

**“Empyrean”
Guy P. Raffa**

Bernard. Cantos 31.58 to 33.51

Where Dante expects to see Beatrice, there appears instead a new guide for the final stage of the celestial voyage. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-53), a gentle father figure who directs Dante's sight to illustrious occupants of the rose (including Beatrice, now returned to her place), is assigned this role primarily for his special devotion to the Virgin Mary. He earned this reputation as Mary's "faithful Bernard" (31.102) through his advocacy of the cult of the Virgin Mary in his voluminous writings, which included sermons, treatises, and letters. It is thus appropriate for Bernard to seek Mary's intercession on behalf of Dante, that he might experience a vision of the Christian godhead and return safely to tell of it (33.1-39). Bernard, who belonged to the Cistercian order (a strict branch of the Benedictines) and became abbot of the monastery at Clairvaux, was one of the most influential Church leaders of the twelfth century. Renowned for his persuasive preaching (he was called the "mellifluous doctor"), Bernard was canonized in 1174.

White Rose. Cantos 30.106 to 32.138

The true home of all the blessed is with God in the Empyrean, a heaven of pure light beyond time and space. Dante sees the blessed systematically arranged in an immense white rose: like a hologram, a three-dimensional image, the rose is formed from a ray of light reflected off the outer surface of the Primum Mobile (30.106-17). The queen of this white rose is the Virgin Mary, traditionally represented as a rose herself (see *Par.* 23.73-4). This celestial rose recalls large rose windows of Gothic cathedrals, many of which are dedicated to Mary. The image of the rose, often red, is also used to represent Christ or, in other contexts, earthly love.

The white rose is symmetrically structured according to various criteria, including belief, age, and gender. One half of the rose, already full, holds those who, according to Christian tradition, believed in Christ to come (the blessed of the Hebrew Bible); the other half, with only a few seats still unoccupied, contains those who believed in Christ already come (saved Christians). Two gendered rows mark this division of the rose in two halves. In the row below Mary appear women of the Hebrew Bible (Eve, Rachel, Sarah, Rebecca, Judith, Ruth, and unnamed others); Beatrice is seated next to Rachel, on the third row from the top. Opposite Mary, John the Baptist heads a row of men containing Francis, Benedict, Augustine, and other Christian fathers. Mary is flanked by Adam (first man) and Moses on one

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side, and Peter (first pope) and John the Evangelist on the other. John the Baptist is flanked by Lucy on one side and Anna, the mother of Mary, on the other. While only adults are seated in the upper section of the rose, below a certain line the rose contains souls of blessed children, their precise location based not on their own merits (since they lacked the power of free will) but on predestination. As physical laws do not apply in the Empyrean, Dante's ability to see these figures is not diminished by distance (30.118-23; 31.76-8).

Ephemera. Canto 33.55-66, 85-96

Dante must penetrate the eternal, divine light to view the underlying order of the universe. To convey the magnificence of this vision that so exceeds his powers of recollection, Dante compares his experience to phenomena known to be fragile or ephemeral (*Par.* 33.55-66). He cannot recall the particulars of what he saw but still feels the pleasant sensation it impressed on his heart, similar to how a dream, though unrecalled, nonetheless leaves an impression on the awakened dreamer. Dante's vision quickly faded, like snow under the warm rays of the sun. It vanished like the leaves, containing the Sibyl's oracles, that were scattered by the wind. The Sibyl, as Apollo's prophetess, inscribed future fates on leaves which, left unattended inside her cavern, were carried away by even the slightest breeze (*Virgil, Aeneid* 3.441-51). When Aeneas visited the Sibyl to learn his destiny, he therefore begged her not to commit her oracles to the leaves--"lest they fly off"--but to chant them herself (*Aeneid* 6.74-76).

Upon seeing how the created universe is bound together by love, Dante forgot so much of this sight only a moment later that more was remembered of what Neptune, god of the seas, had been stunned to see over twenty-five hundred years earlier while standing on the ocean floor: the shadow of the Argos, the first ship, as it passed overhead (*Par.* 33.85-96). Jason and the Argonauts were believed to have undertaken their expedition to acquire the Golden Fleece in 1223 BCE, some twenty-five centuries before Dante's journey in 1300. This final classical allusion of the *Divine Comedy* recalls Dante's reference to the amazement of the Argonauts (*Par.* 2.16-18) within a cluster of classical invocations at the start of the *Paradiso*. Dante's comparison of this one moment in his journey to the epic sweep of history from Jason's voyage to the present highlights the remarkable power and nature of his vision.

Trinitarian Circles. Canto 33.115-45

Within the depths of divine light, Dante perceives a geometric image of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). He "sees" three circles of the same circumference with distinct though unspecified colors. One circle appears as the reflection of the other (Son and Father), and the third circle (Spirit) looks like fire breathed equally by the other two (33.115-45). Dante's final challenge, resolved not on his own but through a flash of divine grace, is to comprehend the perfect fit between a human figure and the second circle in which it appears. This is the theological paradox of the incarnation, two complete natures--human and divine--in a single person (Christ). Dante compares his unsuccessful effort to grasp this paradox on his own to that of a geometer who seeks to square the circle: that is, using only a straight edge and a compass, to construct a square with area equal to that of a given circle. Dante's intuition of the impossibility of this mathematical feat was confirmed over five centuries later (1882) by Ferdinand Lindemann.