DANTE AND DIONYSIUS: THE ARTICULATION OF THE HEAVENLY VISION OF CANTO 28 OF THE *PARADISO*

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Canto 28 of the *Paradiso* discusses Dante's vision of the nine choirs of angels which surround God. Beatrice instructs him on their functions, their three hierarchies and their correct ordering. The Pilgrim sees a tiny point around which glow nine bright and spinning circles, turning at a rate of speed that varies in proportion to their distance from the point. In her discourse, Beatrice specifically mentions to the Pilgrim the mystic Dionysius and Pope (Saint) Gregory the Great. Both theologians were extremely influential in medieval angelology, but proposed different orderings for the nine choirs of angels. Beatrice declares that Dionysius was correct and Gregory wrong in their teachings on the proper ordering of the angels. I intend to demonstrate how Dante's conscious decision not only to single out but to favor Dionysius reflects his desire both to applaud as well as to amplify the Dionysian themes which he chooses to make use of in this canto. Additionally, I maintain that Dante expands the whole concept of proper ordering and "hierarchy" in the canto not only by discussing the angelic hierarchies, but also by constructing a "hierarchy" of theologians.

Pope Gregory (ca. 540-604), considered to be the "architect" of the medieval papacy,[1] was known for, among his other writings, his collection of *Homilies on the Gospel*. The *Homily on the Gospel of Luke* is one of the sources which contains his teaching on angels. The Pseudo-Dionysius (ca. latter 5th century), as he is known today, was a Christian Platonist author who fraudulently claimed to be Dionysius the Areopagite, an Athenian convert to Christianity of the Apostle Paul spoken of in Acts 17:34. His body of writings includes *The Celestial Hierarchy*, which discusses the names, functions and order of the nine angelic groups, and was quite well-known in the Middle Ages by both theologians and Church Fathers alike. Current scholarship has still not uncovered the real identity of the Pseudo-Dionysius. However, in the Middle Ages, his writings were generally accepted as authentic and authoritative and they influenced the idea of a divinely established cosmic "order."

Various theologians had noticed the numerous scriptural designations for angels and had attempted to compile them into lists of groups. What distinguished the Dionysian teaching, however, was the precise way in which the nine orders were grouped in three hierarchies.[2] In the writings of Dionysius, the three angelic hierarchies try to assimilate as much as possible to and seek union with the Divinity. However, the orders of angels also have the task to pass *down* the light of God- their function is an illuminative one.

Light and knowledge of God flow *from* God and each angelic being becomes radiant with light and passes that light *down*, until it eventually reaches us on earth. In Dionysius, the hierarchical scale of being and the sense of dependence have significance in this matter of illumination - higher orders have a greater capacity to receive more of God's presence and pass it on. The closer any given angelic order is to God, the greater capacity that order has to receive the Divine Light. It should be noted that Dionysius does not assign the angels any practical cosmological role, as Dante does, to angelic "motor" intelligences which move the spheres.[3]

In Canto 28, Beatrice ennumerates to the Pilgrim the nine groups of angels in the following Dionysian order: the first hierarchy is comprised of Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones. The second hierarchy is made up of Dominions, Virtues, and Powers; finally, the third hierarchy includes the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels.[4] Beatrice discusses the angels in three specific groups which she refers to as "ternaro" (115),[5] "gerarcia" (121), and "tripudi" (124). Additionally, she names them in the Dionysian descending sequence from top to bottom beginning with the order of the Seraphim and ending with the order of the Angels. Thus, Dante accepts not only the Dionysian system of nine orders but the idea of three hierarchies as well.

In the *Paradiso*, Dante refers to Dionysius twice, and in both instances, he is mentioned specifically in relation to his knowledge about the angels. In canto 10, in the sphere of the Sun among the theologians, Dionysius is introduced by Thomas Aquinas as he who saw on earth what an angel is and what it does: "Appresso vedi il lume di quel cero/ che giù, in carne, più a dentro vide/ l'angelica natura e 'l ministero" (115-117). Then again in canto 28, Beatrice credits Dionysius for having named and ordered the angelic groups correctly: "E Dionisio con tanto disio/ a contemplar questi ordini si mise,/ che li nomò e distinse com'io" (130-132). The Poet chooses "contemplar" to describe Dionysius' "contemplation" or deep reflection upon the angelic orders. But we are then made to understand that Dionysius was correct not only because he "contemplated" the angelic orders, but because the Apostle Paul revealed it to him: "E se tanto secreto ver proferse/ mortale in terra, non voglio ch'ammiri;/ chè chi 'l vide qua su lil discoperse" (136-138). In both canto 10 and canto 28, Dante-Poet highlights the fact that Dionysius contemplated these angels on earth, not in Heaven, with the emphatic "*che giù in carne*" and "*mortale in terra*."

Beatrice remarks that Paul revealed truths about the angels "con altro assai del ver di questi giri" (139). Beatrice does not explicitly state what the "other truths" are which Paul revealed to Dionysius. Whatever they may have been, we can be sure that Dante is now seeing these truths himself with his

very own eyes, just as Paul did. Presently, it is *Dante* who is *seeing* "these truths" - what was first understood and contemplated by Dionysius on earth will now be seen by Dante in Heaven. These passages place Dante and Dionysius in a close hierarchical relationship in terms of knowledge of celestial "truths." The Dionysian contemplations serve as authoritative forerunners to the celestial angelic visions of Dante-Poet.

The various words which Dante uses in canto 28 to describe the angelic hierarchies reflect not only his fondness for the number three, but also the Dionysian triadic system of ordering. What is outstanding is the way in which the Poet emphasizes the number three in describing the angelic beings themselves: "Perpetualemente 'Osanna sberna/ con *tre* melode, che suonano in *tre*/ ordini di letizia, onde s'*interna*" (118-120) (emphasis mine). One commentator has noted that "Dante has structured this tercet to convey the ideas of circularity (eternity) and trinity (God)."[6] Observing that Dante has taken pains to use only three words to fill out one verse ("perpetualemente 'Osanna' sberna"), he maintains that this tercet "on a literal level is about the three orders that form the second hierarchy of angels, on another level - the poetic level of language imitating action - it is also a verbal picture of God."[7] If it is a verbal picture of God, however, it is certainly *not* a picture of God that we have in canto 28.

The image of God as a tiny, brilliant point is perhaps the most striking aspect of Dante's representation of the Divinity. Commentators have noted that medieval theologians, including Bonaventure and Aquinas, referred to God as a center, a point, or as "One." But largely ignored by Dante commentators is the image of the center point of a circle and surrounding radii as it appears in Dionysius, when he explains the participation of beings in God's goodness. Dionysius explains that all beings participate in the goodness of God, and this goodness overflows and dispenses itself outward toward multiplicity:

> Now this is unified and common to the whole divinity, that the entire wholeness is participated in by each of those who participate in it... it is rather like the case of a circle. The center point of the circle is shared by the surrounding radii.[8]

The image we see of God in canto 28 is not the triune God of *Paradiso* 33, where God is seen as three circles of three different colors all contained distinctly within one single circumference. Canto 28's God is the Point-God, the One-God, the indivisible and geometric God. Only once in the canto is God called "Dio"(128) and only once is he referred to as the "favilla pura" (pure flame)(38). Instead, he is mainly referred to as "punto." Seven times in his

poem the Poet calls God a "point," each reference occuring in the *Paradiso*. The majority of these references are clustered in canto 28 - here God is named "punto" *five* times.

While nobody would deny the significance of "three" when speaking about God, the uses of "three" in the canto do not refer to Him. Instead, every word which is formed with the number "three" (tre) in the entire canto either describes or refers to the angelic hierarchies, not God. The use of "terzo" in verse 29 refers to the third fiery ring (out of a total of nine fiery rings) surrounding the bright point. These circles of light which spin more or less swiftly and are more or less bright in proportion to their nearness to the point are really the nine angelic choirs. The word "ternaro" in both verse 105 and 115 describes the first and second triads of angels respectively. The "tre melode" and the "tree" found in verse 119 refer to the three melodies which are sung by each of the three hierarchies. The use of "s'interna" in verse 120 refers to the triple ranks of the three hierarchies. Finally, the "tripudi" of verse 124 refers to the third and last angelic hierarchy. These words formed with the number "three" highlight the trio of hierarchies which each contain three orders. When we consider that it was precisely the triadic distribution of the angelic hierarchies that was one of Dionysius' principle "claims to fame" and which he outlined in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Dante's use of three's here in this canto gains a special significance. Dante is seeking to expound upon and even surpass the Dionysian teachings in this angelic canto of his *Paradiso* through his own direct and immediate vision of the angels.

Canto 28 goes beyond emphasizing the angelic hierarchics' role as movers of the spheres. Here we see what their functions are as angels. Their vision, light and movement are all proportional - the closer an angelic order is to the point (God), the more it sees and resembles God: "E dei saper che tutti hanno diletto/ quanto la sua veduta si profonda/ nel vero in che si queta ogni intelletto" (106-108). The entire hierarchical system of angels is pulling toward God, yet they are connected to the various spheres which influence man on earth. Their circling and flaming light really contain a twofold symbolism - their contemplation in regards to God and their action in regards to God's creation. There is both an upward as well as downward motion involved in their "pulling" and "being pulled": "Questi ordini di su tutti s'ammirano/ e di giù vincon sì, che verso Dio/ tutti tirati sono, e tutti tirano" (127-129). The nine orders of angels therefore make up a hierarchy which both gazes toward God and prevails downward. Like the entire community of Paradiso, they are all "pulled" towards the same point (God) and desire to be like him.

In explaining that an angelic hierarchy is uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenments given to it, Dionysius maintains that its goal is to

> enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him. A hierarchy has God as its leader of all understanding and action. It is forever looking directly at the comeliness of God... and causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself.[9]

Likewise, in Dante, the angels have a desire to be like God, to be near him as much as possible. Their "likeness" is proportional, for the higher they are on the angelic scale, the more they are like God, the point: "Cosi veloci seguono i suoi vimi/ per somigliarsi al punto quanto ponno;/ e posson quanto a veder son sublimi" (100-102). Beatrice tells the Pilgrim that the angels' vision delves into the truth of God, and that they are as joyful in as much as they see and know God. They glow and move more or less rapidly according to how close they are from the "favilla pura": "...e chiascheduno/ più tardo si movea, secondo ch'era/ in numero distante più da l'uno/ e quello avea la fiamma più sincera/ cui men distava la favilla pura,/ credo però che più di lei s'invera" (34-39).

In describing the angels in their relationship to God, Dante highlights the importance of order and place in the angelic world which in turn reflects the necessity of order and hierarchy on earth. It is fitting, therefore, that the one and only time the word "gerarcia"(121) appears in the entire *Comedy* is in this very canto. It is equally remarkable that it appears here because it was Dionysius who invented the word itself, in proposing not only a hierarchy of angels but also a hierarchy in the church.[10] Beatrice distinctly corrects Gregory's erroneous teaching, and tells the Pilgrim that upon arriving in Paradise, he "laughed" at his mistake: "in questo ciel, di se medesmo rise" (135). Instead, she singles out Dionysius for his proper ordering and contemplations regarding the angels. Dante-Poet thus adds to the concept of angelic hierarchy the notion of a "hierarchy" of theologians. By mentioning both the "erring" Gregory and the "contemplating" Dionysius, Dante intentionally fits himself within a framework of theologians who taught on angelology. The Pilgrim's own vision, as well as Beatrice's decisive declaration on the "correct" angelic ordering, demonstrates his desire to establish himself as his own authority on angels.

Dionysian theology provides the source for the Pilgrim's vision of the celestial hierarchies. But the link with Dionysius also associates the Pilgrim

with the Apostle Paul who had a vision of Paradise and who named various angelic groups in his scriptural writings.[11] Here at the end of *Paradiso* we have come full-circle, for we are reminded of the Pilgrim's reference to Paul at the onset of his journey in the second canto of *Inferno* when he claims that "io non Paolo sono" (32). Dante-Pilgrim becomes the "Chosen Vessel" to bring back the truth on angels. In essence, however, Dante-Pilgrim surpasses *both* Gregory and Dionysius - he sees for himself the angels twirling around God. Dante becomes the "new Dionysius" who will not only contemplate but will see first-hand God's most sophisticated and intelligent creatures.

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NOTES

[1] Claude Peifer, O.S.B., "Gregory I the Great, Pope," *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribener's Sons, 1988) 668.

[2] Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 75. The author notes that it was Dionysius who "first organized the nine into three groups of three each... whenever medieval angelology presented the angelic ranks as a triple triad, the Dionysian imprint is unmistakable."

[3] Dante brings in the idea of the celestial motors, emphasizing not only their contemplative function but their function as movers of the heavens. In attributing a direct action of the angelic intelligences on the passive nature of the heavens, he identifies both celestial angels as well as motor intelligences. See *Par.* 2.127-129 and *Par.* 28.64-69.

[4] Earlier, in the *Convivio* (2, v) Dante discusses the angels and orders them in the same manner as Pope Gregory in his *Moralium libre exposito in librum B. Job*, 32. Here in Paradise, however, Dante fully abandons his former ordering of the angels in favor of the one proposed by Dionysius.

[5] All quotations from *Paradiso* 28 are taken from *La divina commedia*, ed. Fredi Chiapelli, 2nd ed. (Milano: Mursia, 1960).

[6] Mark Musa, trans. *Paradiso*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1987) 339.

[7] Musa, 339.

[8] *The Divine Names*, IV, 693B (72). All quotations of Dionysius are from *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Trans. Colm Luibheid, Foreward, Notes, and Translation Collaboration by Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist

Press, 1987). Page numbers are given in parenthesis after the chapter and line citations.

[9] *The Celestial Hierarchy*, III,165A (154).

[10] Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary* 19.

[11] See Colossians 1:16, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, and Ephesians 1:21.

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