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Assistant Editor

Giulia Maria Paoletti

Contacts

info@edgarwindjournal.eu
submissions@edgarwindjournal.eu

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Publisher

Bernardino Branca

Contact: Corso Magenta 48, 20123, Milan, Italy

Phone: 0039 3483605940

Email: bernard.branca@gmail.com

Table of Contents

Giulia Maria Paoletti

Introduction

pp. 1-3

Colin Eisler

Oxford's Art-Historical Circus: Life as a Henry Fellow at Magdalen College 1952–3

pp. 4-13

Jaynie Anderson

'Posthumous Reputations': Edgar Wind's Rejected Review of Ernst Gombrich's Biography of Aby Warburg

pp. 14-35

Stefano Farinelli

Edgar Wind and Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs*: A 'Romantic Affection' for the Centaurs

pp. 36-46

Gioachino Chiarini

Time and Space in Dante's *Paradiso*

pp. 47-72

Francesco Monticini

A Nostalgic Gaze Towards Antiquity: The So-Called 'Palaiologan Renaissance'

pp. 73-91

Time and Space in Dante's *Paradiso*¹

Gioachino Chiarini

Abstract

In the third canticle, the subdivision of time and space in Dante's ultramundane journey, in part circumstantially reconstructed in relation to the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, is confirmed with clarity in the *Paradiso*, in turn reinforcing its symbolic form and function. The movement through landscapes of concentric circles, thrice repeated – travelling downwards in the *Inferno*, upwards and towards the sublime in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* – is the prelude to the ultimate vision of God as a point surrounded by concentric vortices of the angelic orders. Astronomical values and symbolisms: 22.5° (planetary reference) = various tendencies of the human character; 30° (zodiacal reference) = specific rational and spiritual attitudes of the individual.

Keywords

Music; song; dance; light; centre

Purgatory represents the arduous escape from all that can drag a human being into the abyss of Hell's unending tortures, as well as everything that the individual must do or avoid doing, even *in extremis*, in order to acquire – sooner or later, and often much later – eternal bliss.

Upon reaching the Mountain's last step, Dante is crowned by Virgil, exemplar of the cardinal virtues. This opens the way to the final pre-Paradisiacal rites that the pilgrim will undertake, having arrived, still living, 'midway on *his* path in life': Beatrice, radiant and theological, will shortly lead him through these rites, in the true Earthly Paradise.

Dante spends six hours getting from the last step of the Mountain to the centre of the Earthly Paradise, which is slightly higher (and closer to God). This is the site, as we have proposed, of the clearing in front of the Tree of Life, which symbolically suggests the subsequent assumption of Dante and Beatrice to the Celestial Heavens. These six hours entail a succession of extreme emotional experiences and exquisite tastes of bliss, but certainly do not require any particular physical effort: in fact, the process is perfected during the ascent from Heaven to Heaven all the way to the Empyrean, gradually eliminating the slightest effort involved in flight or locomotion. Everything, beginning with

¹ This text has been translated by Emma Mandley.

the passage of time, will take place without the slightest uncertainty, tension or anxiety; everything will be perfect and transhumanising (Fig. 1).

‘Let your eyes look straight ahead / fix your gaze directly before you. / Give careful thought to the paths for your feet / and be steadfast in all your ways. / Do not turn to the right or the left, / keep your foot from evil.’ (Proverbs 4: 25–27). In the *Inferno* Dante (mostly) keeps to the left and descends to the pit radially; in the *Purgatorio* he (always) keeps to the right and climbs more or less vertically; only in the Heavens of Paradise does he rise from one heaven to the next with no effort at all, *in a straight line, axially*: it is the Heavens themselves that transport him, each one as it turns, in a given time. The ascent of Dante and Beatrice is, in fact, a sort of *assumption*, aided by Dante’s closeness and growing attunement to Beatrice, who represents theological love.

In other words, in Hell, which – although underground – is in the northern hemisphere, Dante *descends clockwise towards Evil*, but when he descends *anticlockwise*, in other words keeping to the right, he moves forward in the opposite direction to the sun and to time: through subtraction, this reversal of time forms part of the calculation of the overall duration of his journey. In Purgatory Dante *climbs*, at first laboriously, *always in a clockwise direction* but in the better Hemisphere (as earlier described by Aristotle in many of his writings), *towards Good*, eventually with a lightness that feels like a ship sailing downstream. In Paradise *there is no longer any right or left*: he rises up into a luminous dimension which is increasingly splendid and suffused with love, until he reaches the domain of *Pure Light*. The *descent* into Hell begins at *six o’clock in the evening*; the *ascent* (or climb) of Mount Purgatory begins at *six o’clock in the morning*; the *assumption* into Paradise begins on the dot of *midday* from the centre of the Earthly Paradise, axially opposite the centre of the inhabited world (‘Jerusalem’ and ‘Golgotha’, its theological centre) which in turn is positioned in the hemisphere ‘that now is covered wholly with dry land / under the highest point at which there died / the one man sinless in his birth and life.’²

The second six hours of the sixth day (from midday to sunset) enable Dante and Beatrice to rise through the Ether from the Earthly Paradise regenerated by the Son’s death on the Cross to the Heaven of the Moon, then onwards to the Heavens of Mercury and Venus – in other words through the Heavens associated with those planets which were at that time thought to be touched by Earth’s cone-shaped shadow: according to this concept, the action of sinful terrestrial influences weakened as the distance from the planet at the centre of the universe grew greater, ceasing altogether only with the Sun (which at that point had been in Aries for some days). This is like saying that after the sixth day, the seventh will become ever closer to God (from the Heavens of planets untouched by the Earth’s shadow to the Firmament, and then from the Firmament to the Crystalline) until, outside time and space, it becomes fully assimilated with God in the pure light of the

² ‘*che la gran secca / coverchia, e sotto ’l cui colmo consunto / fu l’uom che nacque e visse senza pecca*’ (*Inf.* XXXIV 113–115). English translations in the text of all citations from the *Divine Comedy* are taken from the translation by Robin Kirkpatrick (London and New York: Penguin, 2012).

Empyrean.

The first stage of the journey, from the Earthly Paradise to the Heaven of Fixed Stars, runs from midday in the southern hemisphere (I 43–45) to midday over Jerusalem in the northern hemisphere (XXII 151–153), passing over the mouth of the Ganges at the half way point, when the Sun rises in Aries. In other words, this is Quadrant 4 of the sixth day of the ultramundane journey plus Quadrant 1 of the seventh day: 6 hours + 6 hours, a total of twelve hours.

In order to reconstruct the length of time spent by Dante and Beatrice in the individual planetary Heavens and the location in space where Dante imagined this to be happening, we must once again refer to the unit of measurement of a circle's arc of 22½ degrees (*'mezz'a terza'* or 90 minutes, *an hour and a half*), which we have already encountered in the second part of the journey through Hell, and – with delays and recoveries – in the first part of Purgatory proper. For Dante, who, as we have indicated, was here relying upon a division of time (and of the celestial horizon) that went back to the Etruscans, this segment was the key to the passing of time, the secret cipher of the celestial mechanisms closest to Earth. In fact, as already noted, it is clear that for him 22½ degrees corresponded to the angle of the Ecliptic as it appeared at the midpoint of the inhabited world.

The hours assigned to the ascent through the Ether separating the Earthly Paradise from the Heaven of the Moon, followed by the instantaneous movement between each of the next seven planets, enabled Dante to set the ascent to the Heaven of the Moon and the first three Heavens in Quadrant 4 of the sixth day, and the next four Heavens in Quadrant 1 of the seventh day. And this is exactly what he did.³

From the EARTHLY PARADISE to the Heaven of the MOON

Dante's assumption to the Heaven of the Moon, facilitated partly by the perfect harmony now established between himself and Beatrice, begins *at midday* in Quadrant 4, and concludes *at half past one* on the sixth day of the journey.

The speed of the ascent is sensational, but it does take place in time. Beatrice explains to Dante that this is because of the need to transcend earthly gravity through the decreasing resistance offered by the elements present in the sublunar Heaven – the last and lightest, air and fire (I 76–126).

³ In fact, Dante's attention to the movements in space and time made by himself and his guides is so meticulous that it leads me to think that it derives from the poet's need to adapt numerical structure and values to the perfection of the Creator, his prime interlocutor – a thought that is also implicit in M. Hardt's essay, *Die Zahl in der Divina Commedia* (Frankfurt: Atenäum 1973); available in Italian as *I numeri della Divina Commedia* (Rome: Salerno, 2014).

[CANTO I, part I] 12.00 to 13.30

But before this ascent begins, the third canticle opens with a plea addressed no longer just to the Muses, but to *God himself* in association with the Muses, that together they may help the author to remember and express in poetry the happy attainment of the objective: the unspeakable light of the Empyrean. (I 1–36).

This is followed by yet another description of the equinoctial event:

Rising, the beacon of the world will come
to mortal eyes through many estuaries,
but shines where four spheres join three cruciforms
with better impetus and better stars,
all in conjunction, and with its own mark,
more clearly seals and tempers earthly wax.
That surge of sun made morning there, dusk here,
and all that hemisphere was almost white
while, equally, this other part was dark,
when Beatrice turned, as I saw now,
towards her left and, turning, set her eyes –
no eagle so intent – towards the sun.⁴

The ‘many estuaries’ are the various points from which the Sun (‘the beacon of the world’) rises, day after day. Meanwhile, the estuary, or point, where the *meridian* circle cuts the three most important parallels – the Equator, the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn – forming *three crosses* (Fig. 2⁵) in the Spring Equinox, *that* particular point, occurring when the Sun enters the better star – in the zodiacal sign of Aries – is the one that makes the most positive mark on the world’s affairs, especially human affairs.

At just that moment, Beatrice, who is on the West-East directrix, turns to her left (we are still in the southern hemisphere) and observes that *the Sun is at exactly midday*, while in Jerusalem it is midnight. Not even an eagle would be able to hold its gaze so fixedly upon the diurnal star – this privilege is exclusively granted to the faithful *in heaven* (see also I 63) and will also, exceptionally, be granted to Dante: as he ascends, he will gradually become *transhumanised*, that is to say he is temporarily able to transcend the human condition (I 70–72).

A music he has never before heard and a light he has never seen prepare the pilgrim for the new dimension he has entered almost unawares, lifted vertiginously from the

⁴ ‘Surge ai mortali per diverse foci / la lucerna del mondo; ma 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 emisferio, e l'altra parte nera, / quando Beatrice in sul sinistro fianco / vidi rivolta a riguardar nel sole: / aquila sì non li s'affisse unquanco’ (I 37–48).

⁵ See G. Chiarini, ‘Quattro cerchi, tre Croci. Tempi e silenzi della Divina Commedia’, in *Lecture classensi* 41, Ravenna 2013, pp. 89–106.

Earthly Paradise through air and fire and propelled towards the Heaven of the Moon (I 115).⁶

In the Heaven of the MOON

[CANTI II – IV] **13.30 to 15.00**

[CANTO II] Travelling at a speed almost equal to the constant rotation of the Firmament and now without the friction of air and fire, at *half past one in the afternoon* Dante learns from Beatrice that they have reached the Heaven of the Moon ('this first star', II 30). This is now at last the moment to explain the mystery of the patches on the moon's surface (II 49–111). There follows a lesson on the behaviour of the various Heavens, from the Empyrean that encompasses everything all the way down to the Heaven of the Moon, describing how they differ and distribute their powers (characteristics: the planets; and individual faculties: the zodiac signs), distinctly in 'gyres' and as 'organs of the world' (II 118 and 121), just as the human soul, diffused through the human body ('the dust you are'), assigns different qualities and tasks to its various parts (II 133–135).

[CANTO III] At last it is time for the first inhabitants of the Heaven of the Moon to appear. These are the Blessed whose perfection was very slightly marred, in their lifetime, by 'vows they disavowed' (III 30): knowing not how to do so, they were unable to resist those who forced them to forsake their religious vows. This situation, typically experienced by women, is expressed in the person of Piccarda Donati, who entered a convent of the Poor Clares but was abducted from it by her brother Corso and forced to marry (III 103). Piccarda also tells of Constance, daughter of Roger II, who was likewise snatched away from her nun's life by Gualtieri, Archbishop of Palermo, and given in marriage to Henry VI of Swabia (III 109). Piccarda concludes by singing an 'Ave Maria', disappearing as she does so (III 121).

[CANTO IV] The following Canto is devoted to clarifications: Beatrice explains to Dante that the souls appearing to him in the various Heavens are not real (as Plato would

⁶ The astronomical descriptions in the *Commedia* were only systematically addressed in the first half of the nineteenth century, thanks to the pioneering studies of Padre Marco Giovanni Ponta (*Orologio dantesco e tavola cosmografica*, Città di Castello: Stabilimento Lapi, 1892; the most recent reprint is available from Delhi: Facsimile Publisher, 2020). The most significant milestones in the research initiated by Ponta may in essence be listed as: G. Agnelli, *Topo-cronografia. Viaggio dantesco* (Milan: Hoepli 1891); G. Buti – R. Bertagni, *Commento astronomico della Divina Commedia* (Florence: Sandron, 1966); I. Capasso, *L'Astronomia nella Divina Commedia* (Pisa: Domus Galileiana, 1967 – see also I. Capasso and G. Tabarroni, 'Astronomia', in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, 1970); M. Negri, *L'orologio di Dante. Note per un atlante cronografico della D.C* (Milan: Archipelago, 2015). Among the publications that followed the seven hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth (1265–1965) there are analyses and proposals that are on the whole more than adequate to give a precise idea of the times indicated by the various astronomical descriptions in the *Commedia*: what is sometimes lacking, however, is an understanding of the direction in which Dante the protagonist is descending or ascending – an aporia that particularly affects commentaries to the *Inferno* (see TEWJ I).

have it), but metaphors: he is allowed to see them individually so that he (with a human being's limitations) can understand the different levels of fervour and intensity that govern their faith and spirituality, and therefore their blessedness. In reality, these souls all reside with the other blessed spirits in the Empyrean (*primo giro*, 'the highest gyre', IV 34). She goes on to explain (IV 64–90) the difference between absolute will and relative will: in the case of Piccarda and Constance, their weakness was to submit to violence without reacting ('Free will, unless it wills, cannot be quenched'⁷). Finally, Beatrice adds that both women had been chaste as nuns and Piccarda remained a virgin even after her marriage, while Constance chastely became mother to none other than Emperor Frederick II (IV 118–142). The scene that takes place in the Heaven of the Moon is a perfect example of an exposition of the MOON-WOMAN planetary theme, which features in the planetary sequences of classical poems.⁸

In the Heaven of MERCURY

[CANTI V – VII] 15.00 to 16.30

[CANTO V] No longer subject to the powerful constraints imposed by terrestrial gravity and the elements of *air* and *fire*, Dante is raised up here in an instant, almost imperceptibly (V 93). According to the Dantean *clock* it is now '*a nona*' (nones, or *three o'clock in the afternoon*). The clock's hand has reached the middle of Quadrant 4 on the sixth day: 45 circular degrees which, as previously noted, have a connection to the spatial and cultural position of Rome, between and equidistant from Jerusalem in the east and the Pillars of Hercules in the west – representing its historical function as a 'bridge' between Paganism and Christianity. Since the Heaven of Mercury contains those souls who 'still sought that fame and honour should live after them'⁹ (VI 113 and ff.), it is not surprising that there are 'Roman' souls here.

[CANTO VI] Such 'mercurial' ambition is manifested in the emperor Justinian's case both in his very valuable initiative to collect and codify *the whole body of Roman laws* and, even earlier, in his readiness to change, demonstrated *by his renunciation of the Eutychian heresy for 'the pure faith' of the Church of Rome* (VI 17). Justinian here lays out the history of Rome and its empire in a Ghibelline key, listing its conquests and virtues, including Titus' punishment of the Jews who killed Christ during the reign of Tiberius (the 'third emperor'

⁷ *'volontà, se non vuol, non s'ammorza'* (IV 76).

⁸ This relates in particular to the *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, and *Metamorphoses* (G. Chiarini, *I cieli del mito. Letteratura e cosmo da Omero a Ovidio*, Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2005) and is proof of Dante's extraordinary depth as a reader of the *Aeneid*, his capacity to recognize in it criteria that are quite different from those of medieval rhetorics (the 'seven liberal arts') and to make reference to it: indeed, as we will now see, the characterization of the Blessed whom Dante meets in the individual planetary Heavens is 'classical' and Virgilian, certainly not a reflection of the scholarly approach of his own time.

⁹ *'spiriti attivi perché onore e fama li succeda'* (VI 114).

– ‘*terzo Cesare*’, VI 86), and Charlemagne’s victory over the troublesome Lombards in defence of Pope Adrian (VI 94).

[CANTO VII] Justinian concludes his account by singing the hymn to God ‘*Osanna, sanctus Deus sabaòth, / superillustrans claritate tua / felices ignes horum malacòth!*’, followed by this Heaven’s souls, as they recede and vanish.

In the rest of this Canto, Beatrice explains to Dante how the victorious campaigns against the Jews and the Lombards are wholly consistent with the theme of ‘triumph in battle through skill and courage’, reflecting classical planetary symbolism relating to MERCURY.

In the Heaven of VENUS

[CANTI VIII – IX] **16.30 to 18.00**

[CANTO VIII] It is about 16.30 when Dante is raised up into the Heaven to whose Angels he had dedicated the *Convivio*’s first canzone (Book II, beginning: ‘O you whose intellection moves Sphere Three’, reiterated here in VIII 37).¹⁰ Here we find, predictably, the loving spirits: the souls of those who loved much in the other life. Interestingly, however, the poet does not shy away from underlining the planet’s fundamentally ‘dual’ nature (in the Virgilian sense): the ‘folk of old’ took the name from the ‘lovely Cyprian’, in other words from Venus (VIII 2), and ‘gave it to the star / whose love-looks at the sun touch nape [like the *Evening Star*, Hesperus] then brow [like the *Morning Star*, Lucifer]’¹¹ (VIII 12 ff.). In keeping with this emphasis, the couples express its meaning in a very wide variety of ways: husband and wife Charles Martel (VIII 32) and Clemence of Habsburg (IX 1) are followed by Cunizza da Romano (IX 25) who describes her brother Ezzelino III da Romano, as ‘a burning brand’(IX 29); Cunizza had three husbands, the first of whom was Sordello, and many lovers, but gave loving care and merciful support to her brother’s victims – Dante had already seen Ezzelino steeped in blood in the Seventh Circle of Hell (*Inf.* XII 109 and ff.). Then we meet Folco of Marseilles (IX 94), who had been in love with Adelais, wife of his patron Barral du Baux, and became a monk on her death; and finally, singled out by Folco himself, Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho (IX 116), who ‘looked with favour on that proud assault / of Joshua as victor in the Holy Land’¹² (by hiding the Hebrew scouts in her house, she aided their first victory, IX 124 ff.). These variations on ‘duality’ and the very meaning of love align well with the ancient symbolism of the planet VENUS.

¹⁰ ‘*Voi che ’ntendendo il terzo ciel movete.*’

¹¹ ‘*pigliavano il vocabol de la stella / che ’l sol vagheggia or da coppa or da ciglio*’ (VIII 11 and 12).

¹² ‘*favorò la prima gloria / di Iosue in su la Terra Santa*’ (IX 124 and 125).

In the Heaven of the SUN

[CANTI X – XIV, part 1] 06.00 to 07.30

[CANTO X] Dante (with Beatrice) is raised up into the Heaven of the Sun at the moment it passes from one hemisphere to the other, at about the *hour of prime* in Jerusalem (*six o'clock in the morning*, Quadrant 1). This is just as the planet is entering Aries, as it has done in the past several days: precisely because we are now a few days from the Equinox, Beatrice can tell Dante *the exact point at which the 'theological' Ecliptic has crossed with the 'theological' Equator*, confirming not only the importance of the whole of the first equinoctial week (as extolled at the beginning of *Paradiso*, with the four circles forming three crosses), but also, as has been noted, *the benefits brought about by that particular angle*, which over the course of the year generates the providential appearance of the *four seasons* (X 13–21).

In those days it was thought that the Sun, the central star in the planetary order, was responsible for *harmonizing the behaviour of the other six* 'wandering stars'. The text keeps emphasizing this, starting with the frequency with which its name is mentioned: both literally ('in the sun where I now came to be'; 'for no eye ever went beyond the sun'; 'beyond which [the Atlantic waves], when the time comes round, the sun [...] hides from men'; and figuratively: 'Give thanks to Him [God], the sun of all the angels'; 'another sun [St Francis] was born to light the world';¹³ and even as a toponym, referencing the 'Porta Sole' (the Sun Gate) in Perugia (XI 47).

In this Heaven, in honour of the star's daily discoid appearance and its circular movements, Dante and Beatrice are surrounded by a first 'crown' of the Blessed ('Bright beyond seeing, I saw, now, many flares / make us their centre and themselves our crown'¹⁴), suggesting the image of the Moon and the luminous halo that surrounds it on certain damp nights (X 67–69). These 'burning suns' dance in a circle around Dante three times, singing, then come to a standstill like ballerinas waiting for the music to start again. St Thomas Aquinas introduces himself to Dante, along with the other eleven figures in the crown, who whirl around as the saint points them out, ending back at their starting point: Albertus Magnus, Gratian (the teacher of canon law in Bologna), Peter Lombard, Dionysius the Areopagite, Orosius, Boethius, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, and Siger of Brabant, the Averroist who practised in Paris (X 83–138). At this point the holy dance troupe begins singing and dancing again, reminding Dante of a mechanical clock:

And now, like clocks that call us at the hour
in which the Bride of God will leave her bed
to win the Bridegroom's love with morning song,
where, working, one part drives, the other draws –

¹³ 'dentro al sol dov'io entra'm?' (X 41) 'ché sopra 'l sol non fu occhio ch'andasse' (X 48); 'dietro a le quali lo sol talvolta ad ogne uom si asconde' (XII 48); 'Ringrazia il sol de li angel?' (X 53); 'nacque al mondo un sol?' (XI 50).

¹⁴ 'Io vidi più fulgor vivi e vincenti / far di noi centro e di sé far corona' (X 64).

its 'ting-ting' sounding with so sweet a note
that now the spirit, well and ready, swells –
 so in its glory I beheld that wheel
go moving round and answer, voice to voice,
tuned to a sweetness that cannot be known,
 except up there where joy in-evers all.¹⁵

In truth, it seems that the author has enhanced the image of the monastic wake-up call with the features of a real mechanical clock, perhaps the one on the bell tower of S. Eustorgio, which Dante would have been able to admire when he visited Milan in 1311.

[CANTO XI] In the next Canto, the Dominican St Thomas addresses Dante's perplexity in relation to some of the statements he had made in the previous Canto, then reminds him of the importance of the figures of St Dominic and St Francis, founders of the two mendicant orders, for the recent history of the Church. This spills into a long panegyric on St Francis (XI 43–117), followed by a denunciation of the degenerate Dominicans of the present, which helps to unravel Dante's first doubt.

[CANTO XII] At this point Dante is surrounded by a second crown of the Blessed, singing and dancing (XII 5): when added to the first crown, in a perfect and reciprocal harmony of movement and words, this calls to mind the iridescent luminosity of the rainbow's concentric circles (XII 1–9). The Franciscan St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio delivers a eulogy to St Dominic, followed by a denunciation of the degenerate Franciscans of the present day (XII 22–126). Finally, the remaining eleven souls of the second crown are introduced (including Joachim of Fiore 'endowed with all his gifts of prophecy'¹⁶ (XII 140 and ff.).

[CANTO XIII] At the conclusion of St Bonaventure's speech, the two crowns of 'suns' start moving again, singing and dancing in praise of the Trinity in perfect concentricity, but revolving in opposite directions (in imitation of the two fundamental movements of the starry sky, XIII 1–21). In the rest of the Canto, St Thomas explains that the superiority of Solomon's wisdom is limited to his role as a king and must not be confused with the potential superiority that God granted directly to Adam's wisdom at the moment of Creation, nor with Christ's wisdom, which emanates directly from the Father and is consubstantial with him. The singing and dancing of the two crowns at the beginning of the Canto are preparation for this broad theological disquisition on the theme (which also has a political aspect) of knowing how to make distinctions and weigh up judgements, a theme that is implicit in the whole poem, but whose real substance is presented in the *Paradiso* through continual recourse to song, dance, music and even, as

¹⁵ *'Indi, come orologio che ne chiami / ne l'ora che la sposa di Dio surge / a mattinar lo sposo perché l'ami, / che l'una parte e l'altra tira e urge, / tin tin sonando con sì dolce nota, / che l'ben disposto spirito d'amor turge; / così vid'io la gloriosa rota / muoversi e render voce a voce in temprà / e in dolcezza ch'esser non po' nota / se non colà dove gioir s'insempra'* (X 139–148).

¹⁶ *'di spirito profetico dotato'* (XII 141).

here, the image of the mechanical clock – an example of absolute rhythmical perfection, generating a constant ‘equinoctial’ spiritual condition. And indeed this is confirmed by its reappearance in the following Canto.

[CANTO XIV, part I] Beatrice interjects, taking the theme to its highest level, by inviting the souls of the twenty-four ‘suns’ to tell Dante whether the light that nourishes their present beatitude, making it bloom, will remain the same as it is now for all eternity, never growing weaker or palling, even after the resurrection of the flesh has given them shape and made them visible again. It is obviously a rhetorical question, and the Blessed in their two celestial crowns respond by dancing and singing with still more verve:

Compare: as dancers – wheeling, drawn and pressed
by keener happiness at certain points –
exult in voice, their gestures quickening,
so now, to hear her prompt, devoted prayer,
the holy circles showed new joy, in turns
of flashing speed and notes to wonder at.¹⁷

The perfect congruence of form and content in these musical expressions is well conveyed by the return to and reinforcement of the theme of the Trinity:

The one and two and three who always lives
and always reigns in three and two and one,
uncircumscribed and circumscribing all,
had, three times now, been lauded in the songs
of every spirit there, the melody
a condign prize, however great the worth.¹⁸

The souls’ response is predictable, but equally exultant: this light is eternal and if anything destined to become stronger. And now at last, in a rarefied atmosphere, a third crown of suns appears (XIV 67 and ff.): ‘There, too, it seemed to me that newer things / began to rise to view and form a ring / beyond the circumscription of those two.’ (XIV 73 and ff.); once again, this is without doubt a homage to the figure of the one and triune God. And once again it describes an insuperable celestial perfection.

¹⁷ ‘Come, da più letizia pinti e tratti, / a la fiata quei che vanno a rota / levàn la voce e rallegrano li atti, / così, a l’orazion pronta e divota, / li santi cerchi mostrar nova gioia / nel torneare e ne la mira nota’ (XIV 20–24).

¹⁸ ‘Quell’uno e due e tre che sempre vive / e regna sempre in tre e ’n due e ’n uno, / non circumscriitto, e tutto circumscrive, / tre volte era cantato da ciascuno / di quelli spirti con tal melodia, / ch’ad ogni merito saria giusto muno’ (XIV 28–33).

In the Heaven of MARS

[CANTI XIV – XVII] 07.30 to 09.00

[CANTO XIV, part 2] Dante is raised up into the Heaven of MARS at around ‘*mezz’ora terza*’ (half past seven in the morning). He is soon describing its well-known features (it contains and carries the reddest planet of all: ‘Seeing the flares of laughter in that star, / which seemed now far more fiery than before / I knew full well that I’d been lifted higher’.¹⁹ Here there is a concentration of bustling lights: these are souls of the Blessed that are invisible to the human eye because they shine so brightly, in other words with such spiritual intensity. They form a Cross with arms of equal length (‘the honoured sign that quadrants (joined within a circle) form’,²⁰ XIV 101 and ff.). Weaving through them is a fine dust, in perpetual motion, and in the centre of the Cross ‘blazed out Christ’ (‘*lampeggiava Cristo*’, XIV 104). In fact, as we will discover further on (in Canto XVIII), the (‘Greek’) Cross comprises the Soldiers of Christ. The main theme of the Heaven of Mars is *the militia of Christ* himself, the risen Christ, *triumphant over death and evil*.

The Canto ends with a melody rising up from the Cross: a gentle, bewitching melody, whose words cannot be understood:

As harp or viol – in tempered harmony,
their many strings stretched tight – still ring and sing,
even to those who do not catch the tune,
so, though I did not understand their hymn,
an air now gathered that enraptured me
from lights appearing there throughout the cross.
I realized full well it sang high praise
for, as one who does not understand
yet hears, there came to me, ‘Rise up!’ and ‘Win!’²¹

A perfect example of celestial sacred music, which earthly music tries its best to emulate.

[CANTO XV] The account soon becomes more personal. A higher will brings the song to an end and Dante is joined by his ancestor Cacciaguida, who breaks away from the Cross of the Blessed to speak to him. And so the focus turns to Dante’s city, *Florence, which the god Mars had protected in the Roman era*: in Dante’s day, there was still a damaged statue of the god at the top of the Ponte Vecchio, supposedly fished out of the Arno and placed there as a talisman of the city (XVI 145). The map of a virtuous Florence, in those ancient times populated with a fifth as many men fit to bear arms as in Dante’s day, is evoked by

¹⁹ ‘*Ben m’accors’io ch’io era più levato, / per l’affocato riso della stella, / che mi pareva più roggio dell’usato*’ (XIV 85–87).

²⁰ ‘*il venerabil segno / che fa giunture di quadranti in tondo*’ (XIV 101 and 102).

²¹ ‘*E come giga e arpa, in tempra tesa / di molte corde, fa dolce tintinnio / a tal da cui la nota non è intesa, / così da’ lumi che li m’apparinno / s’accogliea per la croce una melode / che mi rapiva, senza intender l’inno. / Ben m’accors’io ch’elli era d’alta lode, / però ch’ a me venia “Resurgi” e “Vinci”*’ (XIV 118–124).

reference to the structure of Roman settlements: the old city's *Cardo* ran 'between the Baptistery and Mars' ('*tra Marte e il Batista*', XVI 47), in other words between the Ponte Vecchio and the Baptistery of St John; it was intersected by the *Decumanus*, which ran from the neighbourhood of Porta a Prato, across Via degli Speciali and Via del Corso (site of the old 'Corsa dei Barberi', an annual horse race which finished in Piazza Beccaria). The *Cardo* and the *Decumanus* together created a perfect Greek Cross with arms at right angles (XVI 40–48): just like the Cross of the Blessed described earlier (XIV 101 and ff.).

Cacciaguida tells Dante what 'Florence, within the ancient ring'²² was like: a peaceful city, modest, God-fearing, disapproving of luxury, hard-working – the opposite of the city as it is now, surpassing Rome in the inventive beauty of its buildings: it is inevitable that just as it has reached the heights of splendour, so it will reach the depths of moral decadence (XV 111).

[CANTO XVI] There follows an exchange of information between Dante and his ancestor, concerning matters pertinent to their family. Cacciaguida goes on to give a detailed description of the city's passage from its virtuous past to its current decadence, caused by family feuds, the domestic rivalry between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, by uprisings and bloodbaths.

[CANTO XVII] In this Canto, we reach Dante's era; Cacciaguida reveals to Dante that there are some who are plotting to banish him from the city, despite his innocence, and with support from Boniface VIII will bring about his exile: 'And you will taste the saltiness of bread / when offered by another's hand – as, too, / how hard it is to climb a stranger's stair'.²³ He goes on to describe the events that will follow.

[CANTO XVIII, part I] In this first part of Canto XVIII, the last to be dedicated to the Heaven of Mars, Cacciaguida points out in the Cross the souls of some of those who have fought for the faith: Charlemagne, Roland, William of Orange, Godfrey of Boulogne, Robert Guiscard and their Jewish precursors Joshua and Judas Maccabeus, the first a leader and the second a liberator of the people of Israel (XVIII 22–51).

This all fits perfectly with the ancient symbolic characterization of the planet MARS: the *extreme risk* (possibly to life) being run at that time *by both Florence and Dante himself*.

In the Heaven of JUPITER

[CANTI XVIII, part 2 – XX] **09.00 to 10.30**

[CANTO XVIII, part 2] The very ancient symbology of Jupiter ('the temperate star'

²² *Fiorenza dentro da la cerchio antica*' (XV 97).

²³ '*Tu proverai sì come sa di sale / lo pane altrui, e com'è duro calle / lo scendere e salir per l'altrui scale*' (XVII 58–60).

– ‘*temprata stella*’, XVIII 68), relating to both god and planet, is *royalty and justice*. Dante rises up to the sixth Heaven at about *the hour of terce* (*‘ora terza’ – nine o’clock in the morning*) and witnesses the spectacular scene of radiant souls that firstly compose in the air, as they fly, the letters of the sentence ‘DILIGITE IUSTITIAM QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM (XVIII 91–93). They then assume the form of an eagle’s head and neck: this is Jupiter’s Eagle as well as the Imperial Eagle (XVIII 107 ff.). The Canto ends with a heated tirade by Dante against those who write against – or downplay by keeping silent – supreme figures of justice like St Peter and St Paul, who ‘died to serve the vine’, that is to say the Church, to which such writers ‘lay waste’, never imagining that the two leaders of Christianity ‘live still’ (XVIII 131 and ff.).

[CANTO XIX] At the beginning of this Canto, the Eagle shines brightly, pulsing with infinite numbers of rubies which form the just and pious Eagle of Rome (XIX 13), preparing the soil in which the Church of Christ will take root and spread: this is Rome as the ‘bridge’ between the pagan world and Christianity. Once again, having arrived at the middle of the Quadrant (in this case at 45° of Q1), the narrative turns to Rome and its historical vocation. This Eagle, which essentially represents divine justice, is endowed with a single unanimous voice with which it expresses the collective will, inspired by God himself, to re-establish itself on Earth, overcoming the unworthy powers that have variously neglected, violated and wronged it (XIX 103–148).

[CANTO XX] In the following Canto, the Eagle is silent, giving way to the songs of the individual lights of the Blessed, beginning with the five just kings who form the Eagle’s eye: King David; Trajan; Hezekiah, king of Judah; Emperor Constantine; William II of Hauteville, King of Sicily and Apulia; as well as Riphaeus the Trojan (XX 37–72). This is where Dante learns that Trajan and Riphaeus had both died as Christians (XX 94–129).

The planet *JUPITER* was *symbol and guardian of Justice in the pagan world*; the themes are here harmoniously merged and reinforced.

In the Heaven of SATURN

[CANTI XXI – XXII] **10.30 to 12.00**

[CANTO XXI] ‘We’re lifted to the seventh splendour now’, says Beatrice.²⁴ Saturn is the last star in the planetary sequence: it is now ‘*mezz’a sesta*’ (*half past ten in the morning*). The appearance of a ladder (‘I saw, as gold... a ladder’²⁵) immediately confirms that the first part of the ascent through Paradise is coming to an end and the second part is being prepared (XX1 28 and ff.): the ladder’s top is lost to sight, invisible among the splendours of the Firmament *and the last two Heavens* (the Crystalline and the Empyrean) in which, Beatrice

²⁴ ‘*Noi sem levati al settimo splendore*’ (XXI 13).

²⁵ ‘*di color d’oro...vid’io uno scaleo*’ (XXI 29).

explains, lies ultimate salvation (*'l'ultima salute'*, XXII 124).

The invisibility of the ladder's summit is a metaphor – as is made clear by St Peter Damian's explanation to Dante – for the fact that the human mind cannot, with its powers alone, understand the profound mystery of predestination, or indeed a whole range of other truths and dogmas.

Dante remembers that while they are in this planet's heaven, Saturn (a cold star) is in the constellation of Leo (a hot zodiac sign). This, we are given to understand, causes the two properties to coincide, reflecting the dual nature of the contemplative souls gathered here (XXI 1–18).

[CANTO XXII, part I] The sequence of contemplative souls distributed along the dazzling gold ladder (whose derivation is biblical, alluding to the superiority of the contemplative life over the active life) includes the aforementioned Camaldolese hermit Peter Damian, first of Fonte Avellana (not far from Gubbio), then of Nostra Donna sul Lido Adriatico (Santa Maria in Porto, near Ravenna), with whom a long dialogue takes place, culminating in Damian's final condemnation of clerical corruption. Others include St Benedict of Nursia (Norcia), also a hermit and founder of his Order (XXII 40); Maccarius, a hermit from Egypt's Theban region; and Romoaldus, a member of Ravenna's Onesti family, who was initially a Benedictine before founding the hermitage in Camaldoli (XXII 49).

The contemplative life of the hermit saints is seen as a necessary balance to the iniquities of the Church, especially the papacy, and represents the fitting, utterly spiritual culmination of the *first seven* Heavens.

CANTI XXII, part II – XXVII, part I] **12.00 to 18.00.**

[CANTO XXII, part II] Having climbed the ladder to the Eighth Heaven, Dante can, at Beatrice's invitation, turn around and look back down at the distance he has travelled: 'I turned about to look once more through all / the seven spheres and, seeing there the globe, / I smiled to find how small and cheap it seemed'.²⁶ This allusion to the *Somnium Scipionis* by Cicero (*Republic* VI 17) introduces the last *terzine* of Canto XXII, the privileged and simultaneous view of the whole complex planetary system, revealing the respective sizes of the individual planets, their speed and distance.

Once this recapitulative vision is complete, Dante turns to Beatrice, ready to begin the second and more sublime phase of the ascent: 'My eyes I then turned back to her fine

²⁶ *'Col viso ritornai per tutte quante / le sette spere, e vidi questo globo / tal, ch'io sorrisi del suo vil sembiante'* (XXII 133–135).

eyes'.²⁷

In the Heaven of the FIXED STARS

[CANTI XXIII – XXVII] 12.00 to 18.00

[CANTO XXIII] Dante and Beatrice rise up in the Gemini zodiac sign, which is also Dante's birth sign (XXII 110 and ff.), to the Firmament above Jerusalem, *at midday* ('that stretch of sky / where, under noon, the sun displays least speed',²⁸ (XXIII 11 and ff.; see *Purg.* XXXIII 103–105) *entering Quadrant 2 (Q2) of the seventh day. Their speed continues to increase*, since the two pilgrims remain in that sign until sunset, completing the entire arc of 90° in six hours (to be understood in relation to the signs of the zodiac: 2 hours x 3, a tribute to the Trinity), but at a distance from the Earth that is still greater than that of the planets. The Firmament represents the *second* Heaven (also visible to the human eye) which follows the planetary Heaven and precedes the invisible 'third Heaven' of St Paul (2 *Corinthians* 12: 1–5), which Dante represents as the Crystalline and the Empyrean (as seems to be suggested by the Christ on the ceiling of the Florence Baptistery).

Everything is illuminated with a brighter light: it is Christ with his resurrected, transfigured body announcing the arrival of the troops of *his* triumph (XXIII 19 and ff.). Beatrice's smile shines more radiantly: the pair have reached a position from which they can admire Mary, in whom 'the Word of God became our flesh'²⁹ and the Saints – the Mystic Rose. A celestial music and a sapphire-coloured sky complete the scene, while an angelic light encircles the Mother of God:

The sweetest melody that sounds on earth,
Or that which most attracts the soul to it,
Would seem like cloud ripped wide by thunder claps
When heard beside the sounding of that lyre
Whose notes now crowned the lovely sapphire-stone,
Through whom the skies en-sapphire clearer still.³⁰

This is the Archangel Gabriel, the 'angel-love' of the Annunciation. When he has completed his profession of faith in Mary (XXIII 103–108), the entire luminous retinue sings her praises as she follows Christ and is followed in turn by the angelic escort, high into the heavens.

Christ and Mary disappear towards the Empyrean, but St Peter and the Blessed

²⁷ *'Pocchia rivolsi li occhi alli occhi belli'* (XXII 154).

²⁸ *'la plaga / sotto la quale il sol mostra men fretta'* (XXIII 11 and 12).

²⁹ *'in che 'l verbo divino / carne si fece'* (XXIII 73).

³⁰ *'Qualunque melodia più dolce suona / qua giù e più a sé l'anima tira, / parrebbe nube che squarciata tona, / comparata al sonar di quella lira / onde si coronava il bel zaffiro / del quale il ciel più chiaro s'inzaffira'* (XXIII 97–102).

remain, softly chanting a ‘Salve Regina’ (XXIII 128).

[CANTO XXIV] At Beatrice’s request, in this Canto and the two following, St Peter examines Dante closely about the Catholic faith. The Blessed joyfully respond to the proposal by engaging, now faster, now slower, in various types of round dance – the perfect dance, inspired by the orbits of the celestial bodies:

Thus Beatrice. And those happy souls
became like spheres revolving round fixed points,
flaming in spinning turns as comets do.
The well-tuned wheels of gold chronometers
will seem (to those who check) to whirl in gear,
the first cog steady and the last in flight
so, too, with all their measures swirling diff-
erently, they, dancing, let me estimate
the riches – slow or rapid – each possessed.³¹

The reference is to the system of toothed wheels in a mechanical clock (ranging from the smallest to the largest, from the slowest to the fastest), evoking the full glory and beatitude of these simultaneous songs of the Blessed.

Now St Peter questions Dante about FAITH, the first theological virtue. The pilgrim’s answers confirm his strong and perfect faith (‘Faith is substantial to the things we hope’,³²) concluding with a solemn statement (XXIV 130 ff.). St Peter turns three times around Dante, singing his approval (XXIV 151 and ff.).

[CANTO XXV] Dante thinks about the Baptistery of St John in Florence, briefly cherishing the idea that he might one day be able to return there as an elderly man to be crowned poet laureate as the author of the *Commedia* (XXV 1–12). But after St Peter, a second celestial flame now appears: the soul of the Apostle James, worshipped and invoked in his Sanctuary at Compostela in Galicia (XXV 13). After St James and St Peter have joyfully greeted each other, they both appear radiantly before Dante, and the newcomer questions him on the theme of HOPE (XXV 52–63). Dante’s response displays his theological sources and St James, blazing with happiness, asks the believer what Hope promises him. Dante’s answer is eternal life: ‘Hope is sure expectation [...] / of glory that will come’ (XXV 67 and ff.)³³ From above, the words of Psalm 9:11 can be heard (‘Let those have hope in you’ – ‘*Sperent in te*’) and the luminous choirs of the Blessed respond in dance.

But now there arrives a third great soul: St John the Evangelist, introduced by

³¹ ‘Così Beatrice; e quelle anime liete / si fero spere sovra fissi poli / fiammando, volte, a guisa di comete. / E come cerchi in temprà d’oriuoli / si giran sì, che ’l primo a chi pon mente / quieto pare, e l’ultimo che voli; / così quelle carole, differente - / mente danzando, de la sua ricchezza / mi facieno stimar, veloci e lente’ (XXIV 10–18).

³² ‘fede è sustanza di cose sperate’ (XXIV 64).

³³ ‘spene [...] è uno attender certo / de la gloria futura’ (XXV 67 and 68).

Beatrice as 'the one who lay upon the breast / of Christ, our Pelican' during the Last Supper,³⁴ and the one to whom the Son of God entrusted, from the Cross, the supreme office of *second son of Mary* (XXV 112–114).

The Saint dispels for Dante the widespread false belief that he had risen to heaven with his own earthly body: 'My body lies as earth in earth'.³⁵ Only Jesus and Mary have enjoyed this privilege and Dante must tell the world the truth (XXV 124–129).

[CANTO XXVI] The doctrinal debate continues in the next Canto, as St John questions Dante about CHARITY, the third theological virtue. Dante begins by saying: 'In every text that Love reads out to me – / voiced low or strong – the Alpha and the Omega is / the Good that brings content to all this court'.³⁶ In other words, every form of love, celestial or earthly, great or small, derives from God, the fount of all good. When he comes to the sacrifice of the Cross, Dante acknowledges the depth of his gratitude to the celestial powers that rescued him from the dark wood:

My being, and the being of the world,
the death that He sustained so I might live,
the hope that all, with me, confess in faith,
the living knowledge I have spoken of –
all drew me from the waves of wrongful love
and set me on the shores of righteousness.³⁷

Beatrice joins with the chorus of the Blessed in softly singing 'Holy, holy, holy' (*Santo, santo, santo*, XXVI 69). Then, with her blazing eyes, she banishes every last trace of the veil over Dante's eyes, enabling him to interrogate the spirit of Adam, which clears up some of his questions: the Adamic language became extinct *before* the confusion of Babel; as for the time spent by Adam in Eden, he was *in a state of purity from the hour of prime to the hour of sext, in a state of sin for the hour that followed the sin of the forbidden fruit* (XXVI 139–142): at midday on the sixth day of Creation, after six hours in Eden, the sin of disobedience was committed; at midday Christ redeemed it by dying on the Cross in Jerusalem; a few hours earlier Dante also spent six sinless hours in Eden, from the hour of prime to the hour of sext. The author's mirror-image coincidences (constructed with total precision) deliberately underline his own part in the story of the Redemption.

[CANTO XXVII] Their time in the starry Heaven is almost over. A wonderful 'Gloria' is sung by all the Blessed who have descended from the Empyrean with Christ and the Virgin to meet Dante (bringing to mind all the prophets that Muhammad found waiting

³⁴ *'colui che giacque sopra 'l petto / del nostro pellicano'* (XXV 112–113).

³⁵ *'In terra è terra il mio corpo'* (XXV 124).

³⁶ *'Lo ben che fa contenta questa corte, / Alfa e O[mega] è di quanta scrittura / mi legge Amore o lievemente o forte'* (XXVI 16–18).

³⁷ *'Ché l'essere del mondo e l'esser mio, / la morte ch'el sostenne perch'io viva, / e quel che spera ogne fedel com'io, / con la predetta conoscenza viva, / tratto m'hanno del mar de l'amor torto, / e del diritto m'han posto alla riva'* (XXVI 58–63).

to welcome him at the Dome of the Rock in the *Book of Muhammad's Ladder*).³⁸ Then, changing from white to red in indignation, St Peter's soul speaks again, advocating condemnation without appeal for the quarrelsome and corrupt papacy and the Church of Rome, 'a shit hole reeking of blood and pus',³⁹ no longer the seat of the Son of God but a place for Lucifer to take his revenge (XXVII 22–27).

There follows a harsh indictment of those who have replaced the greatness of the first popes – like Peter himself, martyrs for their faith – with corruption and hunger for wealth. But then, echoing the prophecy of the imminent defeat of the Whore and the Giant in the Earthly Paradise (*Purg.* XXXIII 34–45), St Peter makes a second prophecy, in truth vaguer and less specific, which foresees imperial powers intervening to put an end to the scandal (XXVII 61–66).

The Blessed rise up and disappear beyond the Firmament like snow falling upwards. Beatrice invites Dante to look down: *the Sun is about to set, Cadiz and the Pillars of Hercules can be seen in the distance*, with the route of the 'mad sea jaunt' (*folle varco*) that was Ulysses' last, desperate adventure. Meanwhile, *in Jerusalem, since Dante is in the sign of Gemini, the Sun, which is in Aries, has set more than two hours earlier* (XXVII 78–87): we are therefore in the last two Quadrants (3 and 4), where Dante, transported from the Crystalline in an increasingly turbulent vortex still further away from Earth, will complete the seventh day of his journey. And this is how it works: Dante turns to look at Beatrice, who uses the power of her own resplendent gaze [*CANTI XXVIII nido di Leda?*, XXVII 98) and transports him to the *Primum Mobile*, explaining that this Heaven's function is to drive the circular motion of all the others, in accordance with the will of God, whose seat is the final and motionless Heaven that encircles all the others: the Empyrean (XXVII 106 ff.).

The astronomical description serves to communicate the idea that Dante is now higher and in a still faster moving Heaven. The Canto concludes with a prophecy made by Beatrice, even more sweeping than its predecessor: shortly before the month of January ceases to be in winter – that is to say after accumulating the daily fraction (*'la centesima'*, the hundredth part) not reckoned in the calculation of the calendar at that time, and therefore some way off – a cataclysm will be unleashed upon the Earth from the highest Heavens, so violent that humanity will be forced to mend its ways (XXVII 142–148): might this be a second universal Flood?

³⁸ Reginald Hyatte, trans., *The Prophet of Islam in Old French: The Romance of Muhammad (1258) and The Book of Muhammad's Ladder (1264)* (Leiden: Brill, 1997). Also available in Italian as *Il Libro della Scala di Maometto*, trans. R. Rossi Testa, notes and afterword by C. Saccone (Milan: SE, 1997), ch. IV 10.

³⁹ *'cloaca / del sangue e della puzza'* (XXVII 25–26).

In the CRYSTALLINE

[CANTI XXVIII–XXIX]

[CANTO XXVIII] *It is six o'clock in the evening in the northern Hemisphere* and we are ever closer to God. Two entire Canti are dedicated to the angelic hosts of the Crystalline: creatures that mediate between eternity and history in the cosmic order of the Heavens' influences, but are at the same time close to human beings, like them endowed with intellect and a capacity to love. Canto XXVIII is devoted to the *nine choirs singing 'Hosanna'* around God, to their hierarchies and to their names.

There then appears a point of infinite brilliance, around which the nine angelic orders turn at the various speeds of the nine Heavens, but in reverse order: in other words getting slower as they get further away from the luminous central point (XXVIII 22–39). Dante is not able to make out the reason for this inversion, but Beatrice explains to him that their speed decreases because the Virtue (or Good) in each angelic order diminishes with each of the circles they occupy (XXVIII 61 ff.). Those closest to the centre – which represents God – are those most swiftly and ardently drawn to Him; they are, in order: Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones, followed by Dominations, Virtues and Powers. The three last circles contain Principalities, Archangels and Angels (XXVIII 97–126). This is the order proposed by Dionysius the Areopagite – Gregory the Great, who had proposed a different order, laughed at himself as soon as he opened his eyes in the Crystalline (XXVIII 136).

[CANTO XXIX] This supremely theological Canto describes the creation of the Angels, the free will granted to them, and the damnation of Lucifer and his followers.

Beatrice tells Dante about the events that took place at the beginning of the Cosmos: the creation of the Angels and their hierarchies as a sign of a divine love that did not want to remain closed in on itself; the invention of the Primum Mobile, all to be understood as form given to brute matter (XXIX 22); and finally Lucifer's terrible rebellion (XXIX 49–57). Here Beatrice gives way to an indignant digression concerning philosophers and preachers whose ambition leads them to misrepresent the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, so that the ignorant flocks are 'pastured full of wind' (*'pasciute di vento'*, XXIX 106 and ff.). Beatrice also touches on the scandalous question of false indulgences (XXIX 118–126), before returning to the theme of the Angels: their infinite, incalculable number and the light they ceaselessly absorb, which makes them, albeit to varying extents, true reflections of the divine light.

The time spent in the Crystalline is twelve hours (two quadrants): this must be understood as *six times two hours*, that is to say at a speed still greater than that experienced in the 'zodiacal' quadrant of the Firmament.

In the EMPYREAN

[CANTI XXX–XXXIII] Dante’s time in the very swift Crystalline is coming to an end, as is the seventh day. The angelic triumph around the unmoving central point (a vision of cosmic triumph granted to Dante in order to offer fundamental theological clarifications to Beatrice, Adam and the three Apostles closest to Christ) gradually fades away (or loses its ‘semblance’ – ‘*perde il parere*’, XXX 6), giving way to a natural light that heralds the beginning of Quadrant 1 on what would be the EIGHTH DAY, were it not for the fact that the last ascent is at hand, to the Heaven ‘beyond the sphere that most amply revolves’⁴⁰: the Empyrean, the very heaven to which the sigh from the young Dante’s heart ascends, searching for Beatrice’s soul in Paradise, in the last sonnet of the *Vita Nova*.

The Sun has therefore only recently completed Quadrant 4 of the seventh day: ‘Maybe, around six thousand miles away, / the sixth hour, close to noon, flares out [an arc of 90°, calculated as about six thousand miles], while earth / inclines its shadow-cone to rest, near level’⁴¹: night’s shadow is about to cover the whole of the southern hemisphere (at an angle reaching to the line of the Equator, i.e. ‘level’). Meanwhile dawn signals the day’s birth in the northern hemisphere. This astronomical description may also seek to suggest *a possible line of separation, at midday, between the subjects explored, respectively, in Canti XXVIII and XXIX*.

The indescribable beauty of Beatrice’s increasingly radiant smile (*‘dolce riso’*) recalls Dante to the Empyrean’s luminosity, as sensed (or witnessed) by his sighing heart after the death of the woman he loved. Since the events of his distant youth, Dante has tried to pursue and understand this smile, but now, close to the Empyrean, it has become pure, overwhelming, incomprehensible light (XXX 28–33). And it is here that Beatrice confidently tells him: ‘We’ve left / the greatest of material spheres [the Crystalline], rising / to light, pure light’⁴² (XXX 38 and ff.).

A new, very bright light envelops everything, and Dante realises that he has temporarily been given the visual ability to gaze upon it: the light forms ‘a river in full spate, / fire-dazzle-gilded, flowing through verges / painted afresh in colours of wonderful spring.’⁴³ This is the beginning of the awe-inspiring vision that harks back to and consolidates the wondrous vision (*‘mirabile visione’*) promised at the end of the *Vita Nova* (XLII): the river gives off sparks of fire (*‘faville vive’*, the Angels) that settle on flowers (the Blessed), before plunging back into that ‘swirling miracle’ (*‘miro gurge’*, XXX 64–69). While Dante feasts his eyes on the prodigious waters, further sharpening his visual faculties so that he can bear the still greater splendour that is to come, the river becomes a huge circular lake whose surface reflects the amphitheatre that accommodates the Blessed,

⁴⁰ ‘*Oltre la sfera che più larga gira*’, *La Vita Nuova* XLI.

⁴¹ ‘*Forse seimila miglia di lontano / ci ferve l’ora sesta, e questo mondo / china già l’ombra quasi al letto piano*’ (XXX 1–3).

⁴² ‘*Noi siamo usciti fore / del maggior corpo al ciel ch’è pura luce*’ (XXX 38 and 39).

⁴³ ‘*fiume in forma di riviera / fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive / dipinte di mirabil primavera*’ (XXX 61–63).

ranged in order of merit: the sparks and flowers have now revealed themselves as the Angels and the Blessed, clearly visible (XXX 90): through the energy contained in the Crystalline that reflects its image, the 'rose' of souls appears in its entire circular expanse (XXX 117). Beatrice shows Dante an empty seat at the centre of the eternal rose (*'rosa sempiterna'*), destined for Henry VII of Luxembourg, whose attempt to restore imperial power would fail because of Clement V – who would shortly end up, along with Boniface VIII, in the Bolgia of the Simonists (XXX 133 ff.).

[CANTO XXXI] In the new Canto, the vision of the pure white rose (*'candida rosa'*) shifts, as it did in the Crystalline, to the Angels' ceaseless flitting from one blessed soul to another, imparting to each one the peace and ardour acquired directly from God. Their faces are flame-red (love), their wings gold (knowledge) and their robes whiter than snow (authority, XXXI 4 ff.). All is harmony, all is a clear vision of God, goodness and shared love: a community that sadly differs not from the ancient imperial and later papal community of Rome but from the present! Dante, 'from human to divine' / coming to this eternal realm from time⁴⁴, looks on in stunned silence (XXXI 25–40).

The vision of the Blessed seated in their chairs fills him with curiosity: he turns to Beatrice for enlightenment, but she has returned to her place in the 'rose'. At his side, replacing her as his guide, is the venerable St Bernard of Clairvaux (XXXI 59). Dante addresses emotional thanks for her past help to the *donna* responsible for his spiritual and intellectual birth and rebirth, which he can now see with the clarity of distance, and asks for her continued protection for the rest of his life:

From servitude you've led me to be free
by all those pathways and by all the means
you have within your power to exercise.
Keep safe in me your own magnificence,
so that my soul, since you have made it well,
should leave the knot of body, pleasing you.⁴⁵

Beatrice has guided him along a path that is now complete. Now it is the turn of the one to whose love Dante is primarily indebted, she who is situated in the brightest part of the 'rose': the Queen of Heaven (*'regina del Cielo'*, XXXI 100), the supreme Mediatrix, through whose graces it is possible to arrive at a knowledge of God. St Bernard invites Dante to look up: enveloped in a light that recalls the eastern light of dawn, rather than the darkening light of sunset, here is the 'Queen', the Madonna (XXXI 114): surrounded by flying Angels singing joyfully, the smiling beauty of the Virgin blazes forth.

[CANTO XXXII] An aura of mystic ecstasy pervades them all, but does not prevent St Bernard from pointing out to Dante the sectors occupied by the Blessed of the Old and

⁴⁴ *'che al divino dall'umano, / a l'eterno dal tempo era'* (XXXI 37–38).

⁴⁵ *'Tu m'hai di servo tratto a libertate / per tutte quelle vie, per tutti i modi / che di ciò fare avei la potestate. / La tua magnificanza in me custodi, / sì che l'anima mia, che fatt'hai sana, / piacente a te dal corpo si disnodi'* (XXXI 85–90).

New Testaments, beginning with the very beautiful Eve, representing the corporeal mother of the human race and placed beneath the Virgin, mother of Christ the Redeemer. Rachel and Beatrice are seated below Eve; below them sit Sarah, wife of Abraham, and Rebecca wife of Isaac, and then Judith and Ruth: the women that Christ freed from Limbo. On the same side, to the right of Dante, are those who believed in ‘Christ to come’ (*in Cristo venturo*, XXXII 1–24); on his left are those who believed in ‘Christ now come’ (*in Cristo venuto*), starting with St John the Baptist and then further down St Francis, St Benedict, St Augustine and others. Not all the seats are yet occupied: they will be, at the end of days, in equal numbers to those from before Christ’s coming (XXXII 39). Between the two sectors are children, not yet able to distinguish between Good and Evil (XXXII 45): their presence, St Bernard explains, does not depend on their actions but on the grace that is variously and uncontestedly distributed at their birth by God, ‘the highest light’ (*altissimo lume* XXXII 71).

Now St Bernard once again invites Dante to turn his gaze upon Mary, whose face most resembles that of Christ and who is most able to support the sight of the Son’s face (XXXII 85–87). The Archangel Gabriel now sings out the greeting of the Annunciation, with all the others responding in chorus (XXXII 97–99). St Bernard resumes his introductions of the Blessed: on one side Adam, St Peter, St John the Evangelist, Moses; on the other Anne, mother of Mary, and St Lucy (XXXII 118–138). But now it is time to rise to the vision of God, ‘the Primal Love’ (*primo amore*, XXXII 142).

[CANTO XXXIII] The final Canto, both of *Paradiso* and of the *Commedia*, opens with St Bernard’s memorable prayer to the Virgin to implore her intercession: ‘Virgin and mother, daughter of your son, / greater than all in honour and humility, / you are the point that truth eternally / is fixed upon.’⁴⁶ He begs that Dante should be granted ultimate salvation (*estrema salvezza*) and that he should remain in his current state of grace until his death (XXXIII 1–39). Encouraged by the founder of the Cistercians, Dante slowly manages to raise his eyes, and from that moment his ability to see becomes so superior to human faculties that he cannot describe what he has seen, but only the special sweet feeling remaining after the vision has dissolved (XXXIII 55–63).

Nevertheless Dante does try to describe the event, remembering that his sight fused with ‘that unending might’ (*col valore infinito*), enabling him to make out, inside that very bright light, the sum of everything that is bound into the universe and scattered through it, like the pages of a book (*si squaderna*, XXXIII 87). For Dante, only the central, brightest point of the vision is a mystical ecstasy, to the extent that he can have no memory of it and cannot therefore give an account of it. As he gazed fixedly, he seemed to see ‘three circling spheres, three-coloured, one in span’⁴⁷ (that is to say of the same size). One of these appeared to be a reflection of the other, like a second rainbow (the Son) generated by the

⁴⁶ ‘Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio, / umile e alta più che creatura, / termine fisso d’eterno consiglio’ (XXXIII 1–3).

⁴⁷ ‘tre giri / di tre colori e d’una contenenza’ (XXXIII 117).

first (the Father), while the third (the Holy Spirit) seemed to be 'breathed' (*'spirato'*) by the other two (XXXIII 116–119): this dynamic image of the Trinity was most likely inspired by Joachim of Fiore's *Liber figurarum*. Within this central vortex, Dante seemed to recognize a portrait, painted in the same three colours, of 'our human form' (*'nostra effigē'*), or at least sense its shadow: is this the *face* of Christ? (XXXIII 131). Then any possibility of understanding evaporated, and suddenly he could no longer see: the '*mirabile visione*' is over.

The point that appears to Dante in the vortex of the nine concentric Heavens, which are graduated according to the importance and qualities of the angelic powers assigned to each one, signals the most geometrically fitting conclusion to a succession which is strictly articulated in (numerical and substantive) harmony with the nature and moral content of the places Dante has visited one after the other: his descent to the infernal abyss; his – increasingly easy – climb up the nonetheless vertiginous Mount Purgatory; and finally his assumption up the heavenly ladder'.

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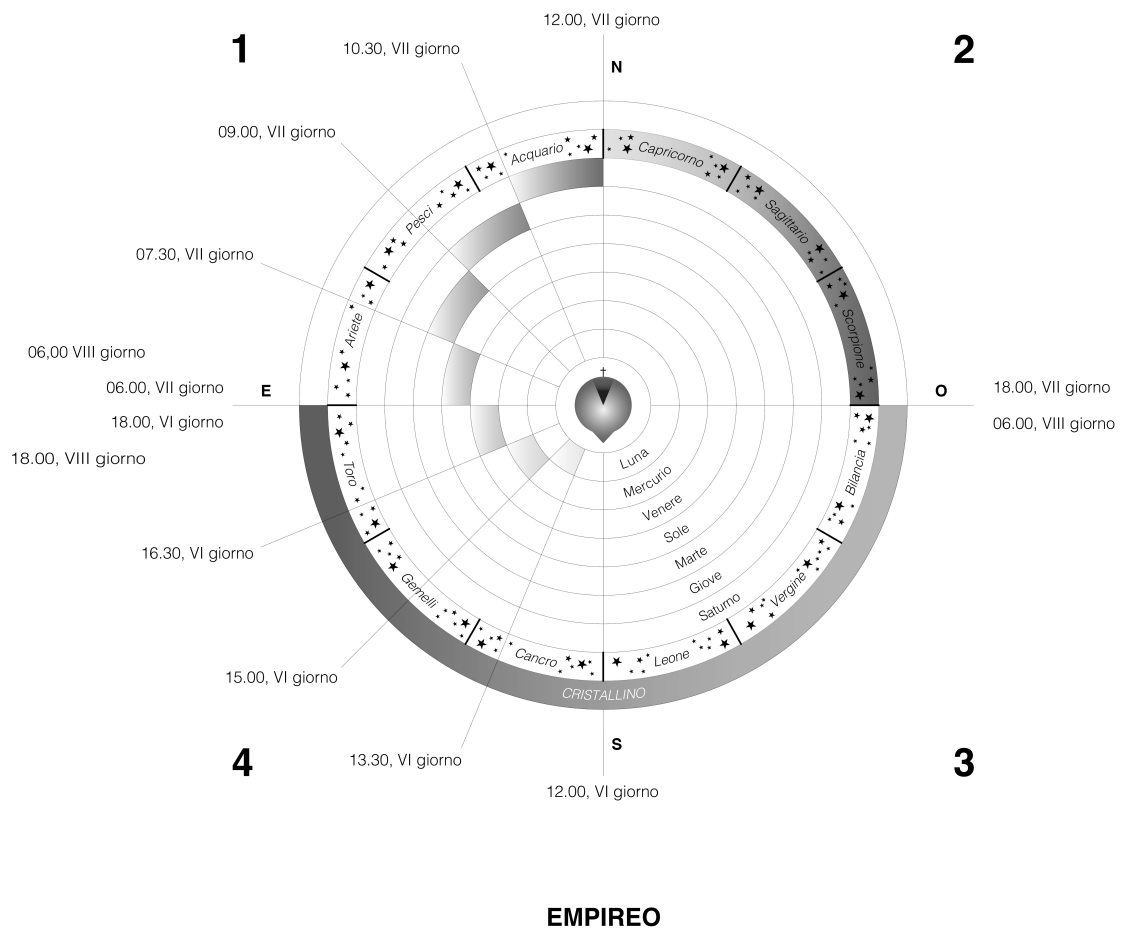


Fig. 1. Map of Heaven.

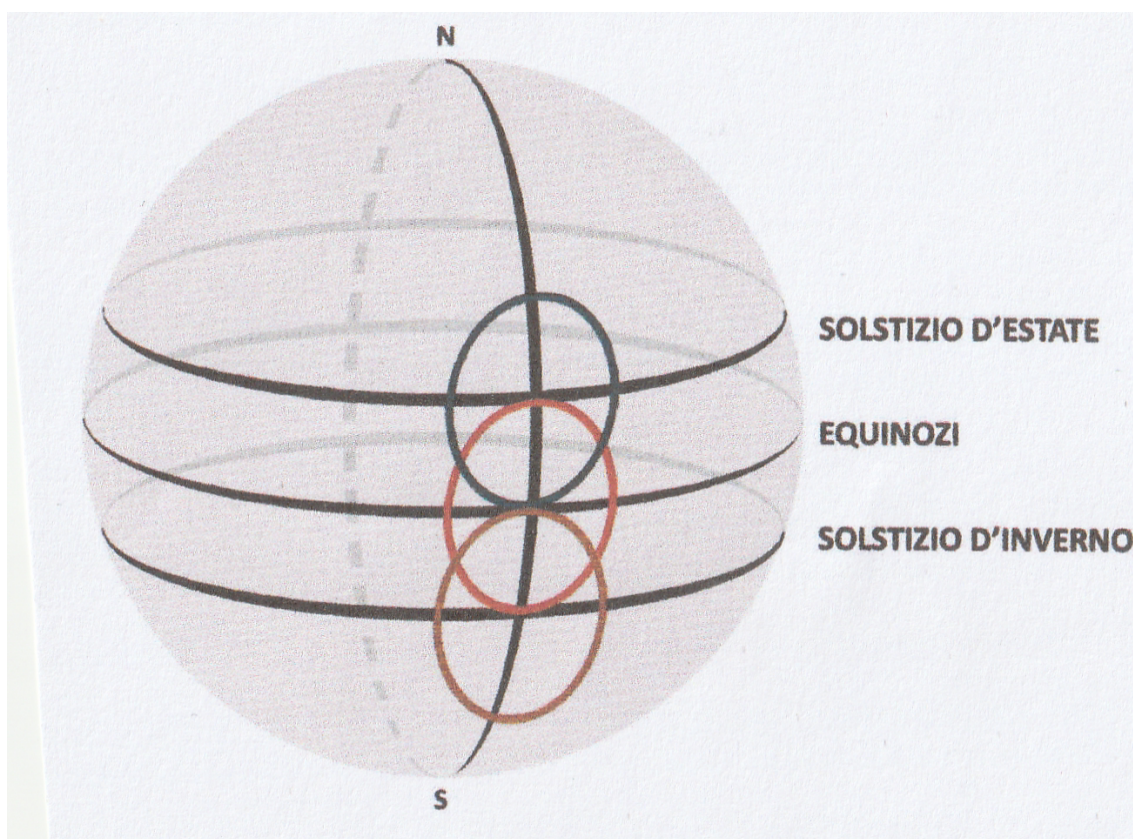


Fig. 2. *Four circles, three crosses.*