

The Divine Comedy

Paradise

Dante Alighieri

Translated by J.G. Nichols



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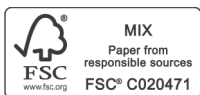
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Paradise

THE NINE ANGELIC ORDERS

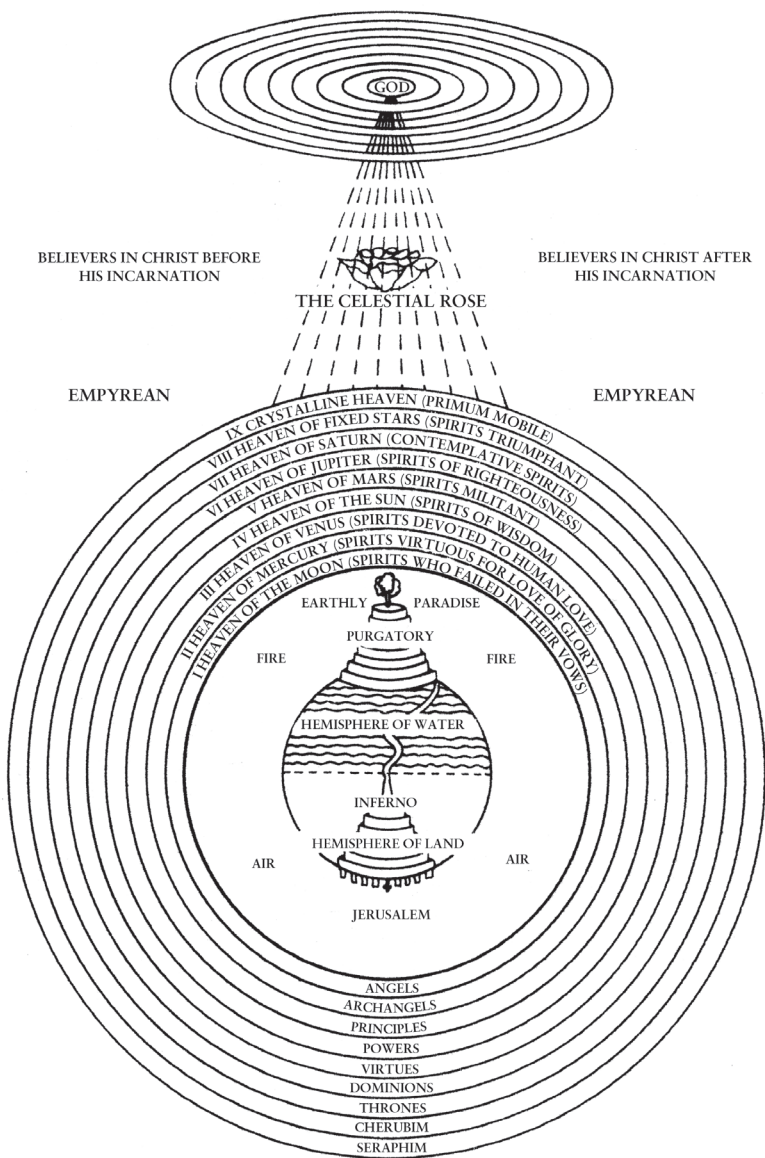


Illustration of Dante's Paradise

CANTO I

At the end of *Purgatory* Dante was standing with Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, “prepared to rise up to the stars” (xxxiii, 145). We are now to experience that ascent with him. According to the Ptolemaic model of the universe, which Dante and his contemporaries accepted, nine hollow and transparent concentric heavens or spheres are revolving, at differing rates, around the earth, which is the physical centre of the universe. Within each of the seven spheres nearest the earth is a shining body which gives the sphere its name: moving outwards from the earth, these are the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Beyond them is the sphere of the fixed stars, and beyond that is the Primum Mobile, whose movement causes the other spheres to move. Finally there is the Empyrean, pure light, the abode of God, Who sets everything in motion. The souls of the blessed are, of course, in the Empyrean, but Dante speaks of meeting them, or rather their semblances, on the various planets.

Dante cannot fully recall his ascent to Heaven. To describe it as best he can, he invokes not simply the Muses, as he had in the first two books of *The Divine Comedy*, but Apollo, the god of poetry himself. Dante hopes that his efforts will win him the poet’s crown of laurel.

Beatrice, who has taken Virgil’s place as Dante’s guide, is looking directly into the sun. When Dante fixes his eyes on her, the light of the sun grows more intense, and he is changed in a way that is indescribable. Beatrice explains that he is no longer on earth, but moving towards the Empyrean. This is the natural tendency of human beings – to desire to be with God – but it is often thwarted because we do have the power to turn away from God. Dante’s ascent is, in his now sin-free state, as natural as a stream running downhill. Then Beatrice turns her eyes from him to gaze once more on Heaven.

La gloria di colui che tutto move
 per l'universo penetra, e risplende
 in una parte più e meno altrove.
 Nel ciel che più della sua luce prende
 fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire
 né sa né può chi di là su discende;
 perché appressando sé al suo disire,
 nostro intelletto si profonda tanto
 che dietro la memoria non può ire.
 Veramente quant'io del regno santo 10
 nella mia mente potei far tesoro,
 sarà ora materia del mio canto.
 O buono Appollo, all'ultimo lavoro
 fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso,
 come dimandi a dar l'amato alloro.
 Infino a qui l'un giogo di Parnaso
 assai mi fu, ma or con amendue
 m'è uopo intrar nell'aringo rimaso.
 Entra nel petto mio, e spira tue 20
 sì come quando Marsia traesti
 della vagina delle membra sue.
 O divina virtù, se mi ti presti
 tanto che l'ombra del beato regno
 segnata nel mio capo io manifesti,
 vedra'mi al piè del tuo diletto legno
 venire, e coronarmi delle foglie
 che la materia e tu mi farai degno.
 Sì rade volte, padre, se ne coglie 30
 per trionfare o cesare o poeta,
 colpa e vergogna dell'umane voglie,
 che parturir letizia in sulla lieta
 delfica deità dovria la fronda

His glory, through Whom everything that is
 Is moving, fills the universe, resplendent
 In one part more and in another less.
 Now in that heaven which most receives His light¹
 I was, with things nobody could recall,
 Or can describe, who comes down from that height,
 Because, as it draws near to its desire,
 The mind sinks into such profundity
 That memory cannot pursue it there.
 And yet, despite such losses, everything 10
 My mind did treasure up from that blessed realm
 Shall now become the matter of my song.
 O good Apollo, for this crowning task
 Make me just such a vessel of your worth
 As you, when granting your loved laurel, ask.²
 One of Parnassus³ peaks has been enough
 Up to this point, but in this ultimate
 Arena where I struggle I need both.³
 Enter my breast with your inspiring breath,
 Just as you did when you drew Marsyas 20
 Out of his fleshly limbs as from a sheath.⁴
 Virtue divine, if you vouchsafe to me
 Yourself, till I make manifest the image
 Of the blessed realm lodged in my memory,
 You shall behold me coming to the foot
 Of your loved tree⁵ to crown myself with leaves
 For which the theme and you have made me fit.
 So seldom are they plucked to celebrate
 The triumph of a Caesar or a poet –
 In which the shameful human will's at fault – 30
 That the Peneian frond⁶ must breed delight
 Within the joyful Delphic deity⁷

1 The Empyrean, the highest (or, in relation to the earth, the outermost) heaven, pure light.

2 Dante now has to invoke not merely the Muses, as he did in *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, but the god of poetry himself. On his wish for the laurel crown see *Par.* xxv, 1–12.

3 Mount Parnassus has two peaks, one sacred to the Muses, the other (Cyrrrha) to Apollo himself.

4 The satyr Marsyas challenged Apollo to a singing contest, and when he lost he was punished by being skinned alive.

5 See “your loved laurel” (l. 15 above): the nymph Daphne, pursued by Apollo, was changed into a laurel.

6 Daphne was the daughter of the river-god Peneus.

7 Apollo, whose oracle was at Delphi.

peneia, quando alcun di sé asseta.
 Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda:
 forse di retro a me con miglior voci
 si pregherà perché Cirra risponda.
 Surge ai mortali per diverse foci
 la lucerna del mondo; ma da quella
 che quattro cerchi giugne con tre croci,
 con miglior corso e con migliore stella
 esce congiunta, e la mondana cera
 più a suo modo tempera e suggella.
 Fatto avea di là mane e di qua sera
 tal foce, e quasi tutto era là bianco
 quello emisperio, e l'altra parte nera,
 quando Beatrice in sul sinistro fianco
 vidi rivolta e riguardar nel sole:
 aquila sì non li s'affisse unquanco.^a
 E sì come secondo raggio sòle
 uscir del primo e risalire in suso,
 pur come pelegrin che tornar vole,
 così dell'atto suo, per li occhi infuso
 nell'immagine mia, il mio si fece,
 e fissi li occhi al sole oltre nostr'uso.
 Molto è licito là che qui non lece
 alle nostre virtù, mercé del loco
 fatto per proprio dell'umana spece.
 Io nol sofferarsi molto, né sì poco
 ch'io nol vedessi sfavillar dintorno,
 com' ferro che bogliente esce del foco;
 e di subito parve giorno a giorno
 essere aggiunto, come quei che puote

a A Latinism for "mai" (from the Latin "unquam").

When he sees anybody thirst for it.
 A spark can be the prelude to a fire:
 And so some better voices after mine
 May find that Cyrrha⁸ answers to their prayer.
 For mortal men the world's great lamp arises
 At various points, but from its outlet, where
 Four circles are united with three crosses,
 It issues on a better course and joined 40
 To better stars, and it can mould and stamp
 The worldly wax most after its own kind.⁹
 It had brought morning yonder,¹⁰ evening here,¹¹
 When rising at that point, till almost all
 Yonder was white,¹² and black our hemisphere,¹³
 And I saw Beatrice turn to her left side
 And gaze unflinchingly into the sun
 As never any eagle ever could.
 And, as a second ray flies up again,
 Out of the first one, like a peregrine 50
 That, having stooped, is eager to return,¹⁴
 Just so her action, piercing through my eyes
 Into my fantasy, caused my reaction:
 I looked into the sun as no one does.
 Much is allowed there which on earth is banned
 To human faculties, because that place¹⁵
 Was formed expressly for all humankind.
 I could not bear the sun for long, but not
 So short a time I failed to see it sparkle
 Like iron emerging from the fire red-hot. 60
 And daylight suddenly seemed added on
 To daylight, as if He Who has the power

8 A metonym for Apollo: see note 1 above.

9 Lines 37–42: the sun appears to rise in different places according to where one is in the world. When the circles of the celestial equator, the ecliptic and the equinoctial colure cross the circle of the horizon at the same spot, the sun (now, at the spring equinox, in Aries) is most favourable to the earth (“worldly wax”).

10 In Purgatory.

11 In Italy.

12 The southern hemisphere, believed to be composed entirely of water except for the island of Mount Purgatory.

13 The northern hemisphere.

14 Other commentators interpret Dante's *pellegrin* as meaning “pilgrim” – therefore, like a homesick pilgrim wishing to return.

15 The Earthly Paradise, created for Adam and Eve and their descendants.

avesse il ciel d'un altro sole adorno.
 Beatrice tutta nell'eterno rote
 fissa con li occhi stava; e io in lei
 le luci fissi, di là su rimote.
 Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei
 qual si fe' Glauco nel gustar dell'erba
 che 'l fe' consorte in mar delli altri dèi.

70

Trasumanar significar per verba^b
 non si poria; però l'esempio basti
 a cui esperienza grazia serba.
 S'i' era sol di me quel che creasti
 novellamente, amor che 'l ciel governi,
 tu 'l sai, che col tuo lume mi levasti.
 Quando la rota che tu sempiterni
 desiderato a sé mi fece atteso
 con l'armonia che temperi e discerni,
 parvemi tanto allor del cielo acceso

80

della fiamma del sol che pioggia o fiume
 lago non fece alcun tanto disteso.
 La novità del suono e 'l grande lume
 di lor cagion m'accesero un disio
 mai non sentito di cotanto acume.
 Ond'ella, che vedea me sì com'io,
 a quietarmi l'animo commosso,
 pria ch'io a dimandar, la bocca aprìo,
 e cominciò: "Tu stesso ti fai grosso
 col falso imaginar, sì che non vedi
 ciò che vedresti se l'avessi scosso.

90

Tu non se' in terra, sì come tu credi;
 ma folgore, fuggendo il proprio sito,
 non corse come tu ch'ad esso riedi."
 S'io fui del primo dubbio disvestito

b Another Latinism: "in words".

Adorned the heavens with another sun.¹⁶
 Beatrice stood with her eyes fixed upon
 The eternal wheels,¹⁷ while I was fixing mine
 On her, once they had shifted from the sun.
 By gazing at her I was changed inside
 As Glaucus changed on tasting of the herb
 Which made of him an oceanic god.¹⁸
 Transhumanition¹⁹ cannot be expressed 70
 In words – so this example must suffice
 For those who will experience it at last.²⁰
 And whether I was nothing then but what
 You fashioned last,²¹ O Ruler of the heavens,
 You know, O Love Who raised me with Your light.
 When the wheeling,²² which You eternalize
 Through its desire for You, drew my attention
 With varied melody You harmonize,²³
 The blazing of the sunlight seemed to make
 The sky so far enflamed no rain or river 80
 Ever resulted in so broad a lake.
 The newness of the sound and the great light
 Kindled in me such longing for their cause
 That I had never known desire like that.
 So she, who saw within me as I do,
 Parted her lips to calm my troubled mind,
 Before I parted mine to ask her to,
 And she began: “You make yourself obtuse
 With false imaginings, and do not see
 What you would see if you could shake them loose. 90
 You’re not on earth, though you suppose you are,
 But lightning, flying from its proper place,
 Flies not so fast as you returning there.”²⁴
 Divested as I was of my first wonder

16 Dante is approaching the sphere of fire (between the earth and the moon).

17 The heavenly spheres.

18 The mythical Greek fisherman Glaucus, noticing that the fish he caught revived on contact with a certain herb, tasted it himself and was transformed into a sea-god.

19 Going beyond human limitations.

20 When they go to heaven.

21 His soul.

22 The turning of the heavenly spheres.

23 The music thought to be caused by the friction between the various spheres revolving at different speeds.

24 To Heaven.

per le sorrise parolette brevi,
 dentro ad un nuovo più fu' inretito,
 e dissi: "Già contento requievi
 di grande ammirazion; ma ora ammiro
 com'io trascenda questi corpi levi."
 Ond'ella, appresso d'un pio sospiro, 100
 li occhi drizzò ver me con quel semblante
 che madre fa sovra figlio deliro,
 e cominciò: "Le cose tutte quante
 hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma
 che l'universo a Dio fa simigliante.
 Qui veggion l'alte creature l'orma
 dell'eterno valore, il qual è fine
 al quale è fatta la toccata norma.
 Nell'ordine ch'io dico sono accline 110
 tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
 più al principio loro e men vicine;
 onde si muovono a diversi porti
 per lo gran mar dell'essere, e ciascuna
 con istinto a lei dato che là porti.
 Questi ne porta il foco inver la luna;
 questi ne' cor mortali è permotore;
 questi la terra in sé stringe e aduna;
 né pur le creature che son fore
 d'intelligenza quest'arco saetta,
 ma quelle c'hanno intelletto ed amore. 120
 La provedenza, che cotanto assetta,
 del suo lume fa 'l ciel sempre quieto
 nel qual si volge quel c'ha maggior fretta;
 e ora li, come a sito decreto,
 cen porta la virtù di quella corda
 che ciò che scocca drizza in segno lieto.
 Vero è che, come forma non s'accorda
 molte fiate all'intenzion dell'arte,
 perch'a risponder la materia è sorda,
 così da questo corso si diparte 130
 talor la creatura, c'ha podere
 di piegar, così pinta, in altra parte;
 e sì come veder si può cadere

By those few words she said and by her smile,
 I found myself entangled even further,
 And said: "Before you spoke I was contented
 To rest in wonder – now I wonder more
 How these light bodies are by mine transcended."
 Then Beatrice, with a sigh of pity mild, 100
 Turned her eyes onto me and, with that look
 A mother casts on her delirious child,
 Began to speak: "All things there are are made
 Cognate with one another: this it is
 Which makes the universe most like to God.
 Here all the higher creatures show the hand
 Of the Eternal Excellence, the end
 For which the aforesaid order was designed.
 Into this selfsame ordinance are drawn
 All natures in their varying degrees, 110
 Some near, some nearer to their origin;
 And so they sail, each to a different haven,
 Over the ocean of all being, each
 Drawn onward by the instinct it was given.
 This is what draws fire up towards the moon –
 This is the motive force in human creatures –
 This makes the earth compact itself in one:
 Not only those created things which have
 No intellect are driven by this bowstring,
 But those who have intelligence and love.²⁵ 120
 The providence by which all this is made
 Keeps by its light one heaven²⁶ motionless,
 Within which whirls that heaven that has most speed.²⁷
 To that still heaven, as to the place designed,
 We are impelled by virtue of that bowstring
 Which shoots its shafts towards a happy end.
 Now it is true we all too often find
 His finished work belies an artist's purpose,
 When his matter is deaf and won't respond; 130
 Just so the creature may be seen to stray
 From the right path at times, having the power,
 Though urged aright, to go another way
 (As we at times may actually see fire

25 Angels and men.

26 The Empyrean.

27 The Primum Mobile, the outermost and fastest of the revolving spheres.

foco di nube, sì l'impeto primo
l'atterra torto da falso piacere.
Non dei più ammirar, se bene stimo,
lo tuo salir se non come d'un rivo
se d'alto monte scende giuso ad imo.
Maraviglia sarebbe in te se, privo
d'impedimento, giù ti fossi assiso,
com'a terra quiete in foco vivo.”
Quinci rivolse inver lo cielo il viso.