

Excerpt from Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*
Paradiso – Canto XXXIII: The Final Vision
Translation by Cotter and Mandelbaum



19th Century French artist Gustave Dore's rendering of Dante viewing Paradise

The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) is considered one of the greatest poems of Europe's Medieval Period. At this time, most serious works were written in Latin, which was the language of the Christian religion. However, Dante wrote this work in Italian, the language of the common people. The poem represents and expands on the philosophical views of Christianity at that time. It builds on Thomas Aquinas's Scholasticism, which linked the secular world of philosophy and reason with the religious world of faith and theology. According to Scholasticism you need both reason and faith to reach truth. Indeed, underscoring the problem of relying purely on religion, earlier sections of *The Divine Comedy* contain criticism of the political corruption of the leader of the Christian religion at the time, Pope Boniface VIII.

The poem is written as a first person account of Dante's travels through Hell (the inferno), Purgatory (an in-between realm), and Paradise (Heaven). Below is an excerpt of the ending of the poem, in which Dante sees the Light of Paradise.

85 Within [the Light's] depths I saw gathered together,
Bound by love into a single volume,
Pages that lie scattered through the universe.

Substance and accidents and their relations
I saw as though they fused in such a way
90 That what I say is but a gleam of light.

The universal pattern of this knot
I believe I saw, because in telling this,
I feel my gladness growing ever larger.

One moment made more slip my memory than
95 Twenty-five centuries robbed from the adventure
That awed Neptune with the shadow of the Argo.¹

So my mind, held in absolute suspense,
Was staring fixed, intent, and motionless,
And by its staring grew the more inflamed.

100 Within that Light a person is so changed
It is impossible to give consent
Ever to turn from it to other sights

Because the Good, the object of the will,
Is gathered all in it, and outside of the Light
105 What there is perfect is flawed [outside of the Light].

Now shall my telling of what I remember
Fall far below the babbling of a baby
Still bathing its tongue at the mother's breast.

Not that there is more than a single semblance
110 Within that living Light on which I looked
And which is always what it was before,

But by the sight that gathered strength in me
As I gazed on, what was One in appearance
Was altering for me as I was changing.

115 In the profound and shining-clear Existence
Of the deep Light appeared to me three circles

¹ So much information passed before Dante's mind while peering into the Light that it was like the information lost when a story, such as the story of Neptune and Argo, is told 2,500 years later as a myth.

Of one dimension and three different colors.

One seemed to be reflected by the other,
Rainbow by rainbow, while the third seemed fire
120 Breathed equally from one and from the other.

O how pale now is language and how paltry
For my conception! And for what I saw
My words are not enough to call them meager.

O everlasting Light, you dwell alone
125 In yourself, know yourself alone, and known
And knowing, love and smile upon yourself!

That middle circle which appeared in you
To be conceived as a reflected light,
After my eyes had studied it a while,

130 Within itself and in its coloring
Seemed to be painted with our human likeness
So that my eyes were completely focused on it.

As the geometry specialist who sets himself
To square the circle² and who cannot find,
135 For all his thought, the principle he needs,

Just so was I on seeing this new vision
I wanted to see how our image fuses
Into the circle and finds its place in it,

And my own wings were far too weak for that.
140 But then my mind was struck by light that flashed
And, with this light, received what it had asked.

Here force failed my high fantasy; but my
desire and will were moved already—like
a wheel revolving uniformly

145 By the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

² Squaring the circle is a problem proposed by ancient geometry specialists. It is the challenge of constructing a square with the same area as a given circle by using only a finite number of steps with compass and straightedge. Squaring the circle has been proven mathematically impossible.

Questions

1. Looking at lines 85-105, what is Paradise like according to Dante?
2. Looking at lines 121-123, what problem does Dante have in describing Paradise?
3. Looking at lines 127-138, to what profession does Dante compare himself? How might this relate to Thomas Aquinas's Scholasticism?
4. In the entire excerpt, can you find a reference that is exclusive to the Christian religion?