**Canto 33 (Dante sees God):**

**The Empyrean:**

***St Bernard[[1]](#footnote-1) offers a lofty PRAYER TO THE VIRGIN, asking her to intercede in Dante’s behalf, and in answer Dante feels his soul swell with new power and grow calm in rapture as his eyes are permitted the DIRECT VISION OF GOD.***

***There can be no measure of how long the vision endures. It passes and Dante is once more mortal and fallible. Raised by God’s presence, he had looked into the mystery and had begun to understand its power and majesty. Returned to himself, there is no power in him capable of speaking the truth of what he saw. Yet the impress of the truth is stamped upon his soul, which he now knows will return to be one with God’s Love. This is the culmination of Dante’s journey and he gives us his final message.***

"Virgin mother, daughter of thy Son;[[2]](#footnote-2)  
 humbled beyond all creatures and more exalted;,  
 predestined turning point of God’s intention;[[3]](#footnote-3)  
   
 thy merit so ennobled human nature   
5 that its divine Creator did not scorn

To make Himself the creature of His creature.

The Love that was rekindled in Thy womb[[4]](#footnote-4)

sends forth the warmth of the eternal peace  
 within whose ray this flower has come to bloom

10 Here, to us, thou art the noon and scope

of Love revealed; and among mortal men  
 the living fountain of eternal hope.  
   
 "Lady, thou art so near God’s reckonings,  
 that who seeks grace and does not first seek thee  
15 would have his wish fly upward without wings.  
   
 Not only does thy sweet benignity  
 flow out to all those who beg, but oftentimes

thy charity arrives before the plea  
   
 In thee is pity, in thee munificence,,  
20 in thee the tenderest heart, in thee unites  
 all that creation knows of excellence!  
   
 Now comes this man who from the final pit

of the universe up to this height has seen.  
 one by one, the three lives of spirit.

25 He prays to thee in fervent supplication  
 for grace and strength, that he may raise his eyes  
 to the all-healing final revelation.  
   
 "And I, who never desire more to see  
 the vision myself than I do that he may see It,  
30 add my own prayer, and pray that it may be.  
   
 enough to move you to dispel to the trace

Of every mortal shadow by thy prayers  
 and let him see revealed the Sum of Grace.  
   
 I pray thee further, all-persuading Queen,  
35 keep whole the natural bent of his affections[[5]](#footnote-5)  
 and of his powers after his eyes have seen.  
   
 Protect him from the stirrings of man’s clay;[[6]](#footnote-6)  
 see how Beatrice and the blessed host  
 clasp reverent hands to join me as I pray.”  
   
40 The eyes[[7]](#footnote-7) that God revers and loves the best   
 glowed on the speaker, making clear the joy

With which true prayer is heard by the most blest.

Those eyes turned then to the Eternal Ray,  
 through which, we must indeed believe, the eye  
45 of others do not find such ready way.  
   
 And I, who neared the goal of all my nature  
 felt my soul, at the climax of yearning,,  
 suddenly, as it out, grow calm with rapture.  
   
 Bernard then, smiling sweetly, gestured to me  
50 to look up, but I had already become  
 within myself all he would have me be.  
   
 Little by little as my new vision grew,  
 it penetrated further through the aura  
 of the high lamp which in Itself is true.[[8]](#footnote-8)  
   
55 What then I saw is more than tongue can say  
 Our human speech is dark before the vision.  
 The ravished memory swoons and falls away.  
   
 As one who sees in dreams and wakes to find  
 the emotional impression of his vision  
60 still powerful while its parts fade from his mind--

just such am I, having lost nearly all  
 the vision itself, while in my heart I feel  
 the sweetness of it yet distill and fall  
   
 So, in the sun, the footprints fade from snow.  
65 On the wild wind that bore the tumbling leaves  
 the Sybil’s oracles were scatted so.[[9]](#footnote-9)  
   
 O Light Supreme who doth Thyself withdraw  
 so far above man’s mortal understanding

lend me again some glimpse of what I saw;

70 make Thou my tongue so eloquent it may   
 of all Thy glory speak a single clue  
 to those who follow me in the world’s day;

for by returning to my memory  
75 somewhat, and somewhat sounding in these verses,  
 Thou shalt show man more of Thy victory.

So dazzling was the splendor of the Ray,

that I must certainly lost my senses  
 had I, but for an instant, turned away.[[10]](#footnote-10)  
   
 And so it was, as I recall, I could  
80 the better bear to look, until at last  
 my vision made one with the Eternal Good.  
   
 O grace abounding that had made me fit  
 To fix my eyes on the Eternal Light  
 until my vision was consumed in it!  
   
85 I saw within Its depth how It conceives,  
 all things in a single volume bound by Love,  
 of which the universe is the scattered leaves;  
   
 substance, accident, and their relation  
 so fused that all I say could do no more  
90 than yield a glimpse of that bright revelation.  
   
 I think I saw the universe form  
 that binds these things, for as I speak these words  
 I feel my joy swell and my spirits warm.  
   
 Twenty-five centuries since Neptune saw  
95 the *Argo’s* keel have not moved all mankind,  
 recalling that adventure, to such awe.[[11]](#footnote-11)

as I felt in an instant. My tranced being,  
 stared fixed and motionless upon that vision,  
 ever more fervent to see in the act of seeing.

100 Experiencing that Radiance, the spirit  
 is so indrawn it is impossible

Even to think if ever turning from It.

For the good which is the will’s ultimate object,  
 is all subsumed in It; and, being removed,  
105 all is defective which in It is perfect.  
   
 Now in my recollection of the rest  
 I have less power to speak than any infant  
 wetting its tongue yet at its mother’s breast;  
   
 and not because that Living Radiance bore  
110 more that one semblance, for It is unchanging  
 and it forever as it was before;  
   
 rather, as I grew worthier to see,   
 the more I looked, the more unchanging semblance  
 appeared to change with every change in me.  
   
115 Within the depthless deep and clear existence  
 of that abyss of light three circles shone---  
 three in color[[12]](#footnote-12), one in circumference:  
   
 the second from the first, rainbow from rainbow[[13]](#footnote-13);  
 the third, and exhalation of pure fire[[14]](#footnote-14)  
120 equally breathed forth by the other two.  
   
 But oh how much my words miss my conception,  
 which is itself so far from what I saw  
 that to call it feeble would be rank deception!  
   
 O Light Eternal fixed in Itself alone,  
125 by Itself alone understood, which from Itself  
 loves and glows, self-knowing and self-known;  
   
 that second aureole[[15]](#footnote-15) which shone forth in Thee,  
 conceived as a reflection of the first[[16]](#footnote-16)---,  
 or which appeared so to my scrutiny---,  
   
130 seemed in Itself of Its own coloration  
 to be painted with man’s image. I fixed my eyes  
 on that alone in rapturous contemplation.  
   
 Like a geometer wholly dedicated  
 to squaring the circle, but who cannot find,  
135 think as he may, the principle indicated---,

so did I study the supernal face.  
 I yearned to know just how or images merges  
 into that circle, and how it there finds place,  
   
 but mine were not the wings for such flight.  
140 Yet, as I wished, the truth I wished for came  
 cleaving my mind in a great flash of light.

Here my powers rest from their high fantasy,  
 but already I could feel my being turned---,  
 instinct and intellect balanced equally,  
   
145 as in a wheel whose motion nothing jars---

by the Love that moves the Sun and the other stars.

1. St. Bernard of Clairvaux was abbot of Clairvaux in Burgandy, a theologian who is associated with devotion to Mary and the ascent towards God through contemplation. Bernard stands as a symbol at the end of the Comedy, the figure who believed in the doctrine and theology of contemplation that is the structure of the poem. Bernard declared that both knowledge and love were necessary components in a union with God, and one must go through a process of contemplation to get there. Bernard’s contemplative process progresses in that one progresses from first loving himself for his own sake to, for his own sake, loving God; then one comes to love God for God’s sake, and in the final stage, he comes to love himself only for God’s sake. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Referring to Mary and the special place she holds in Catholic faith [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All-foreseeing God built his whole scheme for Mankind with Mary as its pivot, for through her He would become man. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. God, in a sense withdrew from man with Adam and Eve’s sin. In Mary, he returned and Himself became man. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bernard is asking Mary to protect Dante lest the intensity of the vision over power his faculties [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Protect him from the stirrings of base human impulses, especially from pride. Dante is about to receive a gift never before given to man and the thought of such glory might well move a mere mortal to an hubris that would turn glory to sinfulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Of Mary [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The light of God is the one light whose source is Itself. All others are a reflection of this [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The oracle, Sybil, the guide to Aeneas by Virgil, wrote her oracles on leaves, one letter to a leaf, then sent her message scattering in the wind. The truth could only be uncovered by one that could gather and put the leaves in the correct order. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Metaphoric statement: no man can lose his good in the vision of God, but only in looking away from it. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 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. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Holy Trinity [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. God and Jesus [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Holy Spirit [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. a circle of light or brightness surrounding something, especially as depicted in art around the head or body of a person represented as holy [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jesus was conceived in God’s image [↑](#footnote-ref-16)