

The Freedom of the Will in Milton and Dante

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ABSTRACT

In the present paper the author intends to analyze the concept of free will in John Milton's thought, in particular in his *Paradise Lost*, and to compare it with Dante Alighieri's theory on free will, arguing also in favor of the thesis according to which *Paradise Lost* can be considered an early-modern version of Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, taking in account also the fact that Milton was a Dante-scholar and his main work was deeply inspired by Dante's *Comedy*. In connection to Milton's work are analyzed – among other elements – his animist materialism, his special monism, his relation to Hobbes, and his antitrinitarianism, as foundations of his idea on free will. In connection to Dante's work the author tries to give an insight to his peculiar dualism, to his ideas on free will as expressed in the *Comedy* and in the *Monarchia*. In the elaboration of his own arguments the author uses the works of some highly ranked scholars.

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KEY WORDS: Alighieri; Milton; Hobbes; *Divine Comedy*; *Monarchia*; *Paradise Lost*; Leviathan; free will; monism; dualism; animist materialism; antitrinitarianism; Neoplatonism; Satan; shadow-body; arbitrium; Briareus; poetry; theology; philosophy.

ABSTRACT

Nel presente studio l'autore intende analizzare il concetto di libero arbitrio nel pensiero di John Milton, in particolare nel suo *Paradise Lost*, e compararlo con la teoria sul libero arbitrio elaborata da Dante Alighieri, argomentando pure a favore della tesi secondo la quale *Paradise Lost* può essere considerato come una versione proto-moderna della *Divina Commedia* dell'Alighieri, tenendo presente che Milton era uno studioso di Dante e la propria opera principale era profondamente ispirata dalla *Commedia*. In connessione all'opera di Milton sono oggetti di analisi – tra l'altro – il materialismo animista, il monismo particolare, la sua relazione con Hobbes, e l'antitrinitarismo, come fondamenti della sua idea sul libero arbitrio. Per quanto riguarda l'opera di Dante, l'autore intende rilevare alcuni dettagli importanti del suo monismo peculiare e delle sue idee sul libero arbitrio espresse nella *Commedia* e nella *Monarchia*. Nell'elaborazione delle proprie tesi l'autore usa lavori di alcuni studiosi altamente riconosciuti.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Alighieri; Milton; Hobbes; *Divina Commedia*; *Monarchia*; *Paradise Lost*; Leviatano; libero arbitrio; monismo; dualismo; materialismo animista; antitrinitarismo; neoplatonismo; Satana; corpo-ombra; arbitrium; Briareus; poesia; teologia; filosofia.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I intend to explore the concept of free will as expressed in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674) and other of his writings – comparing it to Dante's theory on free will –, providing also a brief outline of his criticism of Scholasticism which informed his professed anti-trinitarianism. Indeed, I will argue that *Paradise Lost* be considered an early-modern version of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for which Milton is known to have held high regard.

1. MILTON'S THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTION ON FREE WILL, SALVATION, AND PERDITION

1.1. ON MILTON'S SOURCES AND HIS ANIMIST MATERIALISM, HIS AM-BIVALENT OPPOSITION TO HOBBS. THE INFLUENCE OF HOBBS'S NOMINALISM IN MILTON'S WORK

John Milton is a poet-philosopher (similarly to Dante) and author of *Paradise Lost* that resonates with the consequences of exercising man's God-given power of free will. Stephen M. Fallon provides us a comprehensive analysis of Milton's philosophical sources (Descartes, Hobbes, Cambridge Platonists Ralph Cudworth and Henry More) by which Milton integrated these elements into his own philosophical theory while working on *Paradise Lost*.

An important point in Fallon's analysis is the relevance of Milton's animist materialism, by which «Milton's politics finds a central place for a kind of freedom [which was] denied by Hobbes» (Fallon 1991: 110), with the reservation that no matter the eventual parallels between «Milton's thought and ancient Patristic texts, the contemporary metaphysical debate is the indispensable context of Milton's materialism» (Fallon 1991: 5). In fact, Fallon also intended to explore the ways in which *Paradise Lost* reacts in some way to the contemporary philosophical debates: as an example, it is clear that Milton represents the devils with Cartesian and even more with Hobbesian anthropological features, by which these devils can avoid Milton's peculiar monism as well as Descartes' radical dualism and Hobbes's radical monism. Even this way the Miltonian devils show more affinity to Hobbes's materialism. Fallon intends to give an interpretation also of «the War in Heaven as a battle between Milton's vitalist and Hobbes's mechanist monisms, a battle in which Milton grants his monism the victory it would never achieve outside the poem» (Fallon 1991: 7).

Mortalism, which became characteristic in Milton's mature period, and which was an inevitable concomitant of his materialism, was still absent

from his early poetry. In the period in which Milton completed his Latin prose entitled *On Christian Doctrine*¹ and his main poem *Paradise Lost*, he rejected the dualism of his earlier poetry, which means that he opposed Neoplatonism which was the dominant trend at Christ's College (Cambridge), where he completed his undergraduate studies.²

Thus, Milton in his mature period surely wouldn't share the Platonist views expressed previously in *Comus*,³ but still would sustain his intuitive conception on the spiritualization of body and/or the materialization of soul: «he would find a place for this intuition in a non-Platonic and materialist metaphysic» (Fallon 1991: 83). In *Areopagitica*⁴ we can see clearly the direction in which Milton was moving (in connection to the mind-body relationship) at the time: «for as in a body, when the blood is fresh, the spirits pure and vigorous, not only to vital, but to rational faculties, [...] it argues in what good plight and constitution the body is» (Milton 1644 [JMRR], quoted in Fallon 1991: 86). Here we deal with the corporeal Galenic spirits, refined from the blood, which – in contemporary thought – usually were excluded from the operations of reason and of will.

As we can read (also) about all this in *Paradise Lost*:

¹ Milton, *De Doctrina Christiana*: a theological treatise completed in 1665 and published posthumously, in 1825.

² According to Fallon's adequate formulation of Milton's animist materialism: «instead of being trapped in an ontologically alien body, the soul is one with the body. Spirit and matter become for Milton two modes of the same substance: spirit is rarefied matter, and matter is dense spirit. All things, from insensate object through souls, are manifestations of this one substance. Like Hobbes, Milton circumvented the mind-body problem that vexed Descartes, Gassendi, and the Platonists and that moved them to construct elaborate models of two-substance interaction. But where Hobbes assimilated mind to matter and explained mental events mechanically, Milton assimilated matter to current notions of mind and moved toward the position that all corporeal substance is animate, self-active, and free» (Fallon 1991: 80-81).

³ Milton, *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*, published in 1637.

⁴ A prose polemic published in 1644, at the height of the English Civil War.

O *Adam*, one Almighty is, from whom
 All things proceed, and up to him return,
 If not deprav'd from good, created all
 Such to perfection, one first matter all,
 Indu'd with various forms, various degrees
 Of substance, and in things that live, of life;
 But more refin'd, more spiritous, and pure,
 As neerer to him plac't or neerer tending
 Each in thir several active Sphears assignd,
 Till body up to spirit work, in bounds
 Proportiond to each kind. So from the root
 Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves
 More aerie, last the bright consummate floure
 Spirits odorous breathes: flours and thir fruit
 Mans nourishment, by gradual scale sublim'd
 To vital Spirits aspire, to animal,
 To intellectual, give both life and sense,
 Fansie and understanding, whence the Soule
 Reason receives, and reason is her being,
 Discursive, or Intuitive; discourse
 Is ofttest yours, the latter most is ours,
 Differing but in degree, of kind the same.

(*Paradise Lost* [Milton 2007/1674], 5.469-5.490)⁵

According to the English poet-philosopher's conception, life is the normal condition of matter: Milton «gladly strips soul of its special status – and [...] of its natural immortality – in order to celebrate the vitality of all matter» (Fallon 1991: 107), moreover it is rightly his animist materialism to allow him to avoid incorporealism and/or a mechanistic approach which could compromise his theory on the freedom of the will. His pe-

⁵ In connection (also) to these verses writes Fallon: by reinterpreting Aristotle's conception of the pneuma in *On Christian Doctrine*, Milton «moves away from hylomorphism toward materialism. In *Paradise Lost* that materialistic turn finds expression in an idiosyncratic version of Galen. Milton addresses the relationship between body and soul or matter and spirit in Raphael's lecture to Adam on the continuity between man and angel» (Fallon 1991: 102).

cular materialism is an important contribution to the metaphysical debate of the 17th century. It has to be stressed that Milton and Hobbes – no matter their differences in politics and ethics – are on the same side: they shared the view according to which all that exists is body, even if the (supposed) incorporeal body is inaccessible to the senses. So, Hobbes and Milton participate in the same materialist project, but they are not on the same page in every detail.⁶ As for the consequences for the concept of freedom and free will, it is evident that Milton’s animist materialism gives foundation and relevance to those aspects of freedom which are denied by Hobbes (Cf. Fallon 1991: 110).

It is notorious that Hobbes – by composing his own *Objections* to Descartes’ *Meditations* –, attacked first of all Descartes’ incorporealism and innatism. On the basis of these *Objections* and Descartes’ *Replies* it is obvious that they mutually refused each other’s definitions of “mind”, “idea”, “will” etc. But even so, there are several important similarities shared by Hobbes and Descartes. For both authors, geometry was the foundation for natural philosophy, both excluded formal and final cause from scientific investigation and argued in favor of a mechanistic universe based exclusively on material and efficient causation. Both denied the existence of atoms and of a vacuum, and both formulated some corpuscular theories that correspond with Epicurean atomists like Gassendi and Charleton (Cf. Fallon 1991: 31). Neither Hobbes nor Descartes accept Bacon’s prescriptions and start their argumentations from different a priori principles. Hobbes’s starting point is that the universe contains only matter in motion which can be undertaken to mathematical analysis. «In his dedication to *De Corpore* (1655) he praises Galileo for opening “the gate of natural philosophy universal, which is the knowledge of the nature of *motion*”» (Fallon 1991: 32, Hobbes quoted by Fallon).

⁶ As Fallon writes in connection to all this: «[i]f [Milton and Hobbes] both agree that there is no such thing as incorporeal substance, they disagree on the nature of corporeal substance. Hobbes views life [...] as the mechanical motion of a complex of essentially inert parcels of matter; Milton views matter as essentially alive» (Fallon 1991: 107).

Hobbes's concept of "matter" differs from Descartes's *res extensa* because of the fact that its main characteristic is motion (and not extension), transcending the conception of inert matter, and that spirit or form is the principle of motion and of life. According to Hobbes, life at most is a special case (and not a principle) of motion (Cf. Fallon 1991: 32-33). By abolishing the boundaries between human, animal and mechanical life, Hobbes negates the difference between the human being's spontaneous actions and the supposedly passive reactions of animals or machines.⁷

For Hobbes as a voluntarist (and here we can observe some aspects of the important differences between Hobbes's, Calvin's, Milton's, as well as Dante's conception concerning the relationship between sin and punishment) the damnation of the sinners who acted criminally by necessity, can be traced back exclusively to God's will.⁸ Evidently, Hobbes's determinism destroys the meaning of moral choice, meanwhile his nominalism annihilates the sense of the term *good*. For Hobbes knowledge comes exclusively from sensations caused in certain bodies by other bodies, words (including the "universals") are only modes to talk about bodies. In such a theory there is no room for the existence and the transmission of moral principles, "good" and "evil" are merely conventional terms related to corporeal experience, and do not derive from immutable principles: these have their origin in contracts, primarily in the social contract. Because sin means the violation of the law, in the state of

⁷ As Fallon stresses, in Hobbes's theory «[t]he entire apparatus of Renaissance faculty psychology, with the *will as semi-autonomous entity responding to the direction of the reason and the prompting of the passions*, is rejected. Hobbes replaces it with a model of sensory input translated mechanically into behavioral output» (Fallon 1991: 36, emphasis added).

⁸ Differently from Calvin (with whom Hobbes apparently shows some similarity), according to Hobbes – in Fallon's formulation – «*our wills are moved by nature, not by God's immediate intervention*. Hobbes does not bother himself with arguments about original sin or the universal meriting of damnation – his interests are metaphysical, physical, and political rather than theological» (Fallon 1991: 38, emphasis added).

nature there cannot be sin. To avoid sin, the subject-citizen should follow the command of the sovereign, i.e. of God's earthly representative.⁹

The Cambridge Platonists rejected Hobbes's materialism as well as Descartes's dualistic mechanism. Ralph Cudworth and Henry More sustained that Hobbes's materialism is the logical conclusion of Descartes's mechanism, and together with this they also rejected Descartes's and Hobbes's voluntarism. All this criticism had a strong influence on Milton.¹⁰ It should be noted that the Cambridge Platonists rejected 17th century's materialist mechanism with its theological implications. Henry More attempted to save the notion of spirit, trying to accommodate it with the materialist conception of *extension as criterion of reality*, meanwhile other scholars (connected to the Cambridge Platonists), and among them Milton, tended to reject any notion of incorporeal substance and to accept materialism unreservedly (Cf. Fallon 1991: 78).

In considering the Miltonian description of Satan and the devils, we can grasp clearly Milton's opposition to (and at the same time the functional usage of) Hobbes's philosophy. Gravity, a main element in Hobbes's philosophy, symbolizes determinism (which is antithetical to Milton's thought) in *Paradise Lost*. Determinism is one of the foundations of mechanist materialism and also of Satanic philosophy. For Hobbes the mind is something epiphenomenal, so it follows the laws of physics and of geometry. Analogously, «the devils, too, proceeded from materialism to determinism» (Fallon 1991: 214). We can see that in the Miltonian figure of Satan, nominalism

⁹ According to Fallon's peculiar paraphrase of an important thesis of Hobbes: «*the illusion of autonomy fostered by the notion of free will [...] can disturb the docility of the political subject*. No abstract or transcendent notions of right and wrong should intervene between the authority of the civil government and the obedience of the governed» (Fallon 1991: 39, emphasis added).

¹⁰ As it is stressed by Fallon, «in his response to the sixth set of objections to his *Meditations*, Descartes asserts the same indifference of God's will that More and Cudworth attack as evidence of atheism in Hobbes» (Fallon 1991: 67).

joins empiricism in Satan's Hobbesian rationale for his rebellion. The angels obey God because of his goodness; the devils, like Hobbes, do not recognize any such a priori standard. Hobbes's God is like an earthly sovereign, to be obeyed for his power alone [...]. While Satan will have moments of remorse and clear perception of God's moral authority, his sin generates a Hobbesian nominalist conception of obedience (Fallon 1991: 220).¹¹

1.2. THE CENTRALITY OF THE DOCTRINE OF FREE WILL IN MILTON'S PHILOSOPHY. SOME REFLECTIONS ON MILTON'S CRITICISM OF SCHOLASTICISM, ON HIS ANTITRINITARIANISM, AND ON HIS POLITICAL HERMENEUTICS

According also to William Myers, free will was the governing idea in Milton's philosophy. Milton rejects the Scholastic teaching according to which God is *Actus Purus*, because he holds it to be incompatible with what he believes about willing, meanwhile he sustains his own thesis also by his antitrinitarian views. Freedom is not a corollary of Christian faith and practice for Milton, but their essence (Cf. Myers 2019, Ch. 1: «Milton and Free Will»).

One of the main difficulties in Milton's theological conception derives rightly from his antitrinitarian views:

within the Boethian and trinitarian Deity there is presumably a recognition from all eternity by Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of the need for a redemptive intervention in human affairs and an acceptance of how that intervention is to be effected. In Milton's scheme, however, the bloody sacrifice of the Son is the task of a subordinate. It is admittedly a voluntary action, and the subordinate in question has a 'filial', and not a merely 'creaturely', relation to the Father (Myers 2019, Ch. 1: «Milton and Free Will»).

¹¹ To this it has to be added that «Milton's devils can be more completely and consistently understood as Hobbesian beings than as Cartesian ones» (Fallon 1991: 221).

To understand the foundations of the antitrinitarianism of the English poet-philosopher, the starting-point has to be Milton's unpublished theological treatise, the already mentioned *De Doctrina Christiana*, completed (as it was indicated already, in 1665) almost simultaneously with *Paradise Lost*; in its Chapter V in Book I, entitled «De Filio Dei» («Of the Son of God») Milton made absolutely clear his view according to which (in Martin Dzelzainis's paraphrase) «the Son is not co-equal, co-eternal, or co-essential with the Father» (Dzelzainis 2007, published manuscript: 4).¹² And as for Milton's case for the toleration of antitrinitarianism, this case

ultimately rests on the argument that for one Protestant to persecute another is a form of self-contradiction, since it negates their own «main Principles». Somewhat less predictably, he [Milton] contrasts the persecution of nonconformists in England with the toleration extended to Protestant minorities in some Catholic countries: «for if the *French* and *Polonian* Protestants enjoy all this liberty among Papists, much more may a Protestant justly expect it among Protestants»,

but – as Dzelzainis rightly points out – what Milton claimed here «was disingenuous. Milton in 1673 knew [...] that Polish antitrinitarians were actually being persecuted» (Dzelzainis 2007, published manuscript: 5-6;

¹² As Dzelzainis explains, in many aspects, the most relevant of Milton's treatises is *Of true religion* (published in 1673), in which the English poet-philosopher «is more interested in finding common ground than sharpening differences [between Catholics and Protestants]. What all Protestants agree on “as the main Principles” is “that the Rule of true Religion is the Word of God only: and that their Faith ought not to be an implicit faith, that is, to believe, though as the Church believes, against or without express authority of Scripture”. A Protestant is someone who works out their faith on the basis of their own and not another's understanding of the scripture, even if that understanding turns out to be mistaken. The content of a belief, right or wrong, matters less than how it came to be held. This, rather than the degree of mistakenness, is what differentiates heresy from error [...] [and on the basis of this view] “the obstinate Papist [is] the only Heretick”, whereas “Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, Socinians, Arminians” are merely liable to err» (Dzelzainis 2007, published manuscript: 4-5, Milton quoted by Dzelzainis).

Milton quoted by Dzelzainis). Milton surely was aware of such a Jesuit-inspired intolerance in Poland (as he was aware of the fact that antitrinitarians were under threat in Protestant England), because this can be read in his *Instructions for the Agent to Russia* written in 1657.¹³

The Humble Petition and Advice of 1657 (the second and last codified constitution of England, after the *Instrument of Government* of 1653) meant a success for religious conservatives.

Although the Confession of Faith outlined in Article 11 was to be «recommended to the people» rather than made compulsory, liberty of conscience was denied to «Popery or Prelacy» or to those who did not «profess faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His eternal Son, the true God, and in the Holy Spirit, God co-equal with the Father and the Son, one God blessed for ever». Nor would «such who publish horrible blasphemies» be countenanced. This proscribing of antitrinitarianism may be what prompted Milton to resume work on [the already mentioned] *De Doctrina Christiana*, in which case we might see the treatise as a counter-statement of the fundamental verities even though there was no possibility of its being published under the Protectorate. Indeed, Article 11 probably contributed as much to Milton's disenchantment with the Cromwellian regime as its increasingly monarchical tendencies (Dzelzainis 2007, published manuscript: 7-8; quotations from the *The Humble Petition and Advice* by Dzelzainis).

¹³ According to these *Instructions*, «the envoy, Richard Bradshaw, was to urge the Grand Duke [of Moscovie, who later became Tsar Alexis of Russia] to accept the King of Sweden as a “confederate” [meanwhile in the 1650s and 1660s Russia was in war both with Poland and Sweden] on the grounds that he would then be “secure from the feare of force or innovation on the Russian religion, it being no principle of that Protestant King to force consciences, as it is of the Polonian a Popish King; and the *Muscovitish religion*, a branch of the Greek church, *is not so different from the Protestant religion, as is the Popish and Polonian*, which if it get footing in his dominion by Polonian Jesuits, will not fail to work alterations”, [considering that] [b]y the mid-1650s Poland was clearly in the Counter-Reformation camp and bent on persecution» (Dzelzainis 2007, published manuscript: 6, Milton quoted by Dzelzainis; emphasis added).

In reality Milton «was first prompted to question orthodox belief in the Trinity [already] in the mid-1640s, when he encountered the *Catechesis* in [Johann] Gerhard's volume», i.e. in the *Locorum Theologicorum*, published in Geneva in 1639 (Dzelzainis 2007, published manuscript: 17).¹⁴

As for Milton's relevant reflections on politics, Myers underlines the relevance – in Milton's vision – of God's choice of Israel as his people: also on the basis of this there is a kind of political optimism in his work which is closely related to his optimism about the human being.

He [...] insists that [...] rational self-government is a necessary but not sufficient cause of political freedom, and that all political behaviour must be subordinate to it. He therefore offers his poems to his Restoration audience, trusting to find among them readers capable of enough self-government in their reading (for reading also is choice) to sustain political hope (Myers 2019, Ch. 10: «Freedom and History»).

As Tibor Fabiny points out (analyzing some aspects of prayer – from a phenomenological approach – in *Paradise Lost*), in Milton's thought the term *restoration* besides its political relevance bears also a theologi-

¹⁴ Some further possible remarks on Milton's antitrinitarianism can be the following. In *De Doctrina Christiana* one of Milton's main theological suppositions is God's General Decree which «would have been a free act, since to will the generation of another acting person is to act freely [...]. But Milton insists that that very act was not of God's essence, and [...] this would mean that freedom was not of God's essence either. *No such problems arise [...] in a trinitarian theology which permits us to think of the Father willing the freedom of his consubstantial Son from all eternity; of the Son freely deferring to the will of the Father; and of the Holy Spirit [...] proceeding from this mutually self-effacing union as the unimpeded expression of the Father's will.* Traditional trinitarianism thus implicitly contradicts [or at least it seems to contradict] Kant's argument» (Myers 2019, Ch. 8: «The Law of Freedom», emphasis added). If freedom is something interpersonal, «the freedom of a trinitarian God would also be immanent: *pace* Kant, it would not have “to begin through an act”. For Milton, however, as for Kant, freedom consists precisely in the capacity to initiate actions in time — hence [...] his belief that the generation of the Son would not have been free had it not taken place in time. The freedom of Milton's God is thus a private property, like his wisdom and holiness» (Myers 2019, Ch. 8: «The Law of Freedom”).

cal meaning.¹⁵ For Milton *participation* (in a theological-political and religious sense) was a key-concept (related to Heaven or Paradise), and Hell is the context in which participation is impeded.¹⁶ On the role of Satan in the Miltonian cosmological structure¹⁷ we can quote – among others – Hungarian Protestant author László Ravasz, who claims that

Satan is a tragic hero, whose will, understanding, pain and passions cast a shadow on the universe. His presence inhabits the light of Heaven as a cosmic shadow; in the darkness of Chaos and Hell, he hovers as an awful bluish light like a shadow and a shaft of light cast by the reflector of a heroic and tragic heart which frightens, as-

¹⁵ Milton «believed in the reality of restoration as a new act of creation by God. He was of the fallen reader's party whether knowing it or not. The music, the smell, and the drama of the rich variety of prayers articulated in his epic were ultimately in the service of a doxological project» (Fabiny 2012: 148).

¹⁶ In *The Acting Person* Karol Józef Wojtyła (i.e. Pope John Paul II) distinguishes two principles of “individualism” which, in the case of radical individualism, «“isolates the person who is then conceived of solely as an individual” [...], absorbed in the private self and private good, and “totalism” which “assumes that [...] the *common good* can only be attained by limiting the individual” [...]. Both principles, it is argued, have “at their origin the same intellectual conception” — namely, that “in the individual there is only the striving for the individual good”. This is precisely the logic of Satan's position following his refusal to participate in the society of Heaven after the Son's exaltation has been proclaimed. Such withdrawal from participation is called “avoidance” in *The Acting Person* [...], and it leads Satan first into individualism [...], then into the totalism [...]. [...] Hell is a totalitarian society, grounded in the false individualism of mutual distrust and careerism, by which others are perceived in terms of what one can induce to happen in them. It is the image and obverse of the authentic participatory society of Heaven, which is grounded in and so confirms authentic personal individuation and self-effacement before the transcendent individuation of one's fellow-creatures and of God» (Myers 2019, Ch. 10: “Freedom and History”; Wojtyła 1979 quoted by Myers).

¹⁷ Some important remarks on Milton's cosmology: «Heaven, hell and the cosmos are essentially independent cosmological regions. The space between them is not vacuous but occupied by chaos. As a cosmological region, it has elicited much greater scholarly interest than heaven, and Milton's monism is the chief context of critical attention. [...] Chaos is thus part of God's being, which he has freely chosen not to order, but which he may nevertheless subject to another creative act to come» (Ittész 2012: 37).

tounds, moves to compassion, and exalts (Ravasz 1930 quoted in Péter 2012: 178).

So according to Milton's political hermeneutics – which at first sight shows some Hobbesian traits –, God in *Paradise Lost* can be considered an absolute monarch in a radical sense, i.e. he can't be bound by any law. In Milton's oeuvre the way in which God exercises power confirms his radical absolutism, and «the main reason which prompts Satan to rebel appears to be God's arbitrary promotion of the Son» (Sambras 2012: 94). Moreover

what defines God in his relation to Adam is the law. The whole point of *Paradise Lost* is this one law; the whole question of free will hinges on it. God cannot transgress his sole decree more than Adam; otherwise, both the political and the theological apparatus of *Paradise Lost* would collapse. [...] Laws are necessary as evil books; they are there to offer us the possibility of transgression [...], and, as such, they are the paradoxical foundations on which we build pure reason by the free exercise of our will (Sambras 2012: 100-101).

2. *PARADISE LOST*: A DEVELOPED, 17TH CENTURY'S VERSION OF DANTE'S *DIVINE COMEDY*?

2.1. SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE COMPARISON OF MILTON'S AND DANTE'S WORK

Milton was an avid reader of Dante, and the Dantesque inspiration seems to be fundamental in the structure and the subject matter of *Paradise Lost*. In the following reflections I examine whether the *Divine Comedy* can be considered as an antecedent of *Paradise Lost*, formulating further remarks on the relevance of Milton's philosophical and theological assumptions in *Paradise Lost*.¹⁸

¹⁸ As Hungarian literatureur Antal Szerb noted, «Milton as a traveller in the otherworld

Miklós Péti has demonstrated that in Milton's vision of the underworld Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Iliad* are both key-sources, even if in a certain sense Homer's spirit seems to be more important. This is also relevant as we compare Dante's and Milton's vision of the underworld, because – as it is known – Alighieri's primary main classical sources were Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Statius's *Thebaid*, taking in consideration that in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno* Dante presents also an alternative version of Homer's *Odyssey*, which Dante – in addition to the *Iliad*, and differently from Milton – could not know in its original form (Cf. Péti 2012: 210-216).

2.2. ON DANTE'S SOPHISTICATED DUALISM IN HIS CONCEPTION OF THE UNDERWORLD, AND ON HIS THEOLOGICAL THEORY OF FREE WILL

While Milton's peculiar monism (i.e. his animist materialism, already explained – at least partly – in the present paper) in a certain sense gives some foundation to his theory on the freedom of the will, Dante's dualism has a far more complex relationship to his own conception of free will. It could be also claimed, from another approach, that in Dante's conception free will is extended to the underworld, and it is relevant primarily in that realm.¹⁹ This Dantean conception apparently was not assimilated by Milton, although the *Divine Comedy* otherwise served as an ultimate source of inspiration for *Paradise Lost*. It is worth taking a

is Dante's equal. He might not have known the place of every heavenly and earthly thing in the great Hierarchy as the scholastic Dante did, still his visions are even more grandiose, more frightening: because he is not restrained by Dante's realism, his landscapes are vague, unrestricted, nightmarish dream landscapes. The Underworld is an enormous furnace whose flames give no light but "darkness visible"; the universe traversed by Satan is a fluctuating misty Chaos reminiscent of some of Van Gogh's paintings» (Szerb 1941 quoted in Péter 2012: 184).

¹⁹ As Catherine Gimelli Martin formulates, «Dante's solution to the free will problem is far more mystical than the one provided by Milton's God, although he too is so "dark with excessive bright" (*PL* 3.380 [Milton 2007/1674]), he is invisible to all but his Son» (Martin 2017: 255).

look to the particular version of (body-soul) dualism which is exposed by Dante in the *Purgatorio*, specifically in connection to the souls in the underworld, but which also reveals Dante's dualistic conception in a general sense. This is one of those parts of the *Divine Comedy* in which the author – by Statius-protagonist – explains some (supposedly) scientific issues in a poetic way.

‘When Lachesis runs short of thread, the soul
unfastens from the flesh, carrying with it
potential faculties, both human and divine.
The lower faculties now inert,
memory, intellect and the will remain
in action, and are far keener than before.
‘Without pausing, the soul falls, miraculously,
of itself, to one or to the other shore.
There first it comes to know its road.
‘As soon as space surrounds it there,
the formative force radiate upon it,
giving shape and measure as though to living members.
‘And as the air, when it is full of rain,
is adorned with rainbow hues not of its making
but reflecting the brightness of another,
‘so here the neighboring air is shaped
into that form the soul, which stays with it,
imprints upon it by its powers.
‘And, like the flame that imitates its fire,
wherever that may shift and flicker,
its new form imitates the spirit.
‘A shade we call it, since the insubstantial soul
is visible this way, which from the same air forms
organs for each sense, even that of sight,
‘Through this we speak and through this smile.
Thus we shed tears and make the sighs
you may have heard here on the mountain.
‘And, as we feel affection or desires,
the shade will change its form, and this

is the cause of that at which you marvel’.

(Pg XXV 79-108 [PDP])

The main theses, formulated here by Dante (primarily on the basis of the Scholastic interpretation of Aristotle’s *De Anima*), are the following. As the intellectual soul is fused with the vegetative and the sensitive ones, becoming these one unified soul, after having left the mortal body, this aspect of it, i.e. both the (divine) intellectual soul than the (human) vegetative and sensitive souls are preserved. After death, meanwhile the human part of the soul subsists in us potentially, the divine part (the intellectual soul which includes memory, rationality and *will*) is preserved in its actual form. At the moment of their death some souls find themselves on the shore of the Acheron, from where they are directed to Hell, meanwhile other souls find themselves on the shore of the Tiberis, from where they are directed to Purgatory or to Paradise. It follows then an explanation on the possibility for the souls to have corporeal mutations, on the way they feel pain and on the way they are visible and audible. The formative power in the soul which already formed the organs of the living organism during the embryonic period, works further and, irradiated in the space which surrounds the soul, now forms an apparent body (or shadow-body). According to Dante there is no significant difference between the behaviour of the living persons and the manifestations of the apparent bodies (Cf. Kelemen 2022).

At this point we can take a look to Dante’s conception of free will, which was analyzed in details – among others – by Justin Steinberg. In his recent work (Steinberg 2016) he analyzes Alighieri’s oeuvre mainly from the approach of philosophy of law (including political-philosophical reflections as well), and dedicates an entire chapter to Dante’s conception on *arbitrium* (Cf. Steinberg 2016: 67-106). The following famous verses of the *Purgatorio* have crucial relevance to understand Dante’s conception of free will.

[Virgil to Dante:] ‘No longer wait for word or sign from me.
Your will is free, upright, and sound.

Not to act as it chooses is unworthy:
over yourself I crown and miter you’.

(Pg XXVII 139-142 [PDP])

According to the thesis of Ernst Kantorowicz – formulated in connection to the quoted verses in his famous book (Kantorowicz 1957) – by the crown and the miter (which are imperial and pontifical symbols) Dante becomes a sovereign realizing in himself the “two bodies of the king”, transcending both the ecclesiastical than the secular institutions. Practically Kantorowicz used these Dantean verses to describe the absolute monarch of the 17th century (as an element of his explanation on the formation of the constitutional state), meanwhile – as Steinberg points out – in the Middle Ages was simply not possible for the pope, nor for the emperor to have such an absolute power: their sovereignty was limited – respectively – by canon law and by secular law, even if there were frequent interferences between these two.

The interpretation of Kantorowicz was later developed by Albert Russell Ascoli (Cf. Ascoli 2008): according to his conclusion in this coronation-scene Dante acquires an autonomous and sovereign *poetic-artistic* subjectivity, by which he made himself free from the emperor, the pope and from Scholastic philosophy. Steinberg makes a step forward by claiming that in reality Dante didn’t want to eliminate the existing earthly institutions, but intended to show, particularly by sketching Purgatory as the image of a virtual good government, how the two main institutions (the empire and the church) and other social institutions connected to them could work adequately, by the supposition – primarily – of the continuity of the law (vindicating that obviously law is such a social institution on which all the other social institutions are founded). For Dante free will means mainly that the will is free from passions which could prevent adequate decisions (Cf. Steinberg 2016: 70-73). As Steinberg points out: Dante in *Monarchia* I/XII presents the mind as a kind of ideal state: so the *arbitrium* (*free will*) is not a sovereign who dominates the soul, instead is a judge who takes into consideration the orders of reason. Free will does-

n't have an absolute character but takes strength from his own nature of law, of his own submission to rules. Also Dante conceived the application of free will between limits. So the limited sovereignty in the quoted scene of *Purgatorio* is the opposite concept of the absolute sovereignty described later by Bodin and by Hobbes: the person on the top of Purgatory becomes free in the political, psychological and poetic sense with the intrinsic limitations of these senses. Dante here becomes (more) free, i.e. he can exert his free will also in the sense that the role of Virgil (the allegorical figure of rationality, of the empire and of law) ends at that point, Matelda (the allegorical figure of the *vita activa*) leads Dante through the Earthly Paradise, and then it will be finally Beatrice (the allegorical figure of philosophy, theology, of revelation and – first of all – of the *vita contemplativa*) who will lead Dante in the comprehension of the Heavenly Paradise for which will be necessary the intellectual forms embodied by the same Beatrice (Cf. Steinberg 2016: 74-77; 100-106).

2.3. THE RELEVANCE OF BRIAREUS IN MILTON'S AND DANTE'S OEUVRE. ON MILTON'S ITALIAN INFLUENCES

Before taking a look at some possible analogies between *Paradise Lost* and the *Divine Comedy*, it is important to note some basic differences, focusing also on the political-philosophical motivations behind these two. *Paradise Lost* (as it was indicated already, published in 1674) was partly inspired by a broadside,²⁰ diffused in order to persuade the Presbyterians to assent to a restoration of the monarchy, meanwhile in a general sense Milton supported a republican form of government (for example in his

²⁰ «At the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, Milton was thrown into prison and two of his books supporting the deposition of Charles I were recalled and burned. The large broadside *Proclamation for Calling in, and Suppressing of Two Books By John Milton* (13 August 1660) would have been plastered throughout London. Milton emerged from this scare to produce poetic masterpieces: *Paradise Lost*, on display in several different editions and forms, including a ten-book edition owned by William Wordsworth, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*» (Fulton 2011).

The Tenure of King and Magistrates, published in two versions, in 1649 and in 1650). During the Protectorate (i.e. during the period in which Oliver Cromwell was the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland, between December 1653 and September 1658) Milton – maybe in an opportunistic way – put aside his own republicanism to praise Cromwell’s rule in his *Defensio Secunda* (of 1654). After Cromwell’s death and the dissolution of the Commonwealth Milton returned to his republican ideas and published a number of works against the monarchical form of government. So basically *Paradise Lost* includes a criticism of monarchy and (taking in consideration the war between Heaven and Hell, an important topic in this work) it can be considered a poem about civil war as well.

As for Dante, his main political treatise in Latin is entitled *Monarchia* (written probably in 1312-1313, but which could have been finished also in 1321). In *Monarchia* Dante outlines his own political-theological program which gives the foundations of many of his ideas expressed in a poetic form in the *Divine Comedy*. The two most important subjects in *Monarchia* are the following: the Church (the pope) and the Empire (the emperor) work simultaneously for the salvation of mankind, the Emperor for the salvation on Earth – and this implies the unfolding of the spiritual-intellectual capacities of the human beings, the vindication of their free will –, the Church for the salvation in Heaven. Moreover – according to Dante – it is necessary to establish a European world-Empire (indeed for the salvation of mankind) to prevent any future political conflict. The real aim of the life of the human being is the *vita contemplativa* which can be achieved by the authentic and full experience of the *vita activa*. Dante in his main poem describes his own salvation history knowing in depth the sins in Hell and in Purgatory (related to the negative aspects of the *vita activa*) to get to the contemplation of God in Heavenly Paradise (i.e. to the higher level of the *vita contemplativa*). Obviously *Paradise Lost*’s main subject is the *fall*, meanwhile the *Divine Comedy* – as it was mentioned – is a history of salvation *after the fall* of Dante/Humanity. And a further important difference between the *Divine Comedy* and *Par-*

adise Lost that has to be remembered is that «Dante and Milton share a highly similar cosmological and architectonic imagination, even though both “live” in very different universes, one Ptolemaic and the other proto-Copernican» (Martin 2017: 251).

Despite these important differences it is possible to find some thematic analogies between the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. Among the scholars who – in connection to the main work of Dante and of Milton – were able to present a high-level comparative analysis, George F. Butler is undoubtedly excellent. According to a thesis of Butler, Milton used the *Divine Comedy* as a source and this can be grasped on more levels: Milton knew the *Thebaid* of Statius, the myth of Briareus and also the myth of Tydeus, as well as the Dantean adaptations of these myths (Cf. Butler 2006: 142-143).²¹ Butler mentions Ronald Martinez who argued in a convincing way in favor of the thesis according to which Thebes served as a model for the city of Dite (Dis) in the *Comedy* in a moral as well as in the architectural and geographic sense. And no matter the fact that Statius was an ancient classical author, Dante portrayed him as a secretly converted person (Cf. Pg XXII 64-93 [PDP], in particular verse 73), and it is rightly Statius to lead Virgil and Dante in Purgatory (Cf. Pg XXI-XXV [PDP]).

As has been noted previously, during his studies at Cambridge Milton was intensively studying the work of Dante, of Petrarch and of other Italian authors, and he makes an allusion to all these in an epistle written to Benedetto Buonmattei (an excellent Dante-expert at the time). Milton in his *Of Reformation touching Church Discipline in England* (of 1641) quotes from the *Paradiso* (XX 55-60 [PDP]),²² and in an epistle written

²¹ The representation of some protagonists of the *Thebaid* in the *Comedy*, moreover the Dantean adaptation and characterization of Statius were objects of deep analysis in various studies of C.S. Lewis, Ernst Robert Curtius, Edward Moore e Teodolinda Barolini.

²² These tercets are mainly about the relocation of the imperial headquarters – by the emperor Constantine – to Byzantium, moreover about the fact that no matter the Donation of Constantine was made with good intentions (in Dante’s view), its consequences were catastrophic because rightly thanks to this donation also in the Church avarice and

in 1646 to Henry Lawes (the leading English songwriter in the 17th century) alludes to the episode of Casella (Cf. *Pg* II 76-117 [PDP]). Milton was well informed also in connection to Alighieri's *Monarchia* and *Vita nuova*, in his library it could be found the 1529 edition of the *Convivio*, moreover he had probably a good knowledge of the commentaries to the *Comedy* made by Cristoforo Landino (of 1481) and by Alessandro Velutello (of 1544). In the entry on *Usura* (*Usury*) – a sin which is particularly important in Dante's *Inferno* – of his *Commonplace book* Milton quotes among others from the commentary to the *Comedy* made by Bernardino Daniello da Lucca, of 1568 (Cf. Butler 2006: 143).

Briareus is mentioned by Dante in the *Inferno* (Cf. *Inferno* XXXI 97-99 [PDP]), but is more relevant the description of his representation sculpted in the floor of marble, in the *Purgatorio* (XII 25-33 [PDP]). The image given by Dante – Briareus, compared by Alighieri to Lucifer, who lies defeated on the floor – is evidently a source of the analogous comparison described by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, and the source of this Dantean image is evidently the comparison of Tydeus with Briareus, formulated by Statius: obviously Milton was aware of these comparisons (Cf. Butler 2006: 144).

In the comparison of Satan with the Leviathan (Cf. Milton 2007/1674, Book I, verses 27-722, in particular verses 200-202) Milton again “quotes” Dante in the sense of presenting the consequences of the revolt against God, and takes inspiration from the Dantean interpretation of the *Thebaid* in his own description of Briareus. While Dante portrays Briareus as shot down by a lightning, Milton depicts Briareus – analogously to Statius – as a giant who fought with Jupiter. In the *Thebaid* Statius depicts Briareus in the glorious moment of his fight against the gods of the Olympus, no matter the fact that his destiny was already established, and in a similar way also Tydeus (at the end of the *Thebaid*) perishes. Also in Milton's comparison Briareus's fate (as well as the fate of those who opposed Jupiter) was already pre-established (Cf. Butler 2006: 144). Fol-

corruption prevailed.

lowing Briareus's vision in Hell, Dante shows also a version of the scene in which Tydeus devours the brain of Melanippo ("Menalippo" in Dante's verses): in Alighieri's description (in which, as it was told already, the author makes an explicit reference to the *Thebaid*) count (conte) Ugolino, in his deranged anger, makes the same – till the end of times – with archbishop (arcivescovo) Ruggieri (Cf. *Inferno* XXXII 125-132 [PDP]; cf. Butler 2006: 144-145).²³

On the basis of Butler's analysis it is clear that the Italian influences in Milton's work are fundamental. According to Martin's thesis, *Paradise Lost* is a kind of synthesis of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532), of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581) and obviously of Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (1321) (Cf. "Milton's Epic Syntheses: Ariosto, Tasso, and Dante", in Martin 2017: 241-249).²⁴ Martin ded-

²³ Butler's paper, partially summarized here, is the developed version of an earlier study by him (Cf. Butler 1998). In this earlier work Butler stresses – and maybe this is arguable – that from the point of view of the analysis of the sins Dante would have been the poet of the particular, meanwhile Milton the poet of the universal (Cf. Butler 1998: 355). It is worth quoting the conclusive paragraph of this study: «Milton could look upon Satan as an archetypal tyrant who defies God, seduces the angels, and deceptively leads humanity to damnation. In Hesiod and Ovid he could read the gigantomachy as a classical analogue of the war in heaven. In Dante he could find the classical gigantomachy combined with biblical myth to yield commentary on political theory, Christian doctrine, and historical fact. As his *Commonplace Book* documents, Milton valued Dante's views on the punishment of sins, the corruption of the clergy, and on the necessary separation of the church and the state. Their similar experiences and common perspectives disposed Milton to adapt [in his main work] details from Dante's version of the gigantomachy in the *Commedia* in order to advance his own political and theological outlook in *Paradise Lost*» (Butler 1998: 363). It can be mentioned here that the already quoted Tibor Fabiny recently published in Hungarian a comparative analysis of Milton and Dante, in which he emphasized the analogies between Dante's and Milton's poetic interpretation of the personality of Nimrod (Cf. Fabiny 2022).

²⁴ It is important to note that Tasso wrote a further version of his own masterpiece, entitled *La Gerusalemme Conquistata* (1593): this shows an analogy with the publication of *Paradise Regained* (1671) by Milton. Moreover Ariosto, Tasso, and Milton have as common source Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As Martin underlines, «Milton's entire War in Heaven is riddled with surprising reversals and incertitudes, but Ariosto's ironies nearly

icates an entire chapter to the comparison of Alighieri's and Milton's main work ("The Architectonic Sublime: Dante and Milton", in Martin 2017: 249-261), in which it is stressed – among other important remarks – that «many of Milton's literary techniques are equally Dantean, such as using proems to work shifts from realm to realm and theme to theme», a device which was not used by Homer, Virgil or Tasso, moreover even some personal details in connection to the authors of the *Divine Comedy* and of *Paradise Lost* show some parallelisms:

the great difficulty and length of time to compose their poems, and the political ills both poets [Dante and Milton] have suffered. They are partially recompensed by a celestial patroness who answers their prayers and verifies their right to speak of heavenly things, but both must pray to be made worthy of «soaring» far above the lesser «light» of ancient and Christian poets, and both fear falling and failing (Martin 2017: 251).

So, in a general sense it can be rightly claimed that Milton's and Alighieri's conception of sin, of perdition and eventually of salvation show strict analogies.²⁵

implode the chivalric values he officially endorses. These values are further questioned as non-heroes and even anti-heroes drive the main epic action. Succumbing to the allure of exotic beauties, warriors frequently neglect their military duties and even betray their leaders. Tasso's Rinaldo and Tancredi are less seriously flawed than Ariosto's Orlando or Ruggiero, but Milton's angels similarly undertake partially failed missions» (Martin 2017: 242).

²⁵ As Martin writes: «Both Milton's and Dante's sinners remain capable of good deeds since their motives are not simply evil or perverse but at least partly misguided (*Inferno* XVI 15-18); yet in failing either to love others or excessively loving themselves [...], they gradually destroy their own mental and verbal abilities from within (*Convivio* III.xiii.2). Milton's Satan, Sin, and Death share this fate, but so does his other infernal triad, Moloch, Belial, and Mammon. Both triads exemplify Dante's two main "arms" of destruction, *force* and *fraud*. [...] Since such deeds spring from free will, both poets explicitly defend it, Dante at the center of his *Commedia*, Milton in book 3 [of *Paradise Lost*] as God foresees Satan's success in Eden» (Martin 2017: 254, emphasis added).

3. CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

We have analyzed Milton's work from different aspects – taking a look to its philosophical foundations, to its political-theological background, and to its eventual similarity to Dante's work –, and on the basis of all these we can conclude provisionally that Milton's, as well as Alighieri's spiritual heritage is fundamental in the history of ideas (on the level of literature, philosophy, theology, political theory and poetry). As Dante, Milton was a *poet*-theologian-philosopher, who included a significant part of the scientific (moreover theological and philosophical) knowledge of his time in his main poem in a poetic form.

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