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Robert Zemeckis's *Contact* as a Late-Twentieth Century Paradiso

Abstract

The film *Contact* employs a plot and literary motifs that are in many ways parallel to those in Dante's *Paradiso*. Although the film's philosophical and theological content has received mixed reviews, the film has deep significance because it not only seeks to convey a religious experience but also offers a kind of existential consolation similar to that offered by Dante. This is true even though the film is grounded in a vision of the numinous that is congruent not with the Dante's cosmos but with late twentieth-century science and cosmology. *Contact*, then, is a Dantean film that can be embraced both intellectually and spiritually by large numbers of its audience, and its success demonstrates that basic elements of Dante's *Paradiso* still have the power to move audiences in contemporary America.

Veramente quant'io del regno santo
ne la mia mente potei far tesoro,
sarà ora materia del mio canto.

[Nevertheless, so much of the holy kingdom
as I could treasure up in my mind
shall now be the matter of my song.]

-Dante

They should have sent a poet.

-Ellie Arroway

In the third canticle of the *Divine Comedy*, the *Paradiso*, Dante's narrator/pilgrim takes leave of earth to travel to heaven in the company of his beloved guide, Beatrice¹. Contrary to the impression given by the title, however, the pilgrim spends most of his time traveling up through the geocentric cosmos and reaches a vision of the "heavenly rose" of paradise only in the last few cantos. The *Paradiso*, in fact, presents a series of "shadowy prefaces," in which blessed souls appear in the various celestial spheres in order to instruct the pilgrim on the wonders of the universe, the corruption of earth, and the nature of their blessedness (Jacoff 210). Although it ends with a glorious attempt to describe the mystical vision of God himself, much of the canticle consists of a journey of desire through a warm, welcoming, and breathtakingly beautiful cosmos (Pertile). Dante the author continuously bemoans the inability of his memory to hold and his language to convey the beauty and mystery of what he saw. In the end, as he recalls gazing on the beauty of paradise, Dante admits to being completely incapable of transmitting the glory of what he saw,

Da questo passo vinto mi concedo
più che già mai da punto di suo tema
soprato fosse comico o tragedo.²

[At this pass I concede myself defeated more than ever comic or tragic poet was defeated by a point in his theme.]

While some of the *Paradiso* presents a dazzling picture of what Dante imagined the physical cosmos to look like, an even greater portion of the work is given to somewhat abstract but important discussions of the fine points of medieval Christian theology. Indeed, Dante was a philosophical poet. Such a heavy load of speculative theology, however, may be the reason that the *Paradiso* has sometimes not been as personally moving for Dante's readers as his two other canticles, the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, have been. The first two canticles offer dramatic scenes in which the pilgrim witnesses vignettes of some of the most memorable characters and stories in Western literature. One thinks of Dante's encounters with Francesca, Ulysses, and Count Ugolino, for example. In the *Paradiso*, however, the saints are idealized or "transhumanized," and conflict is, by definition, confined to the mind of the Pilgrim. All is orderly, for the wills of all the blessed are in accord with the Divine Will. Encountered in the sphere of Mercury, Picarda, for example, proclaims, "E'n la sua volontade è nostra pace" [in His will is our peace] (3.85). As a result, judged solely as literature, the *Paradiso* is less exciting and its characters

less engaging than the (sometimes magnificently) flawed characters and personal histories of the other two canticles. Over the centuries the *Paradiso* has even attracted less critical attention than the other two canticles. One critic, Ricardo Quinones, has, for example, called the *Paradiso* "that true undiscovered country of Dante studies" (163).

In fact, Quinones goes even further. He speculates that it is unlikely that late twentieth-century readers of the *Paradiso* will ever move beyond "poetic admiration to the genuine level of personal appropriation" (166). The reasons he cites include the poem's portrayal of the "the (patriarchal) father" as the deepest reality of the cosmos rather than the brotherhood of men and women. In addition, he notes the poem's acceptance of the inherent inequality of people, even in heaven, rather than its insistence on their equality. These are positions, he argues, that are not tenable after the French Revolution (165-66). To these reasons might be added the poem's strong grounding in identifiably medieval culture: its medieval Catholic theology, which may still appeal to many but not to the majority of our contemporaries, and its outdated conception of the nature of the physical universe. I believe, then, that Quinones's point is worth considering even though I continue to enjoy reading the *Paradiso* and believe it is one of the great works of Western literature.

In this essay, however, I would like to consider a possible inference of Quinones's argument. If the *Paradiso* is unlikely to move most contemporary Americans to "the genuine level of personal appropriation," does it follow that contemporary readers or viewers are incapable of being deeply moved by works of literature or film that attempt similar kinds of projects? In fact, I contend that just the opposite may be true at the beginning of the twenty-first century. On one hand, films that attempt to update the Inferno or Purgatorio, such as Vincent Ward's *What Dreams May Come*, may be entertaining, but they are unlikely to touch us at our deepest levels because we are unlikely to believe their visions of the afterlife actually accord with reality. On the other hand, films like Robert Zemeckis's *Contact*, which attempt to reconcile contemporary science with some of our deepest religious longings, can indeed move us deeply. Since, at least at first glance, the story line of *Contact* is so different from that of the *Paradiso*, viewers may not even recognize that the work of the film is parallel in many key respects to the work of Dante's poem.³ It is one task of this essay to demonstrate these parallels.

Contact is the story of a young radio astronomer named Ellie Arroway, a character loosely based on the life of the astronomer Jill Tarter (Poundstone 325). Ellie rebels against the scientific establishment and spends her time listening for possible radio messages from alien civilizations. Her independence and perseverance are rewarded when one day her listening station picks up a radio

signal from the vicinity of the star Vega. This leads Ellie to an intellectual and physical "pilgrimage" in which she must unlock the message of her heavenly guides. The message turns out to be plans for a giant space/time travel machine. She is then chosen as earth's representative to travel to the Vega system. She meets a representative of the alien civilization and returns to earth to attempt to convey his message of consolation to a skeptical world.

Although both the film and the novel relate essentially the same basic story line, they differ in several key ways. For my purposes, the most significant of these differences is that Ellie's love interest in the novel, the scientist Ken der Heer, and the independent minded religious thinker, Palmer Joss, are in the film collapsed into a single character. In the film, Palmer Joss is both the religious thinker and Ellie's lover.

Another important change is that in the film Ellie journeys to Vega alone, not in the company of four other astronauts. This focuses the attention more clearly on Ellie's own psychological, religious, and social difficulties, particularly those she encounters when few believe that she actually made a trip at all. In the film, she has no community of fellow pilgrims to affirm her beliefs and to offer emotional support; Palmer Joss must do this instead.

Finally, in the film Ellie's family history is significantly different. In the novel, the young Ellie loses the man who she believes is her biological father and establishes an antagonistic relationship with the man she believes is "merely" her mother's second husband, John Staughton. Ironically, after her mother's death, she learns that Staughton is indeed her biological father. In the film, however, Ellie is an orphan. She never knows her mother and loses her biological father when she is nine years old. In both novel and film, Ellie must work through emotions related to the loss of "the father." In both, there is a (Virgilian and) Dantean "return to the (patriarchal) father" at the climax of the inter-stellar voyage. But in the film, this reunion is one degree more genuine in that the alien takes on the appearance of Ellie's real father, not the appearance of a man who she mistakenly believed was her father. My remarks henceforth will refer primarily to the film version of *Contact*, for, although the novel has strengths not found in the film, I believe that the particularly Dantean themes I detect in the work are more clearly presented in the film.

There is one key difference between both versions of *Contact* and Dante's *Comedia*, however, that must be recognized from the start. If the *Comedia*'s greatest fiction is that it is not fiction (Cherchi), *Contact* clearly presents itself as a work of fantasy fiction. While in the *Paradiso* Dante begins to call the *Comedia* "sacrato" (23.61) or "sacro" (25.1), as if his verses do record an actual journey into the

hereafter, *Contact* makes no such claims. No one is tempted to believe, as some did with Dante, that a person named Ellie Arroway actually made an incredible journey to the stars.

Yet *Contact* is, just as significantly as the *Paradiso*, concerned with serious religious and philosophical questions worked out in the context of contemporary knowledge of the cosmos. A professor of astronomy at Cornell University, Carl Sagan criticized works of science fiction that flout known principles of physical science (Sagan, "Preface," 3-4), and he attempted to construct the plot of *Contact* in a way that it did not violate any. For example, after sending an early draft of his manuscript to a well-respected relativity physicist, Kip Thorne, Sagan changed the pathways of space/time travel in the novel from black holes to worm holes. Although evidence for the existence of black holes is solid, physicists believe that entrance into a black hole could result only in destruction, not travel. While it is not known that wormholes actually exist, they are permitted by Einstein's equations, and if they exist, according to (the then) current scientific understanding, it was not impossible to believe that one could travel through them (Poundstone 325-26).

If viewers can accept the science in *Contact*, they can also be moved by its religious dimensions. When I call *Contact* "religious," I do not mean that it attempts to convey the major beliefs of any orthodox religion. From the perspective of orthodox believers, the film could well be considered anti-religious.⁴ I mean, rather,

that it attempts to convey humankind's religious sense of awe and wonder when placed in the presence of what Rudolf Otto called the numinous, the *mysterium tremendum*.⁵ Sagan himself refers to Otto's definition of religious feeling in *Contact* when in the novel Ellie explains to Ken der Heer that science should elicit religious feelings. "In the presence of the *mysterium tremendum*," Ellie explains,

People feel utterly insignificant but ... not personally alienated. [Otto] thought of the numinous as 'wholly other,' and the human response to it as 'absolute astonishment.' Now, if that's what religious people talk about when they use words like sacred or holy, I'm with them. I felt something like that just in listening for a signal, never mind in actually receiving it. I think all of science elicits that sense of awe. (153)

Just as the *Paradiso* leads the pilgrim and the reader through a series of "shadowy prefaces" to a direct and immediate encounter with the *mysterium tremendum*, so too do the film and novel versions of *Contact*. In *Contact*, however, the *mysterium tremendum* is not the "God" of any sort of traditional belief. It is certainly not Dante's God. It is the mystery and grandeur of the cosmos, of its (potential) inhabitants, and of man's place within it.⁶

Like the *Comedia*, *Contact* is a philosophical work of art, and in both works one of the major concerns of the film is the relationship of faith and reason. In both works, the relationship between the two is handled allegorically. In the *Comedia*, the pilgrim/narrator needs two guides for his journey. Virgil, who represents reason as well as the heritage of the ancient world, can lead the pilgrim only up from Hell

through Purgatory. Because he is incapable of continuing further, he is replaced as guide by Beatrice, who represents a range of abstractions, including theology and grace. Dante does not, then, reject the importance of reason as a guide, but he clearly subordinates reason to religious belief. As in all of Dante's world, there is a clear hierarchy, and religious belief is superior to reason.

In the film *Contact*, however, reason and faith are put on equal footing. On one level, Ellie is a personification of scientific reason and skepticism and Palmer Joss a personification of religious belief.⁷ (The gender switch, with "reason" being female and "faith," male, suggests that *Contact* is a feminist *Paradiso*.)⁸ They might even be seen as two aspects of a single person, with Ellie representing a person's rational aspects and Palmer representing the creative and mystical aspects. One of the clearest arguments of the film is that neither reason nor faith is, by itself, sufficient - that a whole, healthy person must be grounded in each. Faith and scientific reason are incomplete without the other. Hence, minor characters who represent faith not anchored in scientific reason (such as Billy Jo Rankin or the apocalyptic cult leader who blows up the first space/time machine) are unsympathetic or even insane. The same is true for cynical characters, like David Drumlin, who mouth religious discourse when it suits their purpose but, in the end, seem to have no religious beliefs whatsoever.

Unlike Drumlin, Palmer Joss is clearly a sincere believer. In the novel, Palmer is called a fundamentalist (137), but the film is fuzzy about the nature of his religious beliefs. We are told that he is a former Catholic seminarian, and he clearly opposes the rigid fundamentalism of Rankin. Apart from his firm belief in a personal God and the necessity of faith to give meaning to life, the specific tenets of his faith are left vague. While Joss strongly rejects those who are anti-religious, he is also completely open to the discoveries of modern science. Ellie, on the other hand, is an agnostic on the question of God and uses Ockham's Razor to try to convince Palmer to abandon his faith in God. Of the two, she is the less open-minded. However, one of the results of her trip and the subsequent rejection of her account of it is a new appreciation of the truth of human experiences that cannot be proven scientifically. Just as believers claim to have had experiences with God that are not subject to scientific validation, Ellie is convinced that she made her trip to Vega, but she can offer no scientific evidence. At the end of the film, Ellie receives her strongest support from Palmer, who, as a man of faith, can accept Ellie's account at face value without requiring scientific verification. The message, then, is clear. Scientific reason and religious faith are both absolutely essential for wholeness; neither is complete in itself. The sexual union of Ellie and Palmer represents the union of faith and reason on equal footing. In *Contact* Virgil/Reason is not discarded in favor of Beatrice/faith; rather, they are united in a "sacred marriage."

Besides wrestling with the problem of faith's relationship to reason, *Contact*, like the *Comedia*, is structured around a motif of a journey to the "other world." Although the Middle English word "palmer" was a synonym for "pilgrim," it is Ellie Arroway, not Palmer Joss, who journeys to the stars. Both works of literature reflect the basic structure of what Joseph Campbell has labeled the universal "monomyth" (3-48, 245-51). The hero receives a "call to adventure" from a messenger from the "other world." With the aid of various "helpers," he sets off into the other world and undergoes a series of tests. After defeating various inhabitants of the other world, he wins a "boon," a gift that can be carried back over the boarder to the "everyday world" for the benefit of mankind.

The pilgrim Dante's call comes from Virgil, who is sent by Beatrice, St. Lucy, and the Virgin Mary.⁹ At the time of his call, he is in the midst of a mid-life crisis, lost in a "una selva oscura" [a dark wood] and unsure of how to proceed (*Inferno*, 1.1-21). After some hesitation, Dante follows Virgil, who is both guide and helper, across the border into the world of the dead. Ellie, too, is lost. She is an outcast from the respectable scientific community, and she has never worked through her grief over the loss of her father. Finally, on the verge of having all her funding terminated, she receives a "call to adventure" from outer space in the form of a radio message from Vega. Her major helpers are a blind scientist, Ken Clark, the mysterious tycoon S.R. Haddon, and, of course, Palmer Joss.

One could argue that the period of time between the discovery of the radio signal and Ellie's journey into space forms a modern kind of Inferno and Purgatorio. During this time, Ellie must journey through the chaos and cacophony of contemporary American life and be tormented by such "demons" as the National Security Advisor, Michael Kitz. The parallels between the plot of *Contact* and that of the *Comedia* become most convincing, however, when Ellie, like Dante's pilgrim, begins her voyage up into the cosmos. While Dante does not know for sure whether he traveled through the celestial spheres in body or just in spirit (Paradiso 2.37-42), it is clear in *Contact* that Ellie physically travels through mysterious wormholes to Vega in a transparent capsule, constructed by human hands but fashioned according to the instructions sent from the heavens.

For both pilgrims, the heavenly journey provides a moving representation of the current understanding of the physical universe. Dante invites his reader to look up to the stars

e lì comincia a vagheggiar ne l'arte
di quel maestro che dentro a sé l'ama,
tanto che mai da lei l'occhio non parte.

(Paradiso, 10.10-11)

[and amorously there begin to gaze upon that Master's art who within Himself so loves it that His eye never turns from it.]

He notes how each sphere is placed exactly right and that just the slightest divergence from their paths would have meant that the Earth's potentialities would never have come to fruition (Paradiso 10.16-18). What he concludes from his fantastic voyage is:

La gloria di colui che tutto move
per l'universo penetra, e risplende
in una parte più e meno altrove.
Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende
fu'io, e vidi cose che ridire
né sa né può chi di là sù discende.

(Paradise, 1.1-6)

[The glory of the All-Mover penetrates through the universe and reglows in one part more, and in another less. I have been in the heaven that most receives of His light, and have seen things which whoso descends from up there has neither the knowledge nor the power to relate.]

These words would also be a fitting epigraph for *Contact*. Although a representative of reason and analysis, Ellie is moved almost to incoherence as she travels through the beauties of inter-stellar space. She can only murmur "How beautiful ... how beautiful," and her last words before she descends to meet with the alien are "They should have sent a poet." She, thus, experiences an epiphany, a moment when she realizes that certain truths of the universe simply cannot be conveyed by means of

normal scientific rhetoric. Her communicative powers, like those of the poet Dante, are defeated by the majesty of the heavens.

For both pilgrims, the journey also provides an opportunity to achieve the heavenly perspective on the smallness of earth, "L'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci" [the little threshing-floor which makes us so fierce] (Paradiso, 22.151). In addition, both pilgrims receive a kind of existential consolation by means of a reunion with "the father." In Dante's case, "the father" is actually his great grandfather, the crusader Cacciaguida, who welcomes Dante as "his own blood" (Paradiso, 15.28). The meeting with Cacciaguida renews Dante's pride in his own family line. He is an awesome figure, as full of authority as of moral indignation over the feebleness of the current Italian society. He prophesies Dante's future and gives him the commission to speak boldly of what he (Dante) saw in heaven. His approval lifts Dante's spirits.

Although I have called *Contact* a feminist *Paradiso*, it is ironic that pilgrim Ellie, like Dante, is also healed by a "return to the father." But Ellie's "father" is not the father of the patriarchy. Deposited on an unknown planet, Ellie meets with an alien who takes the shape of her beloved dead father. Although she soon realizes that the being whom she embraces is not, in fact, her dead father, the effect of this encounter is profoundly healing. Ellie's alien is not a daunting, authoritarian father like Cacciaguida but a loving, affirming father. His embrace heals Ellie's profound

sense of loneliness and seems to allow her to move beyond her grief over her father's death.¹⁰ He also comments on her hands, which, he says, are her mother's. Since the film shows that one of her hands bears a ring with a beautiful, round blue stone, I take "mother" here to be a reference to "mother earth," and the alien's comment to be a reflection of his admiration in humankind's abilities to use their hands to construct. It is an affirmation of the basic goodness of human technology.

In addition, the alien instructs Ellie, to the extent she is capable of learning, on the nature of the universe. The cosmos in *Contact* is full of the numinous. The travel through the cosmos fills Ellie with awe of the "wholly other," the *mysterium tremendum*, which, on one level, is the cosmos itself. In addition, when the father/alien reveals that his own civilization did not build the wormhole travel system, Ellie learns of a mysterious presence/absence of an even greater intelligence. The transport system was left by an earlier, more powerful civilization that had mysteriously disappeared. No explanation about who these creatures were or how they built the space/time travel system is given. Another *mysterium tremendum*.

The *Paradiso* ends with Dante's experience of his own *mysterium tremendum*, the beatific vision of God. Although embedded prophecies of what will happen to Dante when he returns to earth exist in the *Paradiso*, the canticle ends with the pilgrim, rapt in wonder, staring at the vision of the godhead. In *Contact*,

however, pilgrim Ellie returns to earth. Although her voyage has taken eighteen hours of travel time, due to space/time relativity near the speed of light, the voyage takes place within a split second of earth time. To earth observers, Ellie's capsule simply drops through the travel machine, and there is no physical evidence (at least evidence that is made public) that Ellie made the trip at all. Ellie is accused of hallucinating her meeting with the father/alien and, worse, being a dupe for the evil machinations of S. R. Haddon.

In a moment filled with dramatic irony, Kitz, demanding an explanation for Ellie's claims in light of the lack of scientific evidence, challenges her with Ockham's Razor. Which explanation, he asks, a split-second trip to the stars or an elaborate hoax, is the simpler, more elegant? As a scientist, Ellie admits that she has no verifiable proof of her experience and that, indeed, the whole experience could have been a hallucination. Yet, Ellie, the confirmed skeptic, paradoxically finds herself in the position of a theist. While she cannot prove that her experience happened, she has "blessed assurance" that it actually did. And she "bears witness" to its reality. The skeptic becomes a believer. Like Dante, she can only offer to the investigative panel "*quant'io del regno santo / ne la mia mente potei far tesoro*" [so much of the holy kingdom as I could treasure up in my mind] (Paradiso, 1.10-11). While it is true that Ellie actually does bring back scientific proof of her journey in

the eighteen hours of static recorded by her camera, Ellie is never made aware of this proof and, thus, her belief in the reality of her voyage rests on faith alone.

The boon that Dante carries back from the other world is many-faceted. It is both a prophetic call to repentance and a consoling vision of reward in the afterlife for those who do good. It is an affirmation that humans are not alone and that, despite the harshness of earthly life, they live in a reality that is, at its most essential, warm, beautiful, and caring. Dante's boon is a call for individuals to join the communion of saints. Ellie's boon both differs and agrees with Dante's in significant ways. On the one hand, Ellie finds that there is no God to judge humans, no call to individual repentance, no condemnation of human sin. When Ellie asks the alien if her meeting with him involves a test, he replies "no tests."¹¹ On the other hand, Ellie brings back a message that humankind can find meaning in life by seeing itself as a part of the inter-stellar community of intelligent life. While the God of orthodox western religions does not exist in Sagan's universe, his universe is not the absurd, meaningless cosmos of the existentialists. The existence of a welcoming community of intelligent life means that the universe, although physically vast and indifferent, offers a message of warmth, comfort, and meaning-different in its details but similar in its effect to that of Dante. Humankind finds meaning in life by trying to become a part of something larger than itself, not the communion of saints, to be sure, but the cosmic community of intelligent life.

Critics of both of Sagan's novel and the film have been split on the question of its intellectual and artistic heft. On the one hand, some critics see them as challenging philosophical works. On the other hand, other critics report that Sagan's ideas are thin or clichéd. Richard Schickel sarcastically likens the film to an asteroid, "a large body of gaseous matter surrounding a relatively small core of solid substance."¹² After readings all the reviews, one wonders if the critics were actually reading the same novel or viewing the same film. One of the reasons for this disparity may be that some critics confuse religion with orthodox belief. They do not see that scientific longings can be religious at their very core. From the distance of seven hundred years, it is easy to forget that Dante's *Paradiso*, although constructed to convey a religious experience, was grounded not only in the religious beliefs but also in the science and cosmology of his own day.¹³ *Contact*'s heft comes from the fact that it seeks to convey a similar religious experience and to offer a similar consolation, even though it is grounded in a vision of the numinous that is congruent with the late twentieth-century science and cosmology.

Contact is a Dantean film that will indeed be personally appropriated by large numbers of its audience. That Dantean *Contact* moves many of its viewers quite deeply suggests that the basic elements of Dante's masterpiece, which lie just beneath its medieval surface elements, will continue to exercise a strong attraction for readers who see their religious longings somehow reflected in the stars.

¹ This article is based on a paper given at the International congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, 3 May 2001. I would also like to acknowledge the aid of research assistants Christopher Lantz and Maria Isabelle Barros.

² *Paradiso, The Divine Comedy*, ed. and trans. Charles S. Singleton, Bollingen Series 80 (Princeton: Princeton, 1977), 30.22-24 [336-37]. All further citations from the *Paradiso* as well as the English translations will be taken from this edition and cited in the text by canto and line numbers.

³ To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet made this comparison although Bette Chambers has remarked that Dante would have been pleased with the proof of God's existence in the novel (43).

⁴ E.g., see Silver 52-54.

⁵ Otto 12-40.

⁶ The religious nature of Ellie's journey is noted by both Colin Greenland (1224) and Raphael Shargel (18-19). Peter Lawler notes that the film *Contact* "appeals...to the religious dimension of the search for extraterrestrial intelligence" (131). Lawler, however, finds that Sagan's aliens, particularly due to their lack of aggression, are not believable (131-35).

Contact is not the only work in which Sagan approaches science "religiously," Thomas M. Lessl argues that Sagan uses "a rhetoric often more characteristic of religious than scientific discourse" in his television series *Cosmos*. The effect of this religious discourse, argues Lessl, is twofold. It helps maintain "the privileged status of science in society" and it grounds faith "in an unimpeachable body of knowledge" (176). I believe that these two goals are operative in *Contact* as well, but my argument about the religious discourse in *Contact* goes a step further. Neither of Lessl's goals touch religious feeling. I believe that there is an attempt in the novel and the film to convey a feeling of the numinous.

A more abstract attempt to convey the wonders of science and to contract it with various kinds of false belief occurs in the essays of Sagan's wonderful book *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

⁷ Kendrick notes that "*Contact* balances science and religion by making the two central characters philosophical polar opposites," but he does not treat them as allegorical representations of science and religion.

⁸ In a review appearing in *Booklist*, "P.K." notes that the novel has "feminist twists" (290). The feminist ideology in *Contact* is also noted in the *Antioch Review*, where the anonymous reviewer notes that Sagan "spends time and effort frying theological and feminist fish" (251).

⁹ *Inferno, The Divine Comedy*, ed. and trans. Charles S. Singleton, Bollingen Series 80 (Princeton: Princeton, 1970), 2.52-117 [16-21]. All further citations from the *Inferno* will be taken from this edition and cited in the text by canto and line numbers.

¹⁰ The healing aspect of this encounter is made explicit in the novel. After returning to earth, Ellie thinks of the alien and realizes that "Whatever happened next, a wound deep within her was being healed. She could feel the scar tissue knitting. It had been the most expensive psychotherapy session in the history of the world" (378).

¹¹ In this aspect, the novel differs from the film to the extent that the astronauts receive an implied threat that, if humans do not find a way to cooperate with each other, they will be left to themselves or even destroyed. This point becomes clear in Ellie's reflections on what the alien shows her. She thinks:

How...theological...the circumstances had become. Here were beings who live in the sky, beings enormously knowledgeable and powerful, beings concerned with our survival, beings with a set of expectations about how we should behave. They disclaim such a role, but they could clearly visit reward and punishment, life and death, on the puny inhabitants of Earth. Now how is this different ... from the old-time religion? (371)

¹² Schickel 150. Among those who find the film challenging are Edd Doerr and Frederick Edwards, who call the film "a feast of intellectual entertainment" (46). Other critics who are impressed by the film's ideas are John Simon and James Kendrick. Critics who find the novel's ideas challenging include Gregory Benford, Jeff Clark, and Sam Cornish. Critics who find either the novel or the film trite or clichéd include Thomas Bray, Marcus Chown, Peter Nicholls, Libby Gelman-Waxner, Raphael Shargel, and J. M. Wall.

¹³ In canto two, Dante even describes a primitive physics experiment that the reader could try to "prove" the pilgrim's "observations" on the intensity of the reflection of light in various parts of the cosmos (*Paradiso*, 2.94-105).

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