

## CANTO XXXIII

THE SEVEN LADIES sing, weeping over the sorrowful fate of the chariot, and Beatrice grieves. But soon they set off, the seven in front of Beatrice, and the Pilgrim, Matelda, and Statius behind her. As they walk, Beatrice, in a very obscurely worded prophecy, predicts the eventual deliverance of the church and commands the Pilgrim to note her words and to repeat them exactly when he writes, in order to teach the living. The Pilgrim asks her why her words fly so high above his power to understand, and she answers that it is to teach him the difference between divine and earthly ways. They come to the source from which the two rivers of Lethe and Eunoë spring, and Matelda, on Beatrice's orders, leads the Pilgrim to drink of the restoring waters of Eunoë. The Poet protests that he would describe this inestimable pleasure at length, but that he has already filled the pages allotted for the second canticle. And so he says only that he came away from that holy water refreshed, eager to rise, and ready for the stars.

*Deus venerunt gentes*, sang the nymphs  
chanting in tears the dulcet psalmody,  
their voices alternating, three, then four, 3

and Beatrice listened to their song,  
sighing and sorrowful—hardly more grief  
showed in the face of Mary at the cross. 6

But when among those virgins silence reigned,  
yielding to her response, she stood up then  
and glowing like a flame, announced to them: 9

"*Modicum et non videbitis me;*  
*et iterum*, sisters so dear to me,  
*modicum et vos videbitis me.*" 12

Then, having placed the seven in front of her,  
she had us move behind with just a nod  
to me and to the lady and the poet. 15

So she moved forward, and she had not gone  
ten steps into the wood when, suddenly,  
she turned to fix her eyes on mine, and said, 18

- looking at me serenely: "Make more haste,  
so that, if I should wish to speak with you,  
you would be close enough to hear my words." 21
- I did as I was told. Once I was close,  
she said: "Why, brother, do you hesitate  
to question me, now that you are with me?" 24
- Like those who feel a paralyzing awe  
when in the presence of superiors  
and scarcely can find breath enough to speak— 27
- I, too, could utter, indistinctly though,  
the words: "My lady, you know all my needs,  
and how to satisfy them perfectly." 30
- Then she to me: "It is my wish that you  
from now on free yourself from fear and shame,  
and cease to speak like someone in a dream. 33
- Know that the vessel which the serpent broke  
was, and is not. Let him who bears the blame  
learn that God's vengeance has no fear of sops. 36
- The eagle that shed feathers on the car  
that would become a monster, then a prey,  
will not remain forever without heirs; 39
- I tell you this because I clearly see  
those stars, already near, that will bring in  
a time—its advent nothing can prevent— 42
- in which five hundred, ten, and five shall be  
God's emissary, born to kill the giant  
and the usurping whore with whom he sins. 45
- Perhaps my prophecy with its dark words,  
obscure as those of Themis or the Sphinx,  
has not convinced you but confused your mind; 48
- but soon events themselves shall be the Naiads  
that will untie this riddle's complex knot—  
with no destruction of the sheep or grain. 51
- Note well my words: what I have said to you,  
you will repeat, as you teach those who live  
that life which is merely a race to death. 54

- And when you write, be sure that you describe  
the sad condition of the tree you saw  
despoiled, not once but twice, here on this spot. 57
- Whoever robs this tree or breaks its limbs  
sins against God, blasphemes in deeds, for He  
created it to serve His Holy Self. 60
- Because God's first soul tasted of this tree,  
more than five thousand years in pain he yearned  
for Him Who paid the penalty Himself. 63
- Your mind's asleep if you do not perceive  
the special reason for the tree's great height  
and why it grows inverted toward the top. 66
- If your vain thoughts had not been to your mind  
waters of Elsa, and your joy in them  
a Pyramus to your mulberry, then 69
- from the tree's two strange attributes alone,  
you would have recognized its moral sense,  
and seen God's justice in the interdict. 72
- But since I see your mind has turned to stone  
and, like a stone, is dark and, being dark,  
cannot endure the clear light of my words, 75
- it is my wish you carry back with you  
if not my words themselves, at least some trace,  
as pilgrims bring their staves back wreathed with palm." 78
- And I to her: "As wax stamped by the seal  
will never lose the outline of the print,  
so, your seal is imprinted on my mind. 81
- But your desired words, why do they fly  
so high above my mind? The more I try  
to follow them, the more they soar from sight." 84
- She said: "Why do they? So that you may come  
truly to know that school which you have followed,  
and see how well its doctrine follows mine— 87
- also, that you may see that mankind's ways  
are just as far away from those divine  
as earth is from the highest spinning sphere." 90

- To that I answered: "I cannot recall  
ever having estranged myself from you:  
I have no guilty conscience on that score." 93
- "You say that you do not remember it?"  
smiling, she said. "But, surely, you recall  
drinking of Lethe's waters just today; 96
- and even as fire can be inferred from smoke,  
your lack of memory is patent proof  
that your estrangement from me was a sin. 99
- But from now on, I promise you, my words  
will be as plain as they will have to be  
for your uneducated mind to grasp." 102
- And blazing brighter, moving slower now,  
the sun was riding its meridian ring,  
whose point in space depends upon the viewer, 105
- when—just as someone who escorts a group  
stops short if something very strange appears  
in front of him—those seven ladies stopped 108
- as they approached the margin of a shade,  
pale as a mountain's shadow on cool streams  
flowing beneath green foliage and dark boughs. 111
- Ahead of them I saw spring from one source  
what might have been the Tigris and Euphrates!  
Then, like close friends, they slowly drew apart. 114
- "O light, O glory of the human race,  
what is this water pouring from one source,  
and then dividing self from self?" I asked. 117
- She answered: "Ask Matelda to explain."  
And then the lovely lady spoke, as though  
she felt she had to free herself from blame: 120
- "I have already made this clear to him,  
this and much more; and Lethe, I am sure,  
could not have washed away the memory." 123
- Then Beatrice: "A more important thing,  
perhaps, weighs on his mind, depriving him  
of memory and clouding his mind's eye. 126

But here before us is the stream Eunoë:  
 now, lead him there and, as it is your wont,  
 revive his weakened powers in its flow." 129

Then, gracious as she was, without demur,  
 submitting her own will to another's will,  
 once this was made apparent by a sign, 132

the lovely lady took me by the hand,  
 and said to Statius as she moved ahead  
 with queenly modesty: "And you come too." 135

Reader, if I had space to write more words,  
 I'd sing, at least in part, of that sweet draught  
 which never could have satisfied my thirst; 138

but now I have completed every page  
 planned for my poem's second canticle—  
 I am checked by the bridle of my art! 141

From those holiest waters I returned  
 to her reborn, a tree renewed, in bloom  
 with newborn foliage, immaculate, 144

eager to rise, now ready for the stars.

## NOTES

1. *Deus venerunt gentes*: Saddened by the tableau depicting the captivity of the church, the seven virtues begin to sing Psalm 78[79], a lamentation for the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem, which begins: "O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; / they have defiled your holy temple, they have laid / Jerusalem in ruins."

3. *their voices alternating, three, then four*: The psalm is being sung antiphonally: the three theological virtues and the four cardinal virtues sing alternate verses.

10-12. *Modicum et non*: During the mournful psalm, Beatrice is said to resemble Mary looking at her Son on the cross (5-6). When the psalm ends, however, Beatrice changes and speaks the words of Christ to his disciples concerning his own departure and return: "A little while and you shall not see me; and again, a little while and you shall see me because I go to

the Father . . ." (John 16:16). Christ and his church, Beatrice reassures all, will someday return triumphant.

13-15. *Then, having placed the seven in front of her*: A new procession is formed by Beatrice's mere nod. The seven virtues, still holding torches as in the previous canto (XXXII, 98-99), precede Beatrice, who here and now represents Sapientia or Wisdom and is herself filling the spot occupied by the chariot in the original procession. Beatrice is followed by the Pilgrim, Statius ("the poet," who has been in silent attendance all along), and Matelda.

17. *ten steps*: It is Dante's custom to employ numbers symbolically, and many commentators have proposed symbolic meanings for the number ten here. None of the interpretations is particularly satisfying, however, and since it is not actually ten steps that Beatrice takes, but rather some unspecified number fewer than ten ("and she had not gone ten steps," 16-17), it is quite possible that Dante meant us simply to understand "ten steps" as several steps.

19-21. *"Make more haste"*: Beatrice is in complete control here, but her role is now more the gentle than the stern mother. The change in Beatrice's tone and glance from the severe to the serene reflects the change in the Pilgrim's state. Having confessed and been forgiven, he no longer deserves Beatrice's righteous anger.

31. *"It is my wish"*: Beatrice is preparing Dante to cross the second river, Eunoë. Just as all memory of his sins was washed away by the Pilgrim's drinking Lethe's waters in *Purg.* XXXI, 102, so the memory of his good deeds and their strength will be restored when he drinks the waters of the Eunoë. Until then, however, the Pilgrim must strive to put aside his fears and shame.

34-35. *the vessel which the serpent broke I was, and is not*: Here, with the beginning of Beatrice's explanation to Dante of the allegorical meaning of the pageant, we return to the apocalyptic atmosphere. Her words echo those of the angel in Revelations as he explains the mystery of the woman on the scarlet beast: "The beast that thou sawest was, and is not" (Apoc. 17:8).

35. *Let him who bears the blame*: A collective reference to Pope Clement and Philip the Fair.

36. *learn that God's vengeance has no fear of sops*: The Italian reads "che vendetta di Dio non teme suppe." The precise meaning of the word *suppe* is not clear. Early commentators mentioned customs, prevalent in Dante's time and before, according to which vengeance for a crime could be expiated if the criminal ate a ritual meal of atonement (a *sop* of bread and wine) over the grave of his victim. If the murderer could accomplish this feat, he would then be free of the vengeance of his victim's family. For a summary of the earlier commentators, see Chimenz (p. 611).

37-39. *The eagle that shed feathers*: The eagle is the Roman Empire. Dante considered Frederick II as the last true heir of the Caesars. Since his death in 1250 the empire has lived in expectation of a strong leader capable of restoring order and tranquility.

43. *five hundred, ten, and five*: Beatrice is prophesying the coming of such an heir to the Caesars: "God's emissary" (44) to Italy. Exactly whom Beatrice had in mind is a question that continues to puzzle readers of the poem. As he was in the *Veltro* prophecy spoken by Virgil at the beginning of the poem (see *Inf.* I, 101-105), Dante is being purposely vague here. Grandgent points out (p. 612) that the practice of equating numbers with the letters of a name is an ancient one, found, for example, in the Hebrew Kabbala, or in Lucian's *Alexander or the False Prophet*, or in Rev. 13:18. It was a practice very much in vogue in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe and comes up elsewhere in Dante's writing (cf. *Vita nuova*, XXX). One guess at an identity for the emissary is based on transforming 515 into the Roman numerals DXV and reversing the last two letters, which gives DVX or dux (leader, a temporal monarch). This code word is then associated with the great emperor and leader Henry VII. The positive tone of Beatrice's presentation in 40-42, "I clearly see . . . its advent nothing can prevent," indicates, perhaps, that Dante was confident of the success of Henry VII's expedition to Italy in 1310. Henry died in 1313. For a summary of the many solutions proposed for this problem, see Mazzamuto's article in the *Enciclopedia dantesca*.

47. *Themis or the Sphinx*: Both Themis and the Sphinx are

associated in classical mythology with "dark words" and obscure riddles. Themis, the daughter of Gaea (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven) and second wife of Zeus, was a prophetic deity, purportedly Apollo's predecessor at Delphi. When consulted by Deucalion and Pyrrha concerning the repopulating of earth after the deluge, Themis told them to cast their mother's bones behind them. Her meaning was that they were to cast stones behind their backs (See Ovid, *Metam.* I, 379-94).

The Sphinx (a monster possessing the head of an innocent girl and the body of a fierce beast) was an oracle of Themis's, who sat on a rock outside the city of Thebes. To every Theban who passed by, she posed the same riddle: "What walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, and on three at night?" Those who failed to solve the riddle were slain. Oedipus, the ill-fated king of Thebes, solved the riddle: Man in his infancy crawls on all fours, in his maturity walks erect, and in old age is supported by a staff. Enraged at having the correct answer, the Sphinx threw herself down from the rock and was killed. Themis later avenged the death of her oracle by dispatching a monster to ravage the Thebans' fields and flocks (See Ovid, *Metam.* VII, 762-65).

49-51. *The Naiads . . . no destruction of the sheep or grain:* Dante erroneously attributes the solving of the riddle of the Sphinx to the Naiads, or water nymphs, having gotten his information from a faulty text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VII, 757), in which the word "Naiades" was substituted for "Laiades" (= Oedipus, the son of Laius).

Beatrice is saying here that her prophecy (or riddle), unlike that of the Sphinx, will be solved with no destruction, with no ravaging of the Thebans' fields and flocks.

54. *that life which is merely a race to death:* St. Augustine (*De civ. Dei* XIII, 10) says the same thing: "ut omnino nihil sit aliud tempus vitae huius, quam cursus ad mortem."

56-57. *the tree you saw I despoiled, not once but twice:* The Pilgrim saw the tree in the Earthly Paradise despoiled first by Adam (as verses 61-63 indicate) and then by the vicissitudes of *Purg.* XXXII, 109-60, especially the episode when the giant (Philip the Fair) detaches the chariot from the tree. (When the chariot was attached to the tree, it had burst into bloom [XXXII, 50-60].)

62. *more than five thousand years in pain he yearned*: Dante (using a round number) adopts the chronology of Eusebius, which puts the birth of Christ at 5200 years and his death on the cross 5232 years after the Creation. The "pain" refers to the 930 years of Adam's life on earth after his exile from the Earthly Paradise; the fact that "he yearned" refers to the 4302 years Adam spent in Limbo waiting for Christ to descend and release him (*Inf.* IV, 52–55). According to these figures, the Crucifixion took place in the year 5232.

65–66. *the special reason for the tree's great height*: The height of the tree is the might of the empire, and the reason it "grows inverted toward the top" is to indicate God's wish for the inviolability of the empire (see *Purg.* XXII, 133–135, and XXXII, 40–42).

68. *waters of Elsa*: The Elsa is a river that flows into the Arno between Florence and Pisa; at certain locations (especially near Colle) it had the property of "petrifying" objects immersed and left in its waters.

69. *Pyramus*: For the story of Pyramus, Thisbe, and the mulberry tree, see the note to *Purg.* XXVII, 37–39. Beatrice is saying that because the Pilgrim's "vain thoughts" (67) have hardened his intellect (68), and because the pleasure he derived from them has left some stain of sin on his mind (it has darkened it as the blood of Pyramus once stained the white mulberry a dark red), he does not understand the significance of the tree: why God prohibited Adam from eating of the tree (70–72).

85–87. *She said: "Why do they?"*: Beatrice is explaining to the Pilgrim why her words are so difficult to grasp; that is, she is answering the question he asked in the preceding tercet (82–84). In this way he will see just how inferior to her "doctrine" (87)—and let us keep in mind that Beatrice is speaking here in her role of Sapientia or Wisdom—were his philosophical studies ("that school which you have followed," 86), based primarily on Aristotle and expounded by Dante in his *Convivio*.

90. *the highest spinning sphere*: This is the outermost of the nine revolving heavens, the *Primum Mobile*.

103–105. *And blazing brighter, moving slower now*: It is now noon in Purgatory, and at noontime the sun appears to be mov-

ing slower. The meridian, unlike the equator, which is a fixed line, shifts from one place to another, according to the longitude of the place in which the viewer is situated. Midday, according to St. Bonaventure, is the noblest hour of the day, the hour in which Christ ascended to Heaven. This is the last reference to time measured by the sun in the *Comedy*.

113. *the Tigris and Euphrates*: These two rivers of southwest Asia rise in Turkey, join in Iraq, and flow into the Persian Gulf. They are the last two of the four rivers mentioned in Genesis (2:14) as watering the Earthly Paradise. Dante's information that these two rivers spring from the same source may have come from Boethius (*Consol. philos.* V, i, 3-4).

115. "*O light, O glory of the human race*": The Pilgrim addresses Beatrice in her allegorical role of Wisdom.

118. "*Ask Matelda to explain*": At last the "lovely lady" who brought the Pilgrim across the river to Beatrice is named, and in a very casual way indeed—as if she were one of Beatrice's best friends (see Singleton, p. 823).

124. *Then Beatrice: "A more important thing"*: She is probably alluding to her reproach of the Pilgrim or, perhaps, to the meaning of the procession that has passed.

127. *the stream Eunoë*: See note to *Purg.* XXVIII, 130.

128. *as it is your wont*: This phrase makes clear Matelda's role at the top of the mountain of Purgatory: we must assume that the "lovely lady" performs this service for all souls who pass through the garden; in fact, she says to Statius in verse 135: "And you come too." Beatrice, on the other hand, will come just once to the top of the mount, as she did in this case, to judge her lover (as Christ will come once at the Final Judgment to judge all mankind). Beatrice's advent, then, is an allegory, a dumbshow for the sake of one man, Dante, the Pilgrim, while Matelda's appearance and action is a reality for every saved soul on its way to Paradise.

129. *revive his weakened powers*: By drinking of the waters of Eunoë, the memory of good deeds done in the past is restored (see *Purg.* XXVIII, 129-31). And it is Matelda (the active life) who performs this office.

134. *Statius*: This is the last reference to Statius in the poem. We must assume that once he has tasted of Eunoë he will, like every purged soul ready to leave Purgatory, rise directly to his predestined seat in the Emyrean.

136-41. *Reader, if I had space*: If it were not for the following tercet and concluding verse (142-45), the *Purgatory* would, indeed, come to a pedantic ending here, in Dante's final Address to the Reader, where the Poet implies a preestablished plan for the structure of his poem.

142-45. *From those holiest waters . . . now ready for the stars*: The Pilgrim describes his condition after drinking (or being submersed in) the waters of Eunoë and returning to Beatrice in terms of rebirth, new life, resurrection, purity, and freedom to rise—the major motifs of the opening canto of the *Purgatory*. Returning to Beatrice from Eunoë represents the fulfillment of Cato's instructions at the foot of the mountain (*Purg.* I, 94-105). As at the end of the *Inferno*, the Pilgrim finds himself at the foot of a mountain that is not unlike that mountain he found he could not climb in Canto I (or the opening) of the *Inferno*. Now, at the end of the *Purgatory*, it is as though for a brief moment the Pilgrim were again at the base of this island, where rushes grow in soft sand, again ready for ascent.

As do the other two canticles of the *Divine Comedy*, the *Purgatory* ends with the word *stelle* ("stars"), stressing the upward movement toward God, the goal and motivating force of the entire poem.

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