

CANTO XXI]

Commentaries

region of the Apennines, containing peaks over 2,000 metres high. One of these, the Cimone, is not far from Florence.
ll. 100-10: "And where they shape their skyline humpback-wise is Carità": The hog-backed ridge, named Castra, is in the Umbrian region of the mountain range. On its north-eastern slope was the Benedictine hermitage of Fonte Avellana.

ll. 121-3: "Therein as Peter Damian I was known" etc.: This is a vexed passage and some commentators have believed that two different persons are referred to here. Peter Damian was in the habit of signing himself Peter the Sinner ("Petrus Peccator"), but there was another Peter (Pietro degli Onesti), a contemporary of Peter Damian, who also called himself Peter the Sinner. He founded the church of Santa Maria del Porto, near Ravenna, where his tomb may be seen with its legend "Petrus Peccans". On the other hand, Peter Damian is said to have spent two years at the monastery of Pomposa (on a small island at the mouth of the river Po), which was known as the convent of Santa Maria. It is to this, probably, (rather than to the church of Santa Maria del Porto) that ll. 122-3 refer.

ll. 125-6: "... the Hat which passing downwards ever sinketh lower": Peter Damian refers here to his appointment as Cardinal in 1057. He died in 1072. (The Cardinal's hat was not instituted until 1252.)

ll. 127-9: "Barefoot and lean came Cephas, came the great Vessel of the Holy Ghost" etc.: Peter Damian recalls the simplicity of life of St Peter and St Paul as they went about preaching (cf. the commands of Christ, Luke x. 5-8). The contrast between the extravagant luxury of prelates and the simple lives of the Apostles was a frequent theme in mediaeval polemical writing directed against clerical abuses.

Heaven of Saturn - Beatrice Reassures Dante

CANTO XXII

THE STORY. Dante turns in terror to Beatrice who reassures him and bids him look round again towards the souls in Saturn. One who draws close reveals himself to be St Benedict, the founder of the monastery at Monte Cassino. Like St Peter Damian, he too rebukes the laxity and corruption of monastic life, and predicts the coming of a time of regeneration. Rising to the heaven of the fixed stars, Dante finds he has entered his native sign of Gemini. Bending his gaze downwards, he is able to contemplate all seven planets beneath him and to discern the inhabited portion of the globe. Filled with a serene sense of the latter's insignificance, he turns once more to gaze into the lovely eyes of Beatrice.

O'erwhelmed with awe and terror, to my guide

I turned, just as a little boy will run

Seeking protection at his mother's side,

Swiftly, as though she comforted a son,

Pallid, agitated and gasping in his fear,

Yet ever by her voice to reason won,

She said: "Thou knowest thou art in Heaven here,

Thou knowest in Heaven all is holiness,

And zeal the source of every deed so'er.

How singing had transformed thee, thou mayst guess;

Or, had I smiled, couldst thou have borne it, say,

Moved as thou art by sound of righteousness?

Hadst thou but heard the boon for which they pray,

The vengeance yet to come thou now wouldst know -

Thou wilt behold it ere thy dying day.

The sword of God falls neither swift nor slow

Save to those eager to see justice done,

Or who in guilt and fear await the blow.

Now turn aside and over others run

Thy glance; souls of great lustre thou wilt see,

If thou but let thy will and mine be one."

So I looked back as she directed me,

And saw a hundred little spheres, whose rays

Gave beauty to each other mutually.

Alighieri, the Florentine. Cantica III, Paradise (II Paradiso)

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The Soul of St Benedict Approaches -

25 I was as one who in his heart gainsays
The thrust of his desire, fearing the shame
Of being importunate, and silent stays.

28 Moving towards me, from those pearls there came
The largest and most lucent, to fulfil
My silent longing to enquire its name.

31 From deep within it, this was audible:
"If thou, as I, our burning love didst know,
Thy inmost thoughts would be expressible.

34 But, lest by tarrying thou shouldst prove slow
To reach thy lofty goal, I will reply
Before thou ask, to what concerns thee so.

37 Cassino on a spur of hill doth lie,
About whose summit, once, there dwelt a herd
Of people pagan and perverse. There I,
The first, bore up the tidings of the Word
Which came on earth that truth might be revealed
And power to rise above on man conferred.

43 Such was the grace illuminating me
That I reclaimed the neighbouring villages
From wrongful worship and impiety.

46 These other flames were all contemplatives,
Warmed by the sun that kindles bounteously
The flowers and the fruits of holiness.

49 Here Romualdus, here Macarius see,
And here my brothers who, in cloisters pent,
From every worldly taint kept their hearts free."

52 I answered him: "Thy words' fond sentiment
And the bright radiance which yonder glows,
Of favours yet to come seen argument;

55 Whereat, as to their full extent a rose
Unfolds its petals, warmed beneath the sun,
So now my confidence dilates and grows.

58 Father, I pray thee, reassure thy son:
Can I behold thee as thou truly art,
With face uncovered? May such grace be won?"

He Rebukes the Degenerate Monks

61 "Thy yearning, brother," thus he did impart,
"In the last sphere will be vouchsafed, even as
Mine own will be, with those of every heart.

64 There and there only every longing has
Final attainment, perfect, ripe and whole,
And there each part is where it always was,

67 For it is not in space and has no pole;
Wherefore our ladder, at its full extent,
Steals from thy view, since yonder is its goal.

70 But Jacob, in the vision which was sent
Of angel figures moving up and down,
Saw where the ladder's loftiest section went.

73 No foot stirs now to reach the rungs; to crown
Iniquity, there in my house men sit
Smirching with wasted ink my Rule's renown.

76 Dens are the buildings, once for abbots fit;
Rancid the meal, and the cows in which they dress
Are like so many sacks stuffed full with it.

79 Gross usury bears lighter the impress
Of God's displeasure than the well-filled purse
Which monkish hearts now covet to excess.

82 Whatever wealth the Church is called to nurse
Belongs to those who ask it in God's name,
Not to the families of monks, or worse.

85 The yielding flesh of man is much to blame:
More than a good beginning was required
Ere ever acorn from an oaktree came.

88 Peter, to found his house, no wealth desired,
Nor I, by fasting and by prayer made rich,
Nor Francis, by humility inspired.

91 If thou wouldst contemplate the point from which
Each one set out, and where their followers are,
Thou wilt perceive how white has changed to pitch.

94 Jordan turned back, the waters fled; by far
The greater marvels these, which God once willed,
Than 'twere these evil doings to debar."



Dante Alighieri, the Florentine. Cantica III, Paradise (II Paradiso)

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CANTO XXII] *The Souls Withdraw – Ascent to Eighth Heaven*

97 Thus he concluded and the voice was stilled.
Collegiate to *collegium* withdrew,
Which like a whirlwind sped, its task fulfilled.
100 After them, my sweet Lady, as they flew,
Impelled me by one sign along the stair,
My nature vanquished by her power anew.
103 On earth, where Nature speeds men everywhere,
Aloft and down, no race or swiftest heat
Comparison with my ascent could bear.
106 Reader, I tell thee, as I hope to meet
The triumph of God's holy ones again,
Whence, weeping for my sins, my breast I beat,
109 Thrust thou thy finger in the flame – for pain
Thou'lt snatch it out, but not so fast as I
Saw and was in the Heaven of the I wain.
112 O stars of glory, from whose light on high
A mighty virtue poureth forth, to you
I owe such genius as doth in me lie;
115 With you there rose and sank again from view
He who is father of all life below
When my first breath in Tuscany I drew;
118 And when grace was vouchsafed to me to go
Within the heavenly circle of your course,
Your region I was granted then to know.
121 To you my soul devoutly breathes, her source
Of strength and power for the hardest phase
Of all her journey towards which now she draws.
124 Beatrice began: "Before long thou wilt raise
Thine eyes and the Supreme Good thou wilt see;
Hence thou must sharpen and make clear thy gaze,
127 Before thou nearer to that Presence be,
Cast thy look downward and consider there
How vast a world I have set under thee,
130 So that thy heart, taking its utmost share
Of joy, may greet the host which triumphing
Exultant comes through this ethereal sphere.

(Gemini) – *Dante Looks at Earth – Commentaries*

So with my vision I went traversing 133
The seven planets till this globe I saw,
Whereat I smiled, it seemed so poor a thing,
136 Highly I rate that judgement that doth low
Esteem the world; him do I deem upright
Whose thoughts are fixed on things of greater awe.
139 I saw Latona's daughter all in light,
Without those markings I did once expound
As matter rare and dense, as I thought right.
142 Thy child's aspect, Hypertion, I found
I could endure, and saw how, moving near,
Thine, Maia, and thine, Dione, ringed him round.
145 Above them I beheld the tempering sphere
Of Jove, between his offspring and his sire;
How their positions changed, to me was clear.
148 All seven being displayed, I could admire
How vast they are, how swiftly they are spun,
And how remote they dwell. I saw entire
151 The threshing-floor, whereon fierce deeds are done;
Wheeling with the eternal Gemini,
Down hills I traced the course the rivers run,
154 Then gazed upon her beauty, eye to eye.

THE IMAGES. *The Heaven of Saturn*: see Canto xxi, under *Images*.
Dante's bewilderment at the great cry of the contemplatives: At the conclusion of St Peter Damian's words, a great cry of wrath goes forth from all the other souls. Dante, bewildered and terrified, turns to Beatrice for reassurance. Allegorically, his bewilderment signifies his (and possibly our) misunderstanding of the contemplative life. He had not expected that these souls would voice such vehement concern about the corruption of the monastic ideal on earth; but absorption in the vision of God does not detach the soul from zealous care for the life of the Church Militant.

The Heaven of the Fixed Stars: In the story, as Dante and Beatrice rise beyond the seventh and outermost of the planets, they enter the firmament or heaven of the fixed stars. This is the eighth and last of the astronomical spheres. The part of it which Dante enters is, approximately, that which is constellated by Gemini, the stars under whose sign he was born. At this point, he retraces with his gaze (for it is endowed with supernatural acuity and power) the course he has taken through the seven planetary spheres, until it rests at last upon



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the puny semblance of our little globe. Allegorically, it is after passing through a period of spiritual contemplation (the Heaven of Saturn) that man can see the world in its true proportions.

NOTES. l. 9: "And zeal the source of every deed so'er": The life of contemplation does not detach the souls' interest from the life of the Church on earth; "righteous zeal is itself a mark of true spiritual contemplation" (Sinclair). l. 13-15: "Hadst thou but heard the boon for which they pray" etc.: The great cry of the contemplatives which startled Dante was a prayer for retribution upon the evil-living monks and prelates. l. 15: "Thou wilt behold it ere thy dying day": The vengeance referred to may be the attack upon Pope Boniface VIII at Anagni, or the humiliation of the Roman Curia by the transfer of the Papal Court to Avignon; or it may be the coming retribution for which Dante longed and which he still hoped to see realized by the power of the "Five-hundred-and-five God-sent" (see *Purg.* xxxiii. 43-4 and note).

l. 25-7: "I was as one who in his heart gainsays etc.": Dante, as if by instinct, behaves fittingly in the presence of St Benedict, for it was part of the Benedictine Rule that "a monk restrain his tongue from speaking, and, keeping silence, do not speak until he is spoken to". l. 29: "The largest and most licent": This is the soul of St Benedict, the founder of monasticism in the Western Church. He was born of a noble family in Umbria in the year 480. On being sent to school in Rome, he fled in horror from the undisciplined life of his companions and lived for three years in a cave in the Abruzzi. The monks of a neighbouring monastery elected him as their abbot but, on growing restive under his severe rule, they tried to poison him. He left them and in 528 went to Monte Cassino, where he founded his famous monastery on the site of an ancient temple of Apollo. He died at Monte Cassino in 543.

l. 49: *Romualdus*: St Romualdus (960-1027) founded the Order of Camaldoli or Reformed Benedictines. After a vision of monks climbing a ladder to heaven all dressed in white garments, he changed the Camaldolese Benedictine habit from traditional black to white. His monastery is mentioned in *Purg.* v. 96.

Maccarius: of the several saints called by the name of Maccarius, the one to whom Dante is most probably alluding here is St Maccarius the Younger, of Alexandria, who is said to be the founder of monasticism in the East, as St Benedict was in the West.

l. 59-60: "Can I behold thee as thou truly art, with face uncovered?": Dante, in the heaven of the contemplatives, asks whether he may behold a soul in its essence. The question is one which belongs to the contemplative life.

l. 62: "In the last sphere": i.e. in the Empyrean, the abode of God. There Dante will behold all the saints in that aspect which they will have after the Last Judgement (see *Cantos xxx-xxxiii*).

Commentaries

ll. 64-7: "There and there every longing has final attainment, perfect, ripe and whole" etc.: In the Empyrean, all longing is fulfilled, because the will of the souls is in accord with the will of God; every part of the Empyrean, which is motionless, is where it has always been from eternity, for it does not exist in space (but in the mind of God) and does not revolve (as do the other nine heavens).

ll. 70-72: "But Jacob, in the vision which was sent" etc.: Compare *Gen.* xxviii. 12: "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it."

l. 75: "... my Rule's renown": St Benedict's *Rule of Monks (Regula Monachorum)*. It is interesting that Dante here makes St Benedict connect the image of Jacob's ladder with the discipline of his Order, for that is exactly what St Benedict himself does in the preamble to the central chapter of his *Rule*, No. 7, *De Humilitate*. (I am indebted to Father Albert Stacpoole, O.S.B., for this observation.)

ll. 79-81: "Gross usury bears lighter the impress" etc.: We have seen in *Hell* how Dante rates the sin of usury (cf. *Canto xvii.* 37-78). It is a sin against Nature and against the labour that should have cultivated its resources; yet even that is less displeasing to God than the avarice of priests and friars who appropriate to themselves the revenues of the Church (the tithes *quae sunt pumperum Dei*, cf. *Canto xii.* 91-3 and note).

ll. 85-7: "The yielding flesh of man is much to blame" etc.: i.e. man is easily corrupted. It is not enough to start him off on the right road; much more is needed if he is not to stray. Many oak-trees are planted in good soil which succumb to bad weather before they bear acorns.

ll. 88-90: "Peter, to found his house, no wealth desired": The reference here may be to St Peter Damian and not to the Apostle as is generally believed.

l. 98: *Collegium* to "collegium" withdrawn: The soul of St Benedict withdrew to the great company of contemplative spirits, which returned upwards whence it had descended.

l. 111: *the Heaven of the Twins*: i.e. the Constellation of Gemini. Dante and Beatrice have risen to the eighth sphere, the heaven of the fixed stars.

ll. 115-17: *With you there rose and sank again from view etc.*: Dante was born under the sign of Gemini, that is, between 21 May and 21 June.

l. 135: *Whereat I smiled, it seemed so poor a thing*: Dante is probably recalling the appearance of the earth as it seemed to Scipio as he looked down on it from the Galaxy, in Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*. He may also have in mind the following passage from the *Apocalypse of St Paul* (fourth century): "And I looked down from heaven upon the earth and beheld the whole world as it was as nothing in my sight" (M.R. James, translation from the Latin text, p. 325).

l. 139: *Latom's daughter*: Dante now sees the other side of the moon on which he assumes there are no markings. He is partly right, as we



CANTO XXIII

are at last able to confirm, in that there are fewer markings on that side than on the one with which we are familiar.
1. 142: Thy child: i.e. the Sun, Apollo was the son of Hyperion.
1. 144: Thine, Maia: i.e. Mercury, Maia, the daughter of Atlas, became by Jupiter the mother of Mercury.

1. 144: thine, Dione: i.e. Venus.
1. 145-6: the tempering sphere of Jove, between his offspring and his sire: i.e. the planet Jupiter, between Mars, his offspring, and Saturn, his father. He "tempers" the cold of his father with the heat of his son. (Cf. Convivio, II. xiv: "... Jupiter is a star of temperate constitution, midway between the coldness of Saturn and the heat of Mars.")

1. 147: How their positions changed, to me was clear: The movements of the planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, which now draw near each other, and now draw apart, were clearly observed and understood. (The reader may have the same satisfying experience on visiting a planetarium.)
1. 148: All seven being displayed etc.: Dante is able to observe from above the position, movement and relative size of the seven planets, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury and the Moon.

1. 151: The threshing-floor etc.: This metaphor, applied to the inhabited portion of the globe, was not unusual in mediaeval writings. Dante uses it twice in Paradise (cf. Canto xxvii. 86) and once in the De Monarchia III. xvi.

1. 154: Then gazed upon her beauty, eye to eye: The canto begins and ends with Dante's gaze fixed on Beatrice, at first in fear, and finally in serenity. The unworthiness of the world no longer alarms him.

Eighth Heaven (Gemini) - Church Triumphant

CANTO XXIII

THE STORY. As Beatrice fixes her gaze in the direction of the zenith, Dante's eager expectancy is awakened. Before long he sees the heaven brightened by an increased radiance, the light of the saints of the Church Triumphant, among whom, outstanding all, is Christ. Glimpsing for an instant the shining substance of Christ's person, which pierces the swathings of His glory, Dante is at first dazzled and then able to endure the radiance of the smile of Beatrice. His vision thus strengthened, he beholds the lights of the Virgin and the Apostles, the angel who descends to accompany the Virgin on her return to the Emphyrean, and the brilliant white radiance of all the other saints assembled before him.

A bird within the bower of her delight,
Quiet upon the nest with her sweet brood
Throughout the dark concealment of the night,
Anxious to look on them and gather food -
No weary task for her for as at play
Blithely she toils to seek her fledglings' good -
Before the time, upon the topmost spray
Eager awaits the sun and on the East
Fixes her wakeful eye till break of day.
Even so my Lady stood, intent to feast
Her gaze upon that region where the sun,
Climbing at noon, appears to hasten least.
I, seeing her poised in longing, was as one
Who in his heart doth something more desire
And by his hopes is to quiescence won;
But swiftly did the space of time transpire
Between my waiting and beholding how
The heaven was lit with ever brighter fire.
Then she: "Behold Christ's hosts in triumph! Thou
Mayst see the fruit all garnered here above
Which 'neath these circling stars matured ere now."
To me her face seemed all aglow with love;
And in her eyes such joyousness was seen
I cannot tell of it, but onward move.



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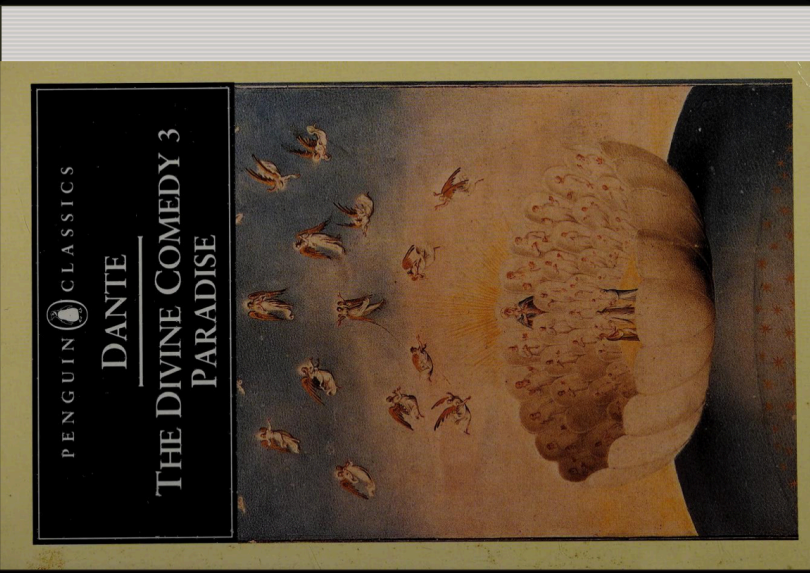
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