so that I thought we moved toward Hell again.
"Hold fast!" my Guide said, and his breath came shrill[2]
with labor and exhaustion. "There is no way
but by such stairs to rise above such evil."
At last he climbed out through an opening
in the central rock, and he seated me on the rim;
then joined me with a nimble backward spring.
I looked up, thinking to see Lucifer
as I had left him, and I saw instead
his legs projecting high into the air.
Now let all those whose dull minds are still vexed
by failure to understand what point it was
I had passed through, judge if I was perplexed.
"Get up. Up on your feet," my Master said.
"The sun already mounts to middle tierce,[3]
and a long road and hard climbing lie ahead."
It was no hall of state we had found there,
but a natural animal pit hollowed from rock
with a broken floor and a close and sunless air.
"Before I tear myself from the Abyss,"
I said when I had risen, "O my Master,
explain to me my error in all this:
where is the ice? and Lucifer—how has he
been turned from top to bottom: and how can the sun
have gone from night to day so suddenly?"
And he to me: "You imagine you are still
on the other side of the center where I grasped
the shaggy flank of the Great Worm of Evil
which bores through the world—you *were* while I climbed down,
but when I turned myself about, you passed
the point to which all gravities are drawn.
You are under the other hemisphere where you stand;
the sky above us is the half opposed
to that which canopies the great dry land.
Under the mid-point of that other sky
the Man who was born sinless and who lived
beyond all blemish, came to suffer and die.
You have your feet upon a little sphere
which forms the other face of the Judecca.
There it is evening when it is morning here.
And this gross Fiend and Image of all Evil

2. Cf. Canto XXIII, 85, where the fact that Dante breathes indicates to the Hypocrites that he is alive. Virgil's breathing is certainly a contradiction. 3. In the canonical day tierce is the period from about six to nine A.M. Middle tierce, therefore, is seven-thirty. In going through the center point, they have gone from night to day. They have moved ahead twelve hours.

who made a stairway for us with his hide
is pinched and prisoned in the ice-pack still.
On this side he plunged down from heaven's height,
and the land that spread here once hid in the sea
and fled North to our hemisphere for fright;
and it may be that moved by that same fear,
the one peak[4] that still rises on this side
fled upward leaving this great cavern here."
Down there, beginning at the further bound
of Beelzebub's dim tomb, there is a space
not known by sight, but only by the sound
of a little stream[5] descending through the hollow
it has eroded from the massive stone
in its endlessly entwining lazy flow."
My Guide and I crossed over and began
to mount that little known and lightless road
to ascend into the shining world again.
He first, I second, without thought of rest
we climbed the dark until we reached the point
where a round opening brought in sight the blest
and beauteous shining of the Heavenly Cars.
And we walked out once more beneath the Stars.[6]

Purgatorio

CANTO I

Ante-Purgatory:
The Shore of the Island Cato of Utica

The Poets emerge from Hell just before dawn of Easter Sunday (April 10, 1300), and Dante revels in the sight of the rediscovered heavens. As he looks eagerly about at the stars, he sees nearby an old man of impressive bearing. The ancient is Cato of Utica, guardian of the shores of Purgatory. Cato challenges the Poets as fugitives from Hell, but Virgil, after first instructing Dante to kneel in reverence, explains Dante's mission and Beatrice's command. Cato then gives them instructions for proceeding.

The Poets have emerged at a point a short way up the slope of Purgatory. It is essential, therefore, that they descend to the lowest

4. The Mount of Purgatory. 5. Lethe. In classical mythology, the river of forgetfulness, from which souls drank before being born. In Dante's symbolism it flows down from Purgatory, where it has washed away the memory of sin from the souls who are undergoing purification. That memory it delivers to Hell, which draws all sin to itself. 6. Dante ends each of the three divisions of the *Commedia* with this word. Every conclusion of the upward soul is toward the stars, God's shining symbols of hope and virtue. It is just before dawn of Easter Sunday that the Poets emerge.

point and begin from there, an allegory of Humility. Cato, accordingly, orders Virgil to lead Dante to the shore, to wet his hands in the dew of the new morning, and to wash the stains of Hell from Dante's face and the film of Hell's vapors from Dante's eyes. Virgil is then to bind about Dante's waist one of the pliant reeds (symbolizing Humility) that grow in the soft mud of the shore.

Having so commanded, Cato disappears. Dante arises in silence and stands waiting, eager to begin. His look is all the communication that is necessary. Virgil leads him to the shore and performs all that Cato has commanded, Dante's first purification is marked by a miracle: when Virgil breaks off a reed, the stalk immediately regenerates a new reed, restoring itself exactly as it had been.

For better waters now the little bark
of my indwelling powers raises her sails,
and leaves behind that sea so cruel and dark.
Now shall I sing that second kingdom[7] given
the soul of man wherein to purge its guilt
and so grow worthy to ascend to Heaven.
Yours am I, sacred Muses! To you I pray.
Here let dead poetry[8] rise once more to life,
and here let sweet Calliope[9] rise and play
some far accompaniment in that high strain
whose power the wretched Pierides once felt
so terribly they dared not hope again.
Sweet azure of the sapphire of the east
was gathering on the serene horizon
its pure and perfect radiance—a feast
to my glad eyes, reborn to their delight,
as soon as I had passed from the dead air[1]
which had oppressed my soul and dimmed my sight.
The planet whose sweet influence strengthens love[2]
was making all the east laugh with her rays,
veiling the Fishes, which she swam above.
I turned then to my right and set my mind
on the other pole, and there I saw four stars[3]

7. Purgatory. 8. The verses that sang of Hell. Dante may equally have meant that poetry as an art has long been surpassed by history as the medium for great subjects. Here poetry will return to its classic state. 9. Muse of Epic Poetry. Dante exhorts Calliope to fill him with the strains of the music she played in the defeat of the Pierides, the nine daughters of Pierius, King of Thessaly. They presumed to challenge the Muses to a contest of song. After their defeat they were changed into magpies for their presumption. Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, V, 294–340 and 662–678) retells the myth in detail. 1. Of Hell. 2. Venus. Here, as morning star, Venus is described as rising in Pisces, the Fishes, the zodiacal sign immediately preceding Aries. In Canto I of the *Inferno* Dante has made it clear that the Sun is in Aries. Hence it is about to rise. 3. Modern readers are always tempted to identify these four stars as the Southern Cross, but it is almost certain that Dante did not know about that formation. In VIII, 89, Dante mentions three other stars as

unseen by mortals since the first mankind.[4]
The heavens seemed to revel in their light.
O widowed Northern Hemisphere, bereft
forever of the glory of that sight!
As I broke off my gazing, my eyes veered
a little to the left, to the other pole[5]
from which, by then, the Wain had disappeared.
I saw, nearby, an ancient man, alone.[6]
His bearing filled me with such reverence,
no father could ask more from his best son.
His beard was long and touched with strands of white,
as was his hair, of which two tresses fell
over his breast. Rays of the holy light
that fell from the four stars made his face glow
with such a radiance that he looked to me
as if he faced the sun. And standing so,
he moved his venerable plumes and said:
"Who are you two who climb by the dark stream
to escape the eternal prison of the dead?
Who led you? or what served you as a light
in your dark flight from the eternal valley,
which lies forever blind in darkest night?
Are the laws of the pit so broken? Or is new counsel
published in Heaven that the damned may wander
onto my rocks from the abyss of Hell?"
At that my Master laid his hands upon me,
instructing me by word and touch and gesture
to show my reverence in brow and knee,
then answered him: "I do not come this way

emphatically as he does these four and no one has been tempted to identify them on the star-chart. Both constellations are best taken as allegorical. The four stars represent the Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. Dante will encounter them again in the form of nymphs when he achieves the Earthly Paradise. 4. *The first mankind:* Adam and Eve. In Dante's geography, the Garden of Eden (the Earthly paradise) was at the top of the Mount of Purgatory, which was the only land in the Southern Hemisphere. All of what were called "the southern continents" were believed to lie north of the equator. When Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden, therefore, they were driven into the Northern Hemisphere, and no living soul since had been far enough south to see those stars. Ulysses and his men (*Inferno*, XXVII) had come within sight of the Mount of Purgatory, but Ulysses mentioned nothing of having seen these stars. 5. The North Pole. The Wain (Ursa Major, i.e., the Big Dipper) is below the horizon. 6. Marcus Porcious Cato, the younger, 95–46 B.C. In the name of freedom, Cato opposed the policies of both Caesar and Pompey, but because he saw Caesar as the greater evil joined forces with Pompey. After the defeat of his cause at the Battle of Thapsus, Cato killed himself with his own sword rather than lose his freedom. Virgil lauds him in the *Aeneid* as a symbol of perfect devotion to liberty, and all writers of Roman antiquity have given Cato a similar high place. Dante spends the highest praises on him both in *De Monarchia* and *Il Convivio*. Why Cato should be so signally chosen by God as the special guardian of Purgatory has been much disputed. Cato may be taken as representative of supreme virtue short of godliness. He has accomplished everything but the purifying total surrender of his will to God. As such he serves as an apt transitional symbol, being the highest rung on the ladder of natural virtue, but the lowest on the ladder of those godly virtues to which Purgatory is the ascent.

of my own will or powers. A Heavenly Lady
sent me to this man's aid in his dark day.
But since your will is to know more, my will
cannot deny you; I will tell you truly
why we have come and how. This man has still
to see his final hour, though in the burning
of his own madness he had drawn so near it
his time was perilously short for turning.
As I have told you, I was sent to show
the way his soul must take for its salvation;
and there is none but this by which I go.
I have shown him the guilty people. Now I mean
to lead him through the spirits in your keeping,
to show him those whose suffering makes them clean.
By what means I have led him to this strand
to see and hear you, takes too long to tell:
from Heaven is the power and the command.
Now may his coming please you, for he goes
to win his freedom; and how dear that is
the man who gives his life for it best knows.
You know it, who in that cause found death sweet
in Utica where you put off that flesh
which shall rise radiant at the Judgment Seat.
We do not break the Laws: this man lives yet,
and I am of that Round not ruled by Minos,[7]
with your own Marcia,[8] whose chaste eyes seem set
in endless prayers to you. O blessed breast
to hold her yet your own! for love of her
grant us permission to pursue our quest
across your seven kingdoms. When I go
back to her side I shall bear thanks of you,
if you will let me speak your name below."
"Marcia was so pleasing in my eyes
there on the other side," he answered then
"that all she asked, I did. Now that she lies
beyond the evil river, no word or prayer
of hers may move me. Such was the Decree
pronounced upon us when I rose from there.

7. The Judge of the Damned. The round in Hell not ruled by Minos is Limbo, the final resting place of the Virtuous Pagans. Minos (see *Inferno*, V) is stationed at the entrance to the second circle of Hell. The souls in Limbo (the first circle) have never had to pass before him to be judged. 8. The daughter of the consul Philippus and Cato's second wife, bearing his three children. In 56 B.C., in an unusual transaction approved by her father, Cato released her in order that she might marry his friend Hortensius. (Hence line 87: "that all she asked I did.") After the death of Hortensius, Cato took her back.

But if, as you have said, a Heavenly Dame
orders your way, there is no need to flatter:
you need but ask it of me in her name.
Go then, and lead this man, but first see to it
you bind a smooth green reed about his waist
and clean his face of all trace of the pit
For it would not be right that one with eyes
still filmed by mist should go before the angel
who guards the gate: he is from Paradise.
All round the wave-wracked shore-line, there below,
reeds grow in the soft mud. Along that edge
no foliate nor woody plant could grow,
for what lives in that buffeting must bend.
Do not come back this way: the rising sun
will light an easier way you may ascend."
With that he disappeared; and silently
I rose and moved back till I faced my Guide,
my eyes upon him, waiting. He said to me:
"Follow my steps and let us turn again:
along this side there is a gentle slope
that leads to the low boundaries of the plain."
The dawn, in triumph, made the day-breeze flee
before its coming, so that from afar
I recognized the trembling of the sea.
We strode across that lonely plain like men
who seek the road they strayed from and who count
the time lost till they find it once again.
When we had reached a place along the way
where the cool morning breeze shielded the dew
against the first heat of the gathering day,
with gentle graces my Sweet Master bent
and laid both outspread palms upon the grass.
Then I, being well aware of his intent,
lifted my tear-stained cheeks to him, and there
he made me clean, revealing my true color
under the residues of Hell's black air.
We moved on then to the deserted strand
which never yet has seen upon its waters
a man who found his way back to dry land.
There, as it pleased another, he girded me.
Wonder of wonders! when he plucked a reed
another took its place there instantly,
arising from the humble stalk he tore
so that it grew exactly as before.

CANTO II

Ante-Purgatory:
The Shore of the Island *The Angel Boatman, Casella, Cato of Utica*

It is dawn. Dante, washed, and girded by the reed, is standing by the shore when he sees a light approaching at enormous speed across the sea. The light grows and becomes visible as The Angel Boatman who ferries the souls of the elect from their gathering place at The Mouth of the Tiber to the shore of Purgatory.

The newly arrived souls debark and, taking the Poets as familiars of the place, ask directions. Virgil explains that he and Dante are new arrivals but that they have come by the dark road through Hell. The newly arrived souls see by his breathing that Dante is alive and crowd about him. One of the new souls is Casella, a musician who seems to have been a dear friend of Dante's. Dante tries three times to clasp him to his bosom, but each time his arms pass through empty air. Casella explains the function of the Angel Boatman and then, at Dante's request, strikes up a song, one of Dante's own canzoni that Casella had set to music. Instantly, Cato descends upon the group, berating them, and they break like startled pigeons up the slope toward the mountain.

The sun already burned at the horizon,
while the high point of its meridian circle
covered Jerusalem, and in opposition
equal Night revolved about the Ganges
bearing the Scales that fall out of hand
as she grows longer with the season's changes:
thus, where I was, Aurora in her passage
was losing the pale blushes from her cheeks
which turned to orange with increasing age.[9]
We were still standing by the sea's new day
like travelers pondering the road ahead
who send their souls on while their bones delay;
when low above the ocean's western rim,
as Mars, at times, observed through the thick vapors
that form before the dawn, burns red and slim;
just so—so may I hope to see it again!—
a light appeared, moving above the sea
faster than any flight. A moment then
I turned my eyes to question my sweet Guide,
and when I looked back to that unknown body

9. The bit of erudite affectation in which Dante indulges in lines 1–9 means simply, "It was dawn."

I found its mass and brightness magnified.
Then from each side of it came into view
an unknown something-white; and from beneath it,
bit by bit, another whiteness grew.
We watched till the white objects at each side
took shape as wings, and Virgil spoke no word.
But when he saw what wings they were, he cried:
"Down on your knees! It is God's angel comes!
Down! Fold your hands! From now on you shall see
many such ministers in the high kingdoms.
See how he scorns man's tools: he needs no oars
nor any other sail than his own wings
to carry him between such distant shores.
See how his pinions tower upon the air,
pointing to Heaven: they are eternal plumes
and do not moult like feathers or human hair."
Then as that bird of heaven closed the distance
between us, he grew brighter and yet brighter
until I could no longer bear the radiance,
and bowed my head. He steered straight for the shore,
his ship so light and swift it drew no water;
it did not seem to sail so much as soar.
Astern stood the great pilot of the Lord,
so fair his blessedness seemed written on him;
and more than a hundred souls were seated forward,
singing as if they raised a single voice
in exitu Israel de Aegypto.[1]
Verse after verse they made the air rejoice.
The angel made the sign of the cross, and they
cast themselves, at his signal, to the shore.[2]
Then, swiftly as he had come, he went away.
The throng he left seemed not to understand
what place it was, but stood and stared about
like men who see the first of a new land.
The sun, who with an arrow in each ray
had chased the Goat[3] out of the height of Heaven,
on every hand was shooting forth the day,
when those new souls looked up to where my Guide
and I stood, saying to us, "If you know it,
show us the road that climbs the mountainside."
Virgil replied: "You think perhaps we two
have had some long experience of this place,
but we are also pilgrims, come before you

1. When Israel out of Egypt came. Psalm CXIII. 2. Note that this is exactly what Dante says of the sinners leaving Charon's ferry in *Inferno* III, 113. 3. Capricorn.

only by very little, though by a way
so steep, so broken, and so tortuous
the climb ahead of us will seem like play."
The throng of souls, observing by my breath
I was still in the body I was born to,
stared in amazement and grew pale as death.
As a crowd, eager for news, will all but smother
a messenger who bears the olive branch,[4]
and not care how they trample one another—
so these, each one of them a soul elect,
pushed close to stare at me, well-nigh forgetting
the way to go to make their beauty perfect.
One came forward to embrace me, and his face
shone with such joyous love that, seeing it,
I moved to greet him with a like embrace.
O solid seeming shadows! Three times there
I clasped my hands behind him, and three times
I drew them to my breast through empty air.
Amazed, I must have lost all color then,
for he smiled tenderly and drew away,
and I lunged forward as if to try again.
In a voice as gentle as a melody
he bade me pause; and by his voice I knew him,
and begged him stay a while and speak to me.
He answered: "As I loved you in the clay
of my mortal body, so do I love you freed:
therefore I pause. But what brings you this way?"
"Casella[5] mine, I go the way I do
in the hope I may return here," I replied.
"But why has so much time been taken from you?"
And he: "I am not wronged if he whose usage
accepts the soul at his own time and pleasure
has many times refused to give me passage:
his will moves in the image and perfection
of a Just Will; indeed, for three months now
he has taken all who asked,[6] without exception.

4. In Dante's time couriers bore the olive branch to indicate not only peace but good news in general. 5. *Casella:* Practically all that is known about Casella has been drawn from the text itself. He seems to have died several months before Dante began his journey, hence early in 1300 or late in 1299. There is no explanation of his delay in reaching Purgatory (the time that has been taken from him). Dante later meets several classes of sinners who must spend a certain period of waiting before they can begin their purification. Clearly it is Dante's conception that the souls bound for Purgatory do not always proceed instantly to their destination, but may be required to expiate by a delay at their gathering point by the mouth of the Tiber (line 101). Casella was a musician and is known to have set some of Dante's *canzone* to music. The song he strikes up (line 112) is such a *canzone.* 6. Boniface VIII decreed a Jubilee Year from Christmas 1299 to Christmas 1300. (See *Inferno* XVIII, 28–33 and note.) His decree extended special indulgences even to the dead. Hence the Angel's permissiveness.

And so it was that in my turn I stood
upon that shore where Tiber's stream grows salt,
and there was gathered to my present good.
It is back to the Tiber's mouth he has just flown,
for there forever is the gathering place
of all who do not sink to Acheron."
"If no new law has stripped you of your skill
or of the memory of those songs of love
that once could calm all passion from my will,"
I said to him, "Oh sound a verse once more
to soothe my soul which, with its weight of flesh
and the long journey, sinks distressed and sore."
"Love that speaks its reasons in my heart,"
he sang then, and such grace flowed on the air
that even now I hear that music start.
My Guide and I and all those souls of bliss
stood tranced in song; when suddenly we heard
the Noble Elder cry: "What's this! What's this!
Negligence! Loitering! O laggard crew
run to the mountain and strip off the scurf
that lets not God be manifest in you!"
Exactly as a flock of pigeons gleaning
a field of stubble, pecking busily,
forgetting all their primping and their preening,
will rise as one and scatter through the air,
leaving their feast without another thought
when they are taken by a sudden scare—
so that new band, all thought of pleasure gone,
broke from the feast of music with a start
and scattered for the mountainside like one
who leaps and does not look where he will land.
Nor were my Guide and I inclined to stand.

CANTO XIX

The Fourth Cornice The Slothful
Dante's Dream of Sirena
The Ascent The Angel of Zeal
The Fifth Cornice The Hoarders and Wasters (The Avaricious)

Just before morning (when the truth is dreamed) Dante dreams of The Siren that lures the souls of men to incontinent worldliness. Hideous in her true form, the Siren grows irresistible in men's eyes as they look upon her. A Heavenly Lady races in upon the dream and calls to Virgil who, thus summoned, strips the Siren, exposing her filthy body. Such a stench rises from her, so exposed, that Dante

wakens shuddering, to find Virgil calling him to resume the journey.

The Angel of Zeal shows them the passage, and when his wings have fanned the Poets, Dante casts off his depression and lethargy, and rushes up the remaining length of the passage.

Arrived at The Fifth Cornice, Virgil inquires the way of one of the souls of The Hoarders and Wasters, who lie motionless and outstretched, bound hand and foot, with their faces in the dust.

The soul of Pope Adrian V replies that, if they have incurred no guilt by Hoarding or Wasting, they may pass on to the right. Dante kneels in reverence to Adrian and is scolded for doing so. Adrian then dismisses Dante in order to resume his purification. Adrian's last request is that his niece, Alagia, be asked to pray for his soul.

At the hour when the heat of the day is overcome
by Earth, or at times by Saturn, and can no longer
temper the cold of the moon;[7] when on the dome
of the eastern sky the geomancers sight
Fortuna Major[8] rising on a course
on which, and soon, it will be drowned in light;
there came to me in a dream a stuttering crone,
squint-eyed, clubfooted, both her hands deformed,
and her complexion like a whitewashed stone.
I stared at her; and just as the new sun
breathes life to night-chilled limbs, just so my look
began to free her tongue, and one by one
drew straight all her deformities, and warmed
her dead face, till it bloomed as love would wish it
for its delight. When she was thus transformed,
her tongue thus loosened, she began to sing
in such a voice that only with great pain
could I have turned from her soliciting.
"I am," she sang, "Sirena.[9] I am she
whose voice is honeyed with such sweet enticements
it trances sailing men far out to sea.
I turned Ulysses from his wanderer's way[1]

7. An intricate passage based on the medieval belief that sunlight reflected from earth to the moon produced warmth on the moon, whereas sunlight reflected from the moon to the earth produced cold on the earth. *At the hour:* Before dawn. The accumulated heat of the day would have been dissipated through the long night and could no longer temper the cold of the moon. *Overcome by Earth:* The last heat of the day is overcome by the night-chilled earth. *Or at times by Saturn:* The times would be those in which Saturn draws close to the horizon. Saturn was believed to be a cold planet, as opposed to Mars, a hot planet. 8. A conjunction of the last stars of Aquarius and the first of Pisces, supposed to signify great good fortune. In this season these stars would be rising just before dawn, hence the sun is coming up behind them and their course will soon be drowned in light. 9. The Sirens were mythological creatures, usually of great beauty, and with the power of singing so entrancingly that they charmed the souls of men. They were usually presented as luring sailors at sea to their destruction. Dante's Sirena is a Christian adaptation. 1. In the Homeric version Ulysses escapes the Siren's blandishments by stuffing his ears with wax and having himself lashed to the mast of his ship. Dante may, perhaps, be following another version of the myth, but more probably he means to portray the Siren as a liar.

with my charmed song, and few indeed who taste
how well I satisfy would think to stray."
Her mouth had not yet shut when at my side
appeared a saintly lady,[2] poised and eager
to heap confusion on the Siren's pride.
"O Virgil, Virgil! Who," she cried, "is this?"
Roused by her indignation, Virgil came:
his eyes did not once leave that soul of bliss.
He seized the witch, and with one rip laid bare
all of her front, her loins and her foul belly:
I woke sick with the stench that rose from there.
I turned then, and my Virgil said to me:
"I have called at least three times now. Rise and come
and let us find your entrance." Willingly
I rose to my feet. Already the high day
lit all the circles of the holy mountain.
The sun was at our backs as we took our way.
I followed in his steps, my brow as drawn
as is a man's so bowed with thought he bends
like half an arch of a bridge. And moving on,
I heard the words: "Come. This is where you climb"[3]
pronounced in such a soft and loving voice
as is not heard here in our mortal time.
With swanlike wings outspread, he who had spoken
summoned us up between the walls of rock.
He fanned us with his shining pinions then,
affirming over us as we went by
"*blessed are they that mourn*"[4]—for they shall have
their consolation given them on high.
"What ails you?" said my Guide. "What heavy mood
makes you stare at the ground?" (We were by then
above the point at which the Angel stood.)
And I: "An apparition clouds my spirit,
a vision from a dream so strange and dreadful
I cannot seem to leave off thinking of it."
"Did you see that ageless witch," he said, "for whom
—and for no other—those above us weep?
And did you see how men escape her doom?
Let it teach your heels to scorn the earth, your eyes
to turn to the high lure the Eternal King
spins with his mighty spheres across the skies."
As falcons stare at their feet until they hear
the wished-for call, then leap with wings outspread

2. She may be Beatrice, or she may be Provenient Grace, but any identification is speculative. 3. Spoken by the Angel of Zeal. 4. The Fourth Beatitude. "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." (Matthew, iv, 5).

in eagerness for the meat that waits them there;
so did I move: filled with desire, I ran
up the remaining length of the rock passage
to the point at which the next great Round began.
When I stood on the fifth ledge and looked around,
I saw a weeping people everywhere
lying outstretched and face-down on the ground.
"My soul cleaves to the dust,"[5] I heard them cry
over and over as we stood among them;
and every word was swallowed by a sigh.
"O Chosen of God, spirits whose mournful rites
both Hope and Justice make less hard to bear,
show us the passage to the further heights."
"If you have not been sentenced to lie prone
in the bitter dust, and seek the nearest way,
keep the rim to your right as you go on."
So spoke the Poet, and so a voice replied
from the ground in front of us. I took good note
of what its way of speaking did not hide.[6]
I turned my eyes to Virgil then, and he
gave me a happy sign of his permission
to do what my eyes asked. Being thus free
to act according to my own intention,
I moved ahead and stood above that soul
whose speaking had attracted my attention,
saying: "O Soul in whom these tears prepare
that without which no soul can turn to God,
put off a while, I beg, your greater care,
to tell me who you were, why you lie prone,
and if there is some way that I may serve you
in the world I left while still in flesh and bone."
"Why Heaven makes us turn our backs shall be
made known to you," the spirit said, "but first
scias quod ego fui successor Petri.[7]
Between Sestri and Chiaveri, flowing on
through a fair land, there is a pleasant river[8]
from which the title of my line is drawn.
A single month, a month and some few days
I came to know on my own weary body
how heavily the Papal Mantle weighs

5. Psalm CXIX. 6. The soul has said, "If you have not been sentenced to lie prone in the bitter dust." The implication is—and it is the first time the point has emerged clearly—that souls may pass through some of the Cornices without delay, if they are free of the taint of sin there punished. 7. "Know that I was Peter's successor." The speaker is Pope Adrian V. He died in 1276 after having been Pope for thirty-eight days. 8. The Lavagna. It flows between Sestri and Chiaveri, small coastal towns near Genoa. Adrian, born Ottobuono de' Fieschi, was the line of the Counts of Lavagna.

upon the wearer who would take good care
to keep it from the mire; compared to that
all other burdens are as light as air.
My conversion, alas, came late; for only when
I had been chosen Pastor of Holy Rome
did I see the falseness in the lives of men.
I saw no heart's rest there, nor ease from strife,
nor any height the flesh-bound soul might climb,
and so I came to love this other life.
My soul was lost to God until that moment,
and wholly given over to avarice;
such was my sin, such is my punishment.
The nature of avarice is here made plain
in the nature of its penalty; there is not
a harsher forfeit paid on the whole mountain.
We would not raise our eyes to the shining spheres
but kept them turned to mundane things: so Justice
bends them to earth here in this place of tears.
As Avarice, there, quenched all our souls' delight
in the good without which all our works are lost,
so, here, the hand of Justice clamps us tight.
Taken and bound here hand and foot, we lie
outstretched and motionless; and here we stay
at the just pleasure of the Father on High."
I had knelt to him. Now I spoke once more.
That spirit sensed at once my voice was nearer
and guessed my reverence. "Why do you lower
your knees into the dust?" he said to me.
And I: "My conscience troubled me for standing
in the presence of your rank and dignity."
"Straighten your legs, my brother! Rise from error!"
he said. "I am, like you and all the others,
a fellow servant of one Emperor.
It is written in holy scripture *Neque nubent*;[9]
if ever you understood that sacred text,
my reason for speaking will be evident.
Now go your way. I wish to be alone.
Your presence here distracts me from the tears
that make me ready. And to your last question:
I have a niece, Alagia,[1] still on earth.

9. . . . They neither marry [nor are given in marriage but are as the angels of God in heaven]" (Matthew, xxii, 30). These were Christ's words when asked to which husband a remarried widow would belong in Heaven. Adrian obviously extends the meaning to include the cancellation of all earthly contracts, fealties, and honors. 1. Daughter of Niccolò di Tedisio di Ugone de' Fieschi and wife of Moroello Malaspina, Marquis of Giovagallo. Dante had been well received by Malaspina and knew and admired his wife for her good works.

If she can but avoid the bad example
those of our line have set, her native worth
will lead her yet the way the blessed go.
And she alone remains to me below."

* * *

CANTO XXVII

The Seventh Cornice *The Angel of Chastity*
The Wall of Fire
The Earthly Paradise *The Angel Guardian*

A little before sunset of the third day on the Mountain the Poets come to the further limit of the Seventh Cornice and are greeted by The Angel of Chastity, who tells them they must pass through the wall of fire. Dante recoils in terror, but Virgil persuades him to enter in Beatrice's name.

They are guided through the fire by a chant they hear coming from the other side. Emerging, they find it is sung by The Angel Guardian of the Earthly Paradise, who stands in a light so brilliant that Dante cannot see him.

The Angel hurries them toward the ascent, but night overtakes them, and the Poets lie down to sleep, each on the step on which he finds himself. (For Statius it will be the last sleep, since there is no night in Heaven.) There, just before dawn, Dante has a prophetic Dream of Leah and Rachel, which foreshadows the appearance, above, of Matilda and Beatrice.

Day arrives; the Poets rise and race up the rest of the ascent until they come in sight of The Earthly Paradise. Here Virgil Speaks His Last Words, for the Poets have now come to the limit of Reason, and Dante is now free to follow his every impulse, since all motion of sin in him has been purged away.

As the day stands when the Sun begins to glow
over the land where his Maker's blood was shed,
and the scales of Libra ride above the Ebro,
while Ganges' waters steam in the noonday glare—[2]
so it stood, the light being nearly faded,
when we met God's glad Angel[3] standing there
on the rocky ledge beyond the reach of the fire,
and caroling *"Beati mundo corde"*[4]

2. It is shortly before sunset of the third day on the Mountain. Dante's details here are the reverse of those given at the opening of II, which see. *The land where his Maker's blood was shed:* Jerusalem. *The Ebro:* For Spain. 3. The Angel of Chastity. He is standing on the narrow rocky path outside the wall of fire. 4. "Blessed are the pure in heart [for they shall see God]." (Matthew, v, 8.)

in a voice to which no mortal could aspire.
Then: "Blessèd ones, till by flame purified
no soul may pass this point. Enter the fire
and heed the singing from the other side."
These were his words to us when we had come
near as we could, and hearing them, I froze
as motionless as one laid in his tomb.
I lean forward over my clasped hands and stare
into the fire, thinking of human bodies
I once saw burned,[5] and once more see them there.
My kindly escorts heard me catch my breath
and turned, and Virgil said: "Within that flame
there may be torment, but there is no death.
Think well, my son, what dark ways we have trod . . .
I guided you unharmed on Geryon:[6]
shall I do less now we are nearer God?
Believe this past all doubt: were you to stay
within that womb of flame a thousand years,
it would not burn a single hair away.
And if you still doubt my sincerity,
but reach the hem of your robe into the flame:
your hands and eyes will be your guarantee.
My son, my son, turn here with whole assurance.
Put by your fears and enter to your peace."
And I stood fixed, at war with my own conscience.
And seeing me still stubborn, rooted fast,
he said, a little troubled: "Think, my son,
you shall see Beatrice when this wall is past."
As Pyramus, but one breath from the dead,
opened his eyes when he heard Thisbe's name,[7]
and looked at her, when the mulberry turned red—
just so my hard paralysis melted from me,
and I turned to my Leader at that name
which wells forever in my memory;
at which he wagged his head, as at a child
won over by an apple. Then he said:

5. Dante must mean as a witness at an execution. Burnings at the stake generally took place in public squares. They were a rather common spectacle. Dante's sentence of exile, it is relevant to note, decreed that he was to be burned if taken on Florentine territory. 6. *Geryon:* The Monster of Fraud. See *Inferno*, XVII. 7. Famous tragic lovers of Babylon. Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, IV, 55–166) tells their story. At a tryst by a mulberry (which in those days bore white fruit) Thisbe was frightened by a lion and ran off, dropping her veil. The lion, his jaws bloody from a recent kill, tore at the veil, staining it with blood. Pyramus, arriving later, saw the stained veil, concluded that Thisbe was dead, and stabbed himself. Thisbe, returning, found him and cried to him to open his eyes for his Thisbe. At that name Pyramus opened his eyes, looked at her, and died. Thisbe, invoking the tree to darken in their memory, thereupon stabbed herself. (Cf. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.) The mulberry roots drank their blood and the fruit turned red ever after.

"Well, then, what are we waiting for?" and smiled.
He turned then and went first into the fire,
requesting Statius, who for some time now
had walked between us, to bring up the rear.
Once in the flame, I gladly would have cast
my body into boiling glass to cool it
against the measureless fury of the blast.
My gentle father, ever kind and wise,
strengthened me in my dread with talk of Beatrice,
saying: "I seem already to see her eyes."
From the other side, to guide us, rose a paean,
and moving toward it, mindless of all else,
we emerged at last where the ascent began.
There I beheld a light[8] that burned so brightly
I had to look away; and from it rang:
"*Venite benedicti patris mei.*"[9]
"Night falls," it added, "the sun sinks to rest;
do not delay but hurry toward the height
while the last brightness lingers in the west."
Straight up through the great rock-wall lay the way
on such a line that, as I followed it,
my body blocked the sun's last level ray.
We had only climbed the first few stairs as yet
when I and my two sages saw my shadow[1]
fade from me; and we knew the sun had set.
Before the vast sweep of the limned horizon
could fade into one hue and night win all
the immeasurable air to its dominion,
each made the step on which he stood his bed,
for the nature of the Mount not only stopped us
but killed our wish to climb, once day had fled.
As goats on a rocky hill will dance and leap,
nimble and gay, till they find grass, and then,
while they are grazing, grow as tame as sheep
at ease in the green shade when the sun is high
and the shepherd stands by, leaning on his staff,
and at his ease covers them with his eye—
and as the herdsman beds down on the ground,
keeping his quiet night watch by his flock
lest it be scattered by a wolf or hound;
just so we lay there, each on his stone block,
I as the goat, they as my guardians,
shut in on either side by walls of rock.

8. This is the Angel Guardian of the Earthly Paradise. 9. "Come ye blessèd of my Father." (*Matthew*, xxv, 34.) 1. Virgil and Statius, of course, cast none.

I could see little ahead—rock blocked the way—
but through that little I saw the stars grow larger,
brighter than mankind sees them. And as I lay,
staring and lost in thought, a sleep came on me—
the sleep that oftentimes presents the fact
before the event, a sleep of prophecy.
At the hour, I think, when Venus, first returning
out of the east, shone down upon the mountain—[2]
she who with fires of love comes ever-burning—
I dreamed I saw a maiden innocent
and beautiful, who walked a sunny field
gathering flowers, and caroling as she went:
"Say I am Leah if any ask my name,
and my white hands weave garlands wreath on wreath
to please me when I stand before the frame
of my bright glass. For this my fingers play
among these blooms. But my sweet sister Rachel[3]
sits at her mirror motionless all day.
To stare into her own eyes endlessly
is all her joy, as mine is in my weaving.
She looks, I do. Thus live we joyously."
Now eastward the new day rayed Heaven's dome
(the sweeter to the returning wanderer
who wakes from each night's lodging nearer home),
and the shadows fled on every side as I
stirred from my sleep and leaped upon my feet,
seeing my Lords already standing by.
"This is the day your hungry soul shall be
fed on the golden apples men have sought
on many different boughs so ardently."
These were the very words which, at the start,
my Virgil spoke to me, and there have never
been gifts as dear as these were to my heart.
Such waves of yearning to achieve the height
swept through my soul, that at each step I took
I felt my feathers growing for the flight.
When we had climbed the stairway to the rise
of the topmost step, there with a father's love
Virgil turned and fixed me with his eyes.
"My son," he said, "you now have seen the torment
of the temporal and the eternal fires;

2. It is the hour before dawn, in which the truth is dreamed. 3. Leah and Rachel were, respectively, the first- and second-born daughters of Laban and the first and second wives of Jacob. Many authors before Dante had interpreted them as representing the Active and the Contemplative Life of the Soul. Leah's white hands (*le belle mani*) symbolize the Active Life, as Rachel's eyes (lines 104–108) symbolize the Contemplative Life.

here, now, is the limit of my discernment.
I have led you here by grace of mind and art;
now let your own good pleasure be your guide;
you are past the steep ways, past the narrow part.
See there the sun that shines upon your brow,
the sweet new grass, the flowers, the fruited vines
which spring up without need of seed or plow.
Until those eyes come gladdened which in pain
moved me to come to you and lead your way,
sit there at ease or wander through the plain.
Expect no more of me in word or deed:
here your will is upright, free, and whole,
and you would be in error not to heed
whatever your own impulse prompts you to:
lord of yourself I crown and mitre you."[4]

* * *

CANTO XXX

The Earthly Paradise Beatrice
Virgil Vanishes

The procession [of the Heavenly Pageant] halts and the Prophets turn to the chariot and sing "Come, my bride, from Lebanon." They are summoning Beatrice, who appears on the left side of the chariot, half-hidden from view by showers of blossoms poured from above by A Hundred Angels. Dante, stirred by the sight, turns to Virgil to express his overflowing emotions, and discovers that Virgil Has Vanished.

Because he bursts into tears at losing Virgil Dante Is Reprimanded by Beatrice. The Angel Choir overhead immediately breaks into a Psalm of Compassion, but Beatrice, still severe, answers by detailing Dante's offenses in not making proper use of his great gifts. It would violate the ordering of the Divine Decree, she argues, to let Dante drink the waters of Lethe, thereby washing all memory of sin from his soul, before he had shed the tears of a real repentance.

When the Septentrion of the First Heaven,[5]
which does not rise nor set, and which has never
been veiled from sight by any mist but sin,
and which made every soul in that high court

4. Crown as king of your physical self and mitre (as a bishop) as lord of your soul. 5. The Septentrion is the seven stars of the Big Dipper. Here Dante means the seven candelabra [of the Heavenly Pageant]. They are the Septentrion of the First Heaven (the empyrean) as distinct from the seven stars of the dipper which occur lower down in the Sphere of the Fixed Stars.

know its true course (just as the lower Seven
direct the helmsman to his earthly port),
had stopped; the holy prophets,[6] who till then
had walked between the Griffon and those lights,
turned to the car like souls who cry "Amen."
And one among them[7] who seemed sent from Heaven
clarioned: "*Veni, sponsa, de Libano,*"[8]
three times, with all the others joining in.
As, at the last trump every saint shall rise
out of the grave, ready with voice new-fleshed
to carol *Alleluiah* to the skies;
just so, above the chariot, at the voice
of such an elder, rose a hundred Powers
and Principals[9] of the Eternal Joys,
all saying together: "*Benedictus qui venis*",[1]
then, scattering flowers about on every side:
"*Manibus o date lilia plenis.*"[2]
Time and again at daybreak I have seen
the eastern sky glow with a wash of rose
while all the rest hung limpid and serene,
and the Sun's face rise tempered from its rest
so veiled by vapors that the naked eye
could look at it for minutes undistressed.
Exactly so, within a cloud of flowers
that rose like fountains from the angels' hands
and fell about the chariot in showers,
a lady[3] came in view: an olive crown
wreathed her immaculate veil, her cloak was green,
the colors of live flame played on her gown.
My soul—such years had passed since last it saw[4]
that lady and stood trembling in her presence,
stupefied by the power of holy awe—
now, by some power that shone from her above
the reach and witness of my mortal eyes,
felt the full mastery of enduring love.
The instant I was smitten by the force,
which had already once transfixed my soul

6. The twenty-four elders who represent the books of the Old Testament. *Griffon:* A mythical figure with the fore parts of an eagle and the hind parts of a lion, here meant to represent the dual nature of Christ as God and Man. 7. *The Song of Solomon.* 8. "Come [with me] from Lebanon, my spouse." *Song of Solomon,* iv. 8. This cry, re-echoed by choirs of angels, summons Beatrice. 9. Angels. 1. "Blessed is he who cometh." (*Matthew,* xxi, 9.) 2. "Oh, give lilies with full hands." These are the words of Anchises in honor of Marcellus. (*Aeneid,* VI, 883). Thus they are not only apt to the occasion but their choice is a sweetly conceived last literary compliment to Virgil before he vanishes. 3. Beatrice. She is dressed in the colors of Faith (white), Hope (green), and Caritas (red). 4. Beatrice died in 1290. Thus Dante has passed ten years without sight of her.

before my boyhood years had run their course,
I turned left with the same assured belief
that makes a child run to its mother's arms
when it is frightened or has come to grief,
to say to Virgil: "There is not within me
one drop of blood unstirred. I recognize
the tokens of the ancient flame." But he,
he had taken his light from us. He had gone.
Virgil had gone. Virgil, the gentle Father
to whom I gave my soul for its salvation!
Not all that sight of Eden lost to view
by our First Mother could hold back the tears
that stained my cheeks so lately washed with dew.[5]
"Dante,[6] do not weep yet, though Virgil goes.
Do not weep yet, for soon another wound
shall make you weep far hotter tears than those!"
As an admiral takes his place at stern or bow
to observe the handling of his other ships
and spur all hands to do their best—so now,
on the chariot's left side, I saw appear
when I turned at the sound of my own name
(which, necessarily, is recorded here),
that lady who had been half-veiled from view
by the flowers of the angel-revels. Now her eyes
fixed me across the stream, piercing me through.
And though the veil she still wore, held in place
by the wreathed flowers of wise Minerva's leaves,[7]
let me see only glimpses of her face,
her stern and regal bearing made me dread
her next words, for she spoke as one who saves
the heaviest charge till all the rest are read.
"Look at me well. I am she. I am Beatrice.
How dared you make your way to this high mountain?
Did you not know that here man lives in bliss?"
I lowered my head and looked down at the stream.
But when I saw myself reflected there,
I fixed my eyes upon the grass for shame.
I shrank as a wayward child in his distress
shrinks from his mother's sternness, for the taste
of love grown wrathful is a bitterness.
She paused. At once the angel chorus sang
the blessed psalm: *"In te, Domine, speravi."*

5. By Virgil. I, 124. 6. This is the only point in the *Commedia* at which Dante mentions his own name. 7. The olive crown.

As far as *"pedes meos"* their voices rang.[8]
As on the spine of Italy the snow
lies frozen hard among the living rafters[9]
in winter when the northeast tempests blow;
then, melting if so much as a breath stir
from the land of shadowless noon,[1] flows through itself
like hot wax trickling down a lighted taper—
just so I froze, too cold for sighs or tears
until I heard that choir whose notes are tuned
to the eternal music of the spheres.
But when I heard the voice of their compassion
plead for me more than if they had cried out:
"Lady, why do you treat him in this fashion?";
the ice, which hard about my heart had pressed,
turned into breath and water, and flowed out
through eyes and throat in anguish from my breast.
Still standing at the chariot's left side,
she turned to those compassionate essences
whose song had sought to move her, and replied:
"You keep your vigil in the Eternal Day
where neither night nor sleep obscures from you
a single step the world takes on its way;
but I must speak with greater care that he
who weeps on that far bank may understand
and feel a grief to match his guilt. Not only
by the workings of the spheres that bring each seed
to its fit end according to the stars
that ride above it, but by gifts decreed
in the largesse of overflowing Grace,
whose rain has such high vapors for its source
our eyes cannot mount to their dwelling place;
this man, potentially was so endowed
from early youth that marvelous increase
should have come forth from every good he sowed.
But richest soil the soonest will grow wild
with bad seed and neglect. For a while I stayed him
with glimpses of my face. Turning my mild
and youthful eyes into his very soul,
I let him see their shining, and I led him
by the straight way, his face to the right goal.

8. In mercy the angel chorus sings Psalm XXXI, 1–8, beginning "In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust" and continuing as far as "thou hast set my feet in a large room." 9. The trees. *The spine of Italy*: The Apennines. 1. *The land of shadowless noon:* Africa. In equatorial regions the noonday sun is at the zenith over each point twice a year. Its rays then fall straight down and objects cast no shadows.

The instant I had come upon the sill
of my second age,[2] and crossed and changed my life,
he left me and let others shape his will.
When I rose from the flesh into the spirit,
to greater beauty and to greater virtue,
he found less pleasure in me and less merit.
He turned his steps aside from the True Way,
pursuing the false images of good
that promise what they never wholly pay.
Not all the inspiration I won by prayer
and brought to him in dreams and meditations
could call him back, so little did he care.
He fell so far from every hope of bliss
that every means of saving him had failed
except to let him see the damned. For this
I visited the portals of the dead
and poured my tears and prayers before that spirit
by whom his steps have, up to now, been led.
The seal Almighty God's decree has placed
on the rounds of His creation would be broken
were he to come past Lethe and to taste
the water that wipes out the guilty years
without some scot of penitential tears!"[3]

CANTO XXXI

The Earthly Paradise Lethe; Beatrice, Matilda

Beatrice continues her reprimand, forcing Dante to confess his faults until he swoons with grief and pain at the thought of his sin. He wakes to find himself in Lethe, held in the arms of Matilda, who leads him to the other side of the stream and there immerses him that he may drink the waters that wipe out all memory of sin.

Matilda then leads him to The Four Cardinal Virtues, who dance about him and lead him before The Griffon where he may look into The Eyes of Beatrice. In them Dante sees, in a First Beatific Vision, the radiant reflection of the Griffon, who appears now in his human and now in his godly nature.

The Three Theological Virtues now approach and beg that Dante may behold The Smile of Beatrice. Beatrice removes her veil, and in a Second Beatific Vision, Dante beholds the splendor of the unveiled shining of Divine Love.

2. Beatrice's womanhood. When she had reached the full bloom of youth Dante turned from her and wrote to his *donna gentile*. [The *donna gentile* (noble or gentle lady) is not identified by name.] Allegorically, he turned from divine "sciences" to an overreliance upon philosophy (the human "sciences"). For this sin he must suffer. 3. In passing Lethe and drinking its waters, the soul loses all memory of guilt. This, therefore, is Dante's last opportunity to do penance.

"You, there, who stand upon the other side—"[4]
(turning to me now, who had thought the edge
of her discourse was sharp, the point) she cried
without pause in her flow of eloquence,
"Speak up! Speak up! Is it true? To such a charge
your own confession must give evidence."
I stood as if my spirit had turned numb:
the organ of my speech moved, but my voice
died in my throat before a word could come.
Briefly she paused, then cried impatiently:
"What are you thinking? Speak up, for the waters[5]
have yet to purge sin from your memory."
Confusion joined to terror forced a broken
"yes" from my throat, so weak that only one
who read my lips would know that I had spoken.
As an arbalest will snap when string and bow
are drawn too tight by the bowman, and the bolt
will strike the target a diminished blow—[6]
so did I shatter, strengthless and unstrung,
under her charge, pouring out floods of tears,
while my voice died in me on the way to my tongue.
And she: "Filled as you were with the desire
I taught you for That Good beyond which nothing
exists on earth to which man may aspire,
what yawning moats or what stretched chain-lengths[7] lay
across your path to force you to abandon
all hope of pressing further on your way?
What increase or allurement seemed to show
in the brows of others that you walked before them
as a lover walks below his lady's window?"
My breath dragged from me in a bitter sigh;
I barely found a voice to answer with;
my lips had trouble forming a reply.
In tears I said: "The things of the world's day,
false pleasures and enticements, turned my steps
as soon as you had ceased to light my way."
And she: "Had you been silent, or denied
what you confess, your guilt would still be known
to Him from Whom no guilt may hope to hide.
But here, before our court, when souls upbraid

4. Of Lethe. But also the other side of the immortal life, i.e., still living. 5. Of Lethe. 6. The figure is a bit confusing. Dante seems to say that the bolt (corresponding to an arrow) of a crossbow strikes the target with less force when the bow snaps. He does not stop to consider that the bolt may miss the target entirely. Nevertheless, the intent of his figure is clear enough. 7. These were, of course, defensive military measures. The moats guarded castles. The chains were strung to block roads, bridges, and gates.

themselves for their own guilt in true remorse,
the grindstone is turned back against the blade.[8]
In any case that you may know your crime
truly and with true shame and so be stronger
against the Siren's song another time,
control your tears and listen with your soul
to learn how my departure from the flesh
ought to have spurred you to the higher goal.
Nothing in Art or Nature could call forth
such joy from you, as sight of that fair body
which clothed me once and now sifts back to earth.
And if my dying turned that highest pleasure
to very dust, what joy could still remain
in mortal things for you to seek and treasure?
At the first blow you took from such vain things
your every thought should have been raised to follow
my flight above decay. Nor should your wings
have been weighed down by any joy below—
love of a maid,[9] or any other fleeting
and useless thing—to wait a second blow.
The fledgling waits a second shaft, a third;
but nets[1] are spread and the arrow sped in vain
in sight or hearing of the full-grown bird."
As a scolded child, tongue tied for shame, will stand
and recognize his fault, and weep for it,
bowing his head to a just reprimand,
so did I stand. And she said: "If to hear me
grieves you, now raise your beard and let your eyes
show you a greater cause for misery."[2]
The blast that blows from Libya's hot sand,
or the Alpine gale, overcomes less resistance
uprooting oaks than I, at her command,
overcame then in lifting up my face;
for when she had referred to it as my "beard"
I sensed too well the venom of her phrase.
When I had raised my eyes with so much pain,
I saw those Primal Beings, now at rest,
who had strewn blossoms round her thick as rain;
and with my tear-blurred and uncertain vision
I saw Her turned to face that beast which is

8. Turning the grindstone away from the blade sharpens it. Turning it back against the blade dulls it. Thus Beatrice is saying that when a soul openly confesses in true repentance what could not in any case be hidden from God, the sword of Justice is blunted, i.e., no longer cuts as deeply. 9. Dante mentions another maiden in some of his songs but in an indefinite way. No specific reference can be attached to these words. 1. Sometimes used for trapping birds. 2. The sight of her accompanied by the guilty knowledge that he had turned away from so much beauty and perfection.

one person in two natures without division.[3]
Even veiled and across the river from me
her face outshone its first-self[4] by as much
as she outshone all mortals formerly.
And the thorns of my repentance pricked me so
that all the use and substance of the world
I most had loved, now most appeared my foe.
Such guilty recognition gnawed my heart
I swooned for pain; and what I then became
she best knows who most gave me cause to smart.
When I returned to consciousness at last
I found the lady who had walked alone[5]
bent over me. "Hold fast!" she said, "Hold fast!"
She had drawn me into the stream up to my throat,
and pulling me behind her, she sped on
over the water, light as any boat.
Nearing the sacred bank, I heard her say
in tones so sweet I cannot call them back,
much less describe them here: "*Asperges me.*"[6]
Then the sweet lady took my head between
her open arms, and embracing me, she dipped me
and made me drink the waters that make clean.
Then raising me in my new purity
she led me to the dance of the Four Maidens;[7]
each raised an arm and so joined hands above me.
"Here we are nymphs; stars are we in the skies.
Ere Beatrice went to earth we were ordained
her handmaids. We will lead you to her eyes;
but that your own may see what joyous light
shines in them, yonder Three,[8] who see more deeply,
will sharpen and instruct your mortal sight."
Thus they sang, then led me to the Griffon.
Behind him, Beatrice waited. And when I stood
at the Griffon's breast, they said in unison:
"Look deep, look well, however your eyes may smart.
We have led you now before those emeralds[9]

3. The Griffon. He is the masque of Christ and represents His two aspects as man and God. 4. Her mortal self. 5. Matilda, who appears in Canto XXVIII, having been foreshadowed by Leah in Dante's dream (XXVII). She may be taken to symbolize the Active Life of the Soul. 6. *Asperges me hyssopo, et mundabor; lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor.* ("Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.") *Psalms* li, 7. These are the words the priest utters when he sprinkles holy water over the confessed sinner to absolve him. 7. The Four Cardinal Virtues: Justice, Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance. In their present manifestation they are nymphs. In another manifestation they are the four stars Dante saw above him when he arrived at the base of the mountain. (I, 23, note.) 8. The Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity (*i.e., Caritas*). 9. The eyes of Beatrice. Dante may have intended to describe them as green (hazel) but more likely his choice of words here is meant only to signify "jewel bright." Green is, of course, the color of Hope, and an allegorical significance may be implied in that.

from which Love shot his arrows through your heart."
A thousand burning passions, every one
hotter than any flame, held my eyes fixed
to the lucent eyes she held fixed on the Griffon.
Like sunlight in a glass the twofold creature
shone from the deep reflection of her eyes,
now in the one, now in the other nature.
Judge, reader, if I found it passing strange
to see the thing unaltered in itself
yet in its image working change on change.
And while my soul in wonder and delight
was savoring that food which in itself
both satisfies and quickens appetite,[1]
the other Three, whose bearing made it clear
they were of higher rank, came toward me dancing
to the measure of their own angelic air.
"Turn, Beatrice, oh turn the eyes of grace,"
was their refrain, "upon your faithful one
who comes so far to look upon your face.
Grant us this favor of your grace: reveal
your mouth to him, and let his eyes behold
the Second Beauty,[2] which your veils conceal."
O splendor of the eternal living light!
who that has drunk deep of Parnassus' waters,[3]
or grown pale in the shadow of its height,
would not, still, feel his burdened genius fail
attempting to describe in any tongue
how you appeared when you put by your veil
in that free air open to heaven and earth
whose harmony is your shining shadowed forth!

* * *

Paradiso

CANTO I

The Earthly Paradise *The Invocation*
Ascent to Heaven *The Sphere of Fire, The Music of the Spheres*

Dante States his supreme theme as Paradise itself and invokes the aid not only of the Muses but of Apollo.

1. "They that eat me shall yet be hungry, and they that drink me shall yet be thirsty." (*Ecclesiasticus*, xxiv, 21.) 2. The smile of Beatrice (Divine Love). Dante was led to the First Beauty by the Four Cardinal Virtues. Now the Three Theological Virtues, as higher beings, lead him to the second, and higher beauty, which is the joy of Divine Love in receiving the purified soul. 3. The fountain of Castalia. To drink from it is to receive poetic gifts. To grow pale in the shadow of Parnassus signifies to labor at mastering the art of poetry.

Dante and Beatrice are in The Earthly Paradise, the Sun is at the Vernal Equinox, it is noon at Purgatory and midnight at Jerusalem when Dante sees Beatrice turn her eyes to stare straight into the sun and reflexively imitates her gesture. At once it is as if a second sun had been created, its light dazzling his senses, and Dante feels the ineffable change of his mortal soul into Godliness.

These phenomena are more than his senses can grasp, and Beatrice must explain to him what he himself has not realized: that he and Beatrice are soaring toward the height of Heaven at an incalculable speed.

Thus Dante climaxes the master metaphor in which purification is equated to weightlessness. Having purged all dross from his soul he mounts effortlessly, without even being aware of it at first, to his natural goal in the Godhead. So they pass through The Sphere of Fire, and so Dante first hears The Music of the Spheres.

The glory of Him who moves all things rays forth
through all the universe, and is reflected
from each thing in proportion to its worth.
I have been in that Heaven of His most light,
and what I saw, those who descend from there
lack both the knowledge and the power to write.
For as our intellect draws near its goal
it opens to such depths of understanding
as memory cannot plumb within the soul.
Nevertheless, whatever portion time
still leaves me of the treasure of that kingdom
shall now become the subject of my rhyme.
O good Apollo,[4] for this last task, I pray
you make me such a vessel of your powers
as you deem worthy to be crowned with bay.[5]
One peak of cleft Parnassus heretofore
has served my need, now must I summon both[6]
on entering the arena one time more.
Enter my breast, I pray you, and there breathe
as high a strain as conquered Marsyas
that time you drew his body from its sheath.[7]
O power divine, but lend to my high strain
so much as will make clear even the shadow

4. The God of Poetry, and the father of the Muses. Note, too, that Apollo is identified with the Sun and that Dante has consistently used the Sun as a symbol for God. 5. The laurel wreath awarded to poets and conquerors. 6. Parnassus has two peaks: Nisa, which was sacred to the Muses; and Cyrrha, which was sacred to Apollo. Heretofore Nisa has been enough for Dante's need, but for this last canticle he must summon aid from both peaks (i.e., from all the Muses and from Apollo as well). 7. The satyr Marsyas challenged Apollo to a singing contest and was defeated. Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, VI, 382–400) recounts in gory detail how Apollo thereupon punished him by pulling him out of his skin leaving all the uncovered organs still functioning.

of that High Kingdom stamped upon my brain,
and you shall see me come to your dear grove[8]
to crown myself with those green leaves which you
and my high theme shall make me worthy of.
So seldom are they gathered, Holy Sire,
to crown an emperor's or a poet's triumph
(oh fault and shame of mortal man's desire!)
that the glad Delphic god must surely find
increase of joy in the Peneian frond[9]
when any man thirsts for it in his mind.
Great flames are kindled where the small sparks fly.
So after me, perhaps, a better voice
shall raise such prayers that Cyrrha[1] will reply.
The lamp of the world rises to mortal view
from various stations, but that point which joins
four circles with three crosses, it soars through
to a happier course in happier conjunction
wherein it warms and seals the wax of the world
closer to its own nature and high function.[2]
That glad conjunction had made it evening here
and morning there; the south was all alight,
while darkness rode the northern hemisphere;
when I saw Beatrice had turned left to raise
her eyes up to the sun; no eagle ever
stared at its shining with so fixed a gaze.[3]
And as a ray descending from the sky
gives rise to another, which climbs back again,
as a pilgrim yearns for home; so through my eye
her action, like a ray into my mind,
gave rise to mine: I stared into the sun

8. In which grows the sacred laurel, or bay. 9. The laurel or bay, so called for Daphne, daughter of the river god Peneus. Cupid, to avenge a taunt, fired an arrow of love into Apollo and an arrow of aversion into Daphne. Fleeing from the inflamed Apollo, Daphne prayed to her father and was changed into a laurel tree. *The glad Delphic god:* Apollo. 1. Apollo's sacred peak, here taken for Apollo himself. If Apollo does not heed his prayer, Dante will at least show the way, and perhaps a better poet will come after him and have his prayer answered by Apollo, whereby Paradise will at last be well portrayed. 2. Short of pages of diagrams, there is no way of explaining Dante's astronomical figure in detail. A quick gloss must do: *The lamp:* The Sun. *Various stations:* various points on the celestial horizon from which the sun rises at various times of the year. *Four circles with three crosses:* The four circles here intended are: (1) the celestial horizon, (2) the celestial equator, (3) the ecliptic, and (4) equinoxial colure, the great circle drawn through both poles and the two equinoxial points. When the sun is in this position the time is sunrise of the vernal equinox and all four circles meet, each of the other three forming a cross with the celestial horizon. Astrologers took this to be a particularly auspicious conjunction. Its *happier course* (line 40) brings the brighter and longer days of summer. Its *happier conjunction* (line 40) with the stars of Aries bring it back to the sign of the first creation (see *Inferno* I, 38–39 note). And certainly the fact that the diagram forms three crosses would weigh it with the good omens of both the cross and trinity. All would once more be in God's shaping hand. So the wax *of the world* (line 41) is warmed and sealed, in a first sense by the warmth of approaching summer, and in a clearly implicit spiritual sense by the favor of God's will upon His creation. 3. In the Middle Ages men believed that the eagle was able to stare directly into the sun.

so hard that here it would have left me blind;
but much is granted to our senses there,
in that garden made to be man's proper place,
that is not granted us when we are here.
I had to look away soon, and yet not
so soon but what I saw him spark and blaze
like new-tapped iron when it pours white-hot.
And suddenly, as it appeared to me,
day was added to day, as if He who can
had added a new sun to Heaven's glory.
Beatrice stared at the eternal spheres
entranced, unmoving; and I looked away
from the sun's height to fix my eyes on hers.
And as I looked, I felt begin within me
what Glaucus felt eating the herb that made him
a god among the others in the sea.[4]
How speak trans-human change to human sense?
Let the example speak until God's grace
grants the pure spirit the experience.
Whether I rose in only the last created
part of my being,[5] O Love that rulest Heaven
Thou knowest, by whose lamp I was translated.
When the Great Wheel that spins eternally
in longing for Thee,[6] captured my attention
by that harmony attuned and heard by Thee,
I saw ablaze with sun from side to side
a reach of Heaven:[7] not all the rains and rivers
of all of time could make a sea so wide.
That radiance and that new-heard melody
fired me with such a yearning for their Cause
as I had never felt before. And she
who saw my every thought as well as I,
saw my perplexity: before I asked
my question she had started her reply.
Thus she began: "You dull your own perceptions
with false imaginings and do not grasp
what would be clear but for your preconceptions.
You think you are still on earth: the lightning's spear

4. The fisherman Glaucus, noting how his catch revived and leaped into the sea after being laid upon a certain herb, ate some of it and was transformed into a god (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIII, 938–968). 5. The soul, which is created after the body. (See *Purgatorio* XXV, 37–75.) *O Love that rulest Heaven:* God. *Whose lamp:* Beatrice as the reflector of God's love. 6. Dante says, literally: "The wheel that Thou, in being desired [i.e., loved] by it, makest eternal." The Great Wheel is the Primum Mobile, its motion deriving from the love of God. *That harmony:* The Music of the Spheres. 7. Dante believed that the earth's atmosphere extended as high as the Sphere of the Moon. Beyond the Moon is another atmosphere of fire. This sphere of fire was believed to cause lightning. (See also line 115, "the fire about the moon.")

never fled downward from its natural place
as rapidly as you are rising there."
I grasped her brief and smiling words and shed
my first perplexity, but found myself
entangled in another, and I said:
"My mind, already recovered from the surprise
of the great marvel you have just explained,
is now amazed anew: how can I rise
in my gross body through such aery substance?"
She sighed in pity and turned as might a mother
to a delirious child. "The elements
of all things," she began, "whatever their mode,
observe an inner order. It is this form
that makes the universe resemble God.
In this the higher creatures see the hand
of the Eternal Worth, which is the goal
to which these norms conduce, being so planned.
All Being within this order, by the laws
of its own nature is impelled to find
its proper station round its Primal Cause.
Thus every nature moves across the tide
of the great sea of being to its own port,
each with its given instinct as its guide.
This instinct draws the fire about the moon.
It is the mover in the mortal heart.
It draws the earth together and makes it one.
Not only the brute creatures, but all those
possessed of intellect and love, this instinct
drives to their mark as a bow shoots forth its arrows.
The Providence that makes all things hunger here
satisfies forever with its light
the heaven within which whirls the fastest sphere.[8]
And to it now, as to a place foretold,
are we two soaring, driven by that bow
whose every arrow finds a mark of gold.
It is true that oftentimes the form of a thing
does not respond to the intent of the art,
the matter being deaf to summoning—
just so, the creature sometimes travels wide
of this true course, for even when so driven
it still retains the power to turn aside
(exactly as we may see the heavens' fire
plunge from a cloud) and its first impulse may

8. The Primum Mobile.

be twisted earthward by a false desire.
You should not, as I see it, marvel more
at your ascent than at a river's fall
from a high mountain to the valley floor.
If you, free as you are of every dross,
had settled and had come to rest below,
that would indeed have been as marvelous[9]
as a still flame there in the mortal plain."
So saying, she turned her eyes to Heaven again.

* * *

CANTO III

The First Sphere: The Moon The Inconstant Piccarda, Constance

As Dante is about to speak to Beatrice he sees the dim traceries of human faces and taking them to be reflections, he turns to see what souls are being so reflected. Beatrice, as ever, explains that these pallid images are the souls themselves. They are The Inconstant, the souls of those who registered holy vows in Heaven, but who broke or scanted them.

Among them Piccarda Donati identifies herself, and then identifies The Empress Constance. Both, according to Dante's beliefs, had taken vows as nuns but were forced to break them in order to contract a political marriage. Not all the souls about them need have failed in the same vows, however. Any failure to fulfill a holy vow (of holy orders, to go on a pilgrimage, to offer special services to God) might place the soul in this lowest class of the blessed.

Piccarda explains that every soul in Heaven rejoices in the entire will of God and cannot wish for a higher place, for to do so would be to come into conflict with the will of God. In the perfect harmony of bliss, everywhere in Heaven is Paradise.

That sun that breathed love's fire into my youth[1]
had thus resolved for me, feature by feature—
proving, disproving—the sweet face of truth.
I, raising my eyes to her eyes to announce
myself resolved of error, and well assured,
was about to speak; but before I could pronounce
my first word, there appeared to me a vision.
It seized and held me so that I forgot
to offer her my thanks and my confession.
As in clear glass when it is polished bright,

9. Because then it would be going against the order of the universe. What is purified must ascend to God as inevitably as earthly waters must flow downhill. 1. Beatrice.

or in a still and limpid pool whose waters
are not so deep that the bottom is lost from sight,
a footnote of our lineaments[2] will show,
so pallid that our pupils could as soon
make out a pearl upon a milk-white brow—[3]
so I saw many faces eager to speak,[3a]
and fell to the error opposite the one
that kindled love for a pool in the smitten Greek.[4]
And thinking the pale traces I saw there
were reflected images, I turned around
to face the source—but my eyes met empty air.
I turned around again like one beguiled,
and took my line of sight from my sweet guide
whose sacred eyes grew radiant as she smiled.
"Are you surprised that I smile at this childish act
of reasoning?" she said, "since even now
you dare not trust your sense of the true fact,
but turn, as usual, back to vacancy?
These are true substances you see before you.
They are assigned here for inconstancy
to holy vows. Greet them. Heed what they say,
and so believe; for the True Light[5] that fills them
permits no soul to wander from its ray."
So urged, I spoke to those pale spirits, turning
to one who seemed most eager, and began
like one whose mind goes almost blank with yearning.
"O well created soul, who in the sun
of the eternal life drinks in the sweetness
which, until tasted, is beyond conception;
great would be my joy would you confide
to my eager mind your earthly name and fate."
That soul with smiling eyes, at once replied:
"The love that fills us will no more permit
hindrance to a just wish than does that Love[6]
that wills all of Its court to be like It.
I was a virgin sister[7] there below,
and if you search your memory with care,
despite my greater beauty, you will know
I am Piccarda,[8] and I am placed here

2. The figure seems oddly out of context but its intent is clear: Dante is suggesting that the image is related to the face as a footnote is related to the text. 3. The brow would have to be death-pale as marble, but perhaps Dante intends these spirits to be chalky-white. 3a. Dante and Beatrice are now on the moon. 4. Narcissus. His error was in taking a reflection (his own) to be a real face. Dante's opposite error is in taking real faces to be reflections. 5. God. 6. God as the essence of *Caritas*. 7. A nun. 8. Piccarda Donati was the daughter of Simone Donati (*Inferno* XXV, 32) and sister of Forese (*Purgatorio* XXIII, 48) and of the war-leader, Corso (*Purgatorio* XXIV, 82ff.). Forese was Dante's friend. Dante was married to Gemma Donati, who

among these other souls of blessedness
to find my blessedness in the slowest sphere.
Our wishes, which can have no wish to be
but in the pleasure of the Holy Ghost,
rejoice in being formed to His decree.
And this low-seeming post which we are given
is ours because we broke, or, in some part,
slighted the vows we offered up to Heaven."
And I then: "Something inexpressibly
divine shines in your face, subliming you
beyond your image in my memory:
therefore I found you difficult to place;
but now, with the assistance of your words,
I find the memory easier to retrace.[9]
But tell me, please: do you who are happy here
have any wish to rise to higher station,
to see more, or to make yourselves more dear?"[1]
She smiled, as did the spirits at her side;
then, turning to me with such joy she seemed
to burn with the first fire of love, replied:
"Brother, the power of love, which is our bliss,
calms all our will. What we desire, we have.
There is in us no other thirst than this.
Were we to wish for any higher sphere,
then our desires would not be in accord
with the high will of Him who wills us here;
and if love is our whole being, and if you weigh
love's nature well, then you will see that discord
can have no place among these circles. Nay,
the essence of this blessèd state of being
is to hold all our will within His will,
whereby our wills are one and all-agreeing.
And so the posts we stand from sill to sill
throughout this realm, please all the realm as much
as they please Him who wills us to His will.
In His will is our peace. It is that sea
to which all moves, all that Itself creates
and Nature bears through all Eternity."
Then was it clear to me that everywhere

also had a brother named Forese, but Piccarda's family was grander than Dante's in-laws. Piccarda was already a nun and living in her convent when her brother Corso, needing to establish a political alliance, forced her to marry Rossellino della Tossa of Florence. Various commentators report that Piccarda sickened and soon died as a consequence of having been so forced against her will and vows. 9. A desperate simplification of Dante's untranslatable *"m'è più latino"* (literally, "it is more Latin to me"). Learned men of Dante's time used Latin naturally and gracefully. Thus to make a thing "more Latin" was to facilitate it. An opposite form of a similar idiom is our still current "It's Greek to me." 1. More dear to God.

in Heaven is Paradise, though the Perfect Grace
does not rain down alike on all souls there.
But as at times when we have had our fill
of one food and still hunger for another,
we put this by with gratitude, while still
asking for that—just so I begged to know,
by word and sign, through what warp she had not
entirely passed the shuttle[2] of her vow.
"The perfection of her life and her great worth
enshrine a lady[3] hereabove," she said,
"in whose rule some go cloaked and veiled on earth,
that till their death they may live day and night
with that sweet Bridegroom[4] who accepts of love
all vows it makes that add to His delight.[5]
As a girl, I fled the world to walk the way
she walked, and closed myself into her habit,
pledged to her sisterhood till my last day.
Then men came, men more used to hate than love.
They tore me away by force from the sweet cloister.
What my life then became is known above.
This other splendor who lets herself appear[6]
here to my right to please you, shining full
of every blessedness that lights this sphere,
understands in herself all that I say.
She, too, was a nun. From her head as from mine
the shadow of the veil was ripped away.
Against her will and all propriety
she was forced back to the world. Yet even there
her heart was ever veiled in sanctity.
She is the radiance of the Empress Constance,[7]
who by the second blast of Swabia
conceived and bore its third and final puissance."[8]
She finished, and at once began to sing
Ave Maria, and singing, sank from view

2. The vertical strings of a loom are the warp. Across them the shuttle draws the woof. Not to draw the shuttle entirely through is to leave the weaving unfinished, hence her vow unfulfilled. 3. Saint Clara of Assisi (1194–1253). Born Chiara Sciffi, she became a disciple of St. Francis and, under his influence, founded in 1212 an order of nuns. *Hereabove:* Higher in Heaven. Probably in the Empyrean, but Dante does not mention her again. 4. Christ. He is so called several times in the New Testament. 5. Only those vows that conform to His love are acceptable. A vow to perform a trivial or an evil action would have no standing. 6. Dante says, "who shows herself to you." Clearly, the souls in Paradise can make themselves visible or invisible at will (i.e., Heaven reveals itself of its own love). At the end of the conversation the whole company withdraws from sight. 7. (1154–1198). As the last of the line of Norman kings who took southern Italy in the eleventh century, she was Empress of the Two Sicilies (Sicily and Naples). She married the Emperor Henry VI in 1185 and became the mother of Frederick II. Dante follows a legend, for which there was no basis in fact, that she had become a nun and was forced to leave her convent to marry Henry. 8. The three blasts of Swabia are the three great princes whose origins were in Swabia (in Germany). Frederick Barbarossa was the first. His son, Henry VI, was the second. To Henry, Constance bore the third, Frederick II.

like a weight into deep water, plummeting
out of my sight, which followed while it could,
and then, having lost her, turned about once more
to the target of its greater wish and good,
and wholly gave itself to the delight
of the sweet vision of Beatrice. But she
flashed so radiantly upon my sight
that I, at first, was blinded, and thus was slow
to ask of her what I most wished to know.

CANTO XXXI

The Empyrean The Mystic Rose, The Angel Host, Beatrice Leaves Dante, St. Bernard

The Second Soldiery of the Church Triumphant is the Angel Host and Dante now receives a vision of them as a Swarm of Bees in eternal transit between God and the Rose.

Dante turns from that rapturous vision to speak to Beatrice and finds in her place a reverend elder. It is St. Bernard, who will serve as Dante's guide to the ultimate vision of God. Bernard shows Dante his Last Vision of Beatrice, who has resumed her throne among the blessed. Across the vastness of Paradise, Dante sends his soul's prayer of thanks to her. Beatrice Smiles down at Dante a last time, then turns her eyes forever to the Eternal Fountain of God.

Bernard, the most faithful of the worshippers of the Virgin, promises Dante the final vision of God through the Virgin's intercession. Accordingly, he instructs Dante to raise his eyes to her throne. Dante obeys and burns with bliss at the vision of her splendor.

Then, in the form of a white rose, the host
of the sacred soldiery[9] appeared to me,
all those whom Christ in his own blood espoused.
But the other host (who soar, singing and seeing
His glory, who to will them to his love
made them so many in such blissful being,

9. In XXX, 43, Beatrice promised that Dante would see both hosts of Paradise. The first host is of the sacred soldiery, those who were once mortal and who were redeemed by Christ. They are seated upon the thrones of the Mystic Rose in which are gathered eternally the essences of all those heavenly souls that manifested themselves to Dante in the various spheres below, moved by *caritas* to reveal themselves to Dante at the various levels of his developing understanding. How these souls could be eternally within the Rose while yet manifesting themselves to Dante in the various spheres is, of course, one of the mysteries to be grasped only by revelation. The essential point is that Dante becomes better able to see; the vision of Heaven unfolds to him ever more clearly and ever more profoundly. The second soldiery is of the angels who never left heaven. They soar above the Rose like Heavenly bees, in constant motion between the Rose and the radiance of God. Unlike earthly bees, however, it is from God, the mystical hive of grace, that they bring the sweetness to the flower, bearing back to God, of course, the bliss of the souls of Heaven. (See lines 16–18). The first host is more emphatically centered on the aspect of God as the Son; the second, on the aspect of God as the Father.

like a swarm of bees who in one motion dive
into the flowers, and in the next return
the sweetness of their labors to the hive)
flew ceaselessly to the many-petaled rose
and ceaselessly returned into that light
in which their ceaseless love has its repose.
Like living flame their faces seemed to glow.[1]
Their wings were gold. And all their bodies shone[2]
more dazzling white than any earthly snow.
On entering the great flower they spread about them,
from tier to tier, the ardor and the peace
they had acquired in flying close to Him.
Nor did so great a multitude in flight
between the white rose and what lies above it
block in the least the glory of that light;
for throughout all the universe God's ray
enters all things according to their merit,
and nothing has the power to block its way.
This realm of ancient bliss shone, soul on soul,
with new and ancient beings, and every eye
and every love was fixed upon one goal.
O Threefold Light which, blazoned in one star,
can so content their vision with your shining,
look down upon us in the storm we are!
If the barbarians (coming from that zone
above which Helice[3] travels every day
wheeling in heaven with her beloved son)
looking at Rome, were stupefied to see
her works in those days when the Lateran[4]
outshone all else built by humanity;
What did I feel on reaching such a goal
from human to blest, from time to eternity,
from Florence to a people just and whole—[5]
by what amazement was I overcome?
Between my stupor and my new-found joy
my bliss was to hear nothing and be dumb.
And as a pilgrim at the shrine of his vow

1. See the vision of God and Heaven in Ezekiel, I, 14 ff. 2. See the similar vision in Daniel, X, 4 ff. 3. The nymph Helice (I am afraid the reader will have to Anglicize her name as HEL-ees) attracted Zeus and was turned into a bear by jealous Hera. Zeus translated his nymph to heaven as Ursa Major, the constellation of the Great Bear which contains the Big Dipper. Arcas, her son by Zeus, was translated to Ursa Minor, within which he forms the Little Dipper. The two dippers, being near the pole, are always above the horizon in the northland, the zone from which the barbarians came. 4. Today a section of old Rome. Here Dante uses it to signify Rome in general. 5. This is Dante's last mention of Florence. Note that Florence has not improved but that on the universal scale it has become too insignificant for the sort of denunciation he once heaped upon it.

stares, feels himself reborn, and thinks already
how he may later describe it[6]—just so now
I stood and let my eyes go wandering out
into that radiance from rank to rank,
now up, now down, now sweeping round about.
I saw faces that compelled love's charity
lit by Another's lamp and their own smiles,
and gestures graced by every dignity.
Without having fixed on any part, my eyes
already had taken in and understood
the form and general plan of Paradise:
and—my desire rekindled—I wheeled about
to question my sweet lady on certain matters
concerning which my mind was still in doubt.
One thing I expected; another greeted me:
I thought to find Beatrice there; I found instead
an elder[7] in the robes of those in glory.
His eyes and cheeks were bathed in the holy glow
of loving bliss; his gestures, pious grace.
He seemed a tender father standing so.
"She—where is she?" I cried in sudden dread.
"To lead you to the goal of all your wish
Beatrice called me from my place," he said;
"And if you raise your eyes you still may find her
in the third circle down[8] from the highest rank
upon the throne her merit has assigned her."
Without reply I looked up to that height
and saw her draw an aureole round herself
as she reflected the Eternal Light.
No mortal eye, though plunged to the last bounds
of the deepest sea, has ever been so far
from the topmost heaven to which the thunder sounds
as I was then from Beatrice; but there
the distance did not matter, for her image
reached me unblurred by any atmosphere.

6. It was a custom of the pious, as thanks for an answered prayer, to win forgiveness of sins, or as a testimony of faith, to vow a journey to a stated shrine or temple. Such pilgrimages were often dangerous. Travel was rare in the Middle Ages, and the pilgrim returned from far shrines was much sought after for the hopefully miraculous, and in any case rare, news he brought back. How could Dante, having traveled to the Infinite Summit, fail to think ahead to the way he would speak his vision to mankind? 7. St. Bernard (1090–1153), the famous Abbot of Clairvaux, a contemplative mystic and author. Under him the Cistercian Order (a branch of the Benedictines with a stricter rule than the original order) flourished and spread. All Cistercian monasteries are especially dedicated to the Virgin, and St. Bernard is particularly identified with her worship. 8. In the Mystic Rose, Mary sits in the topmost tier, Eve directly below her, Rachel (the Contemplative Life) below Eve. Beatrice sits to the right of Rachel. In Dante, of course, every mention of three must suggest trinity, but the reader is left to decide for himself the significance of the Mary-Eve-Rachel trinity.

"O lady in whom my hope shall ever soar
and who for my salvation suffered even
to set your feet upon Hell's broken floor;[9]
through your power and your excellence alone
have I recognized the goodness and the grace
inherent in the things I have been shown.
You have led me from my bondage and set me free
by all those roads, by all those loving means
that lay within your power and charity.
Grant me your magnificence that my soul,
which you have healed, may please you when it slips
the bonds of flesh and rises to its goal."
Such was my prayer, and she—far up a mountain,
as it appeared to me—looked down and smiled.
Then she turned back to the Eternal Fountain.
And the holy Elder said: "I have been sent
by prayer and sacred love to help you reach
the perfect consummation of your ascent.
Look round this garden, therefore, that you may
by gazing at its radiance, be prepared
to lift your eyes up to the Trinal Ray.
The Queen of Heaven, for whom in whole devotion
I burn with love, will grant us every grace
because I am Bernard, her faithful one."
As a stranger afar—a Croat,[1] if you will—
comes to see our Veronica,[2] and awed
by its ancient fame, can never look his fill,
but says to himself as long as it is displayed:
"My Lord, Jesus Christ, true God, and is this then
the likeness of thy living flesh portrayed?"—
just so did I gaze on the living love
of him who in this world, through contemplation,
tasted the peace which ever dwells above.[3]
"Dear son of Grace," he said, "you cannot know
this state of bliss while you yet keep your eyes
fixed only on those things that lie below;
rather, let your eyes mount to the last round

9. As she did when she descended to Limbo (as, of course, a manifestation) to summon Virgil.
1. Probably used here in a generic sense to signify the native of any far-off Christian land, but Croatia, aside from lying at one of the outer limits of Christianity, was also known for the ardor of its religious belief. 2. From *vera icon*, the true image. Certainly the most famous relic in St. Peter's, the Veronica was the handkerchief of the faithful follower ever after known as St. Veronica. She gave it to Jesus to wipe the blood from his face on the road to Calvary, and what was believed to be the true likeness of Jesus was believed to have appeared on what was believed to be the cloth in what was believed to be His own blood. 3. According to legend, Bernard was rewarded for his holiness by being permitted a vision of Heaven's blessedness while he was yet on earth.

where you shall see the Queen to whom this realm
is subject and devoted, throned and crowned."
I looked up: by as much as the horizon
to eastward in the glory of full dawn
outshines the point at which the sun went down;[4]
by so much did one region on the height
to which I raised my eyes out of the valley
outshine the rays of every other light.
And as the sky is brightest in that region
where we on earth expect to see the shaft
of the chariot so badly steered by Phaeton,
while to one side and the other it grows dim—
just so that peaceful oriflamme lit the center
and faded equally along either rim.[5]
And in the center, great wings spread apart,
more than a thousand festive angels shone,
each one distinct in radiance and in art.[6]
I saw there, smiling at this song and sport,
her whose beauty entered like a bliss
into the eyes of all that sainted court.
And even could my speech match my conception,
yet I would not dare make the least attempt
to draw her delectation and perfection.
Bernard, seeing my eyes so fixed and burning
with passion on his passion, turned his own
up to that height with so much love and yearning
that the example of his ardor sent
new fire through me, making my gaze more ardent.

CANTO XXXII

The Empyrean *St. Bernard, The Virgin Mary, The Thrones of the Blessed*

His eyes fixed blissfully on the vision of the Virgin Mary, Bernard recites the orders of the Mystic Rose, identifying the thrones of the most blessed.

Mary's Throne is on the topmost tier of the Heavenly Stadium. Directly across from it rises the Throne of John the Baptist. From

4. The comparison is not, as careless readers sometimes take it to be, between a dawn and a sunset (whose brightnesses would be approximately equal) but between the eastern and western horizons at dawn. Bright as Heaven is, Mary outshines it as the east outshines the west at daybreak. 5. The shaft of the chariot of the Sun would project ahead of the horses. It would, therefore, be the first point of light of the new dawn, that moment when light glows on the eastern rim while the horizon to north and south is still dark. Thus Mary not only outshines all heaven as the east at daybreak outshines the west, but even at the uppermost tier of the blessed, those radiances at either side of her are dim by comparison. 6. Motion. No two angel beings are exactly equal in their brightness, nor in the speed of their flight. These festive angels are, of course, another manifestation of the Angel Hierarchy.

her throne to the central arena (The Yellow of the Rose) descends a Line of Christian Saints. These two radii form a diameter that divides the stadium. On one side are throned Those Who Believe in Christ to Come; on the other, Those who Believed in Christ Descended. The lower half of the Rose contains, on one side, the Pre-Christian Children Saved by Love, and on the other, the Christian Children saved by Baptism.

Through all these explanations, Bernard has kept his eyes fixed in adoration upon the Virgin. Having finished his preliminary instruction of Dante, Bernard now calls on him to join in a Prayer to the Virgin.

Still rapt in contemplation,[7] the sainted seer
assumed the vacant office of instruction,
beginning with these words I still can hear:
"The wound that Mary healed with balm so sweet
was first dealt and then deepened by that being
who sits in such great beauty at her feet.[8]
Below her, in the circle sanctified
by the third rank of loves, Rachel is throned
with Beatrice, as you see, there at her side.
Sarah[9] and Rebecca and Judith and she[1]
who was the great-grandmother of the singer
who for his sins cried, 'Lord, have mercy on me!'—
as I go down the great ranks tier by tier,
naming them for you in descending order,
petal by petal, you shall see them clear.
And down from the seventh, continuing from those
in the first six tiers, a line of Hebrew women
forms a part in the tresses of the rose.[2]
Arranged to form a wall thus, they divide
all ranks according to the view of Christ
that marked the faith of those on either side.
On this side, where the flower is in full bloom[3]

7. Of the Virgin. His eyes have not left her. Nor do they turn again to Dante. *The vacant office of instruction:* Formerly held by Beatrice. *I still can hear:* A rhyme-forced addition, not in Dante's text. 8. Mary, Mother of God, sits in the uppermost tier. At her feet in the second tier sits Eve, Mother of Man. *The wound:* Original sin. *Balm so sweet:* Jesus. *Dealt:* The first fault, Eve's disobedience. *Deepened:* Her seduction of Adam, thus spreading sin to all mankind. *In such great beauty:* Eve, having been created directly by God, was perfect in her beauty. 9. Wife of Abraham. *Hebrews,* XI, 11–14, cites her as the mother (by miraculous fertility in her old age) of the Jews who foresaw Christ's coming and believed in him. *Rebecca:* Wife of Isaac. *Judith:* She killed Holofernes and freed the Jews. 1. Ruth, great-grandmother of David ("that singer.") *Who for his sins:* His lust for Bathsheba, wife of Uriah. In order to marry Bathsheba, David sent Uriah to his death in the first line of battle. David's lament is in *Psalm L.* 2. As if the rose were a head of hair and that vertical row of Hebrew women formed a part in it. In the next line the part becomes a wall. 3. That half of the rose-stadium that holds the pre-Christian believers would naturally be completely filled. On the other side there are thrones waiting for those who have yet to win salvation through Christ Descended. Dante, in fact, is laboring to earn one of them for himself. The Day of Judgment will be upon mankind when the last throne is filled, for Heaven will then be complete.

to its last petal, are arranged all those
whose faith was founded upon Christ to Come;
on that, where the half circles show the unblended
gaps of empty seats, are seated those
whose living faith was fixed on Christ Descended.
And as, on this side, the resplendent throne
of Heaven's Lady, with the thrones below it,
establishes the line of that division;
so, facing hers, does the throned blessedness
of the Great John[4] who, ever holy, bore
the desert, martyrdom, and Hell's distress;
and under him, forming that line are found
Francis, Benedict, Augustine, and others
descending to this center round by round.
Now marvel at all-foreseeing profundity:
this garden shall be complete when the two aspects
of the one faith have filled it equally.
And know that below that tier that cuts the two
dividing walls at their centerpoint, no being
has won his seat of glory by his own virtue,
but by another's, under strict condition;
for all of these were spirits loosed from flesh
before they had matured to true volition.[5]
You can yourself make out their infant graces:
you need no more than listen to their treble
and look attentively into their faces.
You do not speak now: many doubts confound you.[6]
Therefore, to set you free I shall untie
the cords in which your subtle thoughts have bound you.
Infinite order rules in this domain.
Mere accidence can no more enter in
than hunger can, or thirst, or grief, or pain.
All you see here is fixed by the decree
of the eternal law, and is so made
that the ring goes on the finger perfectly.
These, it follows, who had so short a pause
in the lower life are not ranked higher or lower
among themselves without sufficient cause.
The king in whom this realm abides unchanging

4. *The Great John:* The Baptist. He denounced Herod Antipos and was beheaded two years before the Crucifixion. He had to wait in Limbo for two years, therefore, till Christ came for him at the Resurrection. 5. The lower half of the rose-stadium contains the blessed infants, the souls of those who died before they had achieved the true volition of reason and faith. Salvation is granted them not directly through belief in Christ but through the faith and prayers of their parents, relatives, and others of the faithful who interceded for them. 6. The infants are ranked in tiers that indicate degrees of heavenly merit. But if they were saved through no merit of their own, how can one be more worthy than the other? Such is Dante's doubt, which Bernard goes on to set at rest by telling him, in essence, that God knows what He is doing.

in so much love and bliss that none dares will
increase of joy, creating and arranging
the minds of all in the glad Paradise
of His own sight, grants them degrees of grace
as He sees fit. Here let the effect suffice.[7]
Holy Scripture clearly and expressly
notes this effect upon those twins who fought
while still within their mother.[8] So we see
how the Supreme light fittingly makes fair
its aureole by granting them their graces
according to the color of their hair.[9]
Thus through no merit of their works and days
they are assigned their varying degrees
by variance only in original grace.
In the first centuries of man's creation
their innocence and the true faith of their parents
was all they needed to achieve salvation.
When the first age of man had run its course,
then circumcision was required of males,
to give their innocent wings sufficient force.
But when the age of grace came to mankind
then, unless perfectly baptized in Christ,
such innocents went down among the blind.[1]
Look now on her who most resembles Christ,[2]
for only the great glory of her shining
can purify your eyes to look on Christ."
I saw such joy rain down upon that face—[3]
borne to it by those blest Intelligences
created thus to span those heights of space—
that through all else on the long road I trod
nothing had held my soul so fixed in awe,
nor shown me such resemblances to God.
The self-same Love that to her first descended[4]
singing *"Ave Maria, gratia plena"*
stood before her with its wings extended.
Thus rang the holy chant to Heaven's Queen
and all the blessed court joined in the song,

7. The cause is buried in God's mind. The effect must speak for itself. 8. Jacob and Esau. According to Genesis, XXV, 21 ff., they were at odds while still in their mother's womb. (Cf. the legend of Polyneices and Eteocles, twin sons of Oedipus and Jocasta.) Dante follows St. Paul (Romans, IX, 11–13) in interpreting the division between Jacob and Esau as a working of God's unfathomable will. "Even as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." Man can note the will of God in such matters ("the effect") but cannot plumb its causes. 9. For what may seem to be superficial reasons. Esau (Genesis, XXV, 25) was red-headed. 1. Among the souls of Hell. Such infants were assigned to Limbo. 2. The Virgin Mary. 3. Mary's. 4. The archangel Gabriel, the Angel of the Annunciation. Dante seems to conceive of Gabriel suspended in air before her, repeating the blissful chant of the Annunciation as he had first hymned it in Nazareth.

and singing, every face grew more serene.
"O holy Father, who endures for me
the loss of being far from the sweet place
where fate has raised your throne eternally,
who is that angel who with such desire
gazes into the eyes of our sweet Queen,
so rapt in love he seems to be afire?"
Thus did I seek instruction from that Great One
who drew the beauty of his light from Mary
as the morning star draws beauty from the sun.
And he: "As much as angel or soul can know
of exultation, gallantry, and poise
there is in him; and we would have it so,
for it was he who brought the victory[5]
to Mary when the Son of God had willed
to bear the weight of human misery.
But let your eyes go where my words point out
among this court, and note the mighty peers
of the empire of the just and the devout.
Those two whose bliss it is to sit so close
to the radiance of the Empress of All Joy
are the two eternal roots of this our rose:[6]
The one just to the left of her blessedness
is the father whose unruly appetite
left man the taste for so much bitterness;
and on her right, that ancient one you see
is the father of Holy Church to whom Christ gave
the twin keys to this flower of timeless beauty.
And that one who in his prophetic sight
foretold the evil days of the Sweet Bride
won by the spear and nails,[7] sits on his right.
While by the other father and first man
sits the great leader to whom manna fell
to feed an ingrate and rebellious clan.[8]
Across the circle from Peter, behold Anna.[9]
She feels such bliss in looking at her daughter
she does not move her eyes to sing 'Hosanna!'
And opposite the father of us all

5. (Dante says "the palm.") Of God's election, that she bear the promised Messiah. 6. Adam and St. Peter. Adam as Father of Mankind, Peter as Father of the Church. Note that Peter has the place of honor on the right. 7. St. John the Evangelist. His *Apocalypse* was received as the prophetic book in which the entire history of the Church is foretold. He sits on Peter's right. 8. Moses. 9. Ste. Anna, Ste. Anne, mother of the Virgin. Her position directly across the circle from Peter's puts her to the right of John the Baptist. *Does not move her eyes to sing 'Hosanna!'*: Like all the other heavenly beings, she constantly sings the praise of God. All others, naturally enough, look up as they sing. She, however, is so filled with bliss by the sight of Mary that she does not turn her eyes from her blessed daughter.

sits Lucy,[1] who first urged your lady to you
when you were blindly bent toward your own fall.
But the time allowed for this dream vision flies.
As a tailor must cut the gown from what cloth is given,
just so must we move on, turning our eyes
to the Primal Love, that as your powers advance
with looking toward him, you may penetrate
as deep as may be through His radiance.
But lest you should fall backward when you flare
your mortal wings, intending to mount higher,
remember grace must be acquired through prayer.
Therefore I will pray that blessed one[2]
who has the power to aid you in your need.
See that you follow me with such devotion
your heart adheres to every word I say."
And with those words the saint began to pray.

CANTO XXXIII

The Empyrean St. Bernard, Prayer to the Virgin, The Vision of God

St. Bernard offers a lofty Prayer to the Virgin, asking her to intercede in Dante's behalf, and in answer Dante feels his soul swell with new power and grow calm in rapture as his eyes are permitted the Direct Vision of God.

There can be no measure of how long the vision endures. It passes, and Dante is once more mortal and fallible. Raised by God's presence, he had looked into the Mystery and had begun to understand its power and majesty. Returned to himself, there is no power in him capable of speaking the truth of what he saw. Yet the impress of the truth is stamped upon his soul, which he now knows will return to be one with God's Love.

"Virgin Mother, daughter of thy son;
humble beyond all creatures and more exalted;
predestined turning point of God's intention;
thy merit so ennobled human nature
that its divine Creator did not scorn
to make Himself the creature of His creature.
The Love that was rekindled in Thy womb
sends forth the warmth of the eternal peace
within whose ray this flower has come to bloom.

1. See *Inferno*, II, 97–100. It was she who first sent Beatrice to rescue Dante from the Dark Wood of Error. She sits opposite Adam. She would, accordingly, be to the left of John the Baptist. 2. Mary.

Here, to us, thou art the noon and scope
of Love revealed; and among mortal men,
the living fountain of eternal hope.
Lady, thou art so near God's reckonings
that who seeks grace and does not first seek thee
would have his wish fly upward without wings.
Not only does thy sweet benignity
flow out to all who beg, but oftentimes
thy charity arrives before the plea.
In thee is pity, in thee munificence,
in thee the tenderest heart, in thee unites
all that creation knows of excellence!
Now comes this man who from the final pit
of the universe up to this height has seen,
one by one, the three lives of the spirit.
He prays to thee in fervent supplication
for grace and strength, that he may raise his eyes
to the all-healing final revelation.
And I, who never more desired to see
the vision myself than I do that he may see It,
add my own prayer, and pray that it may be
enough to move you to dispel the trace
of every mortal shadow by thy prayers
and let him see revealed the Sum of Grace.
I pray thee further, all-persuading Queen,
keep whole the natural bent of his affections[3]
and of his powers after his eyes have seen.
Protect him from the stirrings of man's clay;[4]
see how Beatrice and the blessed host
clasp reverent hands to join me as I pray."
The eyes[5] that God reveres and loves the best
glowed on the speaker, making clear the joy
with which true prayer is heard by the most blest.
Those eyes turned then to the Eternal Ray,
through which, we must indeed believe, the eyes
of others do not find such ready way.
And I, who neared the goal of all my nature,
felt my soul, at the climax of its yearning,
suddenly, as it ought, grow calm with rapture.
Bernard then, smiling sweetly, gestured to me
to look up, but I had already become

3. Bernard is asking Mary to protect Dante lest the intensity of the vision overpower his faculties. 4. Protect him from the stirrings of base human impulse, especially from pride, for Dante is about to receive a grace never before granted to any man and the thought of such glory might well move a mere mortal to an hybris that would turn glory to sinfulness. 5. Of Mary.

within myself all he would have me be.[6]
Little by little as my vision grew
it penetrated further through the aura
of the high lamp which in Itself is true.[7]
What then I saw is more than tongue can say.
Our human speech is dark before the vision.
The ravished memory swoons and falls away.
As one who sees in dreams and wakes to find
the emotional impression of his vision
still powerful while its parts fade from his mind—
just such am I, having lost nearly all
the vision itself, while in my heart I feel
the sweetness of it yet distill and fall.
So, in the sun, the footprints fade from snow.
On the wild wind that bore the tumbling leaves
the Sybil's oracles were scattered so.[8]
O Light Supreme who doth Thyself withdraw
so far above man's mortal understanding,
lend me again some glimpse of what I saw;
make Thou my tongue so eloquent it may
of all Thy glory speak a single clue
to those who follow me in the world's day;
for by returning to my memory
somewhat, and somewhat sounding in these verses,
Thou shalt show man more of Thy victory.
So dazzling was the splendor of that Ray,
that I must certainly have lost my senses
had I, but for an instant, turned away.[9]
And so it was, as I recall, I could
the better bear to look, until at last
my vision made one with the Eternal Good.
Oh grace abounding that had made me fit
to fix my eyes on the eternal light
until my vision was consumed in it!
I saw within Its depth how It conceives

6. I.e., "But I had already fixed my entire attention upon the vision of God." But if so, how could Dante have seen Bernard's smile and gesture? Eager students like to believe they catch Dante in a contradiction here. Let them bear in mind that Dante is looking directly at God, as do the souls of Heaven, who thereby acquire—insofar as they are able to contain it—God's own knowledge. As a first stirring of that heavenly power, therefore, Dante is sharing God's knowledge of St. Bernard. 7. The light of God is the one light whose source is Itself. All others are a reflection of this. 8. The Cumean Sybil (Virgil describes her in *Aeneid*, III, 441 ff.) wrote her oracles on leaves, one letter to a leaf, then sent her message scattering on the wind. Presumably, the truth was all contained in that strew, could one only gather all the leaves and put the letters in the right order. 9. How can a light be so dazzling that the beholder would swoon if he looked away for an instant? Would it not be, rather, in looking at, not away from, the overpowering vision that the viewer's senses would be overcome? So it would be on earth. But now Dante, with the help of all heaven's prayers, is in the presence of God and strengthened by all he sees. It is by being so strengthened that he can see yet more.

all things in a single volume bound by Love,
of which the universe is the scattered leaves;
substance,[1] accident, and their relation
so fused that all I say could do no more
than yield a glimpse of that bright revelation.
I think I saw the universal form
that binds these things,[2] for as I speak these words
I feel my joy swell and my spirits warm.
Twenty-five centuries since Neptune saw
the Argo's keel have not moved all mankind,
recalling that adventure, to such awe
as I felt in an instant. My tranced being
stared fixed and motionless upon that vision,
ever more fervent to see in the act of seeing.
Experiencing that Radiance, the spirit
is so indrawn it is impossible
even to think of ever turning from It.
For the good which is the will's ultimate object
is all subsumed in It; and, being removed,
all is defective which in It is perfect.
Now in my recollection of the rest
I have less power to speak than any infant
wetting its tongue yet at its mother's breast;
and not because that Living Radiance bore
more than one semblance, for It is unchanging
and is forever as it was before;
rather, as I grew worthier to see,
the more I looked, the more unchanging semblance
appeared to change with every change in me.
Within the depthless deep and clear existence
of that abyss of light three circles shown—
three in color, one in circumference:
the second from the first, rainbow from rainbow;
the third, an exhalation of pure fire
equally breathed forth by the other two.
But oh how much my words miss my conception,
which is itself so far from what I saw
that to call it feeble would be rank deception!
O Light Eternal fixed in Itself alone,
by Itself alone understood, which from Itself
loves and glows, self-knowing and self-known;
that second aureole which shone forth in Thee,
conceived as a reflection of the first—

1. Matter, all that exists in itself. *Accident:* All that exists as a phase of matter. 2. Substance and accident.

or which appeared so to my scrutiny—
seemed in Itself of Its own coloration
to be painted with man's image. I fixed my eyes
on that alone in rapturous contemplation.
Like a geometer wholly dedicated
to squaring the circle, but who cannot find,
think as he may, the principle indicated—
so did I study the supernal face.
I yearned to know just how our image merges
into that circle, and how it there finds place;
but mine were not the wings for such a flight.
Yet, as I wished, the truth I wished for came
cleaving my mind in a great flash of light.
Here my powers rest from their high fantasy,
but already I could feel my being turned—
instinct and intellect balanced equally
as in a wheel whose motion nothing jars—
by the Love that moves the Sun and the other stars.

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

1313–1375

The tales of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (completed about 1353) constitute the greatest achievement of prose fiction in a vernacular language of southern Europe during the medieval centuries. In his hundred stories the Italian author presents a great variety of people and situations, aptly and often acutely characterized, and abundant dialogue of varying liveliness and realism.

Born in 1313 in Paris, Giovanni Boccaccio was the son of a Florentine businessman and a Frenchwoman. He was apparently taken to Italy in infancy, and in 1328 was sent to Naples to learn commerce in the office of his father's partner; but after six years, bored with business, he turned to the study of canon law. In 1336 Boccaccio saw Maria d'Aquino in a church at Naples; she is represented as Fiammetta in several of his works, including the *Decameron*. A romantic affair ended in Maria's desertion of her lover, and finally in her death in the plague of 1348. In 1341 Boccaccio returned to Florence. After 1351 he was greatly influenced by Petrarch, and turned in his writing from Italian poetry and prose fiction to Latin works of a scholarly nature. He sheltered Leon Pilatus, inducing him to make the first translation of Homer from Greek. Unlike Petrarch, Boccaccio was devoted to the study of Dante, of whom he wrote a biography; in 1373 he was appointed to a Dante chair or lectureship in Florence. He died in 1375.

Like Chaucer, who wrote his *Canterbury Tales* several decades later, Boccaccio provides a dramatic framework for his narrations. But his storytellers are not miscellaneous pilgrims traveling to a famous shrine; they are seven

young ladies and three young gentlemen who have withdrawn from Florence to the countryside, to escape the Black Death, or plague, of 1348. They engage in gay banter and good-natured raillery; but, as they are all refined and cultivated young people with no occupational bias or ingrained prejudices, their relationships are polite rather than boisterous and lack the force and depth and vitality of those portrayed in *The Canterbury Tales*. They agree on a plan of storytelling—and adhere to it (with slight changes). Here there is no drunken miller, such as interrupts Chaucer's pilgrims, to upset the seemly orderliness acceptable to gentlefolk, for there are no other folk present. Each member of the company is to tell a tale each day; on some days a general topic is assigned, on others each narrator follows his own taste and judgment.

The story about Brother Alberto and his impersonation of the angel Gabriel, a bawdy tale of amorous intrigue and deception, exemplifies what most modern readers regard as typical of the *Decameron*. Like Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, it presents a (moderately) clever person successfully deceiving a very foolish one, but eventually punished for his trickery. In the present story, the man is the trickster and the woman is the foolish dupe, but these roles are often reversed in other stories of the *Decameron;* indeed, Boccaccio digresses during the introduction to the fourth day to assert his devotion to women—the Muses, after all, were women—and, indeed, the women storytellers outnumber the men. He nonetheless knew that some women are foolish, just as he knew, though he was a devout Christian, that some priests and friars fall short of their vocation. Like other authors of his time, he saw nothing wrong in acknowledging these facts and turning them to artistic use.

If reduced to the bare essentials of its plot, this tale could be told far more briefly, as a mere anecdote, a joke. Indeed, it may well have been in circulation as an anecdote both before and after Boccaccio. But he gives it literary value by the way he handles it. He makes the reader see the successive scenes in vivid detail, he creates memorable and amusing characters, and he relates the incidents of the narrative closely to the personalities of those characters. Lisetta is not only credulous but also inordinately vain—her credulity derives from her vanity—and it is because of these qualities that she can be taken in by Brother Alberto's preposterous account of the angel's interest in her. The reader also notices the tacit perception of Lisetta's woman friend, who at once sees through the friar's scheme but, instead of disabusing her foolish friend, leads her on and then gleefully reveals the whole story to the outside world. And Alberto, though clever, is not as cautious as he should be. Otherwise, once warned, he would not have exposed himself to discovery and disgrace.

The story of Federigo and his falcon is told on a day devoted to accounts of love that turns out happily after difficulties on the way. It presents the courtly-love relationship—or one of the possible relationships—in a remarkable combination of realism and nobility. Federigo's conduct perfectly fulfills the code; he devotes himself completely to Monna Giovanna, and his failure to receive any return in no way disturbs the pattern of that devotion. He never repines or complains; his lady's married or widowed condition is all one to him; and, having spent his fortune in the futile effort to attract her, he lives with resignation on his tiny estate. But Federigo is genuinely