

Dante's Shades: Embryology in *Purgatorio* XXV from Plurality to (Near) Unicity of Forms

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of shades (“ombre”) inhabiting the otherworld depicted in the *Divine Comedy*. Dante takes it from the Classical world, and indeed “umbrae” already inhabited the underworld visited by Aeneas in book six of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, but in *Purgatorio* XXV he gives it an Aristotelian interpretation so that it could fit the new Christian setting of his poem. In particular, Dante imagines that when a soul separates from its body at physical death and gets to the afterlife, it can unfold a body of air that gives it both an appearance and all the senses, and that a shade is precisely formed by the separated soul and its aerial body. By contextualizing Dante’s explanation in *Purgatorio* XXV within contemporary eschatological assumptions and embryological discussions, this paper argues that Dante’s doctrine negotiates between two different principles of Scholastic philosophy (unicity and plurality of forms), giving the soul such power that it can indeed unfold a body of air (and therefore have full experience) in the afterlife while at the same time making clear that aerial shades should not be confused with real, fleshly persons. The concept of shade appears as paradoxical, both powerful and limited, and indicates, in different ways, the significance of corporeality for Dante’s anthropology.

Keywords: Dante, medieval eschatology, Purgatory, embryology, soul, body, corporeality.

In the thirteenth century, Christian eschatology with respect to body and soul undergoes a significant change of emphasis: the traditional focus on the Last Judgment and the resurrection of the body shifts towards a sense of “last things” that, if it does not erase the significance of bodily return at the end of time, concentrates nonetheless on the individual destiny of the separated soul and stresses its full

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experience right after physical death.¹ As we might expect from a fourteenth-century eschatological poem, the *Commedia* emphasizes that as soon as the soul leaves its earthly body, it undergoes a personal, individual judgment that immediately fixes the modality of its experience of pain or bliss in the afterlife. In a larger context, thirteenth-century theologians insisted that the fire of hell and purgatory is corporeal.

Dante confronts the issue of how a separated soul can experience physical pain in *Purgatorio* 25, where the pilgrim, upon seeing the distorted and emaciated features of the gluttonous, wonders how a soul can get thinner if it does not need food: “Come si può far magro / là dove l’uopo di nodrir non tocca” (*Purg* 25:20-1).² As Virgil has no precise answer, it is Statius who gives a very long explanatory speech, which is divided in two parts: vv. 37-78 explore the origin of the human soul and its development from vegetative to sensitive to rational, while vv. 79-109 give a scientific account of what a shade is, describing the formation of the aerial body, which is able to experience pain, that the human soul radiates in the otherworld.

The first part of Statius’s speech generated a harsh debate in the 1920s between Giovanni Busnelli (1922:97-297; and Alighieri 1964, 2:392-404) and Bruno Nardi (1920; 1960; 1966; 1967a; 1967b; 1990). Busnelli, who considered Dante a faithful disciple of Thomas Aquinas, wanted to show that the account of the generation of the soul is fully Thomistic. Nardi, on the other hand, showed Dante’s freedom in following several doctrines and pointed out that Dante’s account of the origin of the soul is much less close to Aquinas than Busnelli claimed. Etienne Gilson (1967 and 1974) restates Dante’s full adherence to the Thomistic doctrine, while Kenelm Foster stresses Dante’s ambivalence and is ambivalent himself. Foster agrees with Nardi but also says that it is not possible to reject completely the Thomistic sense that Busnelli claims: “E, tutto considerato, l’interpretazione di Nardi è forse quella che meglio risponde al senso del passo, senza tuttavia escludere del tutto che D. abbia

¹ On the complexity of this transition, see BYNUM and FREEDMAN 1999; see also ARIÈS 1974:27-52; MORRIS 1972: 144-52; LE GOFF 1984 and 1993; BYNUM 1995:279-317. I would like to thank Christoph Holzhey for his generous help in dealing with the complex matter discussed in this article.

² For the materiality of the fire punishing the separated souls, see KLEIN 1960:63; and BYNUM 1995:281. Citations of the *Commedia* are from PETROCCHI’s edition (Alighieri 1966–67); translations are from Singleton’s (ALIGHIERI 1970–75).

voluto attribuirgli quel senso tomista che G. Busnelli vi scorge” (1976:645).³ In this essay, I propose again to discuss the passage on the formation of the soul. By inserting it in the controversy between plurality and unicity of forms, which started in Paris in the 1270s and continued until the first decades of the fourteenth century, I will show the reasons for and the implications of the ambivalence that the text indeed suggests and that is reflected by the scholarly debate. In particular, I will first discuss the ambivalent embryological doctrine in *Purgatorio* 25 and will then connect it to two different understandings of the human being. Indeed, I will argue that this ambivalence informs the construction of the whole poem, particularly in the tension between the power of the separated soul and the significance of bodily return.

I will begin by considering the anthropological models implied by the philosophical doctrines of plurality and unicity of forms, according to which, respectively, in every being there are as many forms as different properties or there is one single substantial form.⁴ I will show the implications that these doctrines had for the conception of the human being and the relation of body and soul primarily with the philosophy of Bonaventure (for plurality) and Thomas Aquinas (for unicity). The doctrine of plurality is the more traditional one and is assumed by Bonaventure, who follows the principles of universal hylomorphism — which conceives of any entity as composed of form and matter — and who, in the case of man, holds that soul and body are each composed of their own form and matter.⁵ The advantage of this model was that it considered body as a concrete entity with its own existence, but its problem was that it threatened the unity of the human being, which risked becoming, rather than what we would today call a fully psychosomatic unity, a sort of partnership of two different entities,

³ Both BETTONI 1970 and MAIERÙ 1970 follow NARDI. For other readings of *Purg* 25 that follow NARDI, see FIGURELLI 1972; PADOAN 1981; TOSCANO 1988; and GUAGNINI 1989. Cf. BOYDE (1981:271-80), who comments on *Purg* 25 with great knowledge and subtlety but does not refer to the debate between plurality and unicity of form, which I deem crucial for a thorough understanding of the passage. For a recent discussion of Statius’s account, see COGAN 1999:129-40.

⁴ For the controversy, I have used CALLUS 1960, 1961, and 1967; MICHEL 1915:569-78; ZAVALLONI 1951; GILSON 1955:416-20; MAZZARELLA 1978; BAZÁN 1983; SANTI 1987; WEBER 1991:74-198; BYNUM 1995:256-76; DALES 1995.

⁵ See GILSON 1949:315-40; VANNI ROVIGHI 1974:67-81; MAZZARELLA 1978:63 and 277-87. In the following analysis on the anthropological conceptions that were implied in the doctrines of plurality and unicity, I am greatly indebted to BYNUM 1995 (esp. 229-78).

body and soul.⁶ In order to connect body and soul, Bonaventure theorizes a mutual desire that one has for the other. The body is perfected and made alive by the soul but, at the same time, the soul also needs the body for completion; the soul longs for its body and is fully happy only when it can administer it: “When God created the body, He joined it to the soul; He united the two in a natural and mutual relationship.... Hence, the soul cannot be fully happy unless the body is returned to it, for the two have a natural ordination to each other” (*The Breviloquium*, pt. 7, chap. 7, Par 4 [in Bonaventure 1962]).⁷ To support his argument, Bonaventure goes back to Augustine’s concept of *desiderium* — the separated soul’s desire for its body — and argues that the soul alone cannot enjoy full vision of God because it is distracted precisely by the desire for the body.⁸

The doctrine of unicity of form, already adumbrated by Albert the Great, is perfected by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas rejects universal hylomorphism and asserts that man is composed of one substantial form — the soul — and the matter that it activates — its body. While Bonaventure conceived of body and soul as two different entities, Aquinas considers the soul as the only form of the body, and the body as the matter of the soul. The rational soul, which also has vegetative and sensitive powers, is the only substantial form of the human being, including its body: “In man there is no other substantial form than the rational soul, and it is due to it alone that a man is not only a human being, but also animal, living, body, substance, ‘something’” (*De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 1, resp.).⁹ By giving absolute primacy to the soul as the only form of the person, the doctrine of unicity fully packs what self is, including what body is, into the soul. According to Aquinas’s

⁶ Aquinas, for instance, attacks plurality on the assumption that to assume several substantial forms in any compound — including the soul or the human being—would be irreconcilable with its unity (see ZAVALLONI 1951:255, 269; CALLUS 1960:583; BAZÀN 1983:395). For the attention that pluralists show toward bodiliness, see SANTI 1987:869-72; and d’AVRAY 1994.

⁷ As DALES (1995:102) formulates Bonaventure’s conception of body and soul, “each [i.e., soul and body] is composed of its own matter and form, but in neither case is the appetite of either one exhausted by its own matter and form; each has a remaining appetite to be joined to the other, the soul to perfect the body, the body to be perfected by the soul. It is in the composite that each one finds its highest development.” See also BYNUM 1995:248-51.

⁸ Bonaventure implies as much when, defending Mary’s bodily assumption into heaven, he argues that if Mary were not in heaven with her body, her soul would be hindered from enjoying God and could not be completely happy. See BYNUM 1991:257.

⁹ “In hoc homine non est alia forma substantialis quam anima rationalis, et per eam homo non solum est homo, sed animal et vivum et corpus et substantia et ens” (in AQUINAS 1875, 14:19; my translation).

formulation, it is better to say that the soul contains the body and makes it one, rather than the opposite: “magis anima continet corpus et facit ipsum esse unum, quam e converso” (*Summa theologiae* 1a, q. 76, art. 3, ad 1).¹⁰ The fact that the soul was conceived of as the only form of the body gave rise to the idea of formal identity, which stressed that it is form that accounts for anything continuing to be that particular thing. Formal identity was stressed by theologians especially in discussions of resurrection, where they argued that the soul can express the nature of the body in any matter it activates. What self is, including what body is, is fully packed into the soul, which can make any matter it activates at resurrection be its body. Durand of St. Pourçain affirms explicitly that to make the resurrection body of Peter, God can use the dust that was once the body of Paul, because the soul of Peter will make whatever matter unites with it be its body (Bynum 1995:259-60). As some scholars have pointed out, the primacy that the doctrine of unicity grants the soul came at a very high price; in fact, although it was spared in Paris, this doctrine was condemned at Oxford in 1277 and in 1284 (see Callus 1960:1025-6; Zavalloni 1951:219-21; Bynum 1995:271-8). Some of the objections that were made to unicity of form stressed that it gave absolute primacy to the soul as the only form of the body so that body was at risk of being conceived as pure potency (Bazán 1983; Tugwell 1990:149-55; Bynum 1995:271-8; and Quinn 1993). The doctrine of unicity sacrificed the commonsense notion of body as something material and concrete—a notion that, on the contrary, was well expressed by the principles of plurality, which, as we have seen, considered body as a separate entity from soul and granted it its own, concrete existence. The implications of unicity of form for both theology and cult practices were dangerous. If it is the rational soul that makes a human body be a body, in the case of relics for instance, what would be the point of venerating something that is not the body of the saint anymore (because it no longer contains the soul of the saint [i.e., it does not have the same form as before]) and that is not

¹⁰ Citations from the *Summa theologiae* (which will be abbreviated ST) are from AQUINAS 1964–81.

necessarily going to be resurrected (because what matters for identity is not matter but form)?¹¹ The doctrine of unicity of form disturbed a spirituality in which a concrete sense of the body was essential to self — a spirituality centered on the doctrine of the Incarnation, the worship of relics and saints, and the careful burials of cadavers, which were considered an important part of the loved ones who had passed away. Moreover, the partisans of unicity are not always consistent in the use of this doctrine. They are, on the contrary, deeply ambivalent. On the one hand they conceive of the soul as the single substantial form of the human being, which carries its whole structure and is able to subsist and experience the full vision of God without the body. On the other hand, they stress that the soul must be united with the body because of the ontological completeness of the person; soul alone is by definition incomplete and requires a body in order to express itself. This is why Thomas Aquinas, who stresses the separated soul's full power, can also say that without its body, the soul is simply an imperfect fragment: "The soul that has separated from its body is therefore imperfect as long as it remains without its body.... The soul is not the whole human being, and my soul is not I" ("Anima exuta corpore, quamdiu est sine corpore, est imperfecta.... anima autem ... non est totus homo, et anima mea non est ego" [*On 1 Cor.*, chap. 15, lectio 2; in Aquinas 1876, 21:33-4, my translation]).¹²

"I will now consider more specifically what the principles of plurality and unicity held about the formation of the soul in the human embryo — an issue that philosophers considered crucial. The two doctrines concentrated the debate upon three sets of alternatives: whether prime matter is absolutely passive potency or contains some actuality of its own; whether in the process of becoming matter is deprived of all precedent forms or not; and whether substantial form, including virtually all preceding forms, confers on prime matter its complete and specific determination or imparts one perfection only. If one takes as true the first hypothesis of each of these three sets, one advocates unicity of form; if one defends the second hypotheses, one advocates plurality of forms" (Callus 1967:1024-7).

¹¹ SANTI (1987:867) points out that in his rejection of unicity of form, Henry of Ghent remarks that the people of London had protested against the partisans of unicity because this doctrine would have made vain the cult of Thomas Becket's head. For the heresies that followed from this interpretation of unicity of form, see ZAVALLONI 1951:317-19; MICHEL 1915:575-9; and BYNUM 1995:273-4.

¹² Aquinas clarifies that "therefore, even if the soul attains salvation in the after life, this is not to say that I do or that the human being does" ("unde, licet anima consequatur salutem in alia vita, non tamen ego vel quilibet homo"). For the ambivalence of doctrine of unicity of form with respect to the significance of the body, see BYNUM 1995:266-71.

With respect to embryology, the partisans of unicity of form, who believed that no substance can have two substantial forms at the same time, conceived of the evolution of the embryo as a discontinuous process in which a series of various generations and corruptions occur. Whenever something changes, its preceding substantial form must disappear and be replaced by a new form: “when a more perfect form supervenes this brings about the dissolution of the preceding one. However, it does so in such a way that the second form possesses whatever the first one does and something more into the bargain” (ST 1a, q. 118, a. 2, ad 2).¹³ It is a discontinuous succession of forms in which each time a new and more perfect form appears, the old one corrupts itself. When the sensitive soul, which also contains the faculties of the vegetative soul, appears, the vegetative soul passes away, and when the rational soul is created by God, the sensitive soul disappears. What remains is the rational soul alone, which is created as already having both vegetative and sensitive faculties and is the only substantial form of man: “Therefore it must be said that the intellective soul is created by God at the completion of man’s coming-into-being. This soul is at one and the same time both a sensitive and nutritive life-principle, the preceding forms having been dissolved” (ST 1a, q. 118, a. 2, ad 2).¹⁴ According to the principles of unicity of form, the soul is created by God as a “forma simplex,” a simple, single form which contains all faculties, from the simplest to the intellectual, and is therefore fully immortal. This is why Aquinas can assume that, when the soul separates from its body, it keeps all its powers—the intellectual ones in act, and the sensitive and nutritive ones not in act but in potency; and these will be reactivated when the soul is re-united with its body at resurrection.¹⁵

¹³ Aquinas conceives the process of human generation according to two principles that ZAVALLONI (1951:253-5) and BAZÁN (1983:390-4) define as the principle of “la hiérarchie des formes” (according to which a more perfect principle can confer a less perfect determination, as well the determination proper to it) and the principle of “la succession des formes” (according to which each time one new form appears, any other preceding substantial form passes away).

¹⁴ “Sic igitur dicendum est quod anima intellectiva creatur a Deo in fine generationis humanae, quae simul est et sensitiva et nutritiva, corruptis formis praexistentibus.”

¹⁵ In ST 1a, q. 77 (“Whether all the powers of the soul remain in the soul when it is separated from the body”), art. 8, Aquinas writes that “all the soul’s powers go back only to the soul as their source. But certain powers, namely understanding and will, are related to the soul taken on its own as their subject of inhesion, and powers of this kind have to remain in the soul after the death of the body. But some powers have the body-soul compound for subject; this

Those who asserted plurality of forms stressed the empirical sense of change as a continuous process in which something evolves on the basis of the concept of act and potency. When the vegetative soul of an embryo is in an active state, the sensitive is in a state of potency, and when the sensitive is active, the rational is in potency (see Zavalloni 1951:312-16). The human soul is one, but composed of different forms that have different properties and that are added one onto the other: the vegetative soul transforms itself into a sensitive soul (that is, a soul that has vegetative and sensitive forms) and the sensitive soul transforms itself — through God’s intervention—into a rational soul (that is, a soul that has vegetative, sensitive, and rational forms). All the forms preceding the intellectual one (which is the only one to be created directly by God) are educed from matter and are therefore supposed to pass away with the soul’s separation from the body. The only form that has a divine origin and is consequently immortal is precisely the intellectual one.¹⁶

I will now consider Statius’s account of the formation of the human soul. I will show that, on the one hand, Statius starts by following the more empirical theory of the continual evolution from one soul to the other, which is typical of the doctrine of plurality and is rejected by Thomas Aquinas. However, Statius ends up presenting a very powerful soul that possesses the same

is the case with all the powers of sensation and nutrition. Now when the subject goes the accident cannot stay. Hence when the compound corrupts such powers do not remain in actual existence. They survive in the soul in a virtual state only, as in their source or root.” And in *Supplementum*, q. 70, art. 1, resp., we find the idea that the sensitive powers of the separated soul, which remain only in a relative sense, will reactivate when the soul gets its body back: “Hence others say that the sensitive and other like powers do not remain in the separated soul except in a restricted sense, namely radically, in the same way as a result is in its principle: because there remains in the separated soul the ability to produce these powers if it should be reunited to its body; nor is it necessary for this ability to be anything in addition to the essence of the soul, as stated above. This opinion appears to be the more reasonable.” Quotations from the *Supplementum* (which was probably put together by Aquinas’s disciple Reginald of Piperno with material from the Sentence commentary after his master’s death) are from AQUINAS 1947–48.

¹⁶ MICHEL (1937) explains that all the forms that are educed from matter (because they are potentially contained in primary matter) are liable to corruption and disappear at physical death: “Subordonnées à la forme proprement substantielle qu’est l’âme intellectuelle, les formes inférieures, par exemple, la forme de la chair, la forme des éléments premiers et mixtes, sont sujettes à corruption. Ces formes inférieures se trouvent à l’état de puissance dans la matière et c’est avec une forme de corporéité particulière que l’âme humaine individuelle s’unit pour constituer la substance d’un corps humain. De même donc que cette substance, avant la génération, était en puissance dans la matière qui a été prise pour former le corps de l’individu, de même après la mort elle retombe par la corruption dans cette même matière, pour y rester cachée à l’état de puissance — de *raisons séminales*, dit plus expressément encore saint Bonaventure en reprenant le terme consacré par saint Augustin — jusqu’à ce qu’elle soit rappelée à l’existence par la voix du Dieu tout-puissant” (2560).

possibilities as the soul presented by the doctrine of unicity of form. Statius begins his speech with the explanation of the formation of the human seed in men (*Purg* 25:37-43). As Patrick Boyde has shown, Statius's explanation follows what Aristotle says in his *De generatione animalium* as commented on by thirteenth-century Christian philosophers using Galen and Avicenna (1981:271-3). Perfect blood, which is the final result of food processed through three digestions (in the stomach, in the liver, and in a region of the heart), is imbued with a formative power that Statius calls "a tutte membra umane / virtù informativa." Most of this perfect blood goes to nourish the body through veins and arteries, while some of it remains in the heart and is transformed, through another digestion, into the sperm that goes to the genital organs (*Purg* 25:37-42). Statius continues to describe the generation and the formation of the embryo and, in the first part of his account, we find the idea of change as an evolution from potency to act so that the very formative power of the semen becomes a vegetative soul. This vegetative soul develops the sensitive faculties that it already had in potency:

Anima fatta la virtute attiva
 qual d'una pianta, in tanto differente,
 che questa è in via e quella è già a riva,
 tanto ovra poi, che già si move e sente,
 come spungo marino; e indi imprende
 ad organar le posse ond' è semente.

The active virtue having become a soul, like that of a plant (but in so far different that this is on the way, and that has already arrived) so works then that now it moves and feels, like a sea-fungus; then it proceeds to develop organ for the powers of which it is the germ (*Purg* 25:52-7).

Statius's account presupposes continuity until the formation of the sensitive soul. In his polemics with Busnelli, Nardi is right when he says that Dante's account differs from Aquinas's, because the continuous process described in vv. 52-7 is different from Aquinas's principle of a discontinuous process in which the new form replaces the old one, which passes away.¹⁷

¹⁷ NARDI (1960:22-33) shows that this initial, continuous process is close to the one described by Albert the Great in his *De natura et origine animae* (where, on the basis of the doctrine of *inchoatio formae*, which presupposes a sense of primary matter not as mere potentiality but as containing a sort of virtual or imperfect actuality, Albert describes the formation of the human soul and says that it is a substance that comes partly from the inside and partly from the

Having arrived at the sensitive soul, Statius has to explain how the embryo, gifted with vegetative and sensitive powers, becomes endowed with intellectual faculties. Statius continues:

Apri a la verità che viene il petto;
e sappi che, sì tosto come al feto
l'articular del cerebro è perfetto,
lo motor primo a lui si volge lieto
sovra tant' arte di natura, e spira
spirito novo, di virtù repleto,
che ciò che trova attivo quivi, tira
in sua sustanzia, e fassi un'alma sola,
che vive e sente e sé in sé rigira.

Open your breast to the truth which is coming, and know that, so soon as in the foetus the articulation of the brain is perfect, the First Mover turns to it with joy over such art of nature, and breathes into it a new spirit replete with virtue, which absorbs that which is active there into its own substance, and makes one single soul which lives and feels and circle on itself (*Purg* 25:67-75).

When the brain has completely developed, the intellectual soul is created by God. God breathes forth the rational soul, which absorbs what it finds active in the fetus into its own substance, and becomes one single soul endowed with three different powers: vegetative, sensitive, and rational. It is here where the move from plurality to (near) unicity occurs. As we have already seen, Busnelli (1922:248-74 and Alighieri 1964, 2:399) is wrong in referring only to Aquinas's doctrine. Aquinas states that the rational soul is created as already having vegetative/sensitive faculties and that the sensitive soul passes away with the creation of the rational soul; Statius, on the contrary, says that

outside) and argues that Statius's account is similar to a position that Aquinas himself had rejected several times: "Hence others say that the vegetative soul is potentially sensitive and that the sensitive soul is its act: so that the vegetative soul which at first is in the semen is raised to the perfection of the sensitive soul by the action of nature; and further that the rational soul is the act and perfection of the sensitive soul, so that the sensitive soul is brought to its perfection ("perducitur ad suum complementum") consisting in the rational soul, not by the action of the generator but by that of the Creator" (*On the Power of God* q. 3, a. 9, ad 9 [AQUINAS 1932, 1:157]). "Another theory, likewise inadmissible, is stated as follows.... [T]he aforesaid seminal power becomes a vegetative soul; and later, the organs having been perfected and multiplied still more, the same power is raised to the level of a sensitive soul; and finally, with the perfecting of the organs' form, the same soul becomes rational ("eandem animam fieri rationalem"), not, indeed, by the action of that seminal power, but through the influx of an external agent" (*Summa contra Gentiles* 2, chapter 89 [in AQUINAS 1955-57]). "Therefore others say that the same life-principle ("anima") that was first merely vegetative, afterwards becomes sensitive through the activity of the seminal power, and finally the same life-principle becomes intellectual ("et tandem ipsa eadem perducitur ad hoc ut ipsa eadem fiat intellectiva"), though not through the active seminal power but through the power of a higher agent, namely God, enlightening the soul from outside" (ST, 1a, q. 118, a. 2, ad. 2). For the continuity of the development in Statius's account up to the formation of the sensitive soul, see BOYDE (1981:275), who also stresses that Statius's "phraseology, syntax and deliberate repetition of key-words do present the embryo's development as one continuous process."

the rational soul absorbs the sensitive soul into its substance. At the same time, I want to argue against Nardi's anti-Thomistic interpretation of Statius's discourse, which is also different from the passages that Nardi considers as expressing the same conception as Dante's. According to these passages (quoted in n. 17), the vegetative soul acquires first sensitive faculties, and then—with the direct intervention of God — rational powers. Statius's emphasis is different: he does not say that the sensitive soul becomes the rational soul because God irradiates the intellect into it; rather, he says that the rational soul, created by God, is the active and surviving agent, which absorbs in its substance the sensitive soul, thus acquiring vegetative and sensitive powers. Until he portrays the formation of the sensitive soul, Dante follows some tenets that differ from the principles of Thomism, but the move into the emphatically discontinuous process that is implied by the creation of the rational soul suggests a movement towards the Thomistic concept. When Etienne Gilson (1967:128-9) says that Dante "has here taken sides with Thomas Aquinas in the famous discussion on the unity of the substantial form in the composite, including man," he may be overstating the case.¹⁸ At the same time, I would stress that the ambivalence is in the text, which indeed suggests the sort of Thomistic sense that Gilson perceives. At the moment of its creation, the rational soul does not have vegetative and sensitive powers and does not contain the structure of the body—as it would according to Aquinas. Only subsequently does the rational soul "pull into its substance," as Dante says, vegetative and sensitive powers. The difference with Aquinas is that the rational soul is not created as already possessing all its powers, rather it absorbs the formative virtue and vegetative and sensitive powers from the embryo to which it unites. By absorbing all these other faculties, the rational soul makes them immortal so that they do not disappear with the soul's separation from the body.

Dante's "alma sola" is the result of a process different from the one described in Aquinas's doctrine, but the two resulting souls can "work" almost in the same way. After the account of the

¹⁸ See also GILSON 1974:80-1. Gilson's well-known passion for Aquinas might have misled him on some points and pushed him toward certain exaggerations. Nonetheless, he has the merit of restating the influence of Aquinas's philosophy in Dante's works after Bruno Nardi's fundamental, but sometimes too vigorous, attempt to distinguish Dante's positions from Aquinas's.

origin of the soul, Statius explains that the separated soul carries with it both what is human (the formative virtue and vegetative-sensitive powers) and what is divine (the intellectual ones created by God):

Quando Lachesis non ha più del lino,
solvesi da la carne, e in virtute
ne porta seco e l'umano e 'l divino:
l'altre potenze tutte quante mute;
memoria, intelligenza e volontade
in atto molto più che prima agute.

And when Lachesis has no more thread, the soul is loosed from the flesh and carries with it as faculties both the human and the divine; the other faculties all of them mute, but memory, intellect, and will far more acute in action than before (*Purg* 25:79-84).¹⁹

Dante wants to grant to the separated soul the same “power” that Aquinas did and, like Aquinas, he imagines that the intellectual powers of the separated soul are in act (“in atto”) while the all the others are in potency (“mute”). But Dante goes farther than Aquinas and does not wait for the resurrection in order to reactivate the “human” part of the person. In Dante’s world the separated soul has the immediate chance of creating a body of air that allows it to express all its powers — not only the rational ones — in the eschatological time between physical death and the Last Judgment. As soon as it has the opportunity, the formative virtue contained in the soul radiates forth in the very same way as it did with respect to the earthly living limbs: “Tosto che loco li la circumscrive, / la virtù formativa raggia intorno / così e quanto ne le membra vive” (*Purg* 25:88-90). The air which surrounds the soul is shaped “virtualmente” (v.96), that is, by virtue of the formative power that was in the semen and that the soul absorbed when it united to the embryo.²⁰ Because it

¹⁹ While Singleton translates “in virtute” (v.80) as “in potency,” I have changed the translation to “as faculties,” because, as Chiavacci Leonardi explains in her commentary, “l’espressione *in virtute* non può significare ‘in potenza’, cioè ‘non in atto’, come molti spiegano, perché nella terzina seguente è detto chiaramente che le facultà intellettive (*il divino*) restano *in atto* anche più acutamente di prima. Si dovrà dunque intendere *virtute* come ‘virtù sostanziale’, nel senso che la parola ha anche a XVIII 51. Tutte le potenze, ‘umane e divine’, sono infatti radicate (‘in radice’, come si esprime Tommaso) nell’essenza stessa dell’anima” (ALIGHIERI 1991–97, 2:746).

²⁰ “E come l’aere, quand’è ben piorno, / per l’altrui raggio che ‘n sé si riflette, / di diversi color diventa addorno; / così l’aere vicin quivi si mette / e in quella forma ch’è in lui suggella / virtualmente l’anima che ristette” (“And as the air, when it is full of moisture, becomes adorned with various colors by another’s rays which are reflected in it, so here the neighboring air shapes itself in that form which is virtually imprinted in it by the soul that stopped there” [*Purg* 25:91-6]).

is the air (and not flesh) that makes it visible, the union of soul and aerial body is called a “shade” (and not a “human being”). The soul furnishes every organ of sensation (“ciascun sentire”), from the simplest one to sight, thus allowing the shade to speak, laugh, weep, and sigh. The pilgrim’s doubt that originated the whole explanation is finally answered:

Però che quindi ha poscia sua paruta,
è chiamata ombra; e quindi organa poi
ciascun sentire infino a la veduta.
Quindi parliamo e quindi ridiam noi;
quindi facciam le lagrime e ’ sospiri
che per lo monte aver sentiti puoi.
Secondo che ci affliggono i disiri
e li altri affetti, l’ombra si figura;
e quest’ è la cagion di che tu miri.

Inasmuch as therefrom it has its semblance, it is called a shade, and therefrom it forms the organs of every sense, even to the sight. By this we speak and by this we laugh, by this we make the tears and sighs which you may have heard about the mountain. According as the desires and the other affections prick us, the shade takes its form; and this is the cause of that at which you marvel (*Purg* 25:100-8).

In describing the function and the characteristics of the separated soul, Dante recognizes the advantages of the principles of unicity of form as they were expressed in the discussions about the resurrection body. Discussing whether all the limbs of the human body will resurrect, Aquinas says that the soul originally and implicitly contains everything that appears in the parts of the body, and that man can not be perfect unless the body expresses externally what the soul contains implicitly.²¹ The powers of the “alma sola” of Statius’s account reflect the concept that the soul “contains” the structure of the body. The self, including physical characteristics and qualities, is fully packed into the souls of the *Commedia*, which radiate a body of air at the very moment when, theologically, they should have no body at all. Shades have not simply an exterior aspect, but also all the organs of the

²¹ “Whatever appears in the parts of the body is all contained originally and, in a way, implicitly in the soul... neither could man be perfect, unless the whole that is contained enfolded in the soul be outwardly unfolded in the body, nor would the body correspond in full proportion to the soul. Since then at the resurrection it behooves man’s body to correspond entirely to the soul, for it will not rise again except according to the relation it bears to the rational soul, it follows that man must also rise again perfect, seeing that he is thereby repaired in order that he may obtain his ultimate perfection. Consequently all the members that are now in man’s body must needs be restored at the resurrection” (*Supplementum*, q. 80, art. 1, resp. [in AQUINAS 1964–81]).

earthly body, including the ones that serve for excretion, as the description of Mohammed makes clear:

Già veggia, per mezzul perdere o lulla,
com'io vidi un, così non si pertugia,
rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla.
Tra le gambe pendevan le minugia;
la corata pareva e 'l tristo sacco
che merda fa di quel che si trangugia.

Truly a cask, through loss of mid-board or side-piece, gapes not so wide as one I saw, cleft from the chin to the part that breaks wind; his entrails were hanging between his legs, and the vitals could be seen and the foul sack that makes ordure of what is swallowed (*Inf* 28:22-7).

Aerial bodies are present not only in hell and purgatory but also in heaven, where at a certain points the shades' features are hidden by the light that surrounds them and is a sign of the souls' intellectual joy.

Nonetheless, the human features are there, carried in the individual souls as an expression of their unique individuality. And human features will be visible again with the resurrection of the body.

In constructing his poem, Dante has the soul account for the identity of the self, including physical identity. Recently, John Bruce-Jones (1995:221) has affirmed that it is the doctrine of unicity of form that allows Dante to stage encounters with human souls that are substantial forms of real persons.²² And Francesco Santi (1993:288) has written that Dante's notion of the person in the *Commedia* is a "very clear example of Thomism," because the soul contains the substance of its body before resurrection. Both Bruce-Jones's and Santi's suggestions confirm my reading of the embryological doctrine explained in *Purgatorio* 25 and my emphasis on its significant move towards the principles of unicity that guarantee the soul's full power. At the same time, Dante's position is more complex and ambivalent than Bruce-Jones and Santi suggest, and Dante is not entirely a partisan of the Thomistic conception of the soul as the only form of the person. If it is true that the "alma sola"

²² "Non è forse neanche esagerato affermare che la posizione di Dante sulla materia prima (dalla parte dei tomisti se pure molto individuale) è una delle ragioni per cui si continua a leggere la *Divina Commedia*.... Il potere della *Commedia* è che in una serie di incontri con anime umane che sono le forme sostanziali di vere persone, il lettore deve affrontare dure e difficili verità sulla condizione umana. La cultura filosofica che rese possibile lo scrivere di questa *Commedia*, è una dove l'anima umana è l'unica forma sostanziale dell'uomo" (1995:221).

described by Dante shares important characteristics with Aquinas's conception of the soul, it is also significant that he describes the process of evolution up to the occurrence of the sensitive soul according to the principles of plurality of forms.

In the last part of this essay, I want to suggest that the vacillation between the principles of plurality and unicity of form that characterizes the embryological doctrine of *Purgatorio* 25 is also reflected in the tensions of the *Commedia's* eschatological panorama. Throughout the *Commedia*, Dante portrays both the strength of the separated soul and the necessity of bodily return as the ultimate moment of one's experience. On the one hand, he presents the soul as the guarantor of the self and the container of the structure of the body. The body of air that the soul radiates as soon as it leaves its earthly body symbolizes the full experience Dante grants the separated soul—and the stress on the soul's full experience is connected with the emphasis that contemporary eschatology placed on the period between physical death and resurrection. On the other hand, Dante stresses the provisional, temporary character of the shades and the important role that resurrection continues to play, showing that a soul without its real body is imperfect, that the shades are temporary surrogates of a wholeness that will be reconstituted at resurrection, and that ultimate, complete experience will be possible only after bodily return.²³ And, significantly, when the poem refers to the earthly body or the resurrection body, Dante employs the image of the body as clothing, an image that expresses the more traditional and concrete sense of body as something that is not contained by the soul, but rather as an entity that is distinct from soul and added to it as its completion (cf. *Inf* 13:103-4; 33:61-3; *Purg* 1:75; 11:44; 16:37-8; 30:13-15; *Par* 25:9 and 31:60).

In *Inferno* 6:106-11, Virgil explained that with the resurrection of the body, the pain of the damned will increase. In *Paradiso* 14, the heavenly counterpart of this passage, the soul of Solomon explains that with the resurrection of the body the beatitude of the blessed will also increase:

²³ I am currently researching Dante's ambivalence about the power of the (somatized) soul and its imperfection without its real body as part of a larger project on the significance of the body in medieval culture. For the same dialectics in Bonvesin da la Riva, another Italian eschatological writer, see GRAGNOLATI 1999. For the importance that Dante grants the concept of resurrection in the *Commedia*, see CHIAVACCI LEONARDI 1988; LINDHEIM 1990; and KIRKPATRICK 1994:243-5.

Come la carne gloriosa e santa
fia rivestita, la nostra persona
piú grata fia per esser tutta quanta;
per che s'accrescerà ciò che ne dona
di gratüito lume il sommo bene,
lume ch'a lui veder ne condiziona;
onde la vision crescer convene,
crescer l'ardor che di quella s'accende,
crescer lo raggio che da esso vene.

When the flesh, glorious and sanctified, shall be clothed on us again, our persons will be more acceptable for being all complete; wherefore whatever of gratuitous light the Supreme Good gives us will be increased, light which fits us to see Him; so that our vision needs must increase, our ardor increase which by that is kindled, our radiance increase which comes from this (*Par* 14:43-51).

Not only will the soul put on its flesh again, but the flesh will be “gloriosa e santa,” that is, glorified with the gifts of *impassibilitas*, *agilitas*, *subtilitas*, and *claritas* that were usually referred to in thirteenth-century discussions of resurrection bodies (see Goering 1982). In particular, Solomon states that the appearance of the resurrection flesh will be brighter than the light that now surrounds the soul:

Ma sí come carbon che fiamma rende,
e per vivo candor quella soverchia,
sì che la sua parvenza si difende;
così questo folgòr che già ne cerchia
fia vinto in apparenza da la carne
che tutto dì la terra ricoperchia.

But even as a coal which gives forth flame, and with its white glow outshines it, so that its visibility is maintained, so shall this effulgence which already surrounds us be surpassed in brightness by the flesh which the earth still covers (*Par* 14:52-7).

Here Dante refers to the principles of plurality and uses the image of the brand employed by Bonaventure when he describes the *claritas* of the resurrection body in his *Sentences* commentary (bk. 4, dist. 49, pt. 2, art. 2, sect. 2, q. 1). While Thomas Aquinas says that the clarity of the resurrection body will be produced by the “*redundantia gloriae animae*”—the overflowing of the soul’s glory—into the body (bk. 4, dist. 44, q. 2, art. 4, solutio 1), it is significant that here Dante is closer to Bonaventure, suggesting that the resurrection body will itself have the “glow” that surpasses the

“effulgence” provoked by the glory of the soul (see Chiavacci Leonardi 1988:261).²⁴ Solomon’s praise of the splendor of the resurrection body is followed by the joyful response of all the souls, who show “disio d’i corpi morti,” desire for their dead bodies:

Tanto mi parver sùbiti e accorti
e l’uno e l’altro coro a dicer “Ammel,”
che ben mostrar disio d’i corpi morti:
forse non pur per lor, ma per le mamme,
per li padri e per li altri che fuor cari
anzi che fosser sempiterne fiamme.

So sudden and eager both the one and the other chorus seemed to me in saying “Amen,” that truly they showed desire for their dead bodies — perhaps not only for themselves, but also for their mothers, for their fathers, and for the others who were dear before they became eternal flames (*Par* 14:62-6).

The idea of the sociability of the joys of heaven is rare among theologians, who emphasized that the resurrection will entail the improvement of the individual’s relation with God (see Bynum 1995:303n92 and Harrison 1999). Dante might have found this idea in Bonaventure’s *Sentences* commentary, where Bonaventure writes that at the resurrection the blessed will rejoice in others’ happiness as much as in their own, and that Peter, in fact, will rejoice in Linus’s happiness even more than Linus does (bk. 4, dist. 49, pt. 1, art. 1, q. 6). At the same time, Dante modifies Bonaventure’s concept and makes it more intimate, because it is not Peter rejoicing in Linus’s — nor any other person’s — glory, but everyone rejoicing in the idea of being reunited with their dearest loved ones. The rhyme words *amme* / *mamme* / *fiamme* express the certitude that with resumption of what now is a dead body, the spiritual flames will again become corporeal and therefore complete individuals.²⁵

²⁴ While Thomas Aquinas considers the qualities of the resurrection body as spillover from the soul into the body and therefore makes the four gifts of the resurrection body dependent on the soul, Bonaventure gives more importance to the body in itself, and makes a distinction between the four gifts’ *dispositio* (which belongs to the body per se and depends from God) and *consummatio* (which depends on the soul that activates them). See also WICKI 1954:287-8.

²⁵ Within such theological language, the use of the word “mamme,” typical of *sermo humilis*, is the sign of a move towards tenderness and intimacy. As BAROLINI (1992:138) comments, “these souls are happily celebrating the future resurrection of their flesh, that most irreducible husk of selfhood, because only in the flesh will they fully experience their love for ‘those who were dear to them before they were eternal flames.’ In other words, their desire for their dead bodies is an expression of their desire to love fully in heaven what they loved in earth: their “mamme,” their “padri,”

The ambivalence towards the principles of plurality and unicity of form that characterized embryology in *Purgatorio* 25 structures the eschatological conception of the whole *Commedia* and the relation between body and soul that it expresses. If, throughout the *Commedia*, Dante uses some principles of unicity to stress the soul's power and imagines that it can radiate a body of air that allows it to express itself before the resurrection, at the same time he stresses that the aerial body is not enough, and that soul without its real body is imperfect. Only when it reunites with the material, concrete body of resurrection (to which Dante refers, as we have seen, with images that echo the principles of plurality), will the soul stop being an incomplete fragment, no matter how bright and luminous, because it is finally reunited with its real body in the concrete, tangible, fleshly perfection of the whole person, "la persona tutta quanta."

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and the "altri che fuor cari." The rhyme of *mamme* with *fiamme*, the flesh with the spirit, is one of Dante's most poignant envisionings of a paradise where earthly ties are not renounced but enhanced."

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