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Article

# Imparadising, transhumanizing, intrining: Dante's celestial vision

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**Abstract** In Canto XXVIII of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice reveals to Dante the nine spheres of the celestial hierarchies, each controlled by one of the ranks of angels. In the opening of this canto, Dante coins the word 'imparadises,' which coordinates with two earlier coinages in the *Paradiso*: 'transhumanize' and 'intrine.' This essay explores the meaning and context of these three words, along with discussions of Robert Duncan's and Osip Mandelstam's involvements with Dante's poem, all of which leads to a more personal investigation of the origin of a poem of my own, 'When Twilight into Noonday Knowledge Gyres,' in which I try to recreate some of the effects of Dante's poem.

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The second half of Canto XXVIII in the *Paradiso* relates by way of Beatrice's explanation the heavenly hierarchy of angels, which Dante, availing himself of the geocentric cosmic ordering Ptolemy propagated in the second century of the Common Era, relates to the planets themselves. Paradise appears as a vault of concentric shells through which Dante is assumed: his visit to each of the nine spheres of heaven (which are also the planetary spheres) is watched over by one of nine angelic orders. In ascending rank, they are: angels (Moon), archangels (Mercury), principalities (Venus), powers (Sun), virtues (Mars), dominions (Jupiter), thrones (Saturn), cherubim (Fixed Stars) and seraphim (Primum

Mobile). Canto XXVIII contains in its opening tercet a verb Dante coined, one whose inventiveness engulfs the entirety of the vision of these grand rotating celestial orbs:

Poscia che 'ncontro a la vita presente  
 d'i miseri mortali aperse 'l vero  
 quell ache 'mparadisa la mia mente (Dante, 1975, Lines 1–3)

'*mparadisa*; 'imparadises.' Longfellow translates these lines to read:

After the truth against the present life  
 Of miserable mortals was unfolded  
 By her who doth imparadise my mind (Dante, [1864] 2006, Lines 1–3)

It's Beatrice, Dante's guide, who engulfs his mind in heaven. She enables a transition from vision enabled by natural light to one projected from supernatural illumination, allowing Dante to see the bright machinery of heaven. The *Paradiso* involves Dante's process of going beyond himself, which is to say, beyond the ken of human experience. In Canto I, he makes use of a novel word to signify this change, declaring,

Trasumanar significar *per verba*  
 non si poria; però l'esempio basti  
 a cui esperienza grazia serba. (Dante, 1975, Lines 70–72)

In Longfellow's version, this reads,

To represent transhumanize in words  
 Impossible were; the example, then, suffice  
 Him from whom Grace the experience reserves. (Dante, [1864] 2006, Lines 70–72)

In other words, *trasumanar*, the passing beyond humanity, is impossible to convey in words. Charles Singleton glosses these lines, saying, 'Dante will now literally rise with Beatrice through the spheres and high above the mortal condition. But in terms of the kind of vision he will have while Beatrice guides him, he now passes into that mode of vision which is possible through the special grace which she represents ... infused from on high' (Dante, 1975, 18). Grace from God that Beatrice embodies imparadises Dante's mind so he can see the great everlasting structure of the heavenly cosmos. 'Transhumanize,' as a coinage, is a verb of motion: it's what the mind does as it journeys toward God. The shape of Dante's poem, which intensifies into a radiant focus in Canto XXVIII of the *Paradiso*, is provided by the truth of the vision the poem discloses in its process.

The imparadised hierarchy of nines Beatrice reveals to Dante is visible as three triunities: angels, archangels, and principalities occupy the lowest order; powers, virtues, and dominions occupy a middle order; and thrones, cherubim, and seraphim occupy the highest order. With Beatrice's instructive guidance, Dante is able to see the 'halo cincturing the light that paints it,' a visionary glimpse of

divine circles subtly rotating closer and closer to God. The vision inspires in Dante another neologism, an invention comparable to *'mparadisa* if not perhaps as encompassing and well-known: *s'interna*, 'threefolds itself.' Somewhat more vulgarly, 'trinitizes itself.' It's actually Beatrice who coins this word: she is explaining to Dante how the second triad of angelic orders expresses its infinite joy. In Longfellow's translation:

The second Triad, which is germinating  
 In such wise in this sempiternal spring,  
 That no nocturnal Aries despoils,  
 Perpetually hosanna warbles forth  
 With threefold melody, that sounds in three  
 Orders of joy, with which it is intrined. (Dante, [1864] 2006, 115–120)

*Intrined*. An additionally ingenious coinage on Longfellow's part, fully meeting Dante's own invention. It's the divine action of an everlasting springtime. ('Nocturnal Aries' represents autumn, when Aries is the constellation opposite to the sun.) Longfellow limns Dante's cosmic cartography in his own diction, a learned American speech. Through this language we're trying to see what otherwise can't be seen but compels our richest speculations.

Canto XXVIII envisions the orders of heaven Dionysius spelled out in *The Celestial Hierarchy*. Dionysius is responsible for coining the word *hierarchy*, which he defines as, 'a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine' (Pseudo-Dionysus, 1987, 153). The identity of Dionysius is unknown. For many centuries he was called Dionysius the Areopagite, believed to be the figure whom Paul, preaching to the Athenians, converts in Acts 17:34. The writings attributed to Dionysius came under suspicion of scholars and readers, not least among them Martin Luther. As a result, he became known in scholarly circles as Pseudo-Dionysius. He was probably a Syrian Christian monk who lived in the sixth century and who quaffed great tankards of the *Enneads* of Plotinus. He also coined the word *thearchy*, devised as a term to complement hierarchy towards understanding the divine, and which seems at least as ingenious as hierarchy but has never yet caught on. By thearchy, Dionysius intended to characterize divinity as, in the words of Bernard McGinn, 'the principle of the universe conceived of primarily as hierarchy, that is, a multiplex ordered manifestation of the divine' (McGinn, 1992, 164). In other words, thearchy encompasses hierarchy which makes manifest its totality in the form of its Trinitarian structures. Or, to be Dantescan about it, thearchy intrines hierarchy. 'The goal of a hierarchy,' states Dionysius, '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' (Pseudo-Dionysus, 1987, 154). Dante describes how this might initially appear to the eyes of man:

A point beheld I, that was raying out  
 Light so acute, the sight which it enkindles

Must close perforce before such great acuteness.  
And whatsoever star seems smallest here  
Would seem to be a moon, if placed beside it  
As one star with another star is placed.  
Perhaps at such a distance as appears  
A halo cincturing the light that paints it,  
When densest is the vapor that sustains it,  
Thus distant round the point a circle of fire  
So swiftly whirled, that it would have surpassed  
Whatever motion soonest girds the world;  
And this was by another circumcinct,  
That by a third, the third then by a fourth,  
By a fifth the fourth, and then by a sixth the fifth;  
The seventh followed thereupon in width  
So ample now, that Juno's messenger  
Entire would be too narrow to contain it.  
Even so the eighth and ninth; and every one  
More slowly moved, according as it was  
In number distant farther from the first. (Dante, [1864] 2006, Lines 16–36)

(‘Juno’s messenger’ refers to Iris, the rainbow, which even transformed into a complete circle would be too small to contain the heavenly sphere of Saturn.) It’s a complete, transfixing vision of heavenly order impressing on us the sense that the motion of the angelic orders corresponds to the intensity of their gaze on God and the proximity of their being to the divine center. It’s a vision of dazzling, illuminated agitation.

Late in *The H.D. Book*, in the midst of a discussion of Dante’s influence on H.D.’s astromantic, epic *Trilogy*, Robert Duncan claims, ‘Paradise, like the houses of the Zodiac, can no longer be placed in the dimensions of the physical universe,’ continuing,

The world-map of Dante is a curiosity, but the poet in the *Paradiso* looking deep into the profound and shining being of God, for all his theological schema of the trinity, sees “one by the second as Iris by Iris seemed reflected, and the third seemed a fire breathed equally from one and from the other” and it is not the theology that lasts but this seeming; for looking “entering through the ray of the deep light which in itself is true,” Dante, who is full of discourse, found his vision “mightier than our discourse, which faileth at such sight.” This Paradise, like H.D.’s, that once was a place in the physical universe, now is a place in feeling. (Duncan, 2011, 589)

Duncan is intuiting a transformation Dante’s poem implies: that the *transhumanized visionary reality of the afterworld precipitates into this world through feeling*. In other words, what can be seen in the afterworld can be felt, in the form

of premonitions or astrological prescience, in this world, in the form of *embodied feeling*. But the visionary reality revealed to Dante, even when expressed at the level of refinement found in Canto XXVIII, is mere seeming, a bright white shadow on an inexhaustible light. In *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*, Erich Auerbach explains:

The spheres of Heaven through which Dante is raised to the presence of God, are not, like the circles of Hell or the degrees of Purgatory, the actual abode of the souls Dante meets there; they make their appearance in one of the spheres only in order to give Dante a clear idea of their rank in the heavenly hierarchy; their actual dwelling place, their ultimate destiny, is beyond all places, in the congregation of the blessed, that is, in the white rose of the Empyrean. (Auerbach, [1929] 2007, 116)

Auerbach adds, 'None can know God fully, not even Mary or the highest ranks of the Angels; only God sees and knows Himself entirely' (Auerbach, [1929] 2007, 117). Dante alludes to this himself in Canto XXVIII, when he pleads with Beatrice to explain to him what he is seeing but can't rationally align with his thinking:

But in the world of sense we can perceive  
That evermore the circles are diviner  
As they are from the centre more remote  
Wherefore if my desire is to be ended  
In this miraculous and angelic temple,  
That has for confines only love and light,  
To hear behoves me still how the example  
And the exemplar go not in one fashion  
Since for myself in vain I contemplate it. (Dante, [1864] 2006, Lines 49–57)

Dante's poem is telescopic and telegraphic. Canto XXVIII looks to us from far back in the mystical history of the Christian mind, summoning Dionysius' celestial hierarchy to envision paradise, which enwraps our mind in its medieval epitome. But Dionysius' mystical vision arises largely from Plotinus' mystical vision 400 years earlier, anticipating Christianity but pagan nevertheless. For Dante, it's a complete vision whose 'coruscations all the sparks repeated,' an intensification and a fireworks all at once. *But does it speak to us in the twenty-first century?* Telegraphs communicate clearly even from far away; our most powerful telescopes peer all the way to the edge of the universe, to an image of its origin in primordial time, which is somehow also future time, signifying the apocalyptic end of the universe we inhabit, reflected in its explosive, energetic origins. The most provocative thing ever written about Dante's poem, to my mind, is a claim in Osip Mandelstam's 'Conversation about Dante,' an essay dictated by the poet to his wife sometime in 1934 or 1935, which is to say, close to the point of the poet's death. In the essay, after insisting, '[t]he future of Dante criticism belongs to the natural sciences,' he prophesies, 'It is inconceivable to

read Dante's cantos without directing them toward contemporaneity. They were created for that purpose. They are missiles for capturing the future. They demand commentary in the *futurum*' (Mandelstam, [1967] 2001, 67).

What does this *futurum* look like? How might it be visualized in a new poetry derived from Dante and still true to the contemporary moment from which the future blooms?

At a reading that Robert Duncan gave soon after the publication of *The Opening of the Field* in 1960, he explained to his audience that in 1953, after he had finished writing his book *Letters* (eventually published in 1956), he was searching for the next project that would occupy him. He said, 'I did have in mind, however, starting a book which would have a definite form, but I wasn't sure about around what themes I would build the forms. In the notebook, I had composed several poems concerning angels and their orders that I eventually discarded ...'<sup>1</sup> Duncan felt, at the time, the theme of the poem wasn't working, structurally speaking. Instead, he located another metaphor to organize the work to come, evolving in part, as Lisa Jarnot documents in her biography of Duncan, out of the poet's reading of the *Zohar*, the *Book of Splendor*, the fountainhead of medieval Jewish mysticism.<sup>2</sup> He left an exploration of the celestial hierarchy until his later work.<sup>3</sup>

Duncan's abandonment of this project stayed with me. As did Mandelstam's provocation about the *futurum* of Dante's poem after I first encountered it. I took them both – Duncan's abandonment and Mandelstam's insistence – as a summons. In Saint Augustine's *City of God*, I read in the eleventh book, which serves in effect as a cosmology, if you can put it that way, of the Heavenly City and the Earthly City, about the dualized quality of knowledge the angels in heaven receive. Saint Augustine writes, 'Those holy angels come to the knowledge of God not by audible words, but by the presence to their souls of immutable truth,' clarifying that in God, whom they look toward, they have one (superior) kind of knowledge, and that in themselves, because they are created beings in God's cosmos, they have another (inferior) kind of knowledge, and both of these co-exist in the minds of the angels. Praise awakens divine knowledge of things, 'as if morning dawned in the minds of those who contemplate them.' Saint Augustine situates this knowledge in relation to the creation itself: in God, they can understand the creation of sun, moon and stars as one thing; in themselves, 'with a knowledge dimmer, and rather of the bare works than of the design.' In the midst of his discussion, Saint Augustine puts it succinctly, 'In Him, therefore, [the angels] have, as it were, a noonday knowledge; in themselves, a twilight knowledge ...' (Augustine, 2000, 374).

These words gave me a title for a poem, 'As Twilight into Noonday Knowledge Gyres.' The word *gyres* suggests the motion of the Dionysian celestial hierarchy Dante watches with Beatrice; it's also a word of hieratic power to Duncan, echoing in the totemic *gerfalcon*, who whirls high in the sky in looming predatory

1 This talk was formerly archived at the now-defunct Factory School website ([www.factoryschool.org](http://www.factoryschool.org)) and is presently unavailable. When a link to the talk was active, I transcribed this part of Duncan's reading. I quote this same passage in an essay on Duncan relevant to the theme of this present essay (see O'Leary, 2011).

2 See Jarnot (2012, 150).

3 Which I discuss in O'Leary (2011).

gyres, whom he names in 'My Mother Would Be a Falconress,' one of his greatest poems. In the midst of it, Duncan incants:

My mother would be a falconress,  
and I her gerfalcon raised at her will,  
from her wrist sent flying, as if I were her own  
pride, as if her pride  
knew no limits, as if her mind  
sought in me flight beyond the horizon. (Duncan, 1968, 53)

A *gerfalcon* is also a *gyrfalcon*. A *gyre* is a circle. The main etymology for the word suggests a seemingly obvious origin: the falcon who circles high in the sky. But another suggests a Late Latin modification from *hierofalcon*, the sacred falcon of the North Country, of the shamanistic arctic climes. Making an epigraph of Saint Augustine's claims about noonday and twilight angelic knowledge, I dedicated my poem 'for/from Robert Duncan.' My intention was to translate, somehow, the gist of Dante's Canto XXVIII from the *Paradiso* into a poetry of the *futurum*. With Mandelstam's permission, I decided to use the sciences to divine the future of this section of the poem, not the natural sciences, as he claims for criticism of Dante's poem, but the physical sciences, specifically astrophysics and cosmology. I decided to frame the poem through a resetting of Dante's confusion about what he is seeing (lines 16–36 of the canto, cited already), as well as Beatrice's clarification. My resetting of these lines (I won't call it a translation) serves as prologue. From there, following the order of heavenly ranks that Beatrice reveals to Dante, I created a set of astrophysical analogies, relying on Peter Coles' *Cosmology: A Very Short Introduction*, a lucid little volume intended for lay readers, to supply the celestial bodies and facts to which I would compare the different ranks in the Dionysian celestial hierarchy.

I was mindful when making my choices to align what Beatrice says with appropriate astronomical qualities. For instance, Beatrice describes the Seraphim and Cherubim, belonging to the highest order and so closest to the center and therefore appearing to Dante to move the least, this way: 'Thus rapidly [the Seraphim and Cherubim] follow their own bonds, / To be as like the point as most they can, / And can as far as they are high in vision' (Dante, [1864] 2006, 150). So, their circling is a sign of their intellection, which is vision, permitting them, in the loftiness of their devotional thinking, to become like God ('like the point as most they can'). Paradoxically, while they don't appear to be moving very swiftly, they are involved in the most consuming motion of any of the spheres. To represent the Seraphim, I chose dark matter, which may comprise most of the mass in the universe. Coles writes that dark matter is 'a mysterious dark energy that is perhaps some relic of the earlier inflationary period' of the life of the universe (Coles, 2001, 11). To represent the Cherubim, I chose a black body, which in Coles' words is 'a perfect absorber and a perfect emitter of radiation,' especially the

background radiation of the Big Bang (Coles, 2001, 59). I wanted both of these angelic orders to be completely absorptive of God's radiant love but also mysterious to the point of opacity (an inversion of their traditional composition: seraphs are made of light, and cherubs made of fire). My poem proceeds along Dante's line of sight: intrined in the triads Beatrice organizes the hierarchies into, from greatest to least in rank. Each analogy takes Dante's poem into the future. Or at least that's my hope. My poem concludes with an image of a stellar pillar as seen from the Hubble telescope, fantasized as belonging to Dante. 'As Twilight into Noonday Knowledge Gyres' appears in my book *Luminous Epinoia*, which is organized into 33 poems – a *Paradiso* – and which resets several other poems from the *Divine Comedy*. I've called it my Dante book. Here's the poem.

*As Twilight into Noonday Knowledge Gyres.*  
*For/from Robert Duncan*

In him, therefore, [the angels] have, as it were, a noonday knowledge; in themselves, a twilight knowledge ... – St Augustine, *City of God* xi.29

The mechanism demands a mysticism; the vertical field is a color like light blue. And not. Its horizon is an amplitude and not an arc. Paradise embraces. Prolongs: when you stare into space, time advances infinitesimally more slowly. Love draws it back. To you.

Imagine motion.  
 Imagine a star in motion, swiftly passing all the other stars: a blurred curve.  
 Imagine sequences of stars, each successively swifter, purer in speed.  
 Imagine God's wildly gyrating action a stillness settling over blowing matter like hot glass. Imagine  
 God a singularity  
 to which all motion draws but himself so fast he's beyond any moving.

The whirligig thought. Staring into this agog. My Lady, sensing my suspense, tells me:

Admire the circle most conjoined to the point  
 around which the whole cosmos suspends:  
 its love outstriding the speed of light.

Outracing and encircling.

*Stella in cielo*, like a star in heaven – a scintillation – truth was seen.

Analogies:

furthest and closest the Seraphim  
like dark matter, of incalculable unknown density,  
not giving off any light, but not absorptive either. As far  
as our equations allow us to see, we still have no image  
for the highest order of angels, clothed in collapsing nanoseconds.

Then Cherubim rise up, a black body, reflecting puzzling spectra.  
A perfect absorber and a perfect emitter of radiation, a cherub appears  
as a fireball, a paradox of growth unchallenged and shapeliness, as if  
the universe itself were opaque to  
the light that created it.

Thrones are an  $\Omega$ ,  
sign of circumpiercing holiness, the dividing line  
between God's eternal expansion and his imminent withdrawal.  
What a pendulum would look like in four dimensions; what the Hebrew  
letter  
*he* – integral in the name of God, the first simple, a link between the inner  
and outer worlds,  
in a word, religion – would sound like uttered  
into matter.  $\Omega$   
marks the escape velocity of God, the ability  
to exceed his own system.

*The first triad.*

Dominations push back on divine energy. Cosmic repulsion  
requires a large scale: the massively expanding field  
of the universe. The law of gravity  
is repulsive, even as these angels attract all angelic orders into  
spheres, they overwhelm with a feeling

to go faster. It's love.  
Love and loathing.

Next the Virtues emanate sound waves endlessly.  
Vibrating frequency modulations yield adherence. Transmission.  
Prayer is our Strength radio.

The Powers are white dwarves whose  
outer bodies explode as their inner being  
collapses. Same as  
snow-white new love.

*The second triad.*

Principalities make gravity, baryonic  
gas falling in earlier than stars. Vistas Milton  
invented in language precede horizons of baryons  
we glimpse now in the coils of superconductors.

In filamentary structures Archangels  
supercluster into galaxies, a star-nexus of mucus,  
a milky clumping of salivas, making  
fuel-nipples light suckles on.

Angels finally  
are fractals, shape-hierarchies, spheres of fire at a distance,  
tongues of flame at their mouths,  
out of which the final triad choruses a baritone hosanna  
echoed by a tenor amen.

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Dante's stellar pillar, three light years tall, plumes star-mass, sphery orphans  
of  
the inward House of David the Word  
ensues into. (O'Leary, 2010, 6–9)

## About the Author

Peter O'Leary's most recent book of poetry is *Phosphorescence of Thought* (Cultural Society). A new book of criticism, *Thick and Dazzling Darkness: Religious Poetry in a Secular Age* (Columbia), and a new book of poetry, *The Sampo* (Cultural Society), are forthcoming. He lives in Oak Park, Illinois, and teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago (E-mail: peter@luxhominem.com).

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