



PENGUIN  CLASSICS

DANTE

The Divine Comedy
Volume 3: Paradise

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PARADISE

The Divine Comedy is one man's vision of the state of souls after death written with the purpose of saving all mankind. It is both man's attempt to communicate with God and an allegory depicting how Everyman, represented by the protagonist or Pilgrim, wins reward or punishment in the afterlife while still living in this life, by exercising his free will to do good or evil. The *Inferno* treats the state of souls of the wicked who are condemned to the pains of Hell. The *Purgatory* deals with the learning of what is good through a spiritual process of purification that is painful yet pleasing, since someday this pain will come to an end. It is a place of moral growth and progress, the realm in which we learn how earthly love becomes divine. The *Paradise* reveals the great beauty of virtue seen in the rewards awaiting God's Blest. The main action of the *Paradise* is concerned with how man's soul, as it contemplates the making of God's universe, rises by stages in order to arrive at an understanding of the One creator of that universe. To see the universe as One is the final goal of the journey, and the movement of the journey is from fragmentation to unity. What the Pilgrim sees in the cantos of the lower heavens, in fact, is all in preparation for his vision in the highest heaven, the Empyrean, where he will see the redeemed, united with their bodies, as they will be after the Last Judgment. The cantos of the lower heavens are the steps of knowledge leading to Perfect Vision and union with God.

The *Inferno* exists as a concrete place somewhere below the surface of the earth. The *Purgatory* is a mountain that rises high above the sphere of water and has a definite, explained origin. But where is Paradise? Of what does it consist? No matter how primitive or simple medieval science, and especially astronomy, may appear to us

today, it did have its own solid, rational system based on deductive reasoning, and within this system it functioned perfectly. According to Dante's Ptolemaic astronomy the universe is geocentric: the earth is at the center of the universe and the planets revolve around it. Constructing the physical universe of his poem on the Ptolemaic system, then, Dante has nine concentric crystalline spheres composed of ethereal substance. Contained within this substance and carried along within these spheres are the heavenly bodies. They are, in ascending order from the earth, the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the Fixed Stars or Constellations. The ninth sphere, or *Primum Mobile*, is the outer boundary of the universe at the edge of space; it is empty and is described by Dante in terms of pure motion. It is the largest and fastest of the spheres, containing and communicating its movement to the eight heavens below it. Enclosing all of these nine spheres is the tenth one of immeasurable size: the *Empyrean*, the realm of pure spirit and perfect peace, spaceless and motionless. It is here that the souls of the Blest dwell with God and His angels.

It is God who gives the *Primum Mobile* its motion, and it is the *Primum Mobile* that imparts motion to the spheres below it. Each of the nine spheres is governed by its own spiritual intelligence or hierarchy of angels, and the combined force of these angelic intelligences over all the spheres is what is known in Dante's world as Nature. Between the realm of brute matter and the angels is man with his immortal soul. Man is beckoned by the spheres which circle around and above him reflecting God's creation. They invite his contemplation. This is the setting for man's return to God, for his drama of salvation.

Canto I of the *Paradise* serves as the overture to the great musical which follows. All of the major themes, movements, structures, images, and symbols appear in some way or another in the opening canto. The Almighty, "The One Who moves all things," is present as soon as the *Paradise* begins in line 1. The *Empyrean*, "His brightest shining heaven" (4), where the final action of this part of the *Comedy* will take place, is introduced as early as possible as if to stress the circular movement of the *Paradise* before the movement itself starts. This is followed immediately by the "incommunicability" topos: "no man . . . has wit or skill to tell about" (5-6), a theme which will return again and again in the course of the journey and

will reach its final "irresolution" in the closing canto of the poem. The concept of "intellect," "goal," and "desire" is introduced in the third tercet. All the joy that will fill the thirty-three cantos of the *Paradise* resounds in line 33: "a new joy in the joyous Delphic god." The symbolic geometry which begins to reveal itself once the Pilgrim and his guide pass beyond that heavenly region upon which the earth still casts its shadow is clearly present in lines 38-39: "the place which joins/four circles with three crosses . . ." Beatrice's all important "eyes," the "sun," and even the "eagle" which will be so brilliantly developed in later cantos are all in tercet 46-48. We are also given a glimpse of all "the eternal spheres" (65) which the Pilgrim will soon visit. The idea of Beatrice as "mother" and the Pilgrim as "child" (101-102) often returns in the course of the journey. There is also the concept of "order" and "form" (104-105). The "bow" (119 and 125) will appear a number of times during the journey, especially in the earlier cantos. The words "intellect and love" are joined in line 120. The Pilgrim's "eagerness to learn" (83), all the light, the "blazing sparks of light" (59), the sound, "strains of harmony" (77-78), and motion that will fill the rest of the *Paradise* are born here in the opening canto.

Let us take a quick look at one of these themes introduced in the opening canto, the one I have called symbolic geometry, and briefly trace its development in the *Paradise*. Dante describes the time of year that he made his ascent to Paradise in terms of four circles and three crosses as a vernal equinox which was thought to be a propitious time of year. The four and three represent another reminder of the seven virtues (four cardinal and three theological) that were shining at the beginning of the ascent of the Mountain of Purgatory (the four stars in *Purgatory* I, 23, and the three torches later on in VIII, 89). Circles and crosses, as the reader will see, are shapes that will be developed in the course of the journey through the Paradise. The action in the sphere of the sun, for example, (cantos X-XIII) is built on the figure of the circle and the sphere of Mars (cantos XIV-XVII), whose action takes place all within the confines of an immense cross. The circle, as I try to point out in my notes, is the dominating figure in the *Paradise*, and Dante makes the circle work for him in a number of ways. There are times when he will even imitate the shape of the circle with his words. At the end of the poem three circles become contained in one, as the pattern running through the Paradise reaches its culmination. A stunning example of

this circularity which Dante used to reflect perfection and trinity and in which language is imitating concept is shown in Canto XIV, 28-30:

That One and Two and Three which never ends
and ever reigns in Three and Two and One,
uncircumscribed and circumscribing all.

There are several other examples in this canto of the same technique. This type of geometrical imagery is particularly evident in the central cantos of the *Paradise* where the circle gives way to the linear cross. In Canto XIV again, we see movement conveyed in terms of the horizontal and vertical lines of a cross in verses 109-111:

From top to base, across from arm to arm
bright lights were moving, sparkling brilliantly
as they would meet and pass each other's glow.

As theology gives way to politics, so the circular becomes the linear. We find this shift in verses 100-102 of Canto XIV:

so, constellated in the depths of Mars,
these rays of light crossed in the holy sign
which quadrants make when joining in a circle.

The straight line will become the circle again towards the end of the Poem. In Canto XXX, 88-90, as the Pilgrim's eyes drink in the river of light emanating from the Empyrean, a miraculous change takes place:

no sooner had the eaves of my eyes drunk
within those waters, than the river turned
from its straight course to a circumference.

And from this image we move to the concept of God as both center and circumference of the same circle a few tercets later (103-105):

in figure of a circle this light spreads,
and is so vast that its circumference
would be too loose a belt to bind the sun.

All this is leading, of course, to the final vision of the Godhead in Canto XXXIII, 115-117, where three circles with three colors are seen clearly all within the same circumference:

Within Its depthless clarity of substance

I saw the Great Light shine into three circles
in three clear colors bound in one same space

And finally, the Pilgrim becomes the geometer whose wish to square the circle (an impossible task) is granted him—though only for a brief moment. With the circle squared the poem comes to an end in the perfect, powerful balance of the closing three verses:

but, like a wheel in perfect balance turning,
I felt my will and my desire impelled

by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Some of the difficulty the reader of the *Paradise* encounters can be reduced to the one important word which Dante invents to describe his unusual condition in Canto I when he looks into Beatrice's eyes that are gazing straight into the sun. He invents the verb *trasumanar* ("transhumanize"):

Gazing at her, I felt myself becoming
what Glaucus had become tasting the herb
that made him like the other sea-gods there.

"Transhumanize"—it cannot be explained
per verba, so let this example serve
until God's grace grants the experience.

(67-72)

The Pilgrim is undergoing a miraculous inner transformation in preparation for his approach to Paradise. He is, in a sense, becoming divine in order to be accepted by all those divine souls who occupy God's immense sea which he is about to enter. He is entering a state beyond mortal explication, one that cannot be explained *per verba* ("with words"). What the poet is saying in the above tercets is that the image of Glaucus and the sea-gods is the best he can do to ex-

plain his miraculous adventure and that those who are deserving will have to wait until they die to understand the true experience of sanctification.

Dante cannot ground his Paradise in the concrete things of the living world as he did in the *Inferno* and *Purgatory*. The souls of the Blest in *Paradise* will be lights, splendors, and sparks that dance and whirl about; they will assume diverse shapes, and speak to the Pilgrim in symbols and signs. The Poet will have to invent more words for other occasions (as he did the verb *trasumanar*), in order to articulate things that cannot possibly be seen by the human eye. The eyes that have been "transhumanized" must learn to read a new and different language.

It was the medieval view that God's creation is the symbol through which He reveals himself and at the same time remains hidden. And that is why Dante bases his imagery to describe what cannot be described on the temporal. Dante makes the visible world of the *Paradise* accessible to the reader by means of light, sound, and motion. Never does he use a simile or any other rhetorical device as mere decoration. There is always a relationship between word and reality. For example, when a cluster of stylistic elements are found in a canto (or in a group of cantos), they are there in imitation of the meaning conveyed therein. It is the subject and meaning, the conceptual, that dictates the course of the structural or stylistic setup. It is Dante imitating God's universe with language.

Contained in the opening tercet of the *Paradise* we find not only the general theme of the entire canticle clearly announced but also the two fundamental structures or movements operating throughout, which are expressed by the two verbs of line 2: "penetrates" and "reflecting" (the Italian is "penetra e risplende"). God's glory, grace, or light pours down from above and in turn is brought back up to Him. As the cantos of the *Paradise* progress there is also a gradual increase in the use of verbs of expanding growth and ones with connotations of the intensity of light. The stress is on "more and more"—more light, more brilliance—all leading to more understanding as the Pilgrim's vision increases. Dante will double words, triple them (for example, line 63 of Canto XI in the original reads: "poscia di di in di l'amo più forte") and limit a line to exactly three words. He invents words (many of them with the prefix *in*) with the intention of intensifying light, sound, and motion—as well as reflecting the general movement and goal of

the *Paradise*. I will quote just two of the many examples of the "more and more" technique. In Canto XXIII, 82-84 (the italics are mine):

just so I saw there hosts of countless *splendors*
struck from above by *ardent rays* of love,
but could not see the source of such a *blaze*.

and in Canto XXVIII, 16-18:

I saw a point that *radiated light*
so *piercing* that the eyes its *brightness strikes*
are forced to shut from such *intensity*.

No time has passed between the end of the *Purgatory* and the beginning of the *Paradise*. The Pilgrim Dante and his spiritual guide Beatrice are standing as they were at the end of the *Purgatory* in the Earthly Paradise. It is noon, and they are probably still surrounded by those seven maidens who symbolize the four moral virtues and three theological ones. Matilda and Statius, who were a part of the scene at the top of the mountain of Purgatory, are no longer present. The mystical rivers of Lethe and Eunoë have been crossed, the one erasing the memory of sin, the other restoring the remembrance of good deeds. The Pilgrim is now, as the closing verse of *Purgatory* tells us, "eager to rise, now ready for the stars."

Beatrice explains how God is the goal that every creature seeks. The universe is made in his image; it is stamped with the likeness of Divine Wisdom, and its beauty depends on its order. She explains the law of love. God or Love, the beginning and end, moves everything, and everything, through Love, moves back to him. According to their diverse instincts, God moves all things to their natural end. All nature is subject to God's law. Now that the Pilgrim is purified and "ready for the stars," Beatrice tells him that his ascent is as natural and inevitable and as much a part of the order of things as a river that must rush down a high mountain or as a flame that must burn upward. The Pilgrim *must* rise now to his natural end, the natural goal of full, perfect, and eternal happiness. God has ordered it so.

In the first nine cantos of the *Paradise* (containing the first three heavens of Paradise) there is an emphasis on the doctrine of deriva-

tion, how from the one comes the many, an expansion of the opening tercet of the *Paradise*. There is also emphasis on man's place in society in relation to his spiritual status. Society involves diversity of function, which implies mankind's different gifts and abilities, and this difference among men is the ultimate cause of the diversity of the stars and, of course, of the spots on the moon. By the time the reader reaches the end of Canto IX, which marks the close of the first major division of the *Paradise*, he should realize that the long discussion of moon spots occupying most of Canto II, and about which the modern reader of the poem may feel Beatrice is making too big a to-do, is, in fact, a prefiguration of the structure of *Paradise* itself as well as a poetic point of reference for many of the themes running through the *Paradise* as a whole.

The souls Dante encounters on his way up to the Empyrean represent, by means of the sphere in which they appear to him, the visible signs of the degree of grace that they have attained in relation to the capacity they have been given. This Dante would not have been able to ascertain in his final vision of the Rose in the Empyrean because of the intensity of the vision. What is symbolized in the vision of the Rose is the equality with which every blessed soul experiences God's grace regardless of its capacity. The important theme in the *Paradise* of the varying capacities of souls for containing the grace of God is also intimately connected to the discussion of the moon spots in Canto II. The explanation of the varying ability of the moon's composition to absorb the *virtù* or power distributed by the order of the Cherubim angels is a foreshadowing in physical or scientific terms of the varying capacities of the blessed souls for assimilating the grace of God. The moon spots, then, are the result of the diverse ways in which divine virtue, originating in the Empyrean, passing through the Primum Mobile, and from there filtering down through the spheres below by means of the angelic Intelligences, joins with the body of the moon.

Not everyone in *Paradise* is equally blessed. God bestows his grace in different degrees according to his own pleasure, and blessedness is a matter of grace. Depending on the amount of grace given through divine predestination, men's visions of God will differ, but it is upon each soul's vision of God that its happiness depends. Though each soul enjoys a different degree of bliss, each is perfectly happy, since it knows it is enjoying bliss to its full capacity which has been ordained by the will of God. The degree of bliss enjoyed by the soul in

Heaven, then, is not dependent entirely on how one led his life on earth, but more on the mystery of predestination. This is the answer the Pilgrim will hear from a number of the souls in Paradise.

In *Paradise* III, Piccarda, in reply to the Pilgrim's question as to whether the happiness of the souls there in the lowest sphere of the moon is not tinged with the desire for a higher place in God's Heaven, says:

"Brother, the virtue of our heavenly love,
tempers our will and makes us want no more
than what we have—we thirst for this alone.

If we desired to be higher up,
then our desires would not be in accord
with His will Who assigns us to this sphere;
think carefully what love is and you'll see
such discord has no place within these rounds,
since to be here is to exist in Love.

Indeed, the essence of this blessed state
is to dwell here within His holy will,
so that there is no will but one with His;

the order of our rank from height to height
throughout this realm is pleasing to the realm,
as to that King Who wills us to His will.

In His will is our peace—it is the sea
in which all things are drawn that it itself
creates or which the work of Nature makes."

(70-87)

Just as Beatrice had explained in the preceding canto, centered around the discussion of the moon spots, that each sphere takes in an amount of Divine Light that is in proportion to its capacity to receive it, so, in the same way, does each individual soul enjoy the bliss of the highest realm in accordance with its capacity.

While still in the first sphere, that of the moon, the Pilgrim is given another piece of important information concerning the workings of Paradise. In Canto IV, Beatrice, answering one of the Pilgrim's unspoken questions, explains:

Not the most Godlike of the Seraphim,
not Moses, Samuel, whichever John
you choose—I tell you—not Mary herself

has been assigned to any other heaven
than that of these shades you have just seen here,
and each one's bliss is equally eternal;

all lend their beauty to the Highest Sphere,
sharing one same sweet life to the degree
that they feel the eternal breath of God.

These souls appeared here not because this sphere
has been allotted them, but as a sign
of their less great degree of blessedness.

(28-39)

The souls, then, that appear to the Pilgrim are not really there. They are projections of their true selves which exist only in the Empyrean, the spaceless heaven of God which is their true home. The spheres serve only to point out certain distinctions or qualities the souls had shown during their life on earth. It is as though God were projecting their images down onto eight crystalline screens for the benefit of the Pilgrim's mortal condition. It is the only way he, as a man making the voyage in the flesh, can be instructed and learn. His condition does not allow him to see things as they truly are; he will see and feel in this realm in a way unknown to him in the previous ones. The Pilgrim, in fact, is not even certain that he is making this final part of the journey with his body (I, 73-75). The faces of the souls he sees are faint images of light, and gradually, the higher up we go, the more the image fades and the emphasis is on the light itself. What he cannot learn directly must be taught him through analogy involving the senses. In *Paradiso XXX*, 76-81, Beatrice explains the symbolic nature of what the Pilgrim has seen so far in his journey through Paradise. Talking about the flowing light in the shape of a stream which the Pilgrim has just seen, she explains:

... "The stream, the jewels you see
leap in and out of it, the smiling blooms
are all prefigurations of their truth.

These things are not imperfect in themselves;
the defect, rather, lies within your sight,
as yet not strong enough to reach such heights."

This stream from which Beatrice invites the Pilgrim to drink is the last of God's projections of reality prefiguring truth.

The first three heavens of the *Paradise* may be thought of as corresponding to the first nine cantos of the *Purgatory*, or to that section known as the Antepurgatory, the place of late repentants, those still tainted with human defects or the shadows of our world. In fact, the Pilgrim in his journey through the first three heavens meets souls who reveal themselves through shadows of inconstancy (the moon), worldly ambition (Mercury), and earthly love (Venus). In the sphere of the moon, Beatrice explains the limits of human perception in her long discourse concerning the spots on the moon. In the second sphere of Mercury, the Emperor Justinian (who speaks for the entire canto) gives the history of the Empire, while Beatrice in the next canto (VII) explains the meaning of the Redemption, and in so doing more light is shed for the Pilgrim, especially regarding some of the events that took place in the mysterious garden at the top of the mountain of Purgatory. In the third sphere of Venus, one of the souls (Charles Martel of the renowned Anjou family) expounds the doctrine of heredity, and the Pilgrim learns that the reason why many men go astray in the world is that they are not encouraged to follow their inherent character or nature.

In the first three spheres of the *Paradise* the Pilgrim meets some souls that he knew in life—as was also true in the Antepurgatory—but this no longer happens once he leaves the sphere of Venus and enters that of the sun. In these first nine cantos the Pilgrim has relatively little to say compared to Beatrice and the souls that come to greet him in these lower spheres.

With Canto X the poet makes a new start, stressing the division he would make between cantos I-IX and what is to follow. The emphasis in this new section is immediately evident in the opening two tercets of Canto X, the many and the one, the trinity and the unity of God:

Looking upon His Son with all that love
which each of them breathes forth eternally,
that uncreated, ineffable first One,

has fashioned all that moves in mind and space
in such sublime proportions that no one
can see it and not feel His Presence there.

Some critics believe that all the doctrine espoused in the *Paradise* falls in either the opening tercet of the canticle itself or the first two tercets of the new beginning in Canto X.

Once the Pilgrim is past the sphere of Venus and into the spheres of the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, the individual souls who speak to him have become parts of larger symbols. The theologians and wise teachers of the sphere of the sun appear in the form of a circle (the symbol of perfection as well as Divinity), those of Mars in a great glowing cross, the souls of Jupiter in an amazing eagle, and those of Saturn as lights that perform around an immense golden ladder.

The heavens are moved by different angelic orders reflecting the Trinity. The sign of the Trinity, like God Himself, seems to be everywhere in the poem. We even saw it in the *Inferno*, not only in the inscription above the Gate of Hell (*Inf.* III, 1-9) but in the presentation of Lucifer in terms of a mock trinity at the bottom of Hell in the final canto. Other manifestations of it in the lower regions could be cited. We saw the Trinity in the Three Advents of Christ as well as in the three dreams of the *Purgatory* (see Introduction to *Purgatory*, pp. xix-xxiii), but most of all we see it here in the third and final realm of *The Divine Comedy*.

The first three spheres are governed by a triad of angels who contemplate God in terms of the Holy Spirit. The next three spheres ascending (sun, Mars and Jupiter) are ruled by that triad of angels who contemplate God in terms of God the Son. Saturn, the Fixed Stars, and the Primum Mobile, the final spheres encased by the Empyrean, are governed by the highest triad of angels, who contemplate God as the Father.

The sphere of Saturn represents a transition point between the six lower spheres and those above in Heaven's hierarchy. No mention is made of entering this sphere, the heaven of the contemplatives. Beatrice simply announces that they are there in the "Seventh Light" (XXI, 13). It is the active life that prepares man for the life of contemplation, and the just rulers of the sphere directly below, not men but shapes of golden lights that sing and fly like a flock of birds, represent the highest level of the active life. It is in that sphere that the

Pilgrim beholds the divine and mystical origin of the Empire and the concept of Justice in relation to it. In the sphere of Saturn the Pilgrim sees a ladder of gold, representing the perfection of the contemplative life, that stretches upward farther than his eye can see. There is no singing or dancing in this sphere as there was in others, since there is no smile from Beatrice. There is, however, a mysterious burst of thunder made by the spirits, and the Pilgrim is terrified by it. It is through contemplation that man begins to enter the mysteries of Paradise, and for this reason Beatrice suggests that her ward follow the souls up the golden ladder. Suddenly they are all swept up the ladder, and the Pilgrim finds himself in the eighth heaven of the Fixed Stars in his own sign of Gemini. From there he looks down upon the seven spheres of the planets, down through to the puny planet of earth, and he smiles at its relative worth and littleness.

The sphere of the Fixed Stars recalls the Earthly Paradise at the top of the mountain of Purgatory. There the Pilgrim was witness to the scene of man's fall, while here in the highest visible region of the celestial world the work of man's redemption is revealed to him. The souls of the Elect who appeared to the Pilgrim separately in the spheres he traveled through now appear all together with numerous other souls in the eighth sphere, which filters its divine influence down through the planets. It is in this heaven that Adam himself appears and instructs the Pilgrim on the Fall. It is here that the Pilgrim will take examinations on Faith, Hope, and Charity, the three theological virtues that are essential for the attainment of the Beatific Vision, and that will allow him to rise closer to God's glory. Just before ascending to the ninth sphere, the Primum Mobile, the Pilgrim takes a last look back at the earth and goes into another one of his protests against the corruption of the Church which he had done at other transitional points in the *Paradiso*.

The Primum Mobile is the swiftest-moving heaven, and with its movement it directs the daily revolutions of all the other spheres below it. Nature, which is the first principle of motion and rest, has its starting point from this sphere, which is bounded only by the love and light of the Empyrean beyond it. Here Beatrice talks about the heavens and the lack of orderly government on earth which refuses to follow divine order. The Seraphim angels turn this ninth sphere, where both motion and time have their origin, and they shed their virtue down upon the Universe. In the eighth sphere, Dante witnessed the Humanity of Christ and His relation to His mother and

the saints; here he discusses the relation between God and His angels. Here the Pilgrim sees God as a minute point of light first reflected in the eyes of Beatrice and then in reality. The light is the symbol for Divine unity as well as the immateriality of the Divine. From that point comes all the spiritual light that penetrates all of creation. In the ninth sphere the movement begun with the opening tercet of the *Paradise* reverses. The pouring down of Divine light through the universe is reversed and the movement now strongly pulls back to God. This we see in that point of light reflected in Beatrice's eyes surrounded by nine whirling circles, the smallest of which spins the fastest in this miraculous vision instead of the slowest as it would in reality.

Beatrice and the Pilgrim reach the Empyrean, the place of pure light and man's perfect happiness. In his ascension through the nine lower heavens the Pilgrim has witnessed as much of God's glory and divinity as is allowed any living man; now he will receive the reward of such contemplation. The light of this realm is so strong that the Pilgrim suffers temporary blindness. His sight returns, and with it a new way of seeing things. He is in a state of ecstasy which man can achieve only in the highest stage of contemplation and with the special grace of God. He will witness the glory and the joy of God's angels and saints in the Rose of Paradise.

Just as Virgil leads to Matilda in the Earthly Paradise, as human reason or natural philosophy leads man to the blessedness of the active life, so Beatrice, or Divine Wisdom, leads man to the blessedness of eternal life represented in the vision of God's countenance. While Beatrice can lead the Pilgrim to God she can do nothing to actually reveal Him. This can be done only through contemplation and grace. It is for this reason that St. Bernard takes Beatrice's place at the end of the poem. Beatrice in her role of Theology is no longer needed in the Empyrean; here the Highest Truth is revealed through intuition, which is the knowledge of invisible things.

Let us pause for a moment and review briefly Beatrice's purpose in *The Divine Comedy*. Her role in the poem is to lead Dante the Pilgrim, who stands for all of us, to the blessedness of eternal life and the vision of God, to which man in his own natural power cannot approach.

Beatrice, the lady with whom Dante the Pilgrim is so much in love throughout *The Divine Comedy*, is first of all the glorified but real woman the poet loved when she lived on earth. It is only later

that she functions as a symbol. The Beatrice who makes her first appearance in the poem in Canto II of the *Inferno* (which should be thought of as the opening canto of the *Inferno*, since Canto I is an introduction to the entire poem) is full of tenderness and pity as she implores Virgil to help her friend who is lost in the "dark wood" to find salvation. Here the figure of Beatrice is veiled in the atmosphere of the *Vita nuova*. There are strong courtly overtones filling Canto II of the *Inferno*. However, when we see Beatrice again in cantos XXX and XXXI of the *Purgatory*, while certain events from the *Vita nuova* are specifically referred to, the atmosphere has changed and Beatrice has become a dominating figure. She is severe and pitiless toward the protagonist in order that he feel true repentance and become worthy of crossing the river Lethe and rising into Heaven. Then in the closing canto of the *Purgatory* Beatrice makes her final symbolic change when she heads a procession with the seven virtues holding their torches, and proceeds to explain the allegorical meaning of the pageant in the previous canto. Here she is more than just that lady in the *Vita nuova*; she has taken on the meaning Dante had in mind for her in its final chapter. She is now *Sapientia*; she is all the wisdom God has revealed to man which allows him to return to his Creator, and this aspect of Beatrice will remain throughout the journey through Paradise. But it is the real woman, and not Divine Wisdom, who in the final canto of the poem takes her seat among the Blest (*Par.* XXXIII, 38). Her role as guide has ended, and she turns her ward over to St. Bernard, who prepares the Pilgrim for the final vision. Truth must now be seen through grace and contemplation. It is through the intercession of Mary Mother of God that the Pilgrim will be allowed to complete his vision, and it is for this reason that Beatrice before returning to her seat in the third circle of the heavenly Rose drops her allegorical role once they reach the Empyrean and puts her ward in the hands of St. Bernard. Beatrice in her allegorical role prepares man for the kind of contemplation he must practice in this realm.

It would be wrong, however, to read Beatrice exclusively or consistently as a symbol. The Beatrice of *The Divine Comedy* is the same flesh-and-blood woman as the Beatrice of the *Vita nuova*. She is the same mediator between the things of this world and those of the next. To read Beatrice as a symbol, and only as a symbol, is to risk missing much of her lyric beauty. Beatrice in the *Paradise* grows more and more beautiful and her smile, eyes, and face grow brighter

as she moves higher from sphere to sphere with the Pilgrim, who seems to fall more and more in love as she reveals her beauty through the truths she expounds. She who is brilliant in her holiness and beautiful in her wisdom shares her light with her lover in the upward flight to God. Her beauty is proportionate to the truth she conveys in her words to the Pilgrim. It is in those often long monologues, which the modern reader of the poem may find tedious, that Beatrice's beauty shines forth as she sheds her light on that Truth which can only fill the Pilgrim with joy, because with her every discourse or explanation he is approaching the very Source of her light and beauty. The lady's face shines with God's glory. She articulates that glory in human terms of wisdom to her lover:

Such was the flowing of the holy stream
that pours down from the Fountain of All Truth
that it now laid both of my doubts to rest.

"Beloved of the First Love, lady divine,"
I said then, "you whose words bathe me in warmth,
wakening me to life again, the depth

of my deep love is not profound enough
to find the thanks your graciousness deserves—

(IV, 115-122)

It is true that the Pilgrim also receives enlightenment from a number of blessed souls who talk to him in the different spheres, but what he does learn from them is, in one way or another, mediated by Beatrice, who will ask a question or encourage her ward to do so.

While the Beatrice of the *Paradise* is the same Beatrice the poet wrote about in his *Vita nuova*, there is a difference between the two. In *Paradise*, though we often find her preaching, she appears as a more human figure. In the *Vita nuova* she never speaks, she gives no explanations. She is simply there as a figure signifying truth. She is a nine, a three, a number in a poem. Her beauty is cold, because the light she sheds upon her lover from her place in Heaven has no real effect on him. He does not understand it; he is not ready to receive it, and that is why the *Vita nuova* ends as abruptly as it does and why, in a sense, it ends in failure. Not until the *Paradise* does the Pilgrim truly learn to love his lady. And it is for this reason that Beatrice, though she may well speak on weighty subjects in order to reveal

God's truths, is more human, more beautiful, more radiant and tender than she has ever been before. Beatrice's beauty in the *Paradise* is in her words. It reveals itself through her arguments.

The journey of the Pilgrim through *Paradise* takes place between two impressive images which occur at the beginning and end of the canticle. These images are stated and restated, developed and modified, reduced and magnified as they stretch and weave their way into the fine lacework of the *Paradise*. The two images are, of course, the one presented by the opening tercet of the *Paradise*.

The glory of the One Who moves all things
penetrates all the universe, reflecting
in one part more and in another less.

and the one contained in the closing lines of the poem:

At this point power failed high fantasy
but, like a wheel in perfect balance turning,
I felt my will and my desire impelled
by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

The glory that shines down from the Empyrean reflects on the souls; those reflections fill the spheres which fill in turn the Pilgrim with their knowledge for his greater understanding as he approaches the Light itself. They teach him by means of light, motion, and music, and by symbol as they shape messages for him in some of the spheres, and dance in unending circles to the triune rhythm of One, Two, Three in others. There are spirits who literally radiate truth for him, others sing it to him in miraculous strains, and in the sphere of the sun the learned spirits, in order to convey their message, turn into lovely dancing maidens for him and then at the close of the canto into a great clock that stikes with the most sensual (and sexual) tones in the entire poem. Each sphere conveys its message in a different way, and the poet never seems to perform the same artistic miracle twice. The *Paradise* may be the most difficult of the three parts of the poem for the reader to understand and appreciate (Dante is well aware of this and warns his reader at the beginning of Canto II that it is not going to be easy traveling in this realm), but it certainly is the most "artistic."

It is in Canto XXVII that the reader will begin to feel the shift in the poem's movement from down to up, at the point when all the

souls in the sphere of the Fixed Stars return to the Empyrean. This change of perspective is subtly introduced in lines 67-72 in what may be called an inverted snowstorm image:

As frozen vapors flake and start to snow
down through our air during the time of year
the horn of heaven's goat touches the sun,
so I saw all of Heaven's ether glow
with rising snowflakes of triumphant souls
of all those who had sojourned with us there.

The spirits are moving upward, thereby reversing the normal direction of the snowflakes. The snow of souls is falling up toward God, from Whose point of view the image is born. There are other inversion images in this canto and the ones that follow. There is an outstanding example of this in the next canto in tercet 127-129 of XXXVIII as Beatrice is bringing to a close her explanation of the perfect correspondence between the heavenly spheres and the angelic orders which govern them:

And all of the angelic ranks gaze upward,
as downward they prevail upon the rest,
so while each draws the next, all draw toward God.

While both movements join in this tercet the stress is on the upward.

In the final canto of the poem the movement started in the very first tercet of the *Paradise* is entirely reversed. The light of God's glory penetrating the universe and reflecting in the many parts of that universe (the division of the One into its parts) is here once and for all gathered back up again and returned to the One. This reversal reaches its climax when the Pilgrim gazing into the "Eternal Light" says of it:

I saw how it contains within its depths
all things bound in a single book by love
of which creation is the scattered leaves:
how substance, accident, and their relation
were fused in such a way that what I now
describe is but a glimmer of that Light.

I know I saw the universal form,
the fusion of all things, for I can feel,
while speaking now, my heart leap up in joy.

(XXXIII, 85-93)

The idea of reversal or the return of the parts to the One is even reflected in the "surrealistic" tercet that immediately follows, a tercet in which the "ineffability" or "incommunicability" theme introduced in Canto I reaches its climax. This is the last of the sea-voyage images in *The Divine Comedy*, and it is a stunning one:

One instant brings me more forgetfulness
than five and twenty centuries brought the quest
that stunned Neptune when he saw Argo's keel.

(94-96)

On the literal level Dante uses this image to convey how remote his experience seemed in time even a moment after it happened. He is saying that the journey of the Argo, the first ship ever to sail the seas 2,500 years ago, is more easily remembered today than is his moment of vision, though he has just experienced it. On another level the language and the structure of this tercet is suggesting that the number 2,500 is being reduced to a one. This is, of course, only one level upon which this tercet functions (see XXXIII, note 94-96).

The return to Unity continues through the final canto. It is clearly there in lines 103-104 ("because the good which is the goal of will is all collected there . . .") and again in 117 ("in three clear colors bound in one same space") as the poet strains to recall his moment of ecstasy when he looked deep into the light of God. And suddenly the Pilgrim sees and understands the dual nature of God. With this "flash of understanding" the two major forces of the *Paradise* are resolved in its final lines, in which the descending and reascending themes join to form a circle:

At this point power failed high fantasy
but, like a wheel in perfect balance turning,
I felt my will and my desire impelled

by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

A circle that is a wheel revolving in its perfect balance is how the Pilgrim Poet's will and desire seem to be impelled by Love (God) at

the moment *The Divine Comedy* closes. Into these closing verses the poet manages to recall with key words the major movements and basic concepts not only of the *Paradise* but also of the entire *Divine Comedy*. The "high fantasy," referring literally to that faculty of the poet which is capable of receiving images, is now filled to capacity and he can see no deeper, and as a result it fails. Also contained in these two words is the concept of "fantasy" in the sense of creative ability: that capacity which made the actual creation and writing of the poem possible. The reader will not be long into his reading of the *Paradise* before he realizes the importance of the nouns "power" (*potenza*) and "wheel" (*ruota*), "sun" (*sole*) and "stars" (*stelle*), and the verbs "turning" (*volgea*) and "impelled" (*è mossa*), as well as the concepts and their ramifications of "perfect balance" (*igualmente*) and the all-important interconnections of "my will and my desire" (*il mio disio e'l velle*). All this is in relation to the most significant word in our world and that of the poem: Love (*l'amor*). It is the agent that set the action of the poem into motion at the beginning of the *Inferno* as much as it is the receiver or object of that same action here at the close of the *Paradise*. And, of course, we know Who Love is: God (*Deus est caritas*). All the lines of the *Comedy* terminate and start in this word; it is the alpha and omega of the poem.

Dante, when he wrote the closing line for his poem, must have had in the back of his mind those three motifs or poetic techniques that gave birth to so much of the fundamental imagery of the *Paradise* and that define its miraculous message: light, motion, and music. In this line

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

(by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.)

there is the light of the "sun" positioned in the middle of the verse itself, and because of its centralization its light illuminates all parts of the verse equally—in fact, there are twelve letters on one side of "il sole" and thirteen following it. There is also the verb "move" which defines its own action, and the word "stelle" in closing position which reflects the central light of the "sun" and gives it back. What is most impressive, however, is the music of this line. Its rhythm seems to be imitating the perfectly balanced turning wheel of the preceding verse as the endecasyllabic Italian line comes to a definite stop after "sole" in order for the voice to pick up the "e" immedi-

arely following, which must be pronounced. I have tried to render this balanced spinning movement by breaking the iambic pentameter of the closing line in English for the first and only time in the *Paradise* with two balancing anapests: one at the beginning (bý thě Lóve) and one at the end that leads up to the stars (aňd thě óthěr stárs). It is the music of the spheres (contained in the word "stars"), a sense of peace and tranquillity, man as one with God and creation, that the author of *The Divine Comedy* wishes to leave his reader.

The word "stars," the last word of the poem, glows with a number of meanings which *The Divine Comedy* itself has given it in the course of the journey. The sun is another star, as the last verse surely implies through the use of the word "other," and we know that the sun is the symbol for God—this is clear from the first canto of the *Inferno*, and the stars stand for all the heavens. It is through the sphere of the Fixed Stars, immediately below the Primum Mobile, that God's grace is filtered down through the lower spheres, finally reaching the material universe—that is what Canto II concerning the spots on the moon is all about. The stars, then, are the link between God and His creation. They are His eyes set in the outermost limits of the physical universe:

O Triune Light which sparkles in one star
upon their sight, Fulfiller of full joy!
look down upon us in our tempest here!
(XXXI, 28-30)

They are the constant reminder to mankind of his connection to his Maker. Through them we see God from our earth. Through them God touches us. Through them Dante connects the three distinct parts of his miraculous poem, the *Inferno*, the *Purgatory*, and the *Paradise*, into a single unity which is *The Divine Comedy*.

M.M.
May 1985
Florence, Italy

ABBREVIATIONS

- a. articulus
 Aen. *Aeneid* (Virgil)
 Consol. philos. *Consolatio philosophiae* (Boethius)
 Conv. *Convivio* (Dante Alighieri)
 Cron. *Chronicles* (Villani)
 De civ. Dei *Ad Marcellinum De civitate Dei contra paganos*
 (Augustine)
 De doct. Chris. *De doctrina Christiana* (Augustine)
 De mon. *De monarchia* (Dante Alighieri)
 De vulg. eloqu. *De vulgari eloquentia* (Dante Alighieri)
 E.D. Enciclopedia Dantesca
 Eclog. *Eclogues* (Virgil)
 Epist. *Epistolae* (Dante Alighieri)
 Eth. Nicom. *Ethica Nicomachea* (Aristotle)
 Etym. *Etymologiarum Libri XX* or *Origines* (Isidore of Seville)
 Hist. *Historiarum adversum paganos libri septem* (Orosius)
 Inf. *Inferno* (Dante Alighieri)
 lect. lectio
 Metam. *Metamorphoses* (Ovid)
 Metaphys. *Metaphysica* (Aristotle)
 Meteor. *Meteorologica* (Aristotle)
 Moral. *Moralium libri, sive Expositio in librum b. Iob* (Gregory I)
 Par. *Paradiso* (Dante Alighieri)
 Phars. *Pharsalia* (Lucan)
 Purg. *Purgatorio* (Dante Alighieri)
 q. quaestio
 resp. respondeo
 Summa theol. *Summa theologica* (Thomas Aquinas)
 suppl. supplementum

CANTO I

AFTER STATING THAT God's glory shines throughout the universe, Dante informs us that he has been to Paradise, and has seen things so extraordinary that he cannot possibly hope to tell about them. Nevertheless, he determines to make this final song his crowning achievement as a poet, and he calls on both the Muses and Apollo for inspiration as he focuses on his journey heavenward. At noon on the spring equinox, Dante, still in the Earthly Paradise, sees Beatrice gazing into the sun, and he imitates her gaze. In so doing, he becomes aware of an extraordinary brightness, as though God had placed in the heavens a second sun, and feels himself being "transhumanized" in preparation for his experience of Paradise. He then finds himself soaring heavenward through God's grace, although he is uncertain whether it is his soul or his corporeal self that rises. As Dante and Beatrice pass out of the earth's atmosphere into the sphere of fire that lies above it, Dante hears the music of the spheres. This music fills him with wonderment and perplexity, but before he can question Beatrice about it, she explains to him the teleological order of the universe, and how it is only natural that, having been purified, he should now rise heavenward.

- The glory of the One Who moves all things
penetrates all the universe, reflecting
in one part more and in another less. 3
- I have been in His brightest shining heaven
and seen such things that no man, once returned
from there, has wit or skill to tell about; 6
- for when our intellect draws near its goal
and fathoms to the depths of its desire,
the memory is powerless to follow; 9
- but still, as much of Heaven's holy realm
as I could store and treasure in my mind
shall now become the subject of my song. 12
- O great Apollo, for this final task,
make me a vessel worthy to receive
your genius and the longed-for laurel crown. 15

- Thus far I have addressed my prayers to one
 peak of Parnassus; now I need them both
 to move into this heavenly arena. 18
- Enter my breast, breathe into me as high
 a strain as that which vanquished Marsyas
 the time you drew him from his body's sheath. 21
- O Power Divine, but lend me of yourself
 so much as will make clear at least the shadow
 of that high realm imprinted on my mind, 24
- and you shall see me at your chosen tree,
 crowning myself with those green leaves of which
 my theme and you yourself will make me worthy. 27
- So seldom, Father, are they plucked to crown
 the triumph of a Caesar or a Poet
 (the shame, the fault of mortal man's desires!) 30
- that when a man yearns to achieve that goal,
 then the Peneian frond should surely breed
 a new joy in the joyous Delphic god. 33
- From one small spark can come a mighty blaze:
 so after me, perhaps, a better voice
 may rise in prayer and win Cyrrha's response. 36
- The lamp that lights the world rises for man
 at different points, but from the place which joins
 four circles with three crosses, it ascends 39
- upon a happier course with happier stars
 conjoined, and in this way it warms and seals
 the earthly wax closer to its own likeness. 42
- This glad union had made it morning there
 and evening here: our hemisphere was dark,
 while all the mountain bathed in white, when I 45
- saw Beatrice turned round, facing left,
 her eyes raised to the sun—no eagle ever
 could stare so fixed and straight into such light! 48
- As one descending ray of light will cause
 a second one to rise back up again,
 just as a pilgrim yearns to go back home, 51

- so, like a ray, her act poured through my eyes
 into my mind and gave rise to my own:
 I stared straight at the sun as no man could. 53
- In that place first created for mankind
 much more is granted to the human senses
 than ever was allowed them here on earth. 57
- I could not look for long, but my eyes saw
 the sun enclosed in blazing sparks of light
 like molten iron as it pours from the fire. 60
- And suddenly it was as if one day
 shone on the next—as if the One Who Could
 had decked the heavens with a second sun. 63
- And Beatrice stood there, her eyes fixed
 on the eternal spheres, entranced, and now
 my eyes, withdrawn from high, were fixed on her. 66
- Gazing at her, I felt myself becoming
 what Glaucus had become tasting the herb
 that made him like the other sea-gods there. 69
- "Transhumanize"—it cannot be explained
per verba, so let this example serve
 until God's grace grants the experience. 72
- Whether it was the last created part
 of me alone that rose, O Sovereign Love,
 You know Whose light it was that lifted me. 75
- When the great sphere that spins, yearning for You
 eternally, captured my mind with strains
 of harmony tempered and tuned by You, 78
- I saw a great expanse of heaven ablaze
 with the sun's flames: not all the rains and rivers
 on earth could ever make a lake so wide. 81
- The revelation of this light, this sound,
 inflamed me with such eagerness to learn
 their cause, as I had never felt before; 84
- and she who saw me as I saw myself,
 ready to calm my agitated mind,
 began to speak before I asked my question: 87

"You have yourself to blame for burdening
your mind with misconceptions that prevent
from seeing clearly what you might have seen. 90

You may think you are still on earth, but lightning
never sped downward from its home as quick
as you are now ascending to your own." 93

As easily did these few and smiling words
release me from my first perplexity
than was my mind ensnared by yet another, 96

and I said: "Though I rest content concerning
one great wonder of mine, I wonder now
how I can rise through these light bodies here." 99

She sighed with pity when she heard my question
and looked at me the way a mother might
hearing her child in his delirium: 102

"Among all things, however disparate,
there reigns an order, and this gives the form
that makes the universe resemble God," 105

she said; "therein God's higher creatures see
the imprint of Eternal Excellence—
that goal for which the system is created, 108

and in this order all created things,
according to their bent, maintain their place,
disposed in proper distance from their Source; 111

therefore, they move, all to a different port,
across the vast ocean of being, and each
endowed with its own instinct as its guide. 114

This is what carries fire toward the moon,
this is the moving force in mortal hearts,
this is what binds the earth and makes it one. 117

Not only living creatures void of reason
prove the impelling strength of instinct's bow,
but also those with intellect and love. 120

The Providence that regulates the whole
becalms forever with its radiance
the heaven wherein revolves the swiftest sphere; 123

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P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

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CAN. \$25.99

ISBN 978-0-14-044443-8



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