

The Paradiso

To you my soul breathes, devoutly, to gain the strength for the difficult passage, which draws her towards itself. Beatrice began to say: 'You are so near the highest blessedness, that your eyes should be sharp and clear. So, before you make your way deeper into it, look down, and see how great a world I have placed under your feet: in order that your heart may be presented, as joyfully as it can to the triumphant crowd which comes, delightedly, through this ethereal sphere.'

I turned my gaze back through each and every one of the seven spheres, and saw this globe, so that I smiled at its pitiful semblance, and I approve that wisdom greatest which considers it least: since he whose thoughts are directed elsewhere may be called truly noble.

I saw the Moon, *Artemis* [p. 421], daughter of *Latona* [p. 504], lit without that shadow which gave me reason before to consider her rare or dense. I endured the face of *Helios* [p. 487], your son *Hyperion* [p. 491], and saw how *Mercury* [p. 519], son of *Maia* [p. 510], and *Venus* [p. 571], daughter of *Dione* [p. 462], move around and near him. Next, *Jupiter* [p. 501] appeared, moderate between *Saturn* [p. 552] his father's cold, and *Mars's* [p. 514] his son's heat, and the changes in their position were clear to me. And all the seven were revealed to me, how large, how fast they are, and how distant from each other in orbit.

The threshing-floor that makes us so fierce, appeared to me from mountains to river-mouth, as I revolved with the eternal Twins: then I turned my eyes to the lovely eyes again.

Paradiso Canto XXIII:1-48 The Vision of Christ

Like a bird among the beloved leaves, who has brooded over the nest of her sweet chicks, in the night that hides all things from us, and who, prematurely, takes to the open branch, eager to see their longed-for aspect, and to find food to feed them, waiting the sun with ardent love, watching fixedly for the dawn to break, so was my Lady, standing, erect and ready, turned towards the region of the south where the sun moves slowest, so that as I looked at her in her anticipation and longing, I became like him, desiring, who wishes something new, and delights in hope.

But the time between one when and the next, for fixing my attention I mean, and for seeing the Heavens grow brighter and brighter, was short.

The Divine Comedy

And Beatrice said: 'See the procession of Christ's triumph, and all the fruits gathered by the wheeling of these spheres.' Her face seemed alight, and her eyes so full of joy, that I have to pass it by, without description.

As *Diana* [p. 421] Trivia in the calm of full moons, smiles among the eternal nymphs who clothe the Heavens in every space, I saw one Sun, above a thousands lights, firing each and all, as our own sun does the things we see above: and the glowing substance shone so brightly through the living light that my vision could not endure it. O Beatrice, sweet, dear guide! She said to me: 'Nothing has defence against what overpowers you. Inside are the wisdom and the power that opened the path between Heaven and Earth, for which there had been such great desire before.'

Even as fire is released from cloud, because it expands so that there is no space inside, and rushes down to earth against its nature, so my mind, expanded by these feasts, issued out of itself, and cannot remember what it became.... 'Open your eyes, and look at what I am: you have seen things that have made you strong enough to endure my smile.'

Paradiso Canto XXIII:49-87 The Virgin and the Apostles

When I heard that gift, worthy of great thanks, that can never be erased from the book that records the past, I was like someone who returns to himself, from an unremembered dream, and tries vainly to recall it to mind. If all of those tongues that Polyhymnia, and her sister *Muses* [p. 524], enriched with their sweetest milk, sounded, the sound would not reach, to a thousandth part of the truth, in helping my singing of the sacred smile, and how it brightened her sacred face.

And so the sacred Poem must take a leap, in describing Paradise, like someone finding his way obstructed. But whoever thinks about the weighty theme, and the human shoulder that has burdened itself with it, will not cast blame if the shoulder trembles beneath it. It is not a path for a little boat, that my bold keel cuts as it goes, nor a pilot who spares himself.

Beatrice spoke: 'Why does my face so entrance you that you do not turn to the lovely Garden that flowers below the rays of Christ? There is *the Rose* [p. 516], in which the Divine Word made itself flesh: there are the Lilies within whose perfume the good way was taken.' And I, who was eager for

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her wisdom, surrendered again to the struggle of my weak vision.

As I have seen, before now, a meadow filled with flowers, under the sun's rays, shining pure through broken cloud, themselves covered in shadow, so I saw many crowds of splendours, shone on from above by ardent rays, not seeing the source from which the glow came. O benign Power that so forms them! You had risen yourself, to make space for my vision that lacked strength.

Paradiso Canto XXIII:88-139 Gabriel: The Redeemed: The Apostles

The name of that lovely flower which I invoke, always, morning and night, drew my mind to gaze at the greatest flame, And when the quality and might of the living star, that overcomes there as it did down here, had been pictured in both my eyes, an encircled flame, formed like a coronet, fell from the Heavens and clothed her, and surrounded her.

Whatever melody sounds sweetest here, and draws the spirit most towards itself, would seem the thunder from a torn cloud, compared to that lyre, to whose sound the lovely sapphire was crowned, who en-sapphires the brightest Heaven. The circling melody named itself: 'I am *Gabriel* [p. 477], the Angelic Love, who circles the noble joy, that takes breathes from the womb, that was the Inn of our Longing: and Lady of Heaven, I will circle, until you follow your Son, and render the Highest Sphere more divine, by entering it.' Then all the other lights rang out with the name of *Mary* [p. 516].

The Primum Mobile, that royal mantle of all the folds of the Universe, that burns brightest, and is most alive, with the breath and manner of God, had its inner shore so far above us that its appearance was not yet visible to me. So my eyes had not the power to follow the crowned flame as She climbed after her own Child. And like the babe, who stretches his arms up towards his mother, when he has suckled, because his mind flames out in external gesture, so each of those fires tapered its flame, so that the deep love they had for Mary was made clear to me. Then they rested there, in my sight, singing *Regina Coeli* [p. 610]: Queen of Heaven, so sweetly, that the delight has never left me.

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O how great the wealth is, filling those rich coffers, spirits, which, on earth, were good sowers of its seed! Here they have life and joy, even from that treasure that was earned, weeping, in Exile, in Babylon, where gold was rejected. Here he triumphs, with the ancient and the new synod, under the noble Son of God, and Mary, that *Peter* [p. 534] who holds the keys to such great glory.

Paradiso Canto XXIV:1-51 Saint Peter

O company, elected to the great feast of the Blessed Lamb, who feeds you in such manner that your hunger is always sated, if, by the grace of God, this man tastes what falls from your table before death has determined his time, take heed of his immeasurable yearning, and sprinkle him a little, you who always drink at the fountain, from which flows that on which his thought is fixed.' So Beatrice spoke: and those joyful souls, made spheres, of themselves, with fixed axes, flaming out like comets.

And as wheels, in harmonious clockwork, turn so that the first seems still, to whoever inspects it, but the last to fly, so these dancers with their various gyres, fast or slow, made me consider their riches. I saw a blissful flame shoot from the one I thought most beautiful, such that none brighter remained: and it swept three times round Beatrice, with a song so divine that my imagination cannot repeat it, and my pen passes on, and I do not write, since our thought, and speech, is too grossly coloured to trace such folds.

'O my holy sister, who begs us, so devotedly, you free me from this lovely sphere by your glowing love.' As soon as the blessed flame had rested, the breath that spoke the words I wrote, turned to my Lady. And she replied: 'O eternal light of that great man to whom our Lord left the keys of this marvellous joy, which he brought to earth, test this man here on the points of faith, lesser or greater, as you choose, the faith that enabled you to walk the waves. Whether he loves well, and hopes truly, and believes, is not hidden from you, since you have sight of that place where everything is brought to light. But since this kingdom has made its citizens from those of true faith, it is fitting that he should be allowed to speak of it, to give it glory.'