Those who read this essay will likely participate in the eighth century of discussion concerning *The Divine Comedy*. Clean copies of the finished canticles, with all their intellectual sizzle and range, their right-on humanity and intertextual strutwork, and above all their poetic command, flexible, profound, precise—with all that intact already, the completed work began to circulate in 1320, the last year of its author's life. Yet as 2020 approaches, in every creative arena, “the Poem” (as the great scholar Charles Singleton liked to call it) looms as an ever-more-common referent.

I’m not the only one to have noticed. Joan Acocella, in assessing the 2007 Hollander translation of *Paradiso* (with which that husband-and-wife team completed roughly 3,600 pages of poem and commentary), plunged into a close reading combined with an assessment of twentieth-century Dante criticism, assuming readers of *The New Yorker* would be eager to go along. Judith Shulevitz, in a 2003 essay for the *Times Book Review*, detected a similarly widening appeal in two successful recent novels, Matthew Pearl’s *The Dante Club* and Nick Tosches’s *In the Hand of Dante* (unfortunately, neither book proved much good, though Tosches had a fine radical premise). In 2004 Harriet Rubin brought out a combination of biography and analysis, *Dante in Love*, its strengths and weaknesses encapsulated in the overheated subtitle: *The World's Greatest Poem and How it Made History*. The book earned Rubin a lengthy NPR interview, never mind that her subject was one of the most thoroughly discussed in history; on-air she cited T. S. Eliot's claim that “Dante and Shakespeare divide
the modern world between them," then asserted that, these days, the Florentine took up "more and more of the sky."

More and more bandwidth, certainly: new-millennial fascination with the Comedy results in thousands of items on a Web search. But Google hardly offers the best place to appreciate Dante's present influence. The overwhelming example would be Peter Jackson's movie trilogy The Lord of the Rings. Tolkein's novels, to be sure, outlined a Christian redemption tale similar in many respects to that of the Comedy. But in the films, Jackson and his collaborators make transparent, not to say ham-fisted, use of effects from Inferno and Purgatory. Nor does it matter if the movies' brain trust never read a word of the original terza rima. What they put on-screen derived from material that's become common visual and conceptual currency, including the famed engravings by Doré.

The demonic Orcs, for instance, are summoned out of a region modeled on the Inferno's Ninth Circle, the icebound Cocytus. This bottomland lies below the tower of the diabolic lord Saruman, a potentate at once devastating yet trapped. As for images of Purgatory—which derive primarily from Dante, who dreamed up his Middle Realm out of legends of his era and phrases from St. Paul—even a secondhand familiarity with that sin-cleansing Mountain will call to mind the fourteenth-century poem at the twenty-first-century films' repeated long shots of Frodo and Sam, laboring up terrible steeps to rid themselves of evil. Also, Jackson presents a simulacrum for the Earthly Paradise at the top of the Purgatory, namely the Elf Kingdom. In this leafy domain the dominant figure, like Beatrice on the mountaintop, is a flashing-eyed superwoman.

Correlations of this kind can be forced, shoehorning any story into Dante's frame. A more serious problem may be the reverse: the Comedy may get cut down to iPod-size. With that in mind, I must point out that Jackson created his films without recourse to the Paradiso. The closing canticle enacts the poet's bravest leap of the imagination, at once lasers and lectures, gossamer material that had no place among Jackson's galumphing heavy cavalry. But elsewhere in the films, the parallels amount to a telling case of the Comedy's contemporary penetration into image and meaning. An extraordinary impact for an epic about an afterlife to which few now give credence, composed in a form and language fewer still can penetrate.
Thus my goal: a fresh explanation of that impact. I'll proceed by analysis of three major images in the work, each occurring at similar junctures late in their canticles. This reading owes something to Singleton and to followers like John Freccero and the Hollanders—though in the end I'll argue against them, posing an alternative to the ruling interpretation of the last half-century. After that, with Dante's three signal metaphors in mind, I'll suggest an overarching psychological or anthropological paradigm at work. My suggestion derives in part from long-ago reading of Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1974), and in part from others like Joseph Meeker and Gaetano Cipolla. Like them, I find the Poem most telling in the interplay of its archetypes.

Extravagant as his *Comedy* is, its vastness and extremity far greater than anything by Jackson or Tolkein, Dante nonetheless puts the period to each of the three journeys within his journey by means of something small and ordinary. The word that concludes each canticle is *stelle*, stars: a glimmering diminuendo in which the sound softens from fricative to glottal to mere breath. But of course this contains considerable power as well. Mark Musa, in his notes to the final lines of *Purgatory*, points out that the word suggests "the upward movement towards God." And Musa, with his blank-verse tercets in American English, makes the best translation to quote for my purposes; I cite by canto and line.

Throughout the *Comedy*, then, what guides Dante's Pilgrim towards salvation, and what affords comprehension of God's plan, often finds fragile embodiment, fragile as starlight. Indeed, the contrary holds true. Infernal landmarks are generally notable for their size, the devils and damned saddled with grotesque protuberance; the same proportions apply to the worst trials of the purgatorial mountain. Hence the dramatic problem of *Paradise*, the challenge to create story tension in a place of infinite harmony, extends to the problem of creating images: what shape can enlightenment take when any natural form prompts connection to the Fall? Dante's best-known solution, ingenious yet everyday, is the Celestial Rose, a characterization he first awards the highest Empyrean in a tercet that begins on line 115 of Canto XXX:
And if the lowest tier alone can hold
so great a brilliance, then how vast the space
of this Rose to its outer petals' reach!

The image places a measureless theater, a seat of infinite power, within a flower easy to pluck.

An impressive sleight of hand—but its greatest accomplishment may be the dialogue it helps set up across the epic, a relationship among three closing images. The first two occur at similar points in *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, and these visions in the pit of Hell, at the peak of Purgatory, and beside the stream of lights that borders the Rose present, together, a marvelous paradox. Their progression embodies the opposite of what you would expect; it moves from ostensible power to ostensible weakness.

The first of these climactic images looms in *Inferno* XXXI. On a plateau above the icy bottommost circles of traitors (still above Lucifer, that is), what the Pilgrim sees elicits a confused comparison to a metropolis: "I soon / made out what seemed to be high, clustered towers. / 'Master,' I said, 'what city lies ahead?'" (lines 19-21). Even after Virgil has corrected his Pilgrim, explaining that the uprights ahead are the half-buried giants who rebelled against Jupiter, the urban analogy continues. Dante first makes reference to the towers that circle the Sienese fortress Montereggioni (line 40), then mentions the immense bronze pinecone that, in the poet's time, stood outside St. Peter's in Rome (line 59).

These references join with other allusions made during the recent descent to suggest that primordial figure of vanity and overreach, the Tower of Babel. We are reminded, explicitly, that Nimrod commanded the Tower to be built; we sense, without being told, the claustrophobia of Lower Hell, gated by Dis at the top and Lucifer in the pit. The connection to Dis is implicit in the Pilgrim's very word for the skyscraper-giants. The question "what city . . . ?" uses not *città*, but the more complicated *terra*, suggestive of an entire "*terra*"-tory or city-state.

Nonetheless, Musa, Singleton, Allen Mandelbaum, and others translate the word as "city," and Musa and Singleton note the reiteration from Canto VIII, when the devils atop the walls of Dis refuse the Pilgrim and his guide entrance until an angel descends and pulls
heavenly rank; outside Dis, Dante twice uses the broader *terra*. Therefore, the Pilgrim stumbles through the same dread city now, in the lowest circles, just as down here too, the Sodom that most often comes to his mind is Florence. Pilgrim Dante may be approaching the Devil himself, but he asks a natural question, the same as must have occurred more than once to exile Dante. Catching sight of a new hilltop stronghold: *che terra è questa!*

Now Lucifer, in the final canto, presents a tower still more frightening. Virgil however introduces him as the city we already know: “This is he, this is Dis...” (XXXIV, line 20). Also he’s first taken for a windmill, another down-to-earth association, though made unsettling by links to night and fog (lines 4-6). But whatever we call the three-headed thing at the center of the Abyss, the first of such giants seen up close, Nimrod in Canto XXXI, presents a deliberate foreshadowing.

Like the monster below him, Nimrod stands immense yet locked down, half-buried, and Virgil calls attention to the hunter’s horn and its strap, both suggestive of Satan’s leathery wings. More significantly, both creatures remain oblivious to their visitors. Nimrod’s outburst “*Raphèl mai amècche zabi almì*” (line 70) remains impenetrable (Singleton’s summary of attempts at analysis occupies the better part of two pages), and the exclamation should defy understanding, given the giant’s connection to Babel. But the gibberish is most unnerving for its near-intelligibility, like the jabber of a psychotic in an alley. It induces sympathy—there but for fortune—even as it anticipates Satan’s blind absorption in his three-headed chewing.

In the twinned towers of Nimrod and Lucifer, the threat of entrapment is heightened, just as the repeated open *a* in the giant’s nonsense suggests a cry of attack. But these slum landmarks represent the worst of God’s universe as much for their *self-inflicted* solitary confinement as for any freakish external affect. And we very nearly get under their skin; Pilgrim and poet crawl through the fur on Satan’s haunch in order to escape.

The closing cantos of *Purgatory* have their hard-to-figure devices as well. Only a century ago, for instance, did exegesis by Edward Moore and Charles Grandgent clarify much of what Dante meant by the phantasmagoric charade up in the Earthly Paradise. We now under-
stand how, in hallucinatory allegory, Purgatory XXIX, XXX, and XXXII present the elements and history of the Christian faith. Yet to unveil these systems of meaning reveals other subtleties. Consider the final tercet-plus-one of the Purgatory, the sonic effect of the original Italian.

When the Pilgrim turns at last towards the stelle, towards heaven, he's just been baptized in the santissima waters of Eunoë (bathing in the River Lethe lets a soul into this Eden; bathing in Eunoë enables the ascent to Heaven). He has been made new, "refreshed like a newly-leaved plant." His creator cloaks the finale in a fugue of repeating assonance and consonance:

Io ritornai da la santissima onda  
riatto si come piante novelle  
rinovellate di novella fronda  
Puro e disposto a salire le stelle.

No English translation captures the nuance. As if anticipating the games that Vladimir Nabokov later played with the name of his imaginary child-lover in the first lines of Lolita, Dante here opens the mouth wider with each softening syllable of the repeated novelllahh, while at the same time playing conceptually off the repeating flow of a river's current (onda means "wave"). Also, most English renderings are hampered by using "tree" for piante, actually the more generic "plants." Not that Musa and Singleton and others don't have reason for choosing "tree," though the Italian is another common Latinate, albero. Nonetheless, translators wish to draw out the correlation between the Pilgrim's newly blooming spirit and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The poem's protagonist spends much of the thirty-second and thirty-third cantos of Purgatory (the final cantos) meditating on that Tree. Already a "miracle of height" (XXXII, line 41) it goes through miraculous changes at the hands of Beatrice and her angels. Though the Pilgrim understands this mountaintop is Eden, he first spies the tree "stripped of leaf and fruit" (line 39). Then later, like his own revived soul at canticle's end, the tree erupts magically into bloom at a touch of the "pole" (line 49) that is Christ's cross and faith. Still, from its first leafless appearance, this Tree is identified, in the original, as "una pianta" (line 37).
Now, surrounding this tree on the peak, just as down in the meadowlands at Purgatory's foot, one finds a number of other trees, all unremarkable. In the canticle's first episodes, they offer simple shade, as souls rest in preparation for the challenges upslope. Then, after the Pilgrim enters Purgatory proper, as he climbs its ever-steeper terraces, he encounters only two trees of any note. Both are said to be offshoots of Adam's and Eve's pianta on the mountaintop (XXIV, line 117), but Dante calls the first alber (XXII, line 131) and the second pomo, a shorthand for apple-tree (XXIV, line 104). These stand on the Terrace of the Gluttons, where former profligates stagger along emaciated, more Gollum than Frodo. The plant life, full of tormenting fruit, engages the poet's imagination wonderfully: the first grows upside down, a renunciation via botany, and both harbor magic voices of warning.

All this presents a distinct contrast to the outstanding "plant" up beyond the River Lethe, the tallest tree there and the one honored with a chanting circle-dance by Beatrice, her angels, and a monstrous but gentle menagerie. Despite such company, Eden's tree at first carries a faint suggestion of Nimrod's and Lucifer's towers: an immense yet barren upright, silent and "stripped." Dante could hardly have conveyed a more vivid contrast to the rest of the Earthly Paradise, that "heavenly forest thick with living green" (XXVII, line 2), or to any of the trees down the mountain. This one stands as a naked totem for Original Sin, no particular fruit or species, but rather a root genus.

Then, immediately following this mute allegory of the Fall, the pianta goes on to represent the Resurrection. In expressing this aspect of his metaphor Dante allows his fancy free rein, unleashing the canticle's last surreal excesses. This begins with the most bizarre of the local fauna, the griffin-Christ, which touches Adam's tree, "returning to it what it once brought forth" (XXXII, line 51, and the line in Italian offers another gem of sonic balance: "e quel di lei a lei lasciò legato"). After that the pageant turns as carnivalesque as anything in Rabelais—while never losing control of the humble central image. Beatrice sits protecting the roots, and the plant is spared the worst developments. Those take place in the chariot, and show us again the infernal tower: a whore on a throne "like a fort / high on a hill" (lines 148-49).
The interrelations glitter, impossible to miss even amid passages that remain obscure. In *Purgatorio’s* final canto, for instance, Beatrice speaks in riddles, using numerology to prophesy better times; Pietro Mazzamuto has taken the best stab at explanation, but for my purposes, what matters is how easily such arcana could have overwhelmed the work. This *Comedy* could have been reduced to a *Da Vinci Code*, but Dante provides consistent relief from the abstruse via the anchoring figure of the Tree. Beatrice herself at one point simplifies matters by a reference to the “pianta” (original, line 57). She tells her guest that when he writes about these visions, above all:

... be sure you that describe
the sad condition of the tree you saw
despoiled, not once but twice...
(XXXIII, lines 55-57).

That double despoiling provides stinging expression for Dante’s outraged over the corrupt church. Yet before a thing can be polluted, it must once have been pure, and the true power of this canticle’s final scenes derives not from angry invective that requires a footnote, but from a pleasurable experience as universal as a day in the park. For all his high dudgeon and esoterica, the poet never neglects the soothing and uplift that the episode must convey. Readers never lose sight of the luxuriant setting, diametrically opposed to the rubble-strewn lower Inferno; we’re never far from a restorative nap amid wildflowers, a midsummer’s night dream.

*Paradise*, in general, takes us a long way from such familiar points of reference. The realm of the Blest is something else again, all startling illuminations, keen but harmonious explanations, and darting movements over vast spaces. More than once the effects suggest computer animation or Internet hyperlinks, several centuries ahead of their time—but then the subject has no truck with time; it exists outside of time. Nor should anybody confuse the actual Paradise with its faint simulacrum, the Earthly Paradise. The Empyrean, the subject of the final cantos, has flowers and waters that recall the peak of Purgatory, but these too have gone unearthly.
The example most pertinent to my essay is the Pilgrim's first glimpse of the "stream" that forms the border to Highest Heaven in Canto XXX. In keeping with the mad experiment Dante conducts throughout the canticle, his attempt to embody experience that's beyond the body, this stream is not a stream, but rather a flowing ribbon of mosaic, its bits now jewels and now flames, a thread of infinite innocent sensuality and envy-free abundance, all distilled somehow from the Celestial Rose beyond.

In the Italian, the initial description resounds with the \( r \) and \( v \) of \textit{primavera}, the ruling rhyme of the first tercet. The rolling of the lips may suggest flowers bursting at springtime. But in any language, this foretaste of utmost Divinity takes us to strange waters:

\begin{quote}
And I saw light that was a flowing stream, 
blazing in splendid sparks between two banks 
painted by spring in miracles of color.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Out of this spring the sparks of living light 
were shooting up and settling on the flowers: 
they looked like rubies set in rings of gold. (lines 61-66)
\end{quote}

Miracle builds on miracle, with sentient glimmers that leap onto starflowers that turn to heirlooms, meanwhile incorporating allusion to both the Old Testament (Daniel 7:10, the "swift stream of fire") and the New (Revelation 22:1, the "river of the water of life, clear as crystal"). So image, sound, and concept come together to enhance the crossing of a final heavenly boundary. From here the Pilgrim will rise out of the nine widening spheres of Paradise and into the linked petals they all form together, impossibly but perfectly, at their zenith.

So too, over the next several stanzas, the poet takes care to have this crossing express again, as in the first canto of \textit{Paradise}, just how his Dante-character can understand so much that's beyond ordinary understanding. After the Pilgrim drinks from this impossible stream, "the sparks and flowers changed / into a greater festival: / ... both courts of Heaven in their reality." (lines 94-96) Here again, that is, our traveler has managed to "transhumanize"—as Musa renders \textit{trasumanar}, Dante's remarkable neologism from Canto I, line 70.
Simply to enter Paradise, back in the first canto, he needed to transcend to a fresh level of apprehension, and now here in Canto XXX, on the verge of his greatest epiphany, he needs to acquire his fullest powers of perception. Therefore, the Pilgrim undergoes a "transhuman" baptism, more potent than the earlier cleansings in Lethe and Eunoë.

For its creation of one heightened perspective after another, Musa declares in the Introduction to his translation, *Paradise* must be counted "the most 'artistic'" of the three canticles. Yet Dante understands as well that the art of the last thirty-three cantos can never violate the drama of the sixty-seven that came before. The experience, however epic, must retain aspects of human scale. Thus I will focus on another concluding image, which in dialogue with the two others I've looked at sets forth a fundamental human concern, a psychological essence. Once more I'll begin with a problem of translation.

The word that concerns me, "lume," occurs in the first line of the tercet quoted above [XXX, line 61]. The Italian doesn't translate as "light" in the standard sense, though that's the English word used by Musa, Singleton, and Mandelbaum, concurring in the same way they did with "tree" towards the end of *Purgatory*. Nevertheless, for "light" plain and simple, Italians use *luce*. *Lume*, which occurs a number of times during the book's closing cantos (the next iteration comes at line 100), connotes a relative weakness and smallness, an evanescence, as in the expressions *lume a olio*, an oil lamp, or *a lume di candela*, by candlelight. Nor is Dante's reliance on such a term explained simply by the technology of his time. He knows what *luce* is, and in XXX, line 59, he seems to set it up in opposition to the softer word, which follows soon after. In line 59, speaking of the heightened perception Beatrice is helping to create in her guest, he asserts "nulla luce è tanto mera," no light is so bright. Yet a few lines earlier still, in order to prepare her guest for such resplendence, the hostess uses no sun-image, but rather that of *il candelo*: "so is the candle for Its flame prepared." [line 54]

Once the Pilgrim's candle has been dipped into its stream of flame, in Canto XXX, his first impressions of the highest Heaven beyond are full of biplay between the all-powerful *luce* and the more confined and temporary *lume*. In XXXI, line 22, we have the "*luce divina,*" and in line 28 "*trina luce,*" "Triune Light"; both are direct
references to elements of God. In line 50, however, the Pilgrim sees the faces of the Blest "d'altrui lume fregiati," which Musa translates as "adorned in borrowed light," and in line 126, alongside one of the Comedy's several references to Phaeton and his tumbling chariot, the narrator describes how "il lume si fa scemo," dressing the smaller light in an idiom meaning to trick, to make a fool of someone. In any case, an accurate translation conveys the sense of light that's indirect or second-hand. It's not the thing itself, powerful enough to knock Phaeton from the sky.

Scholars have noted the pervading use of reflection and refraction. Singleton explains how, in the penultimate canto, the newcomer to the Celestial Rose discovers he's "been seeing by reflected light all the while." Such a process of discovery makes a natural correlation with the Pilgrim's continuing need to transhumanize; as he approaches each new aspect of the Divine Plan, he must first habituate himself to some smaller-scale model. The process carries through to canticle's end, since it's only in the last tercets that the Pilgrim can look upon God Himself. But my own reading doesn't concern that supreme illumination so much as its flickering domestic stand-in.

When Pilgrim Dante looks finally into the "Light Eternal fixed in Self alone" [XXXIII, line 124], poet Dante rises to the occasion via an alliterative tour de force that depends in large part on its manipulation of the light image—or more precisely, the degrees-of-light image. In this line the indivisible Alpha and Omega is addressed "O luce eterna," but soon after that the visitor treats God made flesh, the man Jesus, in terms more vulnerable: "come lume reflesso," "as light reflected" [line 128]. The Godhead shines without source and without end, whereas its earthly embodiment glints and is gone, and over the final cantos of the Comedy the recurrent opposition of sunlight and candlelight creates dramatic tension. The counterpoint nags at the revelations; the play on words evokes, like Dante-Derrida, the tenuousness of mystic experience.

Noting this tension, this insubstantiality, Freccero and others go to the extreme of suggesting that Paradise describes an exposition unique in all eternity. This one time only, runs the argument, have the Elect descended from their Empyrean chorus to instruct this one special visitor. This reading has some textual support, but it strikes me as making too much of the Pilgrim, and calling attention to the
poet who made him, a poet elsewhere so clear-eyed about sins of pride. I prefer to emphasize how in Dante, God’s house is free of blast and thunder.

The quiet lapping of _luce_ and _lume_ works against inflated rhetoric about omnipotence or righteousness. Had our narrator gone for a more stentorian effect, like an Italian Isaiah, we would’ve come to a briar patch rather than a rose, a place that would brook no transhumanizing. But Dante plays up the quieter side of his light-dialogue, with rhymes like _candela_ and _favilla_, spark. So too, even in _Paradise_, Dante gains a sensory grounding from the canticle’s closing image. The obvious association for this play of illumination and murmurs would be a late-night Mass or novena. But the dappled conclusion of _Paradise_ also suggests another context, earthier, and calls up notions that run counter to much of the past century’s Dante scholarship.

I mean that the softer light of Highest Heaven, in concert with the garden-tree and the slum-tower, enacts something more ambivalent than a “conversion narrative.” The conversion story, the essence of Singleton’s insight, certainly demands the respect of anyone who cares about “the Poem.” The Bollingen translator claimed that Dante gave us an “allegory of theologians” rather than a mere “allegory of poets,” and thus his odyssey has its “proper end not in the life after death, but here in this life” (this in a 1954 essay, “Dante’s Allegory”). So Singleton, and most twentieth-century thinkers with him, see the work as principally an imaginative reframing of its creator’s journey back to faith from the dark wood of exile. According to this interpretation, Dante’s verses had the same root purpose as Scripture: a means to Divinity for both author and auditor.

Of course I am simplifying. That’s what happens to any system of thought under the wash of sixty or seventy years, and with 2020 in sight, Singleton’s analysis begins to feel simple, indeed burdensome. It makes me uneasy to see the conversion reading lowered into place like an inviolable monolith in the notes to Robert Pinsky’s translation of _Inferno_ (otherwise very fine, _tempestoso_).

With regard to the final epiphanies of _Paradise_, then, I must point out their impossible-to-overlook intimations of what used to be called “the act of love.” The glowing eyes and flying sparks limn a growing closeness, and can’t help but suggest a tryst by candlelight. Not just
any sort of tryst, to be sure, nothing juvenile or prurient. Rather, given the context of talking with the dead, combined with the narrator's much-remarked-upon aging (especially at the beginning of Canto XXV), the correct association seems to be some youthful romantic encounter recollected years later, an embrace in the dark once fumbling but now—as the candle of our sensual being gutters—transcendent.

I make this connection fully aware that the author knew conversion. Dante's revival of faith makes itself felt on first reading, in the difference between the teeth-gnashing *Inferno*, begun when he was only a few years out of Florence, and the awed receptivity of the later *Paradise*. And even in the earliest chapters, Dante gives carnal desire its comeuppance, most famously in the case of Paolo and Francesca (*Inferno* V). Likewise, towards the close of *Paradise*, when the poet requires some emphatic expression of desire and contact, he speaks of a baby at its mother's breast (XXX, line 82-84). Nonetheless, at a number of points in those final cantos, it requires no great stretch to imbue the transcendent experience with the ardor of a mature lover, a desire purified by time. Doesn't Master Virgil claim, at the center of the journey, "Natural love can never be at fault?" (*Purgatory* XVII, line 94) And higher up the mountain doesn't a second philosopher-poet, Statius, reiterate the point? A clarifying latter-day companion piece would be *Krapp's Last Tape*, Samuel Beckett's piercing rejection of epiphany. In this one-act play, an old man fast-forwards through his younger self's recorded pontifications about Meaning; he prefers to hear, again and again, a few words about a lost lover.

At the end of the *Comedy*, I believe, "natural love" participates in "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (XXXIII, line 145). And that participation reveals, further, something intrinsic to the work's lasting impact. The concluding images from the end of *Inferno* to the end of the whole—from tower to tree to candle—delineate a consistent movement away from power.

In worldly terms, each of the metaphorical objects is more fragile than the last. Dante first leaves pride and its towers behind, he leaves it to those who feel nothing beyond their own grudges and lusts, and then next he embodies pride's cleansing in the flutter of a newly blossoming tree, and then finally he locates the greatest force in the universe in the frail and transitory glow of a candle. It's a reverse
Pilgrim’s Progress, distinguished by a steady agitation against ordinary representations of the Almighty. It’s an epic demonstration that the Truth and the Way dwell in the meek and the low.

The continuing power of The Divine Comedy depends, in large part, on the importance it awards frailty in its scheme of the eternal. The Poem can still upset expectation, via this tension between the power it seeks to express and the fragility in its instruments of expression. Not all devices in this rare epic partake of that fragility, to be sure. The organization for instance remains more formidable than anything in all but the smallest handful of literary artifacts (Joyce’s Ulysses comes to mind). Still, as I move from textual specifics to general conclusions, I am guided by the Comedy’s tension between mighty themes and lowly embodiments. It says something, for instance, that the comparison with Jackson’s Lord of the Rings is essentially one between crowd scenes and intimate encounters. Jackson crams the screen with armies; Dante pauses for a whisper.

Which brings me to my overarching theory of the work, perhaps psychological, perhaps anthropological. The idea owes something to Jan Kott, and to Joseph Meeker’s The Comedy of Survival, a central text in what’s come to be called literary ecology. I’m also grateful to Gaetano Cipolla and his brief essay about teaching the work’s mythic archetypes. In any case, I start with the term “comedy,” a word many an explicator has wondered over, and take Dante’s masterpiece to be at heart a parable of survival, of getting through and getting on—and so a conversion narrative in a different sense, in which conversion can never be a lone, fixed entity, but rather a process of lifelong iteration. The conclusion of this Pilgrim’s journey is itself an iteration, since we know that our visionary won’t remain floating on air before “the wheel in perfect balance turning” (XXXIII, line 143). Rather, he must tumble away, an out-of-balance pinwheel.

Or Phaeton, young and proud, dumped from his chariot with no one to blame but himself. Indeed, how often the Comedy entails a fall! When our narrator isn’t collapsing physically, as at the end of the Paolo and Francesca episode, he must apologize for a mental breakdown, and his apologies multiply as the story goes on, as his vulgar Italian and bookworm’s analogies prove ever more unequal to his task. Yet his quest survives each stumble, and so it takes on the classic pattern of comedy combined with parable. Culture cannot exist
without such parables, their major players at once hero and clown, here Quixote, there Shine the Signifying Monkey, and more recently Beckett's Unnameable: "I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on."

But of course Beckett's trilogy, another that goes beyond the life of the body, is also a comedy in the ordinary sense; it makes us laugh. The same can be said of *Quixote* or any other picaresque, whereas Dante's voyage offers hardly a chuckle. Our protagonist may fall—and the monolith of the conversion narrative along with him—but it's never a pratfall. This artist doesn't amuse, he fascinates: now poignant, now uncanny, now brilliant. The exception that proves the rule comes in *Inferno*’s Malebolge episodes, but even then it's the demons who play the stooges with locker-room nicknames. The Pilgrim and Guide carry on with horrified rigor, and what I'm proposing doesn't ignore that rigor. Rather, I'm calling attention to its compassion, its humanity.

Human fragility, never so obvious as when we insist "I must go on," lies at the root of why the *Comedy* has become so much more than a lovely literary antique—another *Orlando Furioso*, say, also a "comedy of survival," and in fact constructed on Dante's model. The difference can be seen most clearly when we consider the Poem the way Kott looked at Shakespeare's drama: as representations of the psyche in development. With *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* in mind, the three images I considered emerge as signals for critical stages in spiritual and emotional growth.

The psychological principles that underlie my reading are best known in their framing by Carl Jung. It was Jung who argued that every individual has his or her "Shadow," a realm of things we'd rather not know about ourselves, extremes of our nature and our desire, horrifying yet impossible to dismiss. By extension, the primary work in achieving wholeness as a personality is that of embracing and integrating the Shadow. Then, too, Jung was one of the thinkers who helped refine and articulate the idea of the Unknowable, intrinsic to how our species understands the world. Every civilization recognizes the existence of the Unknowable, some all-encompassing essence out beyond the ken of the wisest sachem, or of the most whole and actualized personality [beyond, too, Jung's own dubious explorations of the "cosmic Overmind"]]. To describe the Unknowable as God is actually to diminish it, as observant Jews would say
about writing His name.

The Divine Comedy embodies these three aspects of human growth and potential via a sequence of illustrations or signifiers so fitting as to seem arranged back at the dawn of Jung's Collective Unconscious. One might use an older locution; one might say, concerning this archetypal sequence, that the Comedy "images them forth." In any case the context requires, surely, explication in poetic terms.

The tower terrifies; it houses our most fearsome icon of self. And yet at the same time it shows us the walls that must come down while we do the work of wholeness, a many-step program that will turn a naked stump in the middle of our life's road to something fully realized and alive, of hopeful green stuff woven, and once that high yet still earthly goal has been achieved, once we've embraced the totality of our embodied spirits, then the candle emerges clearly ahead, the still, small flame that leads us on to our true calling, to a permanence and value we cannot name yet can never cease believing exists. Throughout these passages, this evolution toward a happy end, progress takes the form of renunciation, of putting off our worldly armor and becoming ever more vulnerable.

Tower, tree, candle: shadow, wholeness, hope. A sturdy chain of meaning, that, one with the strength to haul The Divine Comedy across a near-millennium by now, and to ground it firmly in the consciousness of a time like our own, mad for individual self-actualization. Yet as I finish laying out the argument it also begins to seem a bit simple. It begins to sound, almost, like the string of platitudes out of an Oscar winner.

Naturally, I have assurances that my work is nothing so superficial, no pop-mythic imposition on the text. I remember my reading lists, my decades of dedication. My analysis doesn't exclude Singleton's, no more than his negated the so-called "romantic" interpretations of De Sanctis and earlier critics. Nevertheless, after so much of this Comedy, I find myself feeling like the joke's on me—like I'm merely playing the role I was born to, as a younger disciple, when it came my turn to wrestle with so protean a narrative. So this journey too ends in freefall. The seeker has only a moment before the miracle and then staggers dizzily away. The best he can hope for is that when he returns to himself he can still count on so rich and sagacious a text as a companion.