creator can relate. Dante’s concept of active rest—whether he would call it that or not—matters only if it tells something about the human soul. The present essay argues that it does.

For the Poet who reconstructed the imagined event of a Pilgrim traveling through the three kingdoms of God, the giving up of the human will constituted the highest spiritual idea. One had to labor in order to give up the will, but having renounced it, one rested in activity; the will did not disappear, so that the soul became a slave, but so that the soul was liberated, into a new consciousness wherein the right way appeared as the only way. Dante witnesses this consciousness marked by the absence of will again and again in Paradiso. In Canto III, for instance, Piccarda Donati responds to his question about whether she is happy by saying that "the power of love appeases our will so—we only long for what we have" (70-71); a few lines later, she also explains that "in His will there is our peace: that sea / to which all beings move—the beings He creates or nature makes—such is His will" (85-87). To cite just one other example, in Canto XX the Eagle expresses the same idea when he says of all those already in Paradise that "within the incompleteness of our knowledge is / a sweetness, for our good is then refined / in this good, since what God wills, we too will" (136-137).

The present essay has dealt exclusively with the notion of active rest, and it has argued that by the time he climbs to the top of Purgatory, the Pilgrim no longer has to work, because he finds rest in work and in effect erases the distinction between the two. It has been shown also that this notion of
active rest is closely related both to the discourses on will by Virgil in *Purgatory* and to the theological writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. When the soul has been cleansed of its wrongful dispositions, the will—which normally chooses the desired objects in whose direction it moves the soul to move—rests, because choosing is no longer necessary, but continues to act, because right action becomes necessary. The enlightened soul, in other words, acts without agonizing over what constitutes the right action, because the right action is the only way. As Virgil correctly predicts at the beginning of *Purgatory*, the nature of the mountain is such that the pathway is known to have reached an end when climbing farther is "as restful as traveling downstream by boat."
Bibliography


