

Dante's Global Vision: Seeing & Being Seen in the "Divine Comedy"

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“The things of friends are common.” —Greek proverb (quoted by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*)

It is a pleasure to be with you today, to visit Belmont University and see Nashville for the very first time. My talk takes its cue from your theme for the year —“Living in a Global Community.” I have chosen to speak about Dante because his global outlook is well suited to this theme. Dante dared to think the whole of all things and to capture his vision in a single poem—the *Divine Comedy*.



Dante's globalism, his vision of the whole, is not confined to the earth but extends to the entire universe. This includes the invisible, spiritual world as well as the visible, corporeal one. It embraces the human and the divine, the natural and the supernatural. As we know from his writings and the events of his life, Dante cared passionately—one might say, desperately—about community and about “how it goes” with the world. The cosmos for him is the Community of communities. This Community affirms, rather than negates, the human individual and all the smaller, local groups to which we belong: our cities, towns, and neighbourhoods. On a more intimate level, these “little platoons,” as Burke called them, include our families, friendships, romantic attachments, relations with colleagues, and the communal bonds forged by students and their teachers and mentors.

The *Comedy* is a first person epic that tells, or rather sings, of a journey through the three regions of the spiritual cosmos: Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Dante appears in two guises, as both the pilgrim who makes the journey and the poet who artfully recounts it. Dante begins by recalling how he was lost in a



dark wood and close to spiritual, perhaps also physical, suicide. He had lost sight of what he calls “the straight way,” the path of virtue and truth.[1] The epic’s inspiration was Beatrice, Dante’s personal angel and beloved, whom Dante first met when they were only children. Heaven takes pity on Dante, and Beatrice, now enthroned in Paradise, descends into Hell for his sake—into Limbo, the home of virtuous pagans. There she entreats Virgil, the noble and humane poet of Rome and Dante’s poetic model, to serve as Dante’s mentor and guide. Virgil leads Dante through Hell and Purgatory. Beatrice, his higher guide, then takes over and leads him through Paradise. At the end of the poem, Dante reaches the end of all desire: He sees God.

I plan to take us on a much-abbreviated journey through the three parts or canticles, as they are called, of Dante’s poem: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. I do so to convey a sense of Dante’s global vision, his view of the whole, and how the three regions of that whole reflect different perspectives on community. I have chosen three cantos, one from each canticle: from the *Inferno*, the canto on lust; from the *Purgatorio*, a canto on envy; and from the *Paradiso*, a canto on faithfulness marred by inconstancy. A form of seeing and being seen is at work at each level. I realize that many of you have not read the *Comedy*, or perhaps are familiar only with the *Inferno*. I hope that my remarks will inspire you to read the whole poem and to regard it not as a book for class but as a book for life.

Before we begin, I want to make three observations. The first is that the *Comedy* is not a literal report on the afterlife, but rather an allegorical depiction of the whole from the perspective of eternity, a revelation in images of the way things are. Second, as the opening lines of the poem indicate, Dante’s journey is ours as well—the journey of humanity:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita, / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura

“In the middle of the path of *our* life [*nostra vita*], I found myself in a dark wood.” (Opening lines of the *Inferno*) My third observation grows out of the second. The ultimate goal of the *Comedy* is to educate and convert, not just individual readers, but a whole world that is lost in a dark wood and needs to return to “the straight way.”

Part One: Love among the Ruins

Dante's universe is not an infinite expanse but a bounded, beautifully ordered whole: a work of art. It is what the ancient Greeks called a *kosmos*—a term that means ornament. Central to this idea is hierarchy or rank, an order of higher and lower. Hell, the place of lost souls, is the lowest region of Dante's cosmos—the underworld. Hierarchically arranged, it is an enormous funnel that reaches to the center of the earth. Lesser sins are punished higher up, in the less constrictive circles; graver sins are punished lower down, in the more constrictive. The funnel was made when Satan, now a prisoner trapped in ice at the center of the earth, was defeated in his war against God and hurled from Heaven. His fall, in making a hole, also made a mountain on the other side of the earth—Mount Purgatory, the inverted funnel where human souls, with God's help, undo the Fall of Man and escape Hell. Satan's fall in this way played into the hands of divine comedy. Tragic for him, it was comic for us because it produced—ironically and quite against Satan's will—the physical site where the human story is allowed to have a happy ending.

Hell, Virgil tells Dante, is the “the place of the woeful people who have lost the good of intellect.” (*Inf.* 3, 17-18) This means two things. It means that these souls, with the exception of the virtuous pagans in Limbo, have lost the proper functioning of the intellect and are demented. It also means that all these souls, those in Limbo included, have lost all hope of experiencing the vision of God, who is the end of all desire and the source of truth, being, and good order.[2]

The second circle of Hell, the one just below that of the virtuous pagans, contains the souls of those who gave themselves unconditionally to lust. Its relatively high placement suggests that lust is the least damnable of sins. The lustful are hot-blooded rather than cold-hearted and are fittingly placed far from the ice of Hell Central, which contains the souls of the treacherous. Dante calls the lustful “the carnal sinners who subject reason to desire.” (*Inf.* 5, 38-39) They inverted the natural hierarchy, the correct order of ruler and ruled.

The souls here are blown about in a chaotic storm that torments them for eternity. Dante compares the lustful shades to birds, to starlings and cranes, whose "wings" are obviously doing them no good. The shades' desire to move and to fly on their own, their freedom of motion, is constantly thwarted. The storm objectifies the violent, disordered passion to which these lovebirds freely succumbed. It is their sin made visible. Virgil identifies the many famous people here including Semiramis, the Assyrian Queen who legalized incest so that she might indulge in it and at the same time be validated. She made lust into law. There also is Dido from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Cleopatra, Helen, Achilles, Paris, and Tristan. All are connected in one way or another with betrayal and war. Dante feels great pity when he hears Virgil name "the knights and ladies of old times" and is bewildered at why they are in Hell. (70-72) However, it is the pair of contemporary Italian lovers that catches Dante's eye because somehow the lovers remain united in the storm. Dante calls them "these two that go together and seem so light upon the wind." (74-75)

The lovers are Paolo and Francesca, whose tragic romance is one of the most celebrated moments in the *Comedy*. Virgil urges Dante to call the Italian lovebirds by invoking "the love that leads them." Apparently, there is something here that Dante needs to learn at this early stage of his journey. Dante obeys, and bids the lovers speak, but



only one, Francesca, replies. The other, consumed with grief, is wordless and in the end can only weep. (5, 139-142) Paolo and Francesca died at the hand of Francesca's husband, who was also Paolo's older brother, when he caught the lovers in the act. That is why Francesca introduces herself and Paolo as having "stained the world with blood." (90)

When Dante calls to the lovers, again we have the image of birds. The two lovers approach, "as doves, summoned by desire, come with wings poised and motionless to the sweet nest." (82-3) In his depiction of Francesca, Dante perfectly captures the gracious tone of a true Lady: educated, well-bred, sensitive, and well-spoken. Her words and her story melt our hearts, as they do Dante's. Dante is no easy moralist. His poetry exposes us to the pull of

Francesca's tragic tale and the tender feelings that led to her and her lover's ruin. He makes us feel what it is like to be her, to be in the very moment of love's sweet opportunity, even as we are called upon to judge her actions in the clear light of reason. It is hard to believe we are in Hell.

Francesca first tells Dante about her lovely home in Ravenna, then about how Love compelled Paolo and her to do what they did. Her story begins with the eyes. Francesca was beautiful, and Paolo, seeing her beauty, was seized by love for what Francesca calls "the fair form that was taken from me," that is, her mortal body. Then Love makes his next move—it, too, involves the eyes. Francesca, seeing Paolo's loving gaze, was compelled by Love to love him in return, since Love, she affirms, "absolves no one beloved from loving." Then the *coup de grace*: "Love brought us to one death. Caina waits for him who quenched our life." The murderous husband is punished in Caina, which is in the deepest circle of Hell. This part of Francesca's story shows that lighter sins can provoke others far heavier.

Francesca begins three tercets in a row with the word Love, *Amor*. The repetition—"Amor, Amor, Amor"—is an incantation and a summons. Francesca is Love's high priestess, who speaks on behalf of courtly love and its cult of adulterous "knights and ladies." Now in Hell, she eternally relives and cherishes her tragic devotion to her god of choice. She is eternally constrained, imprisoned by her passion, identical to that passion. She is unrepentant, like all the shades in Hell's "blind world." (*Inf.* 4, 13) In the moment that Francesca yielded to erotic love, her vision, narrowed and occluded, did not look past private gratification. She blinded herself to the larger communities to which she and Paolo belonged. In this blind condition, she now justifies and ennobles her carnal act, which brought misery upon herself, her lover, her family, and—from Dante's global perspective—the world.

Dante, a love poet susceptible to both feminine courtesy and erotic passion, is deeply moved by Francesca's story. He asks her a question inspired by his own overwhelming sense of tragic loss through love: "Francesca, thy torments make me weep for grief and pity, but tell me, in the time of your sweet sighing how and by what occasion did love grant you to know your uncertain desires?" (116-120) Francesca responds with one of the poem's most quoted sentences: "There is no greater pain than to recall in misery the happy time." (121-123) The

“happy time” is her union with Paolo. One might counter this nostalgia with another saying: Nothing is more horrible than recalling a time we thought was happy, but was in fact the beginning of our doom.

Francesca goes on to tell Dante how she and Paolo came to know their “uncertain desires.” Again, the eyes are at work, this time in the seemingly harmless act of reading:

‘We read one day for pastime of Lancelot, how love constrained him. We were alone and had no misgiving. Many times that reading drew our eyes together and changed the colour in our faces, but one point alone it was that mastered us; when we read that the longed-for smile was kissed by so great a lover, he who never shall be parted from me, all trembling, kissed my mouth. A Galeotto was the book and he that wrote it; that day we read in it no further.’ (129-138)

“Galeotto” is Gallehault, the knight who served as go-between for Lancelot and Guinevere. In Italian, the word came to mean pimp. The “point” in the story, the moment of the kiss, is Paolo and Francesca’s moment of surrender, just as it was for the lovers in the book. In this fatal moment Francesca became Guinevere and her lover Lancelot. The line between story and life vanished, as Love cast a veil over her eyes. In this dream-state, she left reality, or rather reshaped it to make it conform to her romantic ideal. Here in Hell her delusion endures forever: Hell is the place of those who have lost the good of intellect. As Francesca reveals, it is also the cosmic repository of perverse ideologies that distort reality or nature and replace it with an artifice.

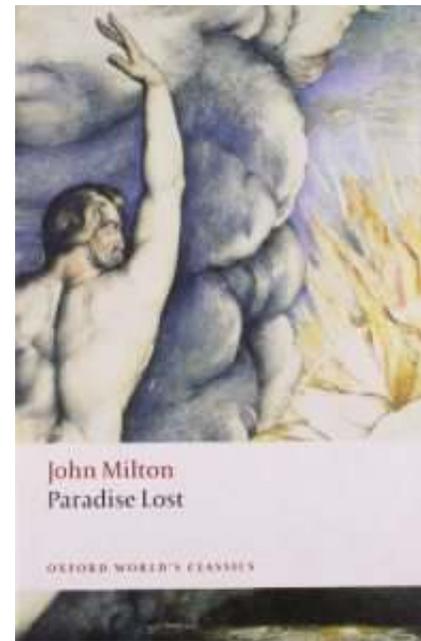
Lancelot and Guinevere are the romanticized traitors of a good and noble king. Their affair played a major role in the downfall of Arthur and Camelot. Their story brought the modern lovers together like a trusty pimp and encouraged them to yield to their conspiracy of the eyes. The book was their prompt and their validation. Here, Dante signals the danger of these sorts of love stories, which, by ennobling illicit love, invite the destruction of all trust, fellowship, and the good order on which society depends. Such stories, like Semiramis, make lust into law. They can make us blind, not in our eyes but in our minds. They beget and promulgate teachings and opinions about love that are hard to resist, but destructive of the soul's natural hierarchy of ruler and ruled. At issue here, we must note, is not pornography, whose corrupting effects are obvious, but a literary work belonging to high culture. A more contemporary example of this culture is Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, which is also about knights and ladies and the betrayal of a good king. The opera is far more dangerous than the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, since it combines the power of music with nihilism made sweet. Wagner's lovers want more than each other: They long to disappear into the Atman or World Spirit and die.



The revelation that love stories can tempt impressionable souls to their eternal loss is no doubt largely responsible for Dante's extreme emotional reaction to what he has just heard. He tells us that he swooned in pity "and fell as a dead body falls." Trochees and alliteration mirror the act of Dante's death-like fall: *e caddi come corpo morto cade*. (142) Dante here makes himself into a symbol. His fall recapitulates the Fall of Man, which resulted from the improper desire for knowledge, and combines it with a swoon that mimics the "little death," as it is called, of sexual release. With this *Liebestod* or love-in-death, the canto of Francesca reaches its end.

Part Two: If Thine Eye Offend Thee

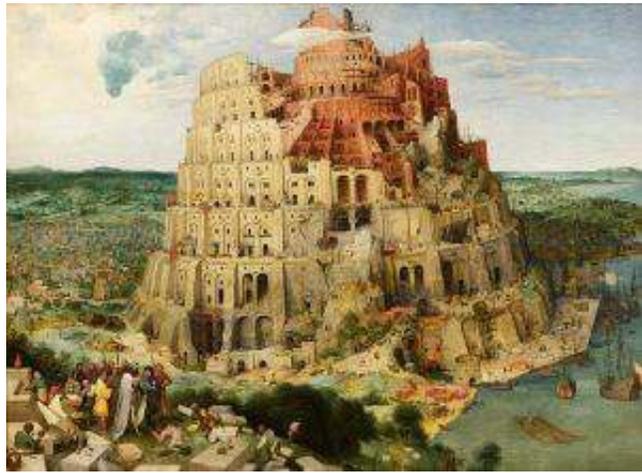
We now go from the seductive beauty of transgressive love to the ugliness of envy. Pride can be beautiful—recall Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Anger, too—think of Achilles, beautiful in his youthful rage. Sloth (in French, *ennui*) has its lazy, languorous charm. Lust, as we have seen, can all too easily be romanticized. Gluttony can take on the attractive look of fastidious, opulent dining. Greed can be made to sound heroic—think of Gordon Gekko's rousing ode to greed in the Oliver Stone movie *Wall Street*. But envy does not have any heroes. There is something cringing, shrivelled, and mean-spirited about it that defies beautification. We do not want to look at it, let alone acknowledge it in ourselves.



What, then, is envy? Aquinas calls it “sorrow at another’s good.” Another word for it is *ressentiment*, the settled condition of resentment. This often finds expression in the phrase: “It’s not fair.” The other face of envy is joy at another’s misfortune. This is *Schadenfreude*, a word that has passed into English usage. The Italian word for envy, *invidia*, is cognate with the verb *videre*, to see. It is derived from the Latin verb *invidere*, “to look askance at, to cast an evil eye upon.” Envy, in other words, is, like lust, a disease of the eyes. Its opposite consists in charity, kindness, and mercy.

As I mentioned earlier, Purgatory is the mountain where reason searches us. It is where penitent souls engage in the clear-sighted, unflinching scrutiny of their past lives. It is a penal colony where souls serve time and endure the corrective torments that restore the soul to its original integrity and health. Souls here are not confined to a circle, as they are in Hell, but spiral up the mountain as they ascend to moral perfection and rational freedom. At the top of Mount Purgatory is the Garden of Eden, the place of earthly bliss. Once there, purified souls ascend higher, as they go to the celestial Paradise, the primal home of souls.

At the first level or terrace, Dante witnesses the purgation of pride. This occurs at the base of the mountain because pride, arrogance, is the foundation of all sin and rebellion against God's law. The proud carry enormous stones on their backs. The heavy burden subdues pride and teaches humility. The terrace of pride, as Dante discovers to his amazement, is adorned with beautiful sculpture—sights to behold. There are murals depicting acts of humility and a carved pavement depicting the consequences of pride.



Just above the terrace of pride is the terrace of envy. There is no artwork here, only barren rock, livid in color. It has the black-and-blue hue traditionally associated with envy—the color of a bruise. This is truly the psychic color of the envious, who are always bruised, always offended at something. Of all the purgatorial torments, the purgation of envy is the most disturbing and the most like something in Hell. At first, Dante does not see but only hears the souls as they pray and lament. Their livid cloaks make them indistinguishable from the stone bank on which they lean. Their being seen by others, at least readily, has been taken away from them. When Dante does manage to see the penitents, he weeps out of pity. They wear “coarse hair-cloth” and seem like blind beggars asking for alms at a church door. The envious are indeed blind. They have their eyelids sewn shut with an iron wire, “as is done to an untamed falcon when it will not be still.” (13, 70-72) When Dante sees this, he feels as though he is committing an outrage, “seeing others without being seen.” (*veggendo altrui, non essendo veduto*, 74) His bad conscience reminds us that human fellowship depends on mutual recognition or regard—shared seeing; to see others without being seen is to spy on them. There is something indecent about it, and Dante is right to feel uncomfortable.

In their blind and beggarly condition, the envious are made to feel the need for other human beings. They are all leaning on each other: “the one supported the other with his shoulder and all were supported by the bank.” (59-60) In this way, Purgatory re-establishes the lost habit of seeing and cherishing the natural goodness and necessity of human interdependence, of human community. As

for the most gruesome aspect of their purgation, the sewn up eyelids, this could be taken cynically as no more than divine payback: The envious looked askance at the goods of others and now must pay the price, but that ignores the therapeutic function of the torment. Like every other sin, envy hurts the soul of the sinner; in particular, it hurts the soul's rational capacity for seeing what is naturally good. Envy makes this aspect of sin explicit. The envious have damaged their capacity to see properly and to rejoice at the sight of other people's good. The wire through the eyelids is the violent cure for violent seeing: When the envious one wishes to see a good—whether wealth, success, power, position, looks, talent, or popularity—but instead sees it destroyed and negated simply because it is not his. Envy is a self-inflicted wound, a self-blinding, and the wire through the eyelids functions to stitch up the wound and ultimately restore clear sight of what is good, good apart from its possessor.

In this canto and throughout the *Comedy*, natural goodness finds its image in the Sun, which ungrudgingly bestows its gift of light and warmth on all alike. The Sun, for Dante, is the image of natural reason. At the very opening of the canto, Virgil addresses the Sun in a beautiful prayer as he acknowledges the liberality that envy destroys:

‘O sweet light by trust in which I enter on this new road...do thou guide us with the guidance that is needful in this place. Thou givest warmth to the world, thou sheddest light upon it. Unless other reason urge the contrary thy beams must always be our guide.’ (13, 16-21)

“Other reason” here refers to the agents of supernatural light, the angels whom Dante and Virgil meet along the way.

Dante sees the penitents force tears out from under their sewn up lids. He addresses the group in words of hope: “O people assured of seeing the light on high which alone is the object of your desire.” (85-87) He then asks, in effect: “Any Italians here?” Dante wants to know so that he might help his fellow countrymen by praying that their torment may be quickened.

The soul first to respond is that of Sapia, a noblewoman from Siena. Her political affiliation led her to being exiled from her native city—just as Dante, for similar reasons, was exiled from his native Florence. Sapia addresses Dante graciously, as Francesca had done. But she also corrects what she perceives as too strong an emphasis on political identity, which is often the source of envy. “O my brother,” she says, “we are every one citizens of one true city.” (94-95) Sapia speaks as though she is already in Heaven, the City of God, where political identity and identity politics are meaningless. And well she might, since those in Purgatory are assured of eternal bliss. Her mild correction of Dante’s nationalism springs from her newfound wisdom, her on-going education in the transcendence of envy. It recalls the vicious rivalries among cities that plagued Italy in Dante’s day. The lesson is not that love of one’s own is bad, but rather that, when corrupted by envy, it leads to partisan hatred and outright war. In the two cantos devoted to envy, politics is at the forefront. Politics is the realm of human experience in which envy and the will to demonize and destroy are most active, as the exiled Dante knew all too well.



Sapia puns on her name, which resembles *savia*, sapient or wise. “Sapient I was not though I was called Sapia,” she says, “and I rejoiced far more at others’ hurt than at my own good fortune.” (108-111) She tells Dante that she was mad, *folle*, since at a mature age, when she ought to have been thinking about her final end, she indulged infinite, insatiable envy. She tells the story of how, from her castle near the city of Colle, she saw the battle in which the army of her townspeople, those of the political party that had driven her out, was defeated by Florentines of her own party. She had prayed that this day would come, and it did—not because she prayed, but because God willed it. (117) She saw one of the Sienese leaders, her nephew and political enemy, Provenzan Salvani, killed in the battle, and she rejoiced, or, as she puts it, “was filled with gladness beyond all bounds.” She was so glad that she no longer cared what happened to her. She turned her “bold face” to God and prayed: “Now I fear Thee no more!” Salvani, the nephew, appears in an earlier canto, on the terrace of pride. (11,

109 ff.) The twisted political situation shows how envy pits city against city, party against party, in the madness of invidious one-upmanship. Envy destroys natural unity. It rips families apart and even causes family members to rejoice in the death of their own flesh and blood. Witness Cain, the exemplar of envy, who killed his brother when Abel's sacrifices were accepted and his were not.

Late in life, Sapia repented of her envy, which by that time had become a hardened habit. She would have repented even later and would have had to wait in the antechamber of Purgatory with the other late repentants, had it not been for Peter the comb seller, a poor and saintly hermit who prayed for her change of heart. The efficacy of intercession through prayer is a recurring theme in the poem and is prominent in the *Purgatorio*. As we hear lower down the mountain from one of the penitents, "much is gained here through those yonder," that is, those who are still living. (3, 145) Dante's rescue from the dark wood began with a chain of female intercessors: Mary pleaded with Lucy, who pleaded with Beatrice to help Dante. (*Inf.* 2, 94-104) Prayer is an example of Dante's global vision and his passionate concern for community. Interceding prayer affirms the Community of the Living and the Dead. The Living and the hopeful Dead pray on each other's behalf. In so doing, each side enacts the virtue of seeing beyond one's self-interest and of actively caring about one's fellow man. Each wills the good of another, indeed that other's highest good. Intercession is the acknowledgment that we are all connected in spirit. It is the bond of all hopeful souls and the means by which they partake actively in, and in some mysterious way affect, the will of God. Prayer is both rational and profoundly humane within the grace-governed world that Dante embraces.

In the final moments of her speech, Sapia asks Dante to pray for her and to restore her name among her surviving family members by informing them that in spite of her sinful life she dwells among those destined for bliss. But then there is a shift in tone as Sapia takes a parting shot at her fellow Sieneese, who in their vanity tried to establish a port to rival those of other cities and build an impressive fleet to go with it. (151-154) They will fail miserably, as she observes. We might infer that Sapia here shows that she is still in the grip of envy, but it is probably more accurate to regard her attack as springing from her clarified vision of envy and of events on earth. As an authority on envy, she no doubt reflects Dante's own judgment of the vain Sieneese.

In the second canto on envy, Dante meets a Italian nobleman, Guido del Duca, who expresses dismay at the fate of his now-degenerate district of Romagna. Guido's tone is not resentful but grief-stricken and is mixed with nostalgia for the virtue and glory of bygone days. Sapia's envy was joy at the suffering of others; Guido confesses to envy's other side: sorrowing at another's good. The emphasis is once again on the eyes, this time with an added physiology of envy: "So enflamed with envy was my blood that if I had seen a man make merry thou hadst seen me suffused with livid color. Of my sowing I reap such straw." (14, 82-85) He goes on to say: "O race of men, why do you set your hearts where must needs be exclusion of partnership?" (86-8)

This phrase, "exclusion of partnership" (*di consorte divieto*), will be our transition from the *Purgatorio* to the *Paradiso*. In the very next canto, Dante asks Virgil to explain these words, which baffle him. (15, 44-45) Virgil responds by telling Dante that humans fix their desires on goods that cannot be shared—things like wealth, reputation, and political power. Some can have more only if others have less. And even if these goods were equally distributed, the little I have, while I have it, is mine and not yours. This reveals the ultimate human blindness, blindness to that good which is by nature shareable and communal. It is a good that one has more of the more one gives it away. This miraculous good is envy's opposite: love as charity. It is the highest principle of fellowship and the supernatural wellspring of all lesser forms of human community.

Virgil, though himself pagan, is surprisingly wise in the ways of the Christian Heaven. He directs Dante's attention to "the highest sphere," where, he says, "the more they are who say *ours*, the more good does each possess and the more of charity burns in that cloister." (55-57) Virgil goes on to describe the love that emanates from God, "that infinite and unspeakable good." This Highest Good gives itself infinitely and, in leaving itself, returns to itself magnified by those to whom it is given: "and the more souls that are enamoured there above the more there are to be rightly loved and the more love there is and like a mirror the one returns it to the other." (73-75) Virgil then points beyond himself to Beatrice, the incarnation of supernatural light. He tells Dante that she "will deliver thee from this and every other craving." (77-78) We shall follow Virgil's lead.

Part Three: The Community of Hearts and Minds

At the top of Mount Purgatory, Virgil leaves Dante without saying good-bye. He just—disappears. Dante is devastated. It is, however, a necessary parting. Dante now needs a higher guide, someone who can take him beyond the realm of natural reason. Virgil led Dante by means of his enlightened speech; Beatrice, too, speaks to Dante with words of light, but she also guides because Dante is in love with her—she guides by virtue of her beauty, which manifests God's grace.

Throughout the *Paradiso*, Dante lays special emphasis on the eyes of Beatrice. They are an image of divine intellection—the intuitive apprehension of truth. We are not told what color or shape her eyes are. What is important is their focus: They are firmly fixed, like the eye of an eagle, on that point of the highest Heaven from which Beatrice descended for Dante's sake and to which she longs to return. Her gaze leads her lover not by a return gaze, but by directing his gaze upward and beyond Beatrice herself. As she tells Dante at one point: "Not only in my eyes is Paradise." (18, 21) The eyes of Beatrice direct Dante's vision to the whole of all things and ultimately to God. They are a corrective to the constrictive, possessive seeing of Paolo and Francesca.



Heaven, like Hell and Purgatory, has levels. This is a stumbling block for most readers. How can Heaven, the place of perfect happiness, have degrees or ranks? To use a verb that Dante invents, what does it mean for some souls to be more "imparadised" than others? Dante discusses this very problem with one of the blessed, Piccarda Donati, who occupies the lowest degree of bliss and is the first soul Dante meets in this final part of his journey. She is the herald of Heaven. Piccarda will complete my Triad of Gracious Women in the *Comedy*. She will initiate us into the realm of perfect community and perfect seeing.

In the *Paradiso*, we accompany Dante as he flies through the visible heavens. These are arranged according to the Ptolemaic astronomy of Dante's day. In this scheme, the cosmos is a rotating sphere with the Earth at its center. Seven celestial bodies orbit around the Earth: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun,

Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. The sphere of the fixed stars comes next, and finally the outer shell of the visible universe. This is the so-called Crystalline, the first bodily sphere to be touched and moved by God's love. Each orbit corresponds to a level of Paradise; that is, to a mode of being imparadised: the Moon to faith marred by inconstancy, Mercury to service marred by ambition, Venus to love marred by wantonness. In the upper regions, the Sun represents wisdom, Mars courage, Jupiter justice, and Saturn temperance. Dante does not set foot on these bodies, as we might imagine. The bodies are made of matter that is permeable and receptive—an image of the spiritual condition of receptiveness to God's grace, and the openness that the blessed have to each other and to newcomers. Dante enters each celestial body, to which the souls of Paradise have descended in accommodation to Dante's as yet imperfect faculties.

We meet Piccarda in the sphere of the Moon, the lowest of the heavenly bodies. The Moon's luminous look has dark spots or blemishes—a feature well suited to faith marred by inconstancy. The souls here are eager to speak with Dante, who is in turn



aroused by their eagerness. He is bursting to know the identity of one soul in particular that seems “most desirous of speech.” He addresses her in gracious terms: “O spirit made for bliss, who in the beams of eternal life knowest the sweetness which, not tasted, never is conceived, it will be a kindness to me if thou satisfy me with thy name and with your lot.” (37-41) Piccarda answers “with smiling eyes.” She tells Dante that in the world she was “a virgin sister,” and that if he searched his memory he would remember who she was. Piccarda had taken vows as a Poor Clare but was forced by her brother, Corso, to leave the convent and enter into a marriage that would advance the family's political prospects. She died soon after the wedding. For her broken vows she occupies the least degree of Heaven. Piccarda then answers the second part of Dante's question, the one about the lot of all the souls at this level:

‘Our affections, which are kindled only in the pleasure of the Holy Spirit, rejoice in being conformed to His order, and this lot which seems so low is given us because our vows were neglected and in some part void.’ (52-7)

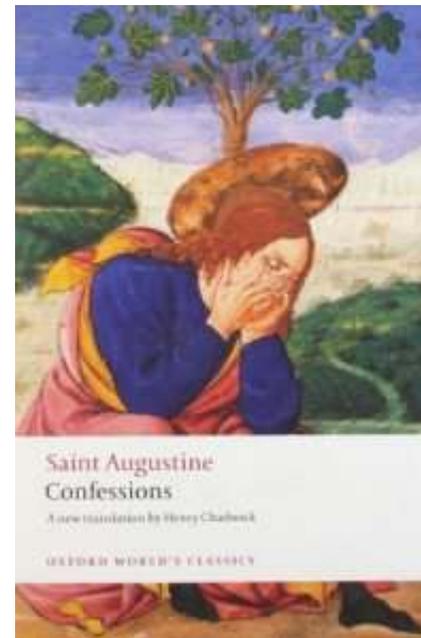
The language of being conformed to an order fits Piccarda's vocation as a nun. Since affections, or feelings, have themselves been altered in the ascent to Paradise, conformity is not submission to a tyrant or mere duty, but rather the joyous yielding of one's will to the Being who wills only what is good. In this perfected community of wills, each will celebrates its freedom of movement. It becomes eternally unerring. We might object that the will cannot be free if it no longer makes choices and has options. But that would be like criticizing a violinist who was so good that she was never even tempted to play badly and was beyond mistakes. While we live in mortal bodies, our freedom of will is the freedom to choose, but the perfection of the will consists in always willing the good that one clearly sees. Freedom, here, is an actuality, not a mere potential.

Dante then asks Piccarda what we would ask if we were in his place: "But tell me, do you who are happy here desire a higher place, that you may see more and become more dear?" (64-6) This question takes us back to the cantos on envy, and betrays Dante's still imperfect seeing. His thinking is still earthly and political (in the corrupted sense). If souls in this region of Heaven did in fact desire more, they would be like us—prone to ambition, lust, and envy. Here we touch on one of the main functions of Dante's Paradise. Paradise is the "place" of individual souls, who had faith in Christ and are purged of sin, but it is also the model of an ideal city or kingdom—a community of hearts and minds that has been purged of covetousness, envy, partisan strife, and the insatiable desire for *more*. As Dante rises through the heavenly ranks, he is initiated into that ideal of perfected fellowship so dismally absent in his beloved Italy and in the world at large.

Piccarda answers Dante's question "with such gladness that she seemed to burn in the first fire of love." His question gives her an opportunity to recollect the temporal beginning of her eternal bliss, the moment she fell in love with God:

'Brother, the power of charity quiets our will and makes us will only what we have and thirst for nothing else. Did we desire to be more exalted, our desire would be in discord with His will who appoints us here, which thou wilt see cannot hold in these circles if to be in charity is here *nesesse* [necessary] and if thou consider well its nature. Nay, it is the very quality of this blessed state that we keep ourselves within the divine will, so that our wills are themselves made one; therefore our rank from height to height through this kingdom is pleasing to the whole kingdom, as to our King who wills us to His will. And in His will is our peace. It is that sea to which all things move, both what it creates and what nature makes.' (70-87)

The passage contains one of the most beautiful lines in the *Comedy*: "and in His will is our peace." (*E'n la sua volontade è nostra pace*, 85) The line echoes the famous sentence from Augustine's *Confessions*: "Our heart is restless until it rests in Thee." Piccarda's answer, which recalls Sapia's address to Dante as a brother, combines ardor and intellectual clarity, heat and light. The marriage of ardor and clarity is typical of the souls in Paradise. Without clarity, ardor would be mere feeling with no anchor in the truth. It would be blind. Without ardor, clarity would be joyless—mind without heart. It would be like getting the point of a really good joke but not finding it funny.



Piccarda speaks authoritatively of the perfected will, not simply because she is humble but because she is suffused with the light of knowledge, which informs her teaching about the will and the community of wills. Piccarda's intellectual vision is not confined to her level but extends to all of Paradise. This is made

evident when she says that the hierarchical scheme of Heaven "is pleasing to the whole kingdom." Piccarda speaks on behalf of the entire heavenly community, which is made one and harmonious by the unerring will of God. Some souls may be limited in their degree of bliss, but all have access to God, one another and the whole of Paradise. Souls at every level—that is, in every mode of being imparadised—enjoy the unity and happiness of the whole kingdom. They are not spatially confined to levels, as the astronomical image depicts them, but spiritually connected to all the levels. God wills each soul into its proper place, its true place, and each soul rejoices in being where it is because it sees with perfect clarity that its assignment is pleasing to the whole community and to God. Knowledge sweetened by charity lifts the burden of selfish desire and makes the soul free to see and love the good of another and of the whole. Piccarda not only rejoices to be where she is; she also rejoices that souls "higher up" are where they are. In her perfect transcendence of envy and her clear intellectual vision of the whole, she is not almost but fully imparadised in the sense that she enjoys the greatest happiness her nature allows.

Dante understands. "It was clear to me then," he says, "that everywhere in heaven is Paradise, although the grace of the Supreme Good does not rain there in one measure." (3, 88-89) His realization echoes the opening lines of the *Paradiso*: "The glory of Him who moves all things penetrates the universe and shines in one part more and in another less." Dante then asks Piccarda to tell him how it came about that she was inconstant in her vow. She tells her story, which we already know, and then dives back into the sea of her unspeakable joy while singing the *Ave Maria*.

But Piccarda's story troubles Dante, as Beatrice sees by the look on his face. He wonders, as do we, how Piccarda can be faulted for her broken vow, since she was forced to leave the convent. Beatrice responds with a harsh teaching that reveals the terrifying seriousness of vows. She tells Dante that Piccarda, by yielding to the force done to her, seconded that force. There was a way in which she might have kept her vow and remained constant: she might have "fled back to the holy place," defying her brother and risking martyrdom. (4, 81) Had she done this, she would have imitated St. Lawrence, who mocked the tormentors who were burning him for his faith ("Turn me over: I'm done on this side!"), or the Roman general Mucius Scaevola, who stuck his own hand into the flames when he was captured by his enemies. True faith is itself like fire—no matter

how much it is wrenched this way and that by violent circumstance, it resists being diverted from its natural impulse to burn up toward Heaven. This is the faith in which Piccarda and those like her were deficient.

My intention, however, is to praise Piccarda, not criticize her. True, she lacked fire and overestimated her the power of her lungs, her natural capacity for breathing in the Spirit of God; she made a vow she couldn't keep. But her very limit, which is part of her whole personality, adorns Heaven and fills out the heavenly hierarchy, the range of possible blessed types and blessed conditions. Heaven does not merely allow Piccarda to be among the blessed; it rejoices in seeing her there. God, we must imagine, rejoices in seeing her there. She is one of the gems of Heaven who adds to the joy of all, like the Moon that adorns the night sky. Her special charm lies in her sublime transcendence of envy and her capacity to rejoice from her modest position in her complete self-knowledge and in the communal nature of the whole.

Throughout, I have emphasized seeing, in particular, reciprocal or mutual seeing. This is the mutual regard and good will that hold a community together. This seeing requires the capacity to acknowledge the virtues of others. The *Paradiso* dramatizes this mutual recognition in the speeches of St. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican, and St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan, whom Dante meets in the sphere of the Sun. Thomas and Bonaventure are the standard bearers, respectively, for Knowledge and Love. Thomas sings the praises of St. Francis, his other (11), and Bonaventure sings the praises of Dominic, his other. (12) This mutual recognition—the generous act of stepping aside and putting another in the limelight—recalls the charity that Virgil beautifully described on the terrace of envy. Thomas and Bonaventure see past the sectarianism of their orders, which on earth were often rivals. Their dance-like reciprocity provides a model for the earthly reconciliation between virtuous and diverse individuals and between worthy and diverse doctrines. This delight in the complementarity of diverse aspects of a single truth pervades the whole of Paradise, where every soul sees and enjoys what very different souls contribute to the common good and the common vision. Each sees and is seen, acknowledges and is acknowledged. This metaphysical transparency is grounded, we must note, in the very nature of the Christian God, who is a community of Persons. God's joyous self-relation and perfected self-love are, for Dante, the ultimate cause and principle of the luminous interrelations and the complementarity of perfected souls.

Conclusion: Dante's Poetic Synthesis

Higher up in Paradise, closer to the first principle of all things, Beatrice utters one of the poem's central teachings. Seeing, she tells Dante, is the true measure of blessedness. Intellectual vision, personified in the intuitive knowledge enjoyed by the angels, always leads and love always follows. (28) This is true to our ordinary experience: We love what has already presented itself to us and made itself apparent as beautiful. So too, the light of knowledge must come before and ground the warmth and longing of love. Seeing is primary. If this were not the case, if love as feeling were primary, then love would easily degenerate into the voluptuous self-worship of Francesca. We would be in love with our feelings, not with the object of our feeling. Only love guided by a clear mind is genuine openness to things as they are and to the true being of others. This love is aroused by Beatrice, whom Dante calls at one point "she who imparadises my mind." (*Par.* 28, 1)



Dante's global vision finds its clearest expression in a Latin prose work, which Dante wrote while he was composing the *Paradiso*. Its title is *Monarchy*. In this work, which is devoted to world government, Dante emphasizes two important things. The first is that our highest vocation is the cultivation of our intellects—the part of us that is both distinctively human and divine. The second point is that humans are by nature communal and best actualize their intellectual potential in common. No one human intellect is self-sufficient, for then it would be God. We need each other, not just for the basics of life, or because we are social beings, or even for moral action, but also for the enrichment and expansion of our minds. This global cooperation—the transparency of all minds that love truth—is impossible, Dante argues, without world peace, which is the primary goal of sound politics. He argues further that this peace cannot come about without a single virtuous emperor who enforces the rule of law and puts an end to conflict and war.

Dante's *Comedy* is a tribute to human intellectual interdependence. It is the synthesis of everything Dante learned from other great minds. In its vision of an ordered whole or cosmos, the poem celebrates the definitive victory of a comic over a tragic sense of life—the victory of hope over despair. The *Comedy* inspires us to share its hope, to imitate its global vision and promote the common good. It exhorts us, exhorts the whole world, to leave the dark wood of self-enclosure and to practice the gracious but often demanding movements of good will and shared seeing.

[1] Author's Note: Translations of the *Comedy* are from John Sinclair's version (Oxford, 1939), which I have occasionally modified.

[2] All three regions of the whole are defined with respect to the intellect—the highest, most God-like part of us. Hell is the place of those who have lost the good of intellect. It is regularly associated with blindness. Purgatory is the mountain "where reason searches us" (*Purg.* 3, 3). Paradise is where the intellect, in community with other intellects, flourishes.

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