Beatrice and Dante. Cantos 1.64-72

For much of the opening canto of Paradiso Dante and Beatrice are still located in the terrestrial paradise atop the mountain of Purgatory. Their flight upward to the celestial realm occurs as Dante stares into Beatrice's eyes, which are themselves fixed on the sun (1.64-72). Compare this optical scenario to the moment in Purgatorio when Dante looked into Beatrice's eyes as they reflected the alternating natures of the Griffin (Purg. 31.118-26). Beatrice's beauty—in particular, the radiance of her eyes and smile—increases as she and Dante rise through the heavens. At times Beatrice's intensified beauty is a sign to Dante that they have in fact ascended to a new region of Paradise.

Piccarda Donati. Canto 3.34-123

Piccarda is the sister of Forese Donati, Dante's Florentine friend expiating the vice of gluttony in purgatory, and the wicked Corso Donati, who (according to Forese in Purgatory) will suffer eternal damnation in hell (Purg. 24.82-7). As a leader of the black guelfs, Corso is one of the political enemies responsible for Dante's exile from Florence. Forese also told Dante that Piccarda resides in Paradise. Members of the Donati family, Piccarda and her brothers are related to Dante through his marriage to Gemma Donati. The lunar sphere is assigned to those who for one reason or another did not maintain their religious vows. Piccarda belonged to the "Poor Clares," an order founded by St. Clare of Assisi (1194-1253), a follower of St. Francis. Corso forced Piccarda to leave the convent of Santa Chiara at Monticelli (near Florence) and marry his henchman, Rossellino della Tosa, for self-serving political reasons. She died soon after this marriage.

Constance. Canto 3.109-20

This "great Constance" (Costanza) was the empress Constance (1152-98), wife of Henry VI, mother of Frederick II (the last dominant Holy Roman Emperor of the Middle Ages), and grandmother of Manfred. Like Piccarda, Constance was forced to leave her convent to enter into a political marriage. Dante's choice of Constance for the sphere of the Moon is a good example of his poetry of names, technically known as interpretatio nominis, which is based on an illuminating resonance between a person's name and his or her fate (or character). See Ciacco, Pier della Vigna, and Sapia. Here Dante exploits the traditional conception of the Moon as both the planet of Diana, the virgin goddess, and the planet of mutability or inconstancy. Piccarda, who was a "virgin sister" in the world (Par. 3.46), insists that though

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Costanza nominally broke her vows when she was forced to leave the convent, she nevertheless remained true to her promise--and thus to her name ("Constance")--in her heart (3.117).

Classical Invocations. Canto 1.13-36, 2.1-18

Classical characters and allusions have a prominent place in the first two cantiche of the *Divine Comedy*: the philosophers and poets of Limbo (Dante's beloved Virgil among them), Capaneus as the archetypal blasphemer, a momentous encounter with Ulysses in Lower Hell, moral exempla from classical mythology and history on the terraces of Purgatory, Cato's role as guardian of the mountain, companionship with Statius on the final terraces and top of Purgatory--to name several of the most obvious cases. Still, Dante's decision to begin his poetic voyage through the "holy kingdom" of Paradise (1.10) with a powerful dose of classical material may be cause for surprise. Invoking *good Apollo*, the poet seeks inspiration that will make his verses worthy of the "loved laurel" (1.13-15). The laurel became the crowning symbol of high achievement--in military campaigns as well as in poetry--when Apollo pledged his enduring love to the nymph Daphne after she metamorphosed into a laurel tree. To exact revenge on Apollo for an insult, Cupid struck the god with an arrow aimed at inciting love while piercing Daphne with an arrow that made her shun love. Daphne, emulating the virgin huntress Diana, rejected the amorous advances of Apollo and took flight. The river god Peneus transformed his daughter into the laurel tree (in answer to her prayers) just as Apollo was about to overtake her (Ovid, *Met*. 1.452-567).

The divine power that Dante calls on here is no stranger to violence, behavior perhaps more readily anticipated for poetry describing the punishments of Hell and purging trials of Purgatory than the workings of Paradise. The inspiration Dante seeks, to enable him to represent even a "shadow" of this blessed kingdom, derives from the same power displayed by Apollo when he killed the satyr Marsyas (who had foolishly competed with the god in a musical contest) by ripping the skin off his entire body (1.19-27): "Blood flowed everywhere, his nerves were exposed, unprotected, his veins pulsed with no skin to cover them. It was possible to count his throbbing organs, and the chambers of the lungs, clearly visible within his breast" (Ovid, *Met*. 6.388-91). Holding nothing back in his celebration of classical inspiration, Dante claims that Apollo, Minerva (Roman goddess of wisdom), and all nine Muses are behind him for his audacious attempt to sail uncharted poetic waters (2.7-9). He predicts that the wonder experienced by his readers during this journey will exceed the
wonder felt by the Argonauts when they saw their leader Jason, aided by Medea's potent magic, yoke fire-breathing oxen to a plow (2.16-18), thereby overcoming one of the obstacles to gaining possession of the Golden Fleece (Ovid, Met. 7.100-21).

**Trasumanar (neologism) and Glaucus.** Canto 1.64-72

Claiming that his ascent from the Terrestrial Paradise to the celestial realm of the blessed cannot be expressed adequately in words, Dante invents the word *trasumanar* ("to transhumanize, to pass beyond the human"), the first of many neologisms in the Paradiso. He compares the internal transformation he undergoes during this ascent to the change experienced by Glaucus, a fisherman-turned-god whose story contains several parallels with Dante's journey. Glaucus found a piece of land along the shore that was completely untouched by human civilization, a place of pristine beauty. He observed that the fish he caught became animated as soon as they touched the grass and that they then escaped en masse back into the water. Understandably amazed, Glaucus chewed several blades of the grass; seized with an irresistible longing for the sea, he bid the earth farewell and dove into the water, where he was received by the sea gods and "deemed worthy to join their company." Glaucus was then purified of his mortal elements and cleansed of sin (after reciting a charm nine times and immersing himself in one hundred rivers), thus becoming immortal himself. As a sea god Glaucus fell in love with Scylla, but the girl rejected his love and was turned into a monster (her lower body transformed into a pack of dogs) by the enchantress Circe after she, in turn, had been rebuffed by Glaucus (who had gone to her for assistance in winning the love of Scylla) (Ovid, Met. 13.900-14.69).

**Hysterón Proteron.** Canto 2.23-6

Dante conveys the speed of his ascent to the first sphere (Moon) by saying it took no longer than it takes an arrow "to strike, fly, and leave the bow" (2.23-6). The reverse chronological order of these actions is an example of *hysterón proteron*, from the Greek for "later / first."

**Moon Spots.** Canto 2.49-148

In addition to explaining the appearance of dark areas on the lunar surface, the episode of the "moon spots," comprising exactly one-hundred verses (2.49-148), establishes an important general lesson for understanding Paradise. Beatrice informs Dante--and the reader--that the usual ways of
attaining knowledge, through sensory perception and even the use of reason, are insufficient for grasping fully the spiritual realities of the heavens. In posing his question to Beatrice, Dante right away dismisses the popular belief for the lunar marks (2.49-51): God adorned Cain with thorns, as punishment for murdering his brother Abel, and exiled him to the Moon--"Cain with his thorns," as Virgil put it when telling time by the Moon in Hell (Inf. 20.124-6). Instead, Dante attributes the appearance of dark areas to the presence of denser and rarer portions of the lunar body (2.55-60), a rational, pseudo-scientific hypothesis that the poet vigorously supported in his earlier philosophical treatise (Convivio 2.13.9). Beatrice's refutation of this view points to the limits of reason and the need for an alternative theory of knowledge in Paradise.

Beatrice develops her argument with the confident hand of a scholastic master. She first objects to Dante's claim that dense and rare matter is the underlying cause of the moon spots: this would imply, by analogy, that a single formal principle (density) determines the varying luminosity of the stars when in fact multiple formal principles must engender multiple stellar powers (manifested by different gradations of brightness) (2.64-72). Turning back to the Moon, Beatrice delineates two possible configurations, both unacceptable, implied by Dante's reasoning. 1) The lunar body contains a section that is rare (i.e., transparent) through and through, which cannot be true because sunlight would then shine through the Moon during an eclipse (2.79-81); 2) the Moon contains alternating sections of rare and dense matter, with the dark spots caused by light reflected from dense matter located deep within the lunar body. Rebutting Dante's rational explanation with a rational argument of her own, Beatrice asks Dante (and us) to imagine an experiment in which light (from a candle located just behind the viewer) is reflected from three mirrors (two would actually suffice), one of which is placed further away from the light source than the other two. The reflected image of light, she argues, would be smaller in the more distant mirror but no less bright than the image reflected from the other mirrors. Thus dense matter further back in the lunar body could not be the reason for the dark spots (2.85-105).

The answer to this celestial question, according to Beatrice, therefore requires a more metaphysical approach (2.112-48). The uniform divine power, distributed among the stars, is unfolded and multiplied down through the heavens. The compounds formed from different powers joined to different planetary bodies then display varying luminosity not only among the stars but also within the Moon (and presumably the other planetary bodies as well).