CHAPTER 18
Paradiso 11–12

Canto 10, discussed in the last chapter, leads quite naturally into Cantos 11 and 12. To begin to explore these latter two cantos, let's look at the end of Canto 12, where we meet Bonaventure, who is a Franciscan, a member of one of the orders of Francis. One trait that theologically distinguishes the Franciscans is that they believe in the priority of will and love in the act of knowledge. The Dominicans, by contrast, or neo-Aristotelians like Aquinas believe in the priority of the intellect in the apprehension of the world. The Dominicans were founded with the explicit mandate to teach in universities, where they thought heresies abounded, and therefore they had to block off the routes of these heresies. The Franciscans were instead witnessing in the world. But both orders are shaped by a belief in poverty that we will soon examine because we need to understand what it means.

At any rate, Bonaventure is a Franciscan, and by the end of Canto 12, he has chronicled the life of Dominic. This is sort of another case of Dante's own extraordinary openness, a view of these characters in the sense that the Franciscans and Dominicans were historically at odds with each other, in terms both of their theologies and of their premises—intellectual premises above all. Here, Dante has a Franciscan tell the life of Dominic, just as earlier in Canto 11 a Dominican, Aquinas, tells the life of Francis. The two cantos are controlled by a chiasmus that permits an intersection of voices and a sense of the interdependence of the two perspectives.

The last words of Canto 12, though, function as a counterweight to the description of the encyclopedia that Aquinas had given at the conclusion of Canto 10, ending with Siger of Brabant. Bonaventure says, "I am the living soul of Bonaventura of Bagnorea, who in the great offices always put the

left-hand care behind. Illuminato and Augustine are here, who were of the first unshod poor brethren that with the cord made themselves God's friends." Then there's a theorist of medieval encyclopedias, Hugh of St. Victor, a Parisian friar who wrote the *Didascalicon,* a text about the stages of education and how the mind comes to the knowledge of God, starting with small elements in outer life, the material world, and proceeding on to the interior lights before reaching God's supreme light. Then we see Peter the bookworm, Peter the Spaniard, another theorist of medieval logic; then Nathan the prophet, who is known as being David's bad conscience, or good conscience, the one pricking him to think about his moral life. After him, there's Chrysostom, the Metropolitan, meaning the man with the golden mouth, the one who possesses the flower of eloquence. And Anselm, another theologian who writes about the reasons for the Incarnation, why God became a man. And Donatus, a Roman grammarian. And Rabanus, a historian. And finally "beside me shines the Calabrian abbot Joachim, who was endowed with prophetic spirit. The glowing courtesy and the well-judged discourse of Brother Thomas has moved me to celebrate so great a paladin, and with me has moved this company."[1] Bonaventure ends with a tip of the hat in the direction of Aquinas, whose example he has followed, an example, once again, of a dialogue and openness between the two orders that are separate but also somehow interdependent.

The presence of Abbot Joachim is another counterweight to Siger of Brabant in Canto 10. This is not our first encounter with Joachim, since I mentioned his name to you in glossing the apocalyptic prophecy of DXV in *Purgatorio* 33. The Joachistic interpretation of that symbol successfully introduces the idea of the end of time, but I also asked you to reject the implications of that prophecy. The Joachistic prophecy was viewed as heretical for a number of reasons. It expresses an impatience with regard to history. That is to say, it really believes, first of all, in the imminent closure of history, the idea that the end is close at hand, and this end of history implies the coming into being of a utopia of the spirit, the third age of the spirit, when finally all institutions and barriers are torn down. The problem is that it always begs for a closure that we cannot really fathom, a closure of the world of historical occurrences. And it was actually Bonaventure himself who asked that Joachim's views be anathematized, and now, here in *Paradiso,* he is writing a sort of palinode. Dante allows him to make amends for the previous condemnation.

Bonaventure found the ideas of Joachim of Flora objectionable because Joachim was de facto dissolving the whole notion of the unity of the

Trinitarian life. His tripartite idea of history was based on the three persons of the Trinity: the age of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person of the Trinity becomes a separate entity, and that view, for Bonaventure, was heretical, but now he acknowledges that Abbot Joachim was in fact endowed with a spiritual prophecy. What seemed to be heretical, in other words, was only prophetic; an intellectual question of thoughts and opinions now appears as divination about things to come, not specified any further. Retrospectively, Dante is legitimizing Joachim and therefore also legitimizing his own position in Canto 33 of *Purgatorio*. Dante shares Joachim's view of the apocalyptic denouement of history, but he rejects the idea that it's possible to establish a date for such an occurrence. So it is that Joachim appears now as a visionary among saints and grammarians.

The other figure that I would like to say something about is Nathan the prophet. Namely, I have to explain why Dante would include Nathan at all. Dante could have chosen so many other figures to place among these wise spirits. He could have chosen someone whose works are canonical in the Bible, but he doesn't. The idea is, I think, a little bit of an autobiographical pun about Dante himself because the name Nathan means "he who gives." And that's what the name Dante means, as well. So perhaps, in the canto where the Franciscan sense of giving is dramatized, Dante saw his own name in the name of Nathan, and it pleases him. Nathan becomes a kind of mask for Dante himself. It is as if he were saying that with another life or a posthumous life in the heavenly apotheosis, that's where he would like to end up.

Now what is so peculiar about this encyclopedic ordering of the arts and the sciences? It doesn't really differ very much from Aquinas, but it's interesting that it's Bonaventure who articulates and celebrates all these names and arts because Bonaventure is himself a theorist of the encyclopedia, very much in the wake of Hugh of St. Victor. But he has one crucial reflection at the beginning of his encyclopedia. He says that the activity of knowing and learning is like going up and down a ladder. It's the metaphor of the ladder of Jacob in the Bible, which is where Bonaventure probably found it, and the ladder of Plato. The idea is that the mind ascends when we learn something, when we get educated, and it actually can go down, too. The interesting thing about Bonaventure is that he says that in a ladder the lowest rungs are always more important than the higher ones, because without those none of us would be able to climb up the ladder. His is a theory of knowledge as a proliferation of lights, internal and external lights, the lights of the senses, the lights that come to us from books, and the light of God. It

is a process of enlightenment. But as we are enlightened, the lowest lights are self-sufficient; there are those who may not be capable of ascending much higher than the first few rungs, but there is already a self-sufficient knowledge that even those individuals can acquire. There is no hierarchy, since the lower elements are as crucial as the higher elements, and that's what really sets Bonaventure apart.

With this image, as with the inclusion of Joachim, we are getting into the erasure of strict barriers and boundaries between what is heretical and what is canonical. Dante's openness reverberates with the lessons of Francis and Dominic in these two cantos. Keep in mind that we are still in the heaven of the sun here, and the sun is such a fundamental symbol of divine generosity. It always gives of itself without ever asking anything back, so it stands for pure munificence. Cantos 11 and 12 are all about this kind of outreach and openness.

For instance, Canto 11 starts with an apostrophe against logical, legal forms of knowledge, the kind of knowledge that tries to define the world in formulas. Dante begins in his own voice, declaring, "O insensate care of mortals! how false are the reasonings that make you beat your wings in downward flight. One was following after the laws, another after the *Aphorisms,* one was pursuing priesthood, and one dominion by force or craft, and another plunder, and another civil business, one was moiling, caught in the pleasures of the flesh, and another was giving himself to idleness, the while, free from all these things, I was high in heaven with Beatrice, thus gloriously received."[2] I think it's an interesting counterpoint between these icons of power that derive from the study of law and logic, and then Dante's reference to himself as free from all of these concerns. This idea of freedom will be a dominant theme of Canto 11.

Dante continues with a little prayer and the introduction of Dominic and Francis: "The Providence that governs the world with that counsel in which every created vision is vanquished before it reaches the bottom, in order that the Bride of Him who, with loud cries, espoused her with the blessed blood, might go to her Delight, secure within herself and also more faithful to Him, ordained on her behalf two princes, who on this side and that might be her guides. The one was all seraphic in ardor"—Francis—"the other, for wisdom, was on earth a splendor of cherubic light"—Dominic. "I shall speak of one, because in praising one, whichever be taken, both are spoken of, for their labors were to one same end."[3] That's the formula that seals the sense of interdependence of intellect and will, of love and knowledge, of two seemingly competing voices.

What follows is what we call a hagiography or a legend, the life of a saint, specifically that of Francis, as told by the Dominican Aquinas. First of all, he tells us, "Between the Topino and the stream that falls from the hill chosen by the blessed Ubaldo, a fertile slope hangs from a lofty mountain wherefrom Perugia feels cold and heat through Porta Sole, while behind it Nocera and Gualdo grieve under a heavy yoke."[4] It's an extraordinarily localized representation of Francis's origin. It's a topography. St. Francis was born in Assisi, but it's almost as if Aquinas were locating him in a more specific place, near the gate called Porta Sole, which is where the the road to Perugia leads.

Then we go from the toponymic, the name of a place, the gate of the sun, to a metaphor for Francis as the sun. So we are in the heaven of the sun, and now Dante invests Francis with all the attributes of this solarity, this continuous, steady giving of oneself as the sun does in the mystical Neoplatonic imagery of Pseudo-Dionysus. Also, as soon as Dante has mentioned the specific place of Francis's birth, the geographic coordinates completely change. We go from the specific and local to the global, the world of the Ganges, the Orient, something vaster. As if he were the sun, Francis really acts between the concrete and local and the widest possible reference. As Dante puts it, "Therefore let him who talks of this place not say *Ascesi*"—which means "I rise," though it's also an obvious punning with Assisi—"which would be to speak short, but *Orient,* if he would name it rightly." It's an extraordinary image of two astronomical terms—the sun and the Orient—for Francis. Francis appears just as the sun does, as one who orients us. What Dante is implying, I think, is that for those who go on the face of the earth and lose their way, Francis becomes the person who can tell them how to find their way back to wherever they are going. For those who do not know their way at all, have never known the way, they are rendered capable of discovering it through him. Francis is providing a light, continuing the metaphorics of the sun, and "he began to make the earth feel, from his great virtue, a certain strengthening."[5] And with that glowing description, Aquinas now gives the story of Francis's life.

Before delving into that biography, however, I want to tell you that Dante knew of Francis also as a great poet. He is actually considered the first poet in the Italian vernacular. A few stanzas from his "Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon" ought to demonstrate how Dante's own poetics here derive straight from this Franciscan vision of spirituality. The "Canticle" is a prayer that praises the Lord in all His aspects, all his connections to the natural world. Francis goes through all four elements, and part

of the suggestiveness of this poem is that it's a song of praise to God, clearly enough, but we never know if Francis is thinking of these elements as the medium through which he can praise or as the cause of his praise, for the Italian is very ambiguous. Furthermore, we can finally understand the rhetoric of praise that is running through this poem. But we also saw the rhetoric of praise in Dante's *Vita nuova,* when he finds out that the best way of writing about Beatrice is to write praise poems, which he distinguishes from flattery by suggesting that poems of praise reject all sense of ownership. He realizes that the fact that one may know the world doesn't mean that one owns it, so that not knowing Beatrice is not just a wish to own her, and his praise of her is as disinterested and as free a mode of acknowledgment of Beatrice herself as possible. Francis is clearly a source for these ideas in Dante's oeuvre, and this whole poetic vision of Francis continues throughout Canto 11.

Dante goes on recounting the life of Francis, and he catches Francis in what I would call, using the language of anthropology, a liminal stage. The word *liminal* comes from the Latin *limen,* which means "threshold" or "limit." These are two concepts that are, in many ways, very contradictory, but the threshold may be a limit or it may be an opportunity to cross beyond a limit. At any rate, Dante places Francis in a liminal position betwixt and between two different orders: on the one hand, the world, and on the other hand, some kind of utopian idea that would be the order that he goes on to institute, a general vision of what the world ought to be.

So, that's where Dante catches Francis as he begins a biographical account modeled on a number of biographies that existed at the time:

> For, while still a youth, he rushed into strife against his father for such a lady, to whom, as to death, none willingly unlocks the door; and before his spiritual court *et coram patre* [a Latin phrase that has the value of a legal formula, which is to say that he marries this as yet unknown woman in the presence of his own father, thus giving legitimacy to his act of marriage] he was joined to her, and thereafter, from day to day, he loved her ever more ardently. She, bereft of her first husband [Christ], for eleven hundred years and more, despised and obscure, remained unwooed till he came; nor had it availed to hear that he who caused fear to all the world found her undisturbed with Amyclas at the sound of his voice; nor had it availed to have been constant and undaunted so that, where Mary remained below,

> she wept with Christ upon the cross. But, lest I should proceed too darkly, take now Francis and Poverty for these lovers in all that I have said. Their harmony and joyous semblance made love and wonder and tender looks the cause of holy thoughts; so that the venerable Bernard first bared his feet, following such great peace, and running, it seemed to him that he was slow. Oh wealth unknown, oh fertile good![6]

There is clearly a reversal. Francis marries Poverty, and in this liminal position, Francis is shown as he is turning upside down all the values that the world holds dear. He wants to marry nothing, for to marry Poverty is really to marry nothing. He embraces owning nothing, but that "union" is conducted as if it were a sacramental act, so he is clearly making fun of marriage.

Not to imply any blasphemy here, but he's parodying the sacrament of marriage. He's parodying the law, because he's marrying Poverty in the presence of his own father. He's parodying social values as he divests himself of all his clothes, which in the Middle Ages, as much as now, stood for some symbolic social status. We are in the presence of a parody of legal language, of sacramental language, even the language of love, for the phrase "none willingly unlocks the door" refers to the door of pleasure. "Their harmony and joyous semblance" is another parody of the language of the amorous discourse of medieval love poetry. Even sexuality, which is certainly a value of the world, Francis will turn on its head. This is a radical critique of the value system of the world, which could be called a prophetic mode of abandoning the idols of the world in favor of some kind of utopia or unexpected vision of how the world ought to be. Ultimately, though, it's an extraordinary nonvalue, because that's what poverty is, something that questions all values.

What did Francis mean by all of this? A little detail that I should tell you is that Francis, in Italian, is Francesco, meaning "free" or "frank." Francis, true to his name, is now absolutely free in his poverty. There's no bondage to anything, nothing that holds him to anything in the world, so this is one important ethical extension of poverty. Dante certainly seems to have stressed the idea of poverty as a very material, corporeal, physical experience. I call it prophetic in the sense that what distinguishes the biblical prophets from other prophets is that they usually choose to bear on their flesh the signs that they utter against the world. This is part of what Francis is doing with this idea that he's *living* his poverty. Poverty is not just

an allegorical representation; it is something lived in the flesh. The literal and the allegorical are now compressed. Dante, I repeat, thinks about the material idea of poverty, a way of opposing avarice and prodigality, but poverty to Franciscans also means poverty of language. Even that poem we saw before was repetitive, full of the same simple formulaic expressions. Even in their language they acknowledge that we cannot own the world, that the world is a world of gifts, and that the more you give and the less you have for yourself, the more you are free and the more productive your own acts can become, as was the case for Francis.

Are we supposed to also associate Dante's own fate as a poor, exiled beggar with this idea of poverty? Of course! For poverty means several things for Dante. Bonaventure will ponder the poverty of language and the poverty of philosophy, but all of these writers also understand poverty in a very literal way. All of them understand that this kind of poverty is really a description of the human condition to begin with. We are all poor, we are all born defective and in need, and some of us go on being needy. The other side of that shared lack is that it's actually a blessing because it permits our universal state of freedom. Is it a consolatory note for Dante to believe that he's not alone in his deprivation? Yes, since Dante, unlike Petrarch, who died one of the wealthiest men of his time by virtue of being a poet, never attained any material success on account of his writing.

But poverty is not all that Dante will discuss with regard to Francis. Francis will try to receive a seal of approval from the popes about the fraternity or order that he organized: "After the poor folk had increased behind him, whose wondrous life were better sung in Heaven's glory, then was the holy will of this chief shepherd circled with a second crown by the Eternal Spirit through Honorius." Pope Honorius agrees to recognize this new order, "and when, in thirst for martyrdom, he, in the proud presence of the Sultan, had preached Christ and them that followed him, and, finding the people too unripe for conversion and in order not to stay in vain, had returned to the harvest of the Italian fields, then on the harsh rock between Tiber and Arno he received from Christ the last seal, which his limbs bore for two years."[7] Dante is alluding to the famous story of the stigmata that Francis received, his body becoming a sign. It's the story of the stigmata, but it's also the story of Francis trying to go and convert the sultan. He fails to produce a convincing theological argument, and the two men separate, each along his own way, and that's it. It's a story that can be understood as an apparent failure of Francis's message. At the same time, it is an extraordinary hermeneutical turn that has taken place in Dante's thinking, a turn

to celebrations of the Crusades. Here we have an encounter between Christians and Muslims in peaceful language, where the two exponents of these belief systems can come together and discuss their ideas. The sultan denies Christian thought, ultimately, but this is an extraordinary change in the dissemination of violence that had been at the center of so much previous theological discourse. Dante is following Francis on a different route, allowing for an important change in the historical understanding of the relationship between Christians and Muslims and their interpretations of the Crusades.

Furthermore, geographic coordinates here and elsewhere in this canto begin to paint a picture of a wide, wide world. We have just read about Francis's trip to Egypt to see the sultan. A little earlier Dante referred to the birthplace of Francis by talking about the Ganges. In other words, Dante is obviously aware that there is a Christian, European world, but there are at least two other places on the map: one a Hindu world of the Ganges, and the other the Muslim world of the Egyptians. Dante is obliquely acknowledging a concern that will prove crucial to Bonaventure.

In 1273 Bonaventure, the man whom Dante will highlight in Canto 12, traveled to Paris to give a number of lectures at the University of Paris. A number of these lectures debate the question of the relationship between what he sees as three distinct cultures: Hindu, Christian, and Muslim. He tries to see in what way they can be harmonized. He connects the Hindu religion with Joachism, in the sense that Joachim's third age, his own age, the age of the Spirit, implies the elimination of all institutions, so that the Spirit is now everywhere and there is no need for any hierarchy or order. Bonaventure claims that this is identical to the world of the Hindus, who believe that God is everywhere. Then he talks about the Muslims as having a theology of an impassable distance, a transcendence that nothing can really bridge, between a God who remains invisible and the world of every man here. Of course, Christianity provides the mediation between the two worlds because it contains a simultaneous transcendence and immanence of God. Dante is, I think, echoing this text and these problems in the canto of Francis, so he places Francis between the Ganges and Egypt, as one who is carving a new space, the space that he calls that of poverty, which means freedom and love as a way of coming to the knowledge of God.

Dante is clearly talking from a Christian standpoint; there's no question about this. To be fair, however, the underlying spirituality of Dante is what I call the "spirituality of the desert." Dante is truly the "poet of the desert," in the sense that in the desert you have modes of a quest such that

where everyone is really going is to the absolute. Whatever journey we may take is always the same journey as everyone else's, and so the spirituality of the quest at least tempers this idea of Dante being unyieldingly strict and firm in this universe of degrees and distinctions that he sets up.

To return to the text, though, the description of Dominic as told by Bonaventure in Canto 12 really rewrites the previous canto. There, Francis represented a parodic, anarchic marriage to the absence of all worldly values. Here, we have a different marriage, between Dominic and faith, or between knowledge and theology if we want to put it at a very general level. The hagiography of Dominic begins: "In that region where sweet Zephyr rises to open the new leaves wherewith Europe sees herself reclad, not far from the smiting of the waves, behind which the sun, after his long course, sometimes hides himself from every man, sits fortunate Calaroga."[8] Dante is talking about the birthplace of Dominic and places him, rightly, in the western part of Spain, where the sun sets. Dominic thereby becomes the counter to Francis, who was born where the sun rises. Between the two of them the whole movement of the sun, the *translatio,* the translation of faith and culture this time rather than empires, seems to be encompassed. The movement of the sun from east to west on account of them seems to have its own quickness, its own rhythm.

Bonaventure continues, "Therein was born the ardent lover of the Christian faith, the holy athlete, benignant to his own and harsh to his foes. And his mind, as soon as it was created, was so full of living virtue that in his mother's womb he made her a prophetess. When the espousals were completed at the sacred font between him and the faith, where they dowered each other with mutual salvation, the lady who gave the assent for him saw in a dream the marvelous fruit destined to issue from him and from his heirs."[9] Here is the marriage ceremony that counters the previous marriage ceremony of Canto 11. I want to draw your attention to the use of these playful images, Dominic as an athlete of faith, a liegeman. Both Francis and Dominic were called the "clowns of the lord," *ioculatores domini* in Latin, for a reason. They bring in a perspective of play in the world. They make fun of the world. They challenge the values of the world, and in this sense they arrive at the most impressive aspect of their theology, ultimately a playful one: the notion that God plays, that creation itself is a spectacle. I call it a "theodrama," a conceptualization that doesn't deprive the Divinity of its seriousness but makes that seriousness part of the world of joy.

In the canto of Dominic, much more than in the canto of Francis, this is a unique moment insomuch as it is a representation in terms of language.

The Dominicans were the intellectual arm of the Church, the Aristotelians, the poets, the philosophers and teachers. There was an idea of orthodoxy strongly associated with Dominic, and yet here the whole representation takes place in terms of language. One example: "Oftentimes his nurse found him silent and awake upon the ground, as though he would say, 'I am come for this.' Oh father of him, Felice indeed! Oh mother of him, Giovanna indeed, if this, being interpreted, means as is said!"[10] Dante is playing with etymologies here: the father is really happy ("felice"), so there is a relationship between his name and his state of mind, and the mother is as full of grace as her name Giovanna would suggest. Orthodoxy and heresy are simply two sides of one coin, for heresy here appears as a question of language, of an order that is above all grammatical. It has a kind of ambiguity that you always presume to be present within the order of language. Even the schisms of *Inferno,* the horrifying picture of a poet who holds his own head like a lamp as he talks to Virgil and Dante, involve questions of language. They are part of the imponderable quality of language, the ambiguities of language, the force of language, and the power of language. But for Dominic in particular, language is at the forefront, and language is play.

The new aesthetics that Dominic manages to release, and Francis too, is a kind of playful idea of the world, a comedy. I tried to explain to you from the first chapters onward how complicated it is to explain why Dante calls his text a comedy. He's talking about how an ordinary man of the year 1300 manages to have the most sublime of experiences. And of course it has a happy ending, and comedies are always the genre of happy endings. And it is about the low level of experiences. And Dante writes it in vernacular Italian. The explanations are numerous, but the real and substantial reason for Dante calling his poem a comedy is exactly that: the poem is a way of responding to this sense of the joyful quality of creation. For all the horror that we have been witnessing through Hell and Purgatory, joy seems to be what Dante is moving toward now. Once you think of play, you can no longer have the tragic vision because you understand that the tragic vision is part of something larger. Comedies, tragedies, and elegies are all linked to the Wheel of Fortune in medieval iconography, so you keep going around and around, but they're all part of something much larger, which is this ludic theology that Dante has been preparing for us all along.