

# Paradise Canto 33

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Canto XXXIII

Argument

St. Bernard supplicates the Virgin Mary that Dante may have grace given him to contemplate the brightness of the Divine Majesty, which is accordingly granted; and Dante then himself prays to God for ability to show forth some part of the celestial glory in his writings. Lastly, he is admitted to a glimpse of the great mystery; the Trinity, and the Union of Man with God.

"O Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son!  
Created beings all in lowliness  
Surpassing, as in height above them all;  
Term by the eternal counsel pre - ordain'd;  
Ennobler of thy nature, so advanced  
In thee, that its great Maker did not scorn,  
To make Himself his own creation;  
For in thy womb rekindling shone the love  
Reveal'd, whose genial influence makes now  
This flower to germin in eternal peace:  
Here thou to us, of charity and love,  
Art, as the noon - day torch; and art, beneath,  
To mortal men, of hope a living spring.  
So mighty art thou, Lady, and so great,  
That he, who grace desireth, and comes not  
To thee for aidance, fain would have desire  
Fly without wings. Not only him, who asks,  
Thy bounty succours; but doth freely oft  
Forerun the asking. Whatsoe'er may be  
Of excellence in creature, pity mild,  
Relenting mercy, large munificence,  
Are all combined in thee. Here kneeleth one,  
Who of all spirits hath review'd the state,  
From the world's lowest gap unto this height.  
Suppliant to thee he kneels, imploring grace  
For virtue yet more high, to lift his ken  
Toward the bliss supreme. And I, who ne'er  
Coveted sight, more fondly, for myself,  
Than now for him, my prayers to thee prefer,  
(And pray they be not scant), that thou wouldst  
Each cloud of his mortality away, [drive  
Through thine own prayers, that on the sovran joy  
Unveil'd he gaze. This yet, I pray thee, Queen,

Who canst do what thou wilt; that in him thou  
Wouldst, after all he hath beheld, preserve  
Affection sound, and human passions quell.  
Lo! where, with Beatrice, many a saint  
Stretch their clasp'd hands, in furtherance of my suit."

The eyes, that Heaven with love and awe regards,  
Fix'd on the suitor, witness'd, how benign  
She looks on pious prayers: then fasten'd they  
On the everlasting light, wherein no eye  
Of creature, as may well be thought, so far  
Can travel inward. I, meanwhile, who drew  
Near to the limit, where all wishes end,  
The ardour of my wish (for so behoved)  
Ended within me. Beckoning smiled the sage,  
That I should look aloft: but, ere he bade,  
Already of myself aloft I look'd;  
For visual strength, refining more and more,  
Bare me into the ray authentical  
Of sovran light. Thenceforward, what I saw,  
Was not for words to speak, nor memory's self  
To stand against such outrage on her skill.

As one, who from a dream awaken'd, straight,  
All he hath seen forgets; yet still retains  
Impression of the feeling in his dream;  
E'en such am I: for all the vision dies,  
As 'twere, away; and yet the sense of sweet,  
That sprang from it, still trickles in my heart.  
Thus in the sun - thaw is the snow unseal'd;  
Thus in the winds on flitting leaves was lost  
The Sibyl's sentence. O eternal beam! [soar?]  
(Whose height what reach of mortal thought may  
Yield me again some little particle  
Of what Thou then appearedst; give my tongue  
Power, but to leave one sparkle of Thy glory,  
Unto the race to come, that shall not lose  
Thy triumph wholly, if Thou waken aught  
Of memory in me, and endure to hear  
The record sound in this unequal strain.

Such keenness from the living ray I met,  
That, if mine eyes had turn'd away, methinks,  
I had been lost; but, so embolden'd, on  
I pass'd, as I remember, till my view  
Hover'd the brink of dread infinitude.

O grace, unenvying of Thy boon! that gavest  
Boldness to fix so earnestly my ken

On the everlasting splendour, that I look'd,  
While sight was unconsumed, and, in that depth,  
Saw in one volume clasp'd of love, whate'er  
The universe unfolds; all properties  
Of substance and of accident, beheld,  
Compounded, yet one individual light  
The whole. And of such bond methinks I saw  
The universal form; for that whene'er  
I do but speak of it, my soul dilates  
Beyond her proper self; and, till I speak,  
One moment seems a longer lethargy,  
Than five - and - twenty ages had appear'd  
To that emprise, that first made Neptune wonder  
At Argo's shadow darkening on his flood.

With fixed heed, suspense and motionless,  
Wondering I gazed; and admiration still  
Was kindled as I gazed. It may not be,  
That one, who looks upon that light, can turn  
To other object, willingly, his view.  
For all the good, that will may covet, there  
Is summ'd; and all, elsewhere defective found,  
Complete. My tongue shall utter now, no more  
E'en what remembrance keeps, than could the babe's  
That yet is moisten'd at his mother's breast.  
Not that the semblance of the living light  
Was changed, (that ever as at first remain'd),  
But that my vision quickening, in that sole  
Appearance, still new miracles descried,  
And toil'd me with the change. In that abyss  
Of radiance, clear and lofty, seem'd, methought,  
Three orbs of triple hue, clipt in one bound:[1]  
And, from another, one reflected seem'd,

[1: "Three orbs of triple hue, clipt in one bound." The Trinity. This passage may be compared to what Plato, in his second Epistle, enigmatically says of a first, second, and third, and of the impossibility that the human soul should attain to what it desires to know of them, by means of anything akin to itself.]

As rainbow is from rainbow: and the third  
Seem'd fire, breathed equally from both. O speech!  
How feeble and how faint art thou, to give  
Conception birth. Yet this to what I saw  
Is less than little. O eternal Light!  
Sole in Thyself that dwell'st; and of Thyself  
Sole understood, past, present, or to come;  
Thou smiledst, on that circling,[2] which in Thee

Seem'd as reflected splendour, while I mused;  
For I therein, methought, in its own hue  
Beheld our image painted: steadfastly  
I therefore pored upon the view. As one,  
Who versed in geometric lore, would fain  
Measure the circle; and, though pondering long  
And deeply, that beginning, which he needs,  
Finds not: e'en such was I, intent to scan  
The novel wonder, and trace out the form,  
How to the circle fitted, and therein  
How placed: but the flight was not for my wing;  
Had not a flash darted athwart my mind,  
And, in the spleen, unfolded what it sought.

[2: "That circling." The second of the circles, "Light of Light," in which he dimly beheld the mystery of the Incarnation.]

Here vigour fail'd the towering fantasy:  
But yet the will roll'd onward, like a wheel  
In even motion, by the Love impell'd,  
That moves the sun in Heaven and all the stars.