“Saturn”  
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Peter Damian. Canto 21.43-135

The soul predestined to welcome Dante in the sphere of Saturn is Peter Damian (1007-72). Peter left a celebrated career as a teacher and entered the Benedictine monastery at Fonte Avellana (in central Italy), where he led a simple life conducive to spiritual worship and contemplation. Peter became abbot in 1043 and a champion of reform and a renewal of spiritual values in Church practice. He reluctantly accepted his appointment to cardinal in 1057. One of Peter's letters (his writings consist of 180 letters, some gathered into short books) contains the image of the ladder of contemplation, and another exhorts his fellow cardinals to forgo lavish material comforts and to live honest, virtuous lives.

Peter forcefully instructs Dante (to instruct others) that God's ways are ultimately cut off from human understanding (and even from that of angels) and should therefore not be probed without measure (21.91-9). He also launches one of the poem's most vivid assaults on Church corruption and hypocrisy by contrasting the ascetic humility of two of Christianity's founding fathers (Peter and Paul) with the decadent lives led by priests of Dante's day (21.127-35). One of Dante's early commentators (Benvenuto), lamenting Church practice later in the fourteenth century, goes even further: rather than seeing the mantle of a gluttonous prelate cover himself and his horse ("two beasts move under a single hide," as Peter Damian puts it in 21.134), one would now observe "three beasts" under the ample cloak: priest, horse, and concubine.

Benedict. Canto 22.28-96

A major figure in the history of Christianity, Benedict (c. 480 - c. 547) is considered the father of the Western monastic tradition. As a student in Rome, he was dismayed by the moral degeneracy he observed in the city and ran off (at age 14) to live an ascetic, solitary life in a cave in mountains east of Rome (Subiaco). His teaching and spiritual example earned him an enthusiastic following, which he exploited by establishing twelve monasteries to mark the renewal of Western Christianity. Benedict founded his most famous monastery at Monte Cassino, site of an ancient pagan temple (to Apollo) in the hills between Naples and Rome. As the author of the Regula Monachorum, the set of rules governing monastic life (with emphasis on teaching and manual labor as well as on prayer), Benedict is understandably enraged by the dissolute lives led by monks of Dante's day (22.73-96). Benedict identifies by name two fellow contemplatives, one known for

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saintliness within the Eastern tradition (Macarius) and the other famous as a Western hermit (Romualdus) (22.49).

**Ladder of Contemplation** Cantos 21.25-42, 22.68-72

Blessed spirits appearing in the sphere of Saturn move along a gleaming golden ladder that reaches up to the Empyrean, true home of all the souls in paradise (21.25-30; 22.61-9). It is appropriate for the ladder, a common metaphor in mystical writings marking "steps" of a spiritual journey to God, to begin here in the heaven adorned with contemplative spirits (22.46-8). Benedict (22.70-2) identifies this ladder of contemplation as the biblical ladder that appeared in a dream to Jacob, one of the twin sons (his brother is Esau) of Isaac and Rebecca. In his sleep Jacob sees a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels climbing and descending. After God, leaning against the ladder, blesses Jacob and his descendants, Jacob awakes and makes a solemn vow to honor his God (Genesis 28:12-22).

**Harmony of the Spheres.** Cantos 21-22

When Dante asks Peter Damian why the "sweet symphony of Paradise," which he heard in the other heavens, is silent in the sphere of Saturn, he is told the contemplative souls refrain from singing in order not to overwhelm their mortal visitor's auditory faculties *(Par. 21.58-63)*. Beatrice withholds her smile when she and Dante enter the seventh heaven for a similar reason. Because her beauty increases as they rise up through Paradise, Dante's eyesight would be destroyed if she were to smile now, just as Semele, a Theban princess pregnant with Bacchus by Jupiter, was incinerated when (tricked by jealous Juno) she foolishly asked her lover to show himself in his full godly splendor *(Par. 21.4-12; Ovid, Metamorphoses 3.253-315)*.

Dante's incorporation of music into his representation of Paradise accords with the Pythagorean theory of the harmony of the spheres that is featured in classical and medieval conceptions of the celestial realm. Cicero, in *The Dream of Scipio*, describes the heavenly music as "a concord of tones separated by unequal but nevertheless carefully proportioned intervals, caused by the rapid motion of the spheres themselves" (5.1). Harmony is achieved from the blending of tones corresponding to the different speeds of the eight revolving spheres, with the Moon emitting the lowest and the Fixed Stars the highest pitched sounds (5.1-2). The identical velocities of Mercury and Venus ensure that there are seven distinct tones, the perfect number which holds the universe together (5.2). Macrobius, combining Plato's
mathematical conception of the world soul with Cicero's musical spheres, believes the notes produced by the heavens "had to be harmonious, for they were innate in the Soul which impelled the universe to motion" (*Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 2.2.24). More specifically, Alan of Lille, writing in the twelfth century, describes the slow, low tones of the Moon (*Anticlaudianus* 4.347-55), the "sweet and finer sound" of the Sun (4.386-88), the "treble voice" of Venus (matched by Mercury's song [4.408-13]), the "Siren of thundering Mars" (4.434-36), Jupiter's "sweet song" (4.458-62), and the "matured harmony" of Saturn's voice (4.478-81).

Dante does not treat the celestial harmony systematically in the *Paradiso*, but he conceives of God as both the composer and conductor of the heavenly music (Par. 1.76-85). In the sphere of Mercury, Dante has the emperor Justinian compare the harmonious arrangement of the celestial spirits throughout Paradise to musical harmony (Par. 6.124-26), and he frequently calls attention to the musical performances of the spirits who appear in the spheres: see, for instance, *Paradiso* 6.1-9 (Mercury), 8.28-30 (Venus), 12.1-9 (Sun), 14.118-26 (Mars), and 18.73-81 (Jupiter). After Peter Damian denounces the immoral practices of "modern pastors," the contemplatives in Saturn raise a collective cry for divine vengeance that confounds Dante with its thunderous volume (Par. 21.130-42, 22.10-15). Blessed souls will once again sing when Dante visits the next heaven, the sphere of the Fixed Stars.