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DANTE'S CONCEPTION OF THE BEATIFIC VISION.¹

"I rejoiced at the things that were said to me: We shall go into the house of the Lord."—Ps. 121.

H^E must be a bolder man than Carlyle who would to-day assert that "the many volumes by way of commentary on Dante and his Book have, on the whole, been written with no great result." The enthusiasm with which the cult of the poet has been revived in recent years has surely been productive of high scholarship, and dispelled many obscurities. Much concerning his life and teaching is intelligible to us that to our fathers was enveloped in mystery and conjecture. The poetry, the history and the autobiography of the *Commedia* are so well explored that "he who runs may read." The theology of Dante is perhaps the one province in which happier results might have been reasonably expected. We must not be understood to imply that this study has been altogether neglected. On the other hand, it has certainly not received the attention it deserves. Non-Catholic writers have seldom the heart or patience to sound the depths of Dante's religion; nor is it perhaps unnatural that they should be out of touch with notions to them absurd and antiquated. Be this as it may, lack of sympathy is evident in the critiques of such eminent scholars as Dr. Moore and Mr. A. J. Butler—a *fortiori*, in pages containing a tithe of their erudition. Under these circumstances we need not be surprised if Catholic commen-

¹ The translations of extracts are taken either from Longfellow (L), or Carey (C), or Hazelfoot (H).

tators—unfortunately too few—lay unusual stress on the dogmatic element of the *Commedia*.

Mr. Gardner has set an example which it is to be hoped will find numerous imitators.² He has succeeded admirably, as the secular press attests, in explaining Dante's religious convictions by means of illustrations derived from the writings of theologians anterior to the fourteenth century. In the following pages, even were it possible, I shall attempt no such exhaustive comparison. My aim is rather to single out one point—and that the central idea of the *Paradiso*—and show with what skilful and almost imperceptible touches the reader is prepared for the grand climax of the final canto. Further, since the *Commedia* is before all "the *Summa* in verse" I shall endeavor to note how faithfully, even in details, this conception of the Beatific Vision reproduces in popular form the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The *Paradiso* is admittedly the highest of all Dante's flights of imagination, and on that account most difficult of understanding. Following the example of Holy Scripture he does not hesitate to employ that chaste realism without which the invisible world is to the concrete mind a sealed book. Yet he insists that all materialistic notions of God and the angels are strictly speaking false, and due to the feebleness of the human mind and language. The defect is entirely on our side, since, to quote the words of Dionysius, "It is impossible for the divine ray to illumine us unless it be shrouded by sacred veils." The closing lines of the *Purgatorio* were a record of the final purification of the pilgrim-poet. The long and searching trial needed to make him fit for the company of angels was at an end, every sin and every affection to sin being purged from his soul in his passage through the despair and anguish of hell and the penitent tears of Purgatory. Fresh from the saving waters of Lethe and Eunoe, no unworthy ties remain to bind him to earth. Joyfully he follows Beatrice, his celestial guide, and with her swiftly soars heavenwards—to God, who is the goal as well as the source of all creation.

Ella è quel mare, al qual tutto si move
Ciò ch'ella crea e che natura face.—*Par.* iii., 86-87.³

But for the action of the poem it is imperative that the pilgrim be not ushered straightway into the awful Presence-chamber, before which the attendant army would pale into insignificance. He must first pass through the outer courts and gather as he goes glimpses of increasing glory beyond. As the grandeur of an Oriental mon-

² "Dante's Ten Heavens," by Edmund G. Gardner, M. A. Second Edition Revised. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

³ This is the sea
To which is moving onward whatsoever
It doth create, and all that nature makes (L).

arch is shown forth in the gorgeous apparel of his slaves, so the magnificence of the King of Kings will be reflected in His servants. From their countenances and demeanor much can be inferred of the happiness which is their portion. The various heavens through which Dante has to pass—the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Stellar Heaven and Primum Mobile—are therefore only symbolical of the grades of bliss and the intensity of vision enjoyed by the blessed in the supreme Empyrean. The poet expressly warns his readers that the spirits appeared to him at these different stages of his upward journey to illustrate more forcibly “the many mansions” actually existing in the Father’s home and also to strengthen his feeble sight against the overwhelming brilliancy of higher spheres.

Ma tutti fanno bello il primo giro,
E differentemente han dolce vita,
Per sentir piu men l’sterno spiro.
Qui si mostraron, non perchè sortita
Sia questa spera lor; ma per far segno
Della celestial ch’ ha men salita.—*Par.* iv., 34-39.⁴

Though in reality none of the nine lower heavens is its true abode the appearance of each spirit is always in strict keeping with the recognized symbolism of this or that planet. In the Sun, for instance, are gathered the great lights of the Church—doctors and teachers such as Sts. Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Chrysostom. Mars, the symbol of war, controlled by the Angelic Order of Virtues, holds many of the famous warriors of history; while in Jupiter, the Heaven of Justice, rulers of renown—David, Trajan and Constantine—are met.

Beatrice alone—his “gentle guide and dear”—is a sufficient reminder of his constant progress through realms of greater happiness, were he blind to all else. Passing from one heaven to another her smile brightens and her loveliness increases apace.

E vidi le sue luci tanto mere
Tanto gioconde, che la sua sembianza
Vinceva gli altri e l’ultimo solere.—*Par.* xviii., 55-57.⁵

and again :

La bellezza mia, che per le scale
Dell’ eterno palazzo piu s’accende,
Com’ hai veduto, guanto piu si sale.—*Par.* xxi., 7-9.⁶

⁴ But all make beautiful the primal circle
And have sweet life in different degrees,
By feeling more or less the eternal breath.
They showed themselves here, not because allotted
This sphere has been to them, but to give sign
Of the celestial which is least exalted (L).

⁵ And so translucent I beheld her eyes,
So full of pleasure that her countenance
Surpassed its other and its latest wont (L).

⁶ My beauty, that along the stairs
Of the eternal palace more enkindles
As thou hast seen, the farther we ascend (L).

Arrived within Saturn she abstains from smiling for this very reason that Dante's mortal sight could not endure the test. He would be turned into ashes as Semele of old by Jove's unveiled beauty. Until he is made stronger to tolerate her excessive beauty, he does not dare to gaze on that countenance in which God seemed to rejoice.

E se natura od arte fe' pasture
Da pigliar occhi, per aver la mente,
In carne umana o nelle sue pinture,
Tutte adunate parrebbe niente
Ver lo piacer divin che mi rifiuse.
Quando mi volsi al suo viso ridente.—*Par.* xxvii., 91-96.⁷

On reaching the Empyrean Beatrice's loveliness exceeds all powers of description. Whatever has been said before can give no true notion of the reality, and reluctantly Dante confesses his inability to praise her further in song.

La bellezza ch'io vidi sì trasmoda
Non pur di là da noi, ma certo io credo
Che solo il suo fattor tutta la goda.—*Par.* xxx., 19-21.⁸

This divinization of Beatrice forces on our notice the double part she is designed to play. Not only is she Dante's first love who was severed from him in the flower of her youth, but she is a striking personification of the Science of Theology which could lead men so near to God. It is the divine science, *par excellence*, because its aim is to know God and through Him His creatures, rather than to know Him through His creatures.

In Christian art and poetry the favorite, doubtless because the least difficult and most effective, way of portraying the spiritual world has always been to represent its people under the guise of human forms. Dante's scholastic temperament seems to have recoiled from this unphilosophic handling of the subject. Not even the saints will he represent in the bodies which were once theirs and which they are to resume at the last day. Much less will he concede to angels a form, be it ever so etherialized. St. John, once piously believed to have been assumed into heaven soul and body, is Dante's authority that "with two robes (of body and spirit) in the blessed cloister are two lights alone (*i. e.*, Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary)." For the rest, the saints, even such as Piccarda, who are lowest in glory, are conceived to be the faintest outline of their former selves, just sufficient to enable the poet to identify them.

⁷ And if or art or nature has made bait
To catch the eyes and so possess the mind,
In human flesh or in its portraiture,
All joined together would appear as naught
To the divine delight which shone upon me
When to her smiling face I turned me round (L).

⁸ Not only does the beauty I beheld
Transcend ourselves, but truly I believe
Its maker only may enjoy it all (L).

Small wonder that he falls into the opposite error to that which Narcissus made, mistaking a substance for a shadow. Beatrice has to correct and assure him they are "true substances" eager for converse. Even this semblance of corporeal existence is quickly discarded. Once the two lowest planets are left behind, there is no further allusion to the features of the Beatified. Henceforth their presence and movements are known only indirectly. Kindled in the light divine they are discernible one from the other by the effulgence which is measured out to each and corresponds to their height in glory. By the advent of these bright luminaries the pilgrim knows that a soul is nigh, though the veil be never drawn aside. It is left for Charles Martel to explain the strange phenomenon :

La mia letizia mi ti tien celato
Che mi raggia dintorno, e mi nasconde
Quasi animal di sua seta fasciato.—*Par.* viii., 52-54⁹

Some signify pleasure at Dante's answers by their increased radiance; others, like Cunizza, indicate their wish to speak with him "by brightening outwardly." So brilliant was the glory of St. John that the apparition dazzled the eyes much as the beams of a tropical sun. While St. Peter is denouncing the usurpers who occupy his vacant throne on earth, the rays proceeding from him and the company of spirits suddenly change from white to red in token of displeasure. Not only is the happiness and glory of each saint commensurate with the brightness of its rays, it is also proportionate to the speed with which each light is seen to revolve. Accordingly, greater speed of gyration is at one time the gauge of individual joy, at another of preëminence among compeers. Similarly in the *Primum Mobile*, the abode of the angels, brightness and swiftness are sure signs of excellence. This accounts for the seeming paradox that the flame nearest the Divinity, and the innermost of the nine circling choirs, corresponds contrariwise to the outermost moving heaven. In material substances "extension," in immaterial "intension" connotes perfection. From the moment these angels were confirmed in grace they have never ceased circling round their Maker in such fashion as Dante now witnesses—"each differing in effulgence and in kind." It is one of St. Thomas' peculiar theories that they, unlike the saints, constitute each a distinct species, and thus every one is endowed with not merely an individual but also specific insight and resultant love.

It will not be out of place to consider why the poet so frequently employs Light as the symbol of eternal life. Later on we shall see that his sole expressions for the Divine Essence, visible in ecstasy, are *lume, luce eterna*. Dean Church has justly remarked the fidelity,

⁹My gladness keepeth me concealed from thee,
Which rageth round about me, and doth hide me
Like as a creature swathed in its own silk (L).

born of a loving study of nature, with which he describes every effect of light and shade, every color and hue. This is indisputable, but its employment in the *Paradiso* has, if we mistake not, a distinctly theological significance. Dante could not but be mindful of the traditional analogy between incorporeal existence and the phenomenon of light—an analogy, moreover, which had the sanction of Holy Scripture. God Himself dwelt “in light inaccessible.” Of the same nature is the Son, and therefore St. Paul does not hesitate to apply to Him the words of the Book of Wisdom and call Him “the brightness of everlasting light.” Nay, more, Christ had declared He was “the Light of the world”—the *lumen de lumine* of the Nicene Creed. In the *de Divinis Nominitus*, Dionysius diligently explains why God should so be called—“because He fills every mind with the light of knowledge; ignorance and error He dispels from the souls in which He dwells, and to them all dispenses His holy light . . . ‘intellectual light’ is that Good called which is above every light . . . flooding the celestial mind and out of Its fulness illumining the earthly, and all their powers of intelligence renewing.”¹⁰ By a natural accommodation of meaning, the blessed, who partake of the divine wisdom, were also conceived to be founts of spiritual light and knowledge. The fact that light was believed to be truly incorporeal was an additional reason why Dante should consider the metaphor as particularly apt. A philosophy, which guarded him against the danger of anthropomorphic notions of the invisible world, recommended the use of an illustration at once forcible and least misleading. Besides, he had St. Thomas’ warrant for it—“Since all intellectual knowledge comes to us through the senses, we transfer even the terminology of ‘sensible cognition’ to that of the intellect, and especially those names which pertain to ‘vision,’ which is the most noble and most spiritual of the senses, and on that account more akin to the intellect; hence it is that ‘intellectual cognition’ itself is termed ‘vision.’”¹¹

“My instruction found entrance through the hearing and the sight.” While the pilgrim’s eyes are delighted by ever-changing scenes, his ears are charmed with the music that ever and anon issues from the rays of light. Now strains of some ravishing hymn, audible from afar, float nearer as a happy band approaches, and now with one accord all is hushed to listen to a client’s prayer; now again, his wish gratified, they return whence they came, taking up the while their former melody. Osannas and Glorias to the Blessed Trinity, intermingled with Aves in honor of the Queen-Mother, fill the heavens, and the happy listener surrenders himself to the intoxica-

¹⁰ C. 4, sec. 5.

¹¹ C. Gent., Bk. 3, c. 53.

tion. Many of the lights he declares to be "more sweet in voice than luminous in aspect." So exquisite was the harmony of the two garlands of saints in the sun, that there only where joy is eternal can it be appreciated—earthly music is not its faintest echo.

So full to overflowing seems their cup of gladness that it would appear impossible for them to receive any additional pleasure. And yet, on Beatrice's approach, the spirits of Mercury are heard to exult, "Lo! this is she who shall increase our love." Still more surprising is it, at first sight, that Dante's speech should add new joy to their lives. By unmistakable signs, however, they show that the gain is mutual and that they are "happier made at each new ministering." The underlying truth is perfectly intelligible in the light of certain scholastic distinctions which are here insinuated. The happiness of angel and saint with regard to its Last End—the Beatific Vision—can suffer no change or diminution. That will never be more or less than was once meted out according to individual deserts. But what is called their "accidental glory" is always capable of increase. Discussing the question as to whether angels can instruct one another, St. Thomas comes to the conclusion that since more truths are seen in God according to the perfection of one's powers, the higher orders can illumine the lower by discovering to them truths of which they were hitherto ignorant.¹² Dante follows in the footsteps of his Master and describes with marvellous exactness the relations of the saints to each other, and to their friends on earth. Their mutual charity, their evident desire to give of their store of knowledge and to obtain blessings for others are amongst the most effective touches in the book. In the restricted sense just referred to must be interpreted all similar passages, where, for instance, angels are likened to a swarm of bees flitting to and fro between the Blessed Trinity and the Saints of the Mystic Rose, carrying to each leaf and flower an increase of ardor and peace.

Even should exception be taken to these modes of expression, on the score of exaggeration, it could never be objected that we are left for a moment in doubt as to what constitutes the "essential happiness" of the blessed host. Many times and in many ways Dante is assured that the souls now before him are actually bathed in the light divine. High and low are gazing uninterruptedly in the mirror where all creation is visible. Therein they have seen Dante's question long before his lips have moved to utterance.

Queste sustanzie, poichè fur gioconde
Della faccia di Dio, non volser viso
Da essa, da cui nulla si nasconde.—*Par.* xxix., 76-78.¹³

¹² *Summa*, 1a p., qu. 106, a. 1.

¹³ From the first, these substances
Rejoicing in the countenance of God
¹³ Rejoicing in the countenance of God
Have held unceasingly their view, intent
Upon the glorious vision, from the which

The whole realm "secure and full of gladness, thronged with ancient folk and new, had look and love turned to one mark from which dependent is the heaven and nature all!" Saint and angel are absorbed in contemplation. It must be evident to a superficial reader that the temper of Dante's age was very different from the present. The pages of the *Divina Commedia* bear the impress of its psychological climate to a marked degree. Written in the golden days of Monasticism, when the great mendicant orders were flooding Europe with new spiritual life and vigor, when the example of Sts. Francis and Dominic was still fresh in the memory of men, when every Italian family sent its quota to swell the ranks of clergy or religious, it was natural that Dante should assume as axiomatic that the contemplative life was to be preferred to the life of action. We shall search the *Paradiso* in vain for any argument or demonstration to that effect. They were superfluous until the principle was called in question. For the presuppositions with which a layman started out, we must consult the tomes of those whose professed object it was to provide a sound basis for the Faith of the people. And what do we find? That they anticipated the objections of a Utilitarian generation which is ever asking, "Of what use are contemplative orders?" These doctors clearly show that of the two endowments of man, sufficiently generalized under the terms of knowledge and action, the former bespeaks our affinity to the angelic nature, the latter to the brute beast. "The highest achievement of man is that which is wrought by his highest power on the most worthy object: the intellect is his highest power and its most worthy object is the divine Good, which again is not the object of the practical judgment but of the speculative; hence his greatest happiness consists in the contemplation of divine things."¹⁴ In another book, St. Thomas subjoins seven additional reasons from Aristotle to convince skeptics that it was really "the better part" which Mary chose.¹⁵ True, this side the grave, contemplative life will always remain inchoative, but since it contains the germ of future bliss it excels and should not be stunted by bodily accomplishments. Imagination may play us false and incline us to irreverently wonder how we can possibly spend an eternity in contemplation without a sense of weariness, but reason, apart from Faith, tells us that the joy of heaven is founded in unceasing meditation and acts of love. To Dante our modern difficulty did not present itself, so that unless we admit his assumption we shall miss the point of many illustrations.

The saints are unanimous in confirming the Catholic teaching that the intensity of their vision is directly proportionate to the merits and gold of good works accumulated below.

¹⁴ *Summa*, 1a, 2æ, qu. 3, a. 5.

¹⁵ *Summa*, 1a, 2æ, qu. 182, a. 1.

E dei saper che tutti hanno diletto,
 Quanto la sua veduta si profonda
 Nel vero, in che si queta ogn' intelletto
 Quinci si può veder come si fonda
 L'esser beato nell' atto che vede,
 Non in quel ch' ama, che poscia seconda;
 E del vedere è misura mercede.—*Par.* xxviii., 106-112.¹⁶

Beatrice's words sound like a subdued echo of Tertullian's vehement rhetoric: "How are there many mansions in the Father's home, except through diversity of merits? And how can star differ from star except through diversity of rays?" (*Adv. Gnost. Scorp.* c. 6.) Dante found it to be the rule alike in the angelic choirs of the Primum Mobile as in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, where St. Peter stood forth preëminent among the saintly host.

A further truth conveyed in Beatrice's last utterance is repeated shortly afterwards in this wise:

. Però che all' atto che concepe
 Seque l'affetto, d'amor la dolcezza
 Diversamente in essa ferve e tepe.—*Par.* xxix., 139-141.¹⁷

The vision of the Good, the True, the Beautiful must move the beholder to corresponding delight and enkindle his desire to possess it. On this point the poet lays some stress. It is the capacity of the intellect, the power of penetrating the Infinite abyss that sets the limit to the creature's love, for as St. Augustine says, "No one can love what is unknown." The contrary opinion, that vision will be measured by the ardor of affection with which each spirit approaches the Eternal Banquet, he by implication rejects. "It is obviously false that the will is superior to the intellect as a motive power; for, primarily, the intellect moves the will . . . the intellect by its act understands, and in so doing anticipates the will; never would the will desire knowledge unless the intellect had first decided that knowledge was beneficial."¹⁸ This characteristic touch of the Angelic Doctor pervades the whole poem and gives us a clue to otherwise meaningless passages. The seraphim is the circle revolving nearest to God Himself precisely because profounder knowledge impels them, more rapidly than others, to union with the divinity. Thus is generated in them a love far surpassing that of the lower choirs.

Consistently with this pious imagery, the Blessed Virgin, who

¹⁶ And thou shouldst know that they all have delight
 As much as their own vision penetrates
 The Truth, in which all intellect finds rest.
 From this it may be seen how blessedness
 Is founded on the faculty which sees,
 And not in that which loves, and follows next;
 And of this seeing merit is the measure (L).

¹⁷ Inasmuch as on the act conceptive
 The affection followeth, of love the sweetness
 Therein diversely fervid is or tepid (L).

¹⁸ C. Gent., Bk. 3, c. 26.

eclipses angels and saints by the intensity of vision and love of God, shines upon Dante—not in the lower heavens, not even in the Primum Mobile, but above and beyond in the Empyrean itself. In the Heaven of the Fixed Stars she had indeed deigned to appear as the Regina Sanctorum Omnium, in the fair garden of the Apostles of which she was the Rose and they the Lilies. A momentary apparition was this and shown in the sequel to be an unusual condescension. Even while Dante gazed entranced on those flowers of Christ's Redemption, the central and largest, "which there excelled as on earth it excelled," was crowned by the Angel Gabriel, who had descended from the upper heaven to attend Her. Straightway she ascended from their midst, her praises chanted on all sides, swiftly through the angels' home to Her Son's side, "making diviner the sphere supreme." A glimpse was all that was vouchsafed to Dante of this ravishing scene, illustrative no doubt of her actual assumption and moral superiority over other creatures. Not until his sight had been inured to more brilliant objects and had been purified in the River of Life is her full glory unveiled to him. By that time, Beatrice had already bidden him adieu and entrusted to St. Bernard her lover's guidance through higher wonders, as if Theology were unequal to the task. As is fitting, the faithful Bernard first presents his charge to the enthroned Queen "to whom this realm (*i. e.*, the Empyrean) is subject and devoted"—his loving Mother Mary. It was insufficient, though necessary, that the pilgrim's eyes had grown accustomed to the pageantry of the lower heavens with their ranks of happy men and women, saints and angels, all raying out the light divine; it was insufficient that the beauty of his beloved had provided an ever growing foretaste of God; his final preparation can be no other than the contemplation of the least feeble reflection of the divine attributes. Seated in the midst of her jubilant court, she outshines them all as does the east the west on a summer morn.

Riguarda omai nella faccia ch' a Christo
 Più si somiglia, ch'è la sua chiarezza
 Sola ti può disporre a veder Christo.

. Quantunque io avea visto davante,
 Di tanta ammirazion non mi sospese,
 Nè mi mostrò di Dio tanto sembante.—*Par.* xxxii., 85-93.¹⁹

There is another and more potent reason for turning to Mary on the very threshold of the Infinite. Most like to God and most loved of Him, she can obtain for her clients favors otherwise impossible.

¹⁹ Look now into the face that unto Christ
 Hath most resemblance; for its brightness only
 Is able to prepare thee to see Christ.

. Whatsoever I had seen before
 Did not suspend me in such admiration,
 Nor show me such similitude of God (L).

The crowning grace of gazing for one short moment on God must be sought at her hands alone. St. Bernard, in that beautiful prayer which has rendered the closing canto famous, begs the Virgin Mother to grant Dante his heart's desire.

Ed io, che mai per mio veder non arsi
 Più ch' io fo per lo suo, tutti i miei preghi
 Ti porgo, e prego che non sieno scarsi,
 Perché tu ogni nube gli dislegli
 Di sua mortalità coi preghi tuoi,
 Sì che il sommo piacer gli si dispieghi.—*Par. xxxiii., 28-33.*²⁰

Once she has signified her gracious acquiescence, the issue does not long remain doubtful. Instantly Dante felt the stilling of desire within his breast, a sure sign of his near approach to "the end of all desires." The whole journey had been a severe yet invigorating discipline for this long-wished-for moment. By slow degrees he had learnt what the Beatific Vision is in its effect and had thus been enabled to form some faint concept of its magnificence. Hitherto he had been taught how wonderful is God in His saints, and how supremely happy are the myriads who possess the pearl of great price—but the source remained hid from view. Already he had been dowered with that supernatural strength without which no creature can hope to see God face to face, to wit, the Light of Glory:

La cui virtù, col mio veder congiunta,
 Mi leva sopra me tanto, ch' io veggio
 La somma essenza della quale è munta.—*Par. xxi., 85-88.*²¹

This was St. Peter Damien's description down in the Heaven of Saturn, since verified in the poet's own person on entering the Empyrean. St. Thomas gives us the reason of our necessity—"No created intellect can see the Divine Essence except in so far as God by His grace discovers Himself to the intelligence. . . . Yet intelligence, whether angelic or human, rises superior to the material world, and *can* therefore be raised beyond its natural powers to something higher."²² Commentators are not agreed as to the precise moment Dante would have us believe this sublime power was bestowed on him. The whole passage (*Canto xxx., l. 50 ad fin.*) certainly describes the uplifting of a blessed soul from the darkness of the outer world into the full light of glory. Perhaps we may go further and say that the poet has portrayed two phases of the one

²⁰ I who never burned for my own seeing
 More than I do for his, all of my prayers
 Proffer to thee, and pray they come not short,
 That thou wouldst scatter from him every cloud
 Of his mortality so with thy prayers,
 That the chief Pleasure be to him displayed (L).

²¹ Of which the virtue with my sight conjoined
 Lifts me above myself so far, I see
 The supreme essence from which this is drawn (L).

²² *Summa* 1a, qu. 12, a. 4.

grace—first, the etherializing of the hidden powers of intellectual vision to a degree hitherto unsuspected, and secondly, the panorama of inconceivable delights that flashes into view of the new-born spirit. His eyes were opened to see the River of Life out of which angels are continually issuing to sink into the flowers (*i. e.*, the saints) that bedeck either bank. One mask remained to be torn away. Dante was commanded to slake the thirst of his eyes in those miraculous waters if he would see symbols transformed into realities. The whole army of the Church Triumphant broke in upon his sight in fashion of the sempiternal Rose, to whose every petal and leaf angelic bands were ministering. The *Lumen Gloriæ* floods his soul. This time he is in nowise confounded by new wonders—"My vision lost itself not in the vastness and height but the extent and nature of that bliss it all embraced." At last this newly acquired virtue is to be tested to its utmost, though it is clearly understood beforehand that it will fall infinitely short of its mark. Dante is well aware that no mortal eye can exhaust the mystery, any more than one can hope to fathom the ocean's depth. On this point he is as pronounced an agnostic as his master, who had laid it down that "only in so far does the creature penetrate the Divine Essence as he is suffused with a greater or lesser share of the Light of Glory. But since no creature can receive an infinite share, it is not possible for any one to know God perfectly."²³ In another pregnant passage Aquinas replies to a possible objection—that the blessed see everything in God—with this significant distinction: "If by 'everything' be understood whatever pertains to the perfection of the universe, manifestly *they* can who see the Divine substance. . . . If, however, whatever God sees in His own Essence be implied, then no creature can see 'everything.'"²⁴ The mysteries of Grace and Predestination, the secrets of hearts are hidden from the blessed, because they depend on the free will either of God or of man. There is no real discrepancy between this doctrine and the express declarations of Dante's interlocutors that they read his every question and wish where "ere thou thinkest, thy thought is revealed." Theologians agree that God satisfies every just and legitimate desire of the saints, and therefore reveals of His secrets whichever is of especial interest to them.

The ineffable vision has been vouchsafed to Dante himself, and together with the whole court of heaven he, too, is beholding the perfect mirror "where depicted everything is seen." The goal of his toilsome journey is reached! He stands face to face with his Maker and looks into the ocean of Light, whence flow the rivulets that till then have sated him. Words fail him, not as they had failed

²³ *Summa* 1a, qu. 12, a. 7.

²⁴ *C. Gent.*, Bk. 3, c. 50.

him before in the course of his narrative when he had only momentarily faltered, but because "our intellect, as it draws near to its desire, so far engulfs itself that memory cannot follow."

. . . . La mia vista, venendo sincera,
E piu e piu entrava per lo raggio
Dell' alta luce, che, da sè è vero
Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
Che il parlar nostro ch' a tal vista cede,
E cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.—*Par.* xxxiii., 52-57.²⁵

Deeper insight shows him how utterly misleading is human speech, cast in its iron moulds of time and space. He is seized with dismay at the hopelessness of any attempt to recall the stupendous scene.

O quanto è corto il dire, e come, fioco
Al mio concetto! e questo, a quel ch' io vidi
E tanto che non basta a dicer poco.—*Par.* xxxiii., 121-123.²⁶

Nevertheless, for the sake of posterity, he essays the task, protesting its impossibility the while. There in the First Truth at once become self-evident all that mortals hold by Faith or feebly demonstrate. Contingency and contingent beings in their changing aspects stand revealed in the one supreme Necessity. In that Eternity outside time—outside all other limits—the past and future are wonderfully present. Every "when" and every "where" are focussed thereto, for is it not the centre and prime mover of the world—the alpha and omega of all.

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
Legato con amore in un volume,
Ciò che per l'universo si squaderna;
Sustanzia ed accidenti, e lor costume,
Quasi conflati insieme per tal modo,
Che ciò ch' io dico è un semplice lume.—*Par.* xxxiii., 85-90.²⁷

And yet in spite of these deep draughts of wisdom there remained ever an Infinite excess. Vision upon vision in the lower spheres had after all but ill prepared the pilgrim for the final one—and of necessity. "Broken lights" of the divine attributes, flashed from diverse points in the universe, wonderful on earth, in hell and in Purgatory, overpowering in heaven, are luminous indeed, yet

²⁵ My sight becoming purified
Was entering more and more into the ray
Of the High Light which of itself is true.
From that time forward what I saw was greater
Than our discourse, that to such vision yields,
And yields the memory unto such excess (L).

²⁶ O how all speech is feeble and falls short
Of my conceit, and this to what I saw
Is such, 'tis not enough to call it little! (L)

²⁷ I saw that in its depth far down is lying
Bound up with love together in one volume,
What through the universe in leaves is scattered;
Substance, and accident, and their operations,
All interlarded together in such wise
That what I speak of is one simple light. (L)

compared with their source are as the twilight. Still they *are* something, and the more valuable to mortal man as they are better suited to his capacity. Infinite Justice, Infinite Knowledge and Infinite Mercy are easiest to describe in finite terms—in the personifications of Justinian, of Beatrice, of Our Lady. So, too, the sublime truths of the Blessed Trinity and the Hypostatic Union had been ever present to Dante on his upward way, foreshadowed by many a simple device. The hymns and movements of the saints, for instance, had been specially reminiscent of the Three in One. Again he finds by experience that the reality surpasses all conception. For an instant he is permitted to contemplate, in mute adoration, the most inscrutable of all mysteries:

Nella profonda e chiara sussistenza
Dell' alto lume parosmi tre giri
Di tre colori e d' una continenza;
E d' un dall' altro, come Iri da Iri,
Parea riflesso, e il terzo parea foco
Che quinci e quin di egualmente si spiri

Quella circolazion, che al concetto
rareva in te come lume riflesso,
Dagli da sè del suo colore stesso
Dentra da sè del suo colore stesso
Mi parve pinta della nostra effige.—*Par.* xxxiii., 115-120; 127-31²⁸

Observe, there is no question in Dante's mind as to the absolute simplicity and immutability of the Godhead. He is most careful to warn his readers that there only appeared to be circles, etc.—*parvemi, parea*. Omnipotence remaining one and undivided seems to the onlooker to be full of never-ending changes. The Beatific Vision is a mass of apparent contradictions, until a final illumination reconciles the mystery of the Blessed Trinity and the Incarnation, when of a sudden the rapture ends.

It is not the least hopeful sign of the times that the burden of the *Paradiso* is daily becoming better known and loved. In some cases the interest may indeed be purely æsthetic, but in others it is a stepping-stone to unknown lands. Enamored of Dante's exalted Idealism, many to whom Scholasticism was a byword and a reproach are led to regard with less disdain the intellectual giants of the Dark Ages. Closer acquaintance may discover to them what a priceless treasure bigotry has thrown away. The gain to the Catholic Church

²⁸ In the profound and bright fused elements
Of the high light, three circles on me beamed,
Triple in hues, and single in contents;
And one reflected by another seemed,
As rainbow is by rainbow, and the third
Seemed fire which equally from either streamed.

That circle which seemed so conceived to be
Within Thee, as to be a light reflected,
Of its own very hue appeared to me
Within, when somewhat by my eyes inspected,
To have our image painted thereupon. (H)

is obvious. Random criticism of her methods and aims must be gradually disarmed. Her doctrines, as set forth by her saintly sons, will have renewed power to compel the submission of the thoughtful. Surely this is an issue to be prayed for, to-day, when dogma is fast fading from men's minds, and when, as a recent writer has told us, "the art and mystery of religion, whether as a profession or a creed, have come into such peril as never perhaps was since Europe accepted the Christian teaching."²⁹

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THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY.

THERE are not wanting reasons of a modern and immediate nature which make it henceforth useful and consoling to reflect on the earliest history of the Church, and in a special manner on the period of her foundation by the Apostles and their successors. The nineteenth century saw the almost complete loss of every external advantage that Catholicism had acquired through popular affection and public policy since the days of Constantine. The French Revolution was like a hurricane, after which only the hulk of the "Navicella" floated on the troubled waters of human life. Within one generation the mysteries of several ancient Oriental civilizations have been unveiled with a detail and an accuracy almost beyond belief. Egypt, Babylon, Assyria and remote India have yielded up with their languages an extensive knowledge of their history and their institutions. The remotest pre-history of the people of Europe has been laid bare, and in the process have arisen noble sciences like philology, anthropology and ethnology. Scholarly travel has chosen for its special object the rudest embryonic beginnings of human culture in every zone and clime. Thus we find ourselves in presence of an historical temper of mind that is very general, and whose first query is the natural and salutary one concerning the origin of things. Epochs of humanity, like the stages of the earth's growth, have each their own "cachet." In a critical and creative age, with so little left of the simple unquestioning habit of faith, it was impossible that the origin of so vast an institution as Christianity should not engage the attention of a multitude of students. It was impossible, too, that there should not follow a great diversity of views and opinions according as bias, heredity,

²⁹ q. v. Dr. Barry's article on *The Prospects of Catholicism* in the *National Review* for October, 1901.