

## The Visual Arts and Dante's *Paradiso*

This lecture returns to Dante, and to the relationship of his poetry with the visual arts, and will concentrate on the final cantica of his *Divine Comedy*, the *Paradiso*. 'Paradiso', you will be glad to hear, does mean 'Paradise' as we use the word in English, and in this third phase of his journey Dante flies up from the *earthly* Paradise, on the summit of the Mountain of Purgatory, and ends his journey beyond the confines of the physical universe in the *celestial* Paradise, Heaven with a capital H, the abode of God, the angels and the blessed.

However, for twenty nine of the thirty three cantos, Dante and Beatrice make their journey through the 'heavens' with a *small* H, and in the plural. You must remember that the medieval universe was a huge sphere, made up of concentric spheres, like the layers of an onion, with an unmoving sphere of solid Earth at the centre, then the three liquid spheres of Water, Air and Fire, and then nine spheres of aether, transparent, solid, spinning round the earth, the first seven of them bearing just one luminary—the planets—in the order you see, the eighth carrying the constellations of 'fixed stars', and the ninth, the *primum mobile*, without any luminaries, imparting its diurnal revolution to all the spheres that it encloses:

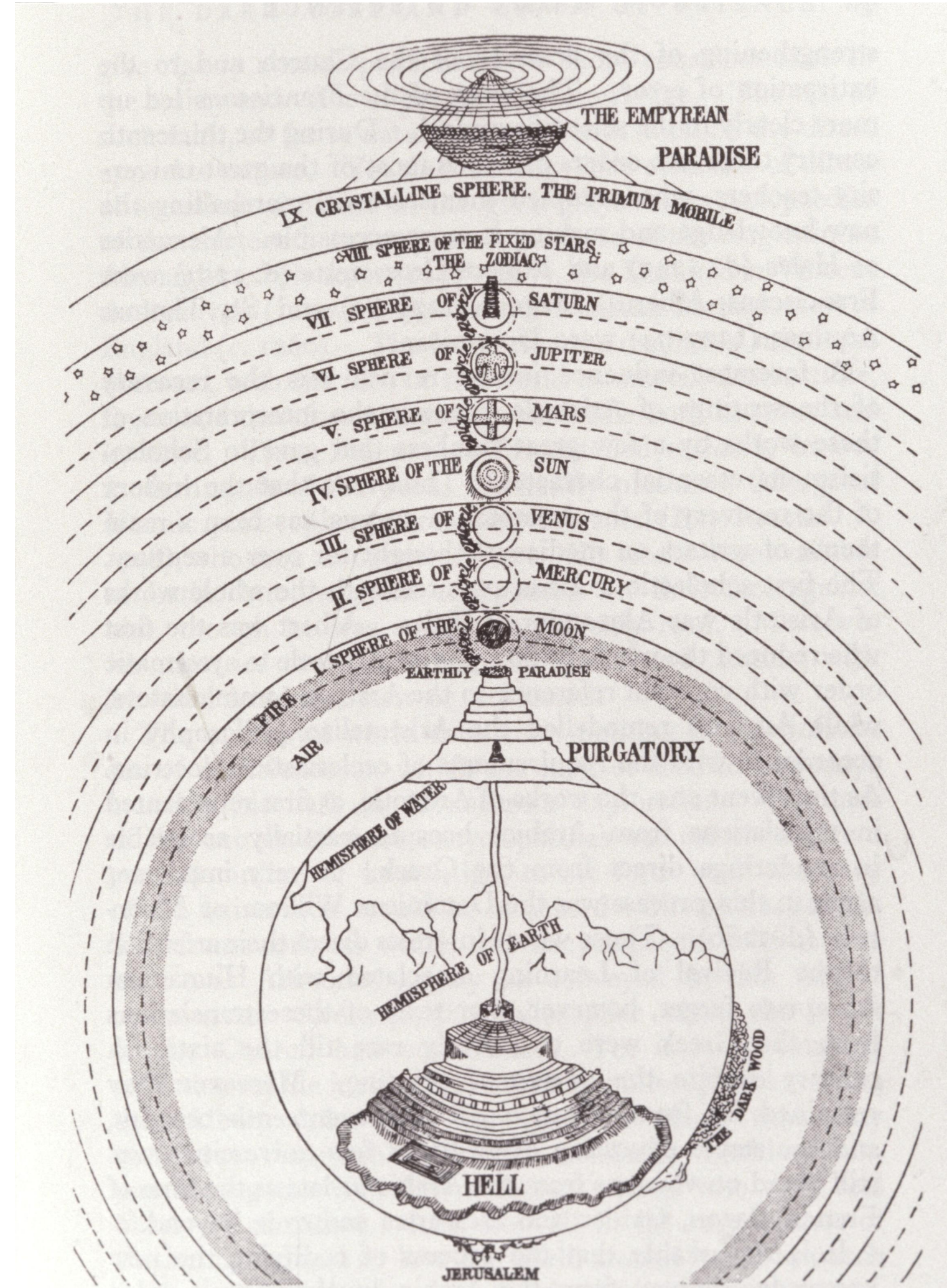


Figure 1: (P\_Pa\_1) Dante's scheme of the universe, adapted from Caetani



In canto 30, Dante and Beatrice will pass beyond this ‘greatest body’, beyond matter, space and time, into the tenth heaven, which he calls the Empyrean, the Heaven with a capital H. This, as we are told in the opening lines of the cantic, is the ‘heaven that receives most of the divine light’. But, as we are also told in the first three lines, the radiance of God (his ‘gloria’), penetrates the *whole* of the universe, even though it fades in intensity in proportion to the distance from its source.

So, light pervades the nine aetherial heavens, through which Dante the pilgrim has to pass; and you must also remember that he and Beatrice actually enter each of the luminaries in turn. He does not just go *to* the moon, as Neil Armstrong did, and onto its surface; he penetrates *into* its body, and similarly with the sun and the other ‘planets’. So there is no ‘pit’ as in Hell, no ‘mountain’ as in Purgatory—in fact, no landscape at all, no body of any kind composed of the four elements, but only transparency, and light of ever increasing brilliance.

In the first 29 cantos, where we shall remain for the greatest part of this lecture, Dante does see and converse with the souls of the dead as he had done in Hell and Purgatory, because it is arranged that groups of souls descend from the Empyrean to welcome him in each of the heavens in turn. The souls of the blessed, the ‘beati’, also irradiate light themselves, which increases in intensity in proportion to the degree of their blessedness, and they are perceived by Dante the pilgrim as ‘lights, torches, or lanterns’.

In the first of the heavens, in the Moon, closest to the earth, Dante can still see the human faces within their radiated glory; even though he is slow to recognise his childhood friend, Piccarda, and her companions, because ‘something divine is shining out of their countenances:

«O ben creato spirito, che a’ rai  
di vita eterna la dolcezza senti  
che, non gustata, non s’intende mai...»

...

Ond’io a lei: «Ne’ mirabili aspetti  
vostri risplende non so che divino  
che vi trasmuta da’ primi concetti.»  
(3, 37–9, 58–60)

However, already in the second stage in his ascent, the planet Mercury, and in all the higher spheres, the spirits or souls have become splendours, ‘splendori’, who express their joy in seeing Dante by a perceptible increase in their refulgence. The pilgrim cannot see the *features* of Romeo da Villanova, rather ‘his light shines within the pearl’ of the planet itself:

sì vid’io ben più di mille splendori  
trarsi ver’noi, e in ciascun s’udia:  
«Ecco chi crescerà li nostri amori».  
E sì come ciascuno a noi venìa  
vedeasi l’ombra piena di letizia  
nel folgór chiaro che di lei uscia.  
(5, 103–8)

E dentro la presente margarita  
lucè la luce di Romeo



Figure 2: (P\_Pa\_2) Giovanni di Paolo’s illumination of *Paradiso* 5



This is Romeo, whose light shines, and those are his daughters and their royal husbands, who are only mentioned in the narrative, and not seen by the pilgrim. Botticelli, whose drawings we shall be looking at in the final lecture, was the first to take Dante *au pied de la lettre*, and every one of these flaming torches which appear to Dante in the Heaven of the Stars, conceals or 'steals from our sight' one of the blessed, as from the sight of the pilgrim:



Figure 3: (P\_Pa\_3) Botticelli illustration from *Paradiso* 24



In more recent times, it was only Gustave Doré, in 1868—and perhaps just this once—who managed to be somewhat faithful to the text *and* to satisfy the reader's eye, in his interpretation of the souls who formed a circle around Dante in the heaven of the sun:

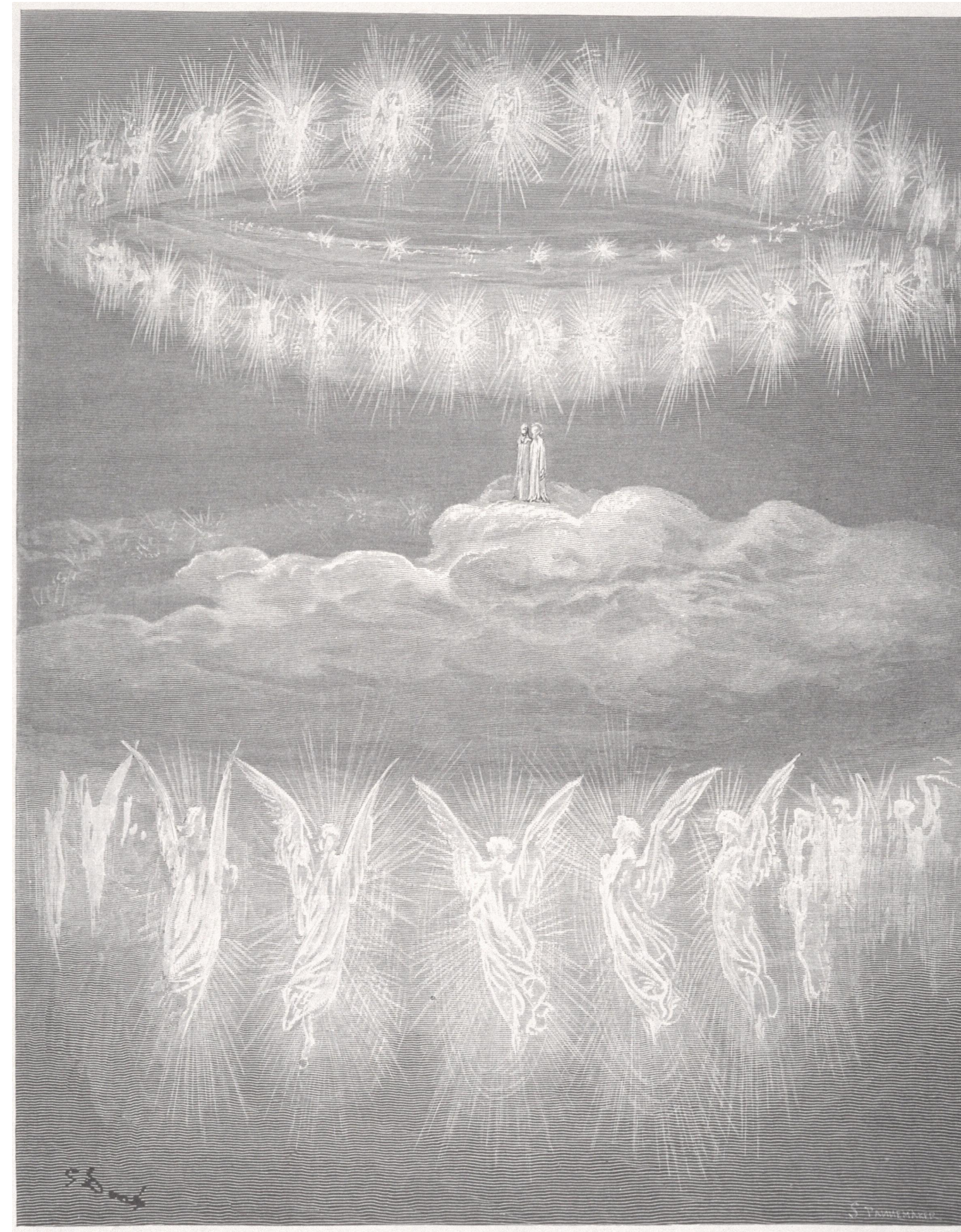


Figure 4: (P\_Pa\_4) Botticelli illustration from *Paradiso* 28



This is a good moment to remark that the painters and sculptors who were active in Dante's lifetime had relatively little to offer to his imagination in the representation of Heaven.

In a scene of the Last Judgement, the blessed traditionally sit on their thrones, mere spectators, betraying no emotion at the diabolic behaviour of the devils below or the torments of the damned, whose suffering does not touch them ('la cui miseria non li tange'), as in the following detail from Giotto, at Padua:



Figure 5: (P\_Pa\_5) [caption required for Giotto fresco]



In the thirteenth century, French artists had invented a new event—a more cheerful event—which allowed some kind of representation of the Empyrean. This was the Coronation of the Virgin.



Figure 6: (P\_Pa\_6) Panels from triptych by Orcagna



What you see above is the centre and left hand panel of a triptych by Andrea Orcagna, from the 1370s, now in the National Gallery, which follows very closely the model established for Italian artists by Giotto in Santa Croce at Florence. Yet even here, as you can see, in this Feast Day in Paradise the saints have to sit in rows, and look pretty glum. So, you now know why the visual parallels I am going to adduce will not come from frescos or altarpieces, nor from the great Tuscan masters of Dante's day.

Rather, we shall cross the Apennines to look at some mosaics from an ancient tradition best exemplified in Ravenna; and we shall cross the Alps to visit some of the great cathedrals of France and England, where the solid walls, as they climb, seem to dissolve and to become light, to see windows, like the so-called 'Five Sisters' at York, which were erected in the decade of Dante's birth, and the Rose Window at Lincoln, originally erected in the mid-thirteenth century, and called the Bishop's Eye.



Figure 7: (P\_Pa\_7) (l-r) Mosaic at Ravenna, 'Five Sisters' at York, 'Bishop's Eye' at Lincoln



The Bishop in question was none other than Robert Grosseteste, a Franciscan philosopher and theologian, translator and commentator, and author of two very influential works on the physics and the metaphysics of light. Indeed, I had originally intended to focus in this lecture on the relevant *concepts*, scientific and religious, that underly the whole of the *Paradiso*, but I have cut the treatment of both down to the barest minimum.

...a puncto lucis sphaera lucis quamvis magna subito generetur

...

[*Lux*], cuius per se est haec operatio, scilicet se ipsam multiplicare et in omnem partem subito diffundere

Grosseteste, De luce seu de inchoatione formarum\*

According to Grosseteste, light, by its very nature, cannot not multiply itself. It has a *vis multiplicativa*; as soon as it exists, it must spread out in all directions, so that if you start with a point of light, it will immediately generate a *sphere* of light, a sphere of luminosity.



Figure 8: (P\_Pa\_8) Giovanni di Paolo, [FIXME: ref and possibly date needed]



Now, St Augustine had said that ‘God is light’, *Deus lux est*; and in the *Paradiso*, Dante the pilgrim first perceives God as a point which was irradiating light, ‘un punto che raggiava lume’. Two cantos later, in Dante’s brief account of the Creation of the Universe, it is made clear that he conceives it as a ‘self-opening of the eternal love into new loves’, and this self-opening is depicted as instantaneous irradiation of the Divine Light, a multiplication of the light which is God.

In this perspective, the medieval cosmos is in principle nothing other than a ‘sphere of rays’ emanating from God, and all bodies whatsoever, even the darkest, and most impenetrable, participate, in different ways, in the nature of light:

Omnia corpora, qualiacumque sint, participant naturae lucis secundum  
magis et minus.  
Alia claritas solis, alia claritas lunae, et alia claritas stellarum. Stella  
enim ab stella differt in claritate.  
(*Ad Corinthios* 1, 15, 41)

The consequences of this are mind-blowing, and there is not space to go into more than *one* of them in this lecture. For Dante, as for all thinkers in his culture, there was a hierarchy of light, a ladder, or scale of light:

corpi lucenti	sole
corpi diafani	stella
corpi opachi, colorati	lucciola
	aria
	acqua
	ambra
	bianco
	rosso
	nero

At the top of the ladder are bodies that shine, ‘corpi lucenti’, ‘lucent bodies’, in a scale of brightness that goes from the sun at the top to the phosphorescent firefly at the bottom. In the middle come the ‘transparent bodies’, ‘corpi diafani’, such as air, water, alabaster or amber. At the lowest level of all, we find light ‘incorporated’ in *all* opaque bodies, ‘corpi opachi’, which is a synonym for ‘coloured bodies’, ‘corpi colorati’, which were perceived as forming a scale of colours running from white at the top to black at the bottom.

This leads us to the those two points I want to quickly make about the nature and behaviour of light, as they were explained in contemporary physics and optics, which both fascinated Dante as concepts, and deeply affected his poetry in the *Comedy*.

In a passage in a prose work, the *Convivio*, Dante says he follows the usage of philosophers by distinguishing, within the generic term light, three species or successive manifestations; first, light ‘in its fountain-head or beginning’ (in what we have just called a ‘lucent body’), then light as a ‘ray’ in a transparent medium



Figure 9: (P\_Pa\_9) Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna



So much for the verb ‘risplendere’; now we pass to the verb ‘sfavillare’, meaning to ‘sparkle’, or to send out ‘sparks’, ‘faville’. At different moments in the *Paradiso*, Dante invites us to think of a ‘fire’ or a ‘furnace’, of a ‘coal which gives off a flame’, or the ‘flame of a candle’. A fire, with its leaping flames, can be thought of as a pulsating source of light, varying in intensity from one moment to the next,

and of course, able to send out sparks (‘scintille’, fiammelle’), as, for example, when burning logs are struck.

The point I am driving at is that Dante was well aware of a source of light which can be described as flaming, sparkling, scintillating, or coruscating and apparently alive, and for that very reason impossible to simulate in a painting. Nevertheless, you can sometimes see an effect very *similar* to sparkling in the stained glass windows of our cathedrals and churches; that is, North of the Alps, where the weather is often ‘cloudy bright’, and the wind is driving the clouds, such that the sun is constantly going in or coming out again, or at least varying in intensity, depending on the nature of their cover. Then, the windows do seem to be not only ‘lucent’ bodies, but ‘sparkling’ bodies, ‘sfavillanti’.

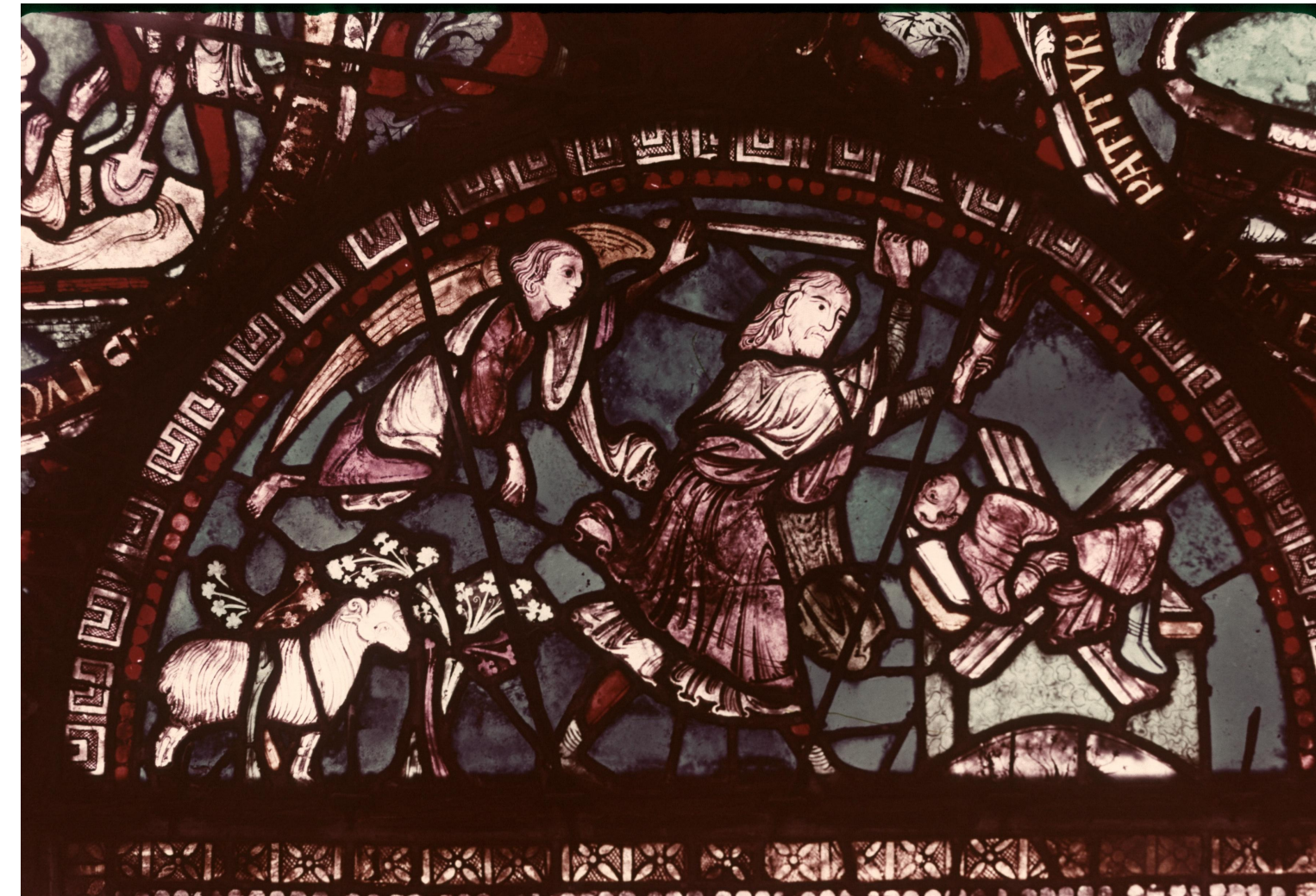


Figure 10: (P\_Pa\_10) [FIXME: caption needed]



And so we come to the third of Dante's verbs, *lucère*. As you will have gathered, my thoughts about sparks and pulsating sources of light, were inspired by this passage in Canto 18 of *Paradiso*, where the lights which rise up like innumerable sparks, are the souls of the just, *justorum animae*, who according to Solomon 'will shine and run to and fro like sparks in the stubble':

E vidi scendere altre luci dove  
era il colmo de l'emme...

...

Poi, come nel percuoter d'i ciocchi arse  
surgono innumerabili faville,

...

resurger parver quindi più di mille  
luci e salir, qual assai e qual poco,  
sì come 'l sol che l'accende sortille...  
(18, 97–8, 100–1, 103–5)

Justorum animae...fulgebunt et tamquam scintillae in harundineti  
discurrent.  
(*Liber sapientiae*, 3, 1, 7)

This should remind you of what I said in the beginning: that in the *Paradiso*, there is a further class of 'lucent bodies' to add to the sun or furnaces or torches, namely, the 'blessed', whose outshining love and joy turn them into so many lights and fires, and who cannot therefore be represented faithfully by a painter spreading his powdered colours onto a wall or a wooden panel.

Put yourself for a moment into the shoes of a miniaturist who was called upon to paint the arrival of Dante and Beatrice in the sun:

Lo ministro maggior de la natura...

...

sì girava per le spire...

...e io era con lui; ma del salire

non m'accors' io...

È Beatrice quella che sì scorge  
di bene in meglio, sì subitamente  
che l'atto suo per tempo non si sporge.  
(10, 28, 34–5, 37–9)

*Nature's prime minister...was revolving through the spirals of his  
course...and I was with him; but I didn't notice my ascent...Beatrice  
it is who guides from good to better, so swiftly, that her action does  
not extend into time.*

In other words, she acts *instantaneously*, which does not mean just 'very quickly', but literally 'in no time at all'. Now, the most talented of the miniaturists who took up the challenge of 'figuring Paradise' (to use Dante's phrase, 'figurare il Paradiso'), was without doubt the artist from Siena, Giovanni di Paolo, whose work we have already seen once, and who was painting about a century after Dante's death.



Figure 11: (P\_Pa\_11) Giovanni di Paolo, [FIXME: name of work needed]



His work, of which another example is given above, reveals him to be immensely accomplished and intelligent. This stylised, but recognisably Tuscan, landscape under the rays of the sun, presents the sun *precisely* as Nature’s ‘minister’, servant, who ‘imprints’ or ‘stamps’ the world with the ‘power of the heavens’. Beatrice’s gesture and attitude is really worthy of ‘her who leads from good to better’, while space flight is well suggested in the sinuous lines of the two bodies, and by Beatrice’s fluttering veil. But alas, Dante himself says that he completed this phase in the instant—he didn’t fly, he just *arrived*.

Let us proceed in the same Canto, on to the following lines:

Quant’ esser convenia da sé lucente  
 quel ch’era dentro al sol dov’ io entra’ mi,  
 non per color, ma per lume parvente!  
 Perch’ io lo ’ngegno e l’arte e l’uso chiami,  
 sì nol direi che mai s’imaginasse;  
 ma creder puossi e di veder si brami.  
 E se le fantasie nostre son basse  
 a tanta altezza, non è maraviglia;  
 ché sopra ’l sol non fu occhio ch’andasse.  
 (10, 40–8)

*How lucent in themselves  
 must have been what was in the sun where I entered,  
 appearing, not by colour, but by light.  
 If I were to summon up all my talent, and art and experience,  
 I should never express it in such a way  
 that one could form an image of it.  
 And if our imaginations are too low  
 for such heights, it is no wonder;  
 for no eye has gone so high as the sun.*

If it is impossible to represent the instantaneity of space flight, what are we to say about the souls of the blessed, who appear to Dante *within the body* of the sun, and shine out so brilliantly that they overpower the light of the sun itself? Dante specifies that they were visible to him *not* because they were different in colour from the sun, but thanks to the intensity of the light they were irradiating.

Giovanni di Paolo admits defeat. He ‘chucks in the towel’, so to speak, and ignores the letter of the text. Thus, he instead uses different colours to render visible (‘parvente’) at least the different conditions of the souls when they were alive.

We can distinguish the Venerable Bede, by his monk’s habit; Saint Isidore, Bishop of Seville, by his mitre; two university professors from Paris, Richard of St Victor and Siger of Brabant; and, in Dominican robes, St Albert the Great and St Thomas Aquinas—or, with the crown on his head, King Solomon:



Figure 12: (P\_Pa\_12) Giovanni di Paolo [FIXME: title needed]



I would like to turn back now to stained glass windows, and think a little more about them. The glass itself is a ‘coloured body’, a *corpus coloratum*, no less than the tesserae of a mosaic, or a mineral like *lapis lazuli* used by a painter. Yet because it allows the light to ‘shine through’—because it is ‘trans-lucent’—when we look at it set in the window, from the darker interior of the nave, it has the effect of being a ‘lucent body’, of being a *source* of light, a ‘spring’ from which light ‘flows’, or a ‘fountain-head’—and remember that all these words were originally metaphors, being ‘carried across’ from water to light.



Figure 13: (P\_Pa\_13) [FIXME: caption needed]



In other words, stained glass is the only medium which can give the effect that Dante had in mind when he described the souls of the blessed in the heavens; and I have chosen an image of the Virgin Mary at this point, partly because Dante will refer to her, metaphorically, as a 'fountain' of Hope, 'fontana di speranza', or a 'blazing torch' of Charity, 'face di caritate'.

Remember, too, the point I made earlier about the effects of seeing stained glass in a non-Mediterranean land, on windy, cloudy-bright days when the glass can seem like a flaming, sparkling fire, and when, towards sunset, as the rays of the sun are almost horizontal, the window can become what Dante calls 'fulvido di fulgore', literally, 'fulvid with lightning'.

Nor is the translucency of the glass itself the only point of contact between Dante's poetry and the medieval stained glass window. Let us think for a moment about the technique of inserting bits of glass into a window.



Figure 14: (P\_Pa\_14) (l-r) Stained glass in Westminster Abbey (detail); Rose window at St Clare, Assisi



As you can see in the image above, a famous detail from our Westminster Abbey, the individual pieces of coloured glass are first set in strips of lead, a soft and malleable metal which can be moulded to form flexible, variable outlines. The leaded strips are then inserted into a stone frame, which can also be carved into regular, geometrical shapes, triangles, quatrefoils, ovoids. These stone shapes can then be put together, for example, to create a huge circle like that shown on the right: one of the so-called 'rose windows', that became common in the twelfth century. As you can see, the 'roses' are extremely beautiful from the outside, pure geometry. The example pictured is in Assisi, at the church of St Clare, and was completed in 1265, the year of Dante's birth—so he would certainly have been familiar with this kind of window.

When you go inside, the geometrical shapes, which are 'common sensibles', are enhanced by colour and light, 'the proper visibles'. Below is the same window, from the inside; and there are elements in a window like this which may have suggested some of the pyrotechnic displays that Dante imagined in his *Paradiso*:

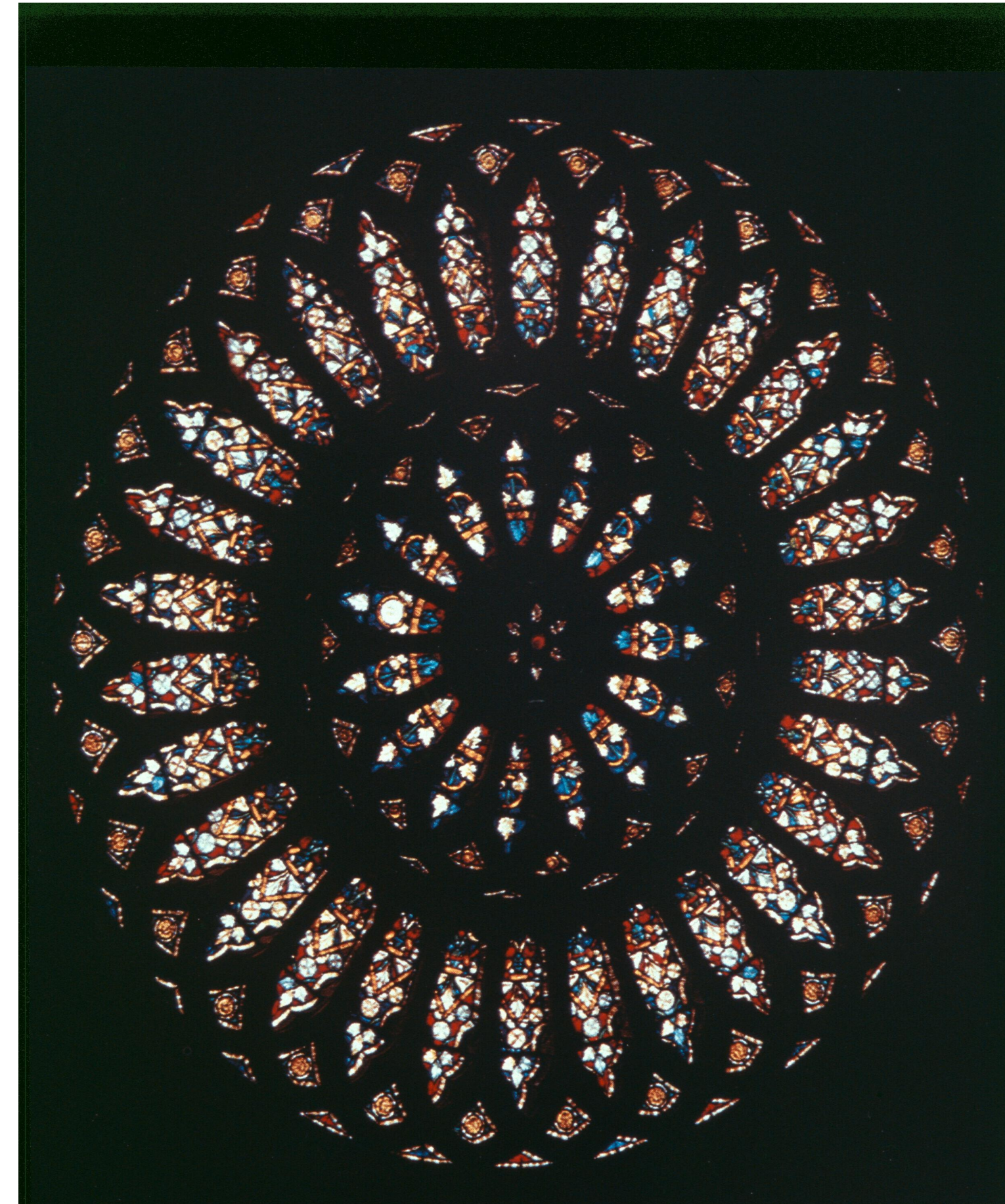


Figure 15: (P\_Pa\_15) Rose window at St Clare, Assisi (interior)



In this case, it is hard not to think of the three concentric circles of lights that appear to Dante in the Heaven of the Sun.

I have now shown you stained glass and stained glass windows in England and in Italy, and the moment has come to make a pilgrimage to France, to the city which more than any other has a right to be called the 'Mecca', of all those who make pilgrimages to see stained glass: Chartres, a tiny town dominated, as you can see, by its cathedral, which was rebuilt in Gothic style in the first three decades of the thirteenth century, after a disastrous fire destroyed its predecessor in 1194:



Figure 16: (P\_Pa\_16) Aerial view of Chartres



It has three portals, which are covered in row upon row of sculptures, so famous that people often speak of Chartres Cathedral as the 'Acropolis' of France. But what interests us in this lecture are the nave and the two aisles, which were built to hold the huge windows that were designed to be filled with colour. There used to be no fewer than 176 such windows in this one building, and it is almost miraculous that no fewer than 145 of them survive, laid out as you can see in this plan of the cathedral:

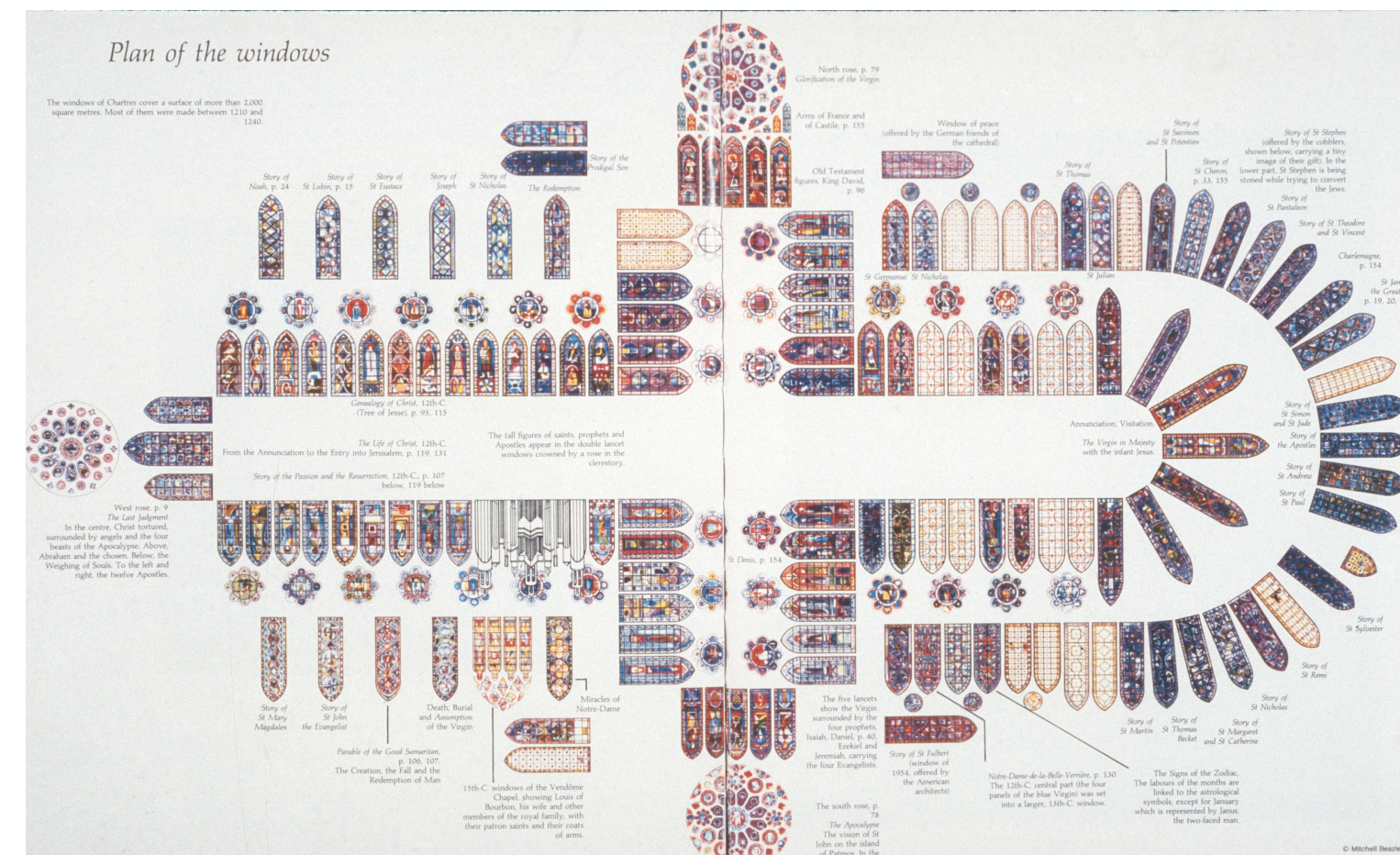


Figure 17: (P\_Pa\_17) Plan of the windows at Chartres Cathedral



We will look at just five of them—first, two of the ‘vertical’ windows; and then, after a pause to study some texts from the *Bible*, we shall come back to the three rose windows, North, West and South, which will prepare us for the lecture’s finale.

The first of the vertical windows is divided into 24 compartments, grouped into three ‘flowers’, six ‘leaves’, and two ‘buds’, while the lower zone is given over to the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

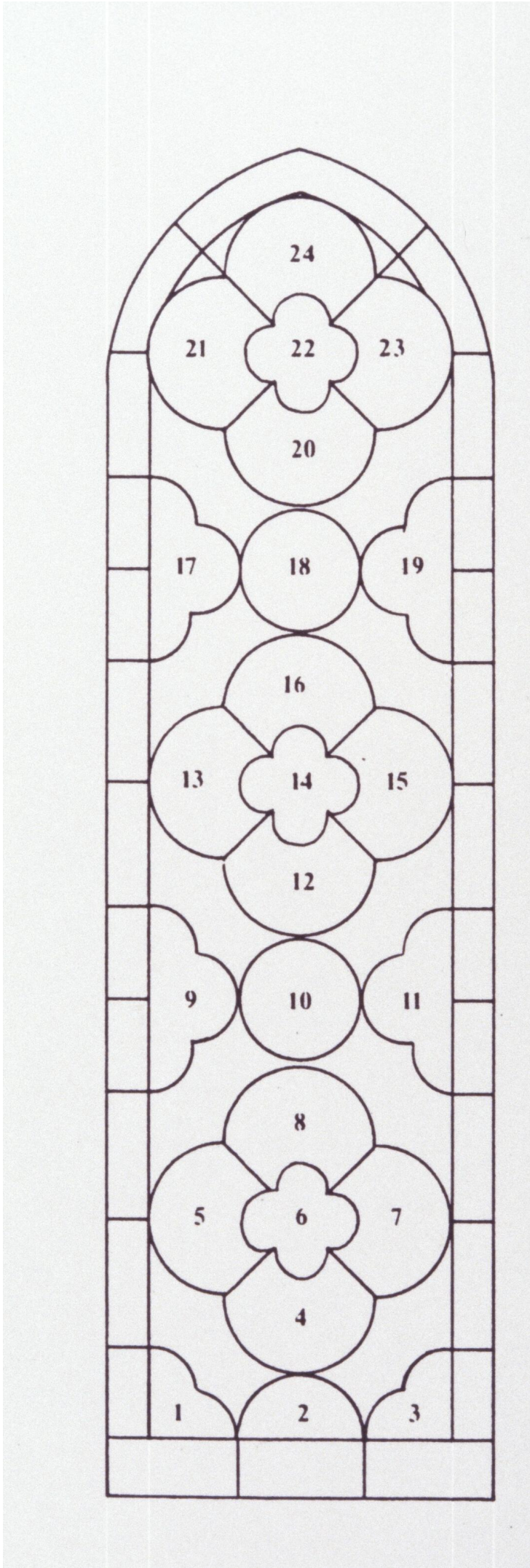


Figure 18: (P\_Pa\_18) Detail from vertical window at Chartres and diagram



In the vertical 'petal' to the left, you can see the unnamed traveller, 'a certain man', who is emerging confidently from the Gate of Jerusalem under a cloudless blue sky, to make the journey to Jericho.

In the quatrefoil at the centre of the flower (below on the left), two thieves, dressed in green, are lying in ambush on a hill which is as red as blood:



Figure 19: (P\_Pa\_19) Two details of quatrefoil of vertical window at Chartres



To the right, the thieves are beating the traveller with huge clubs, while an accomplice is stripping him of all his clothes, as the parable specifies. The thieves will leave him half dead (as our translations say) or 'half alive', *semivivus*, as the Latin says, at the edge of the road.

And finally, it is at the edge of the road that we find him in the upper 'petal' (below), in the scene where the Priest and the Levite will pass by on the other side of the road, silhouetted against the intense blue of the sky:



Figure 20: (P\_Pa\_20) Detail of the upper petal in the vertical window at Chartres



What I have shown you are four scenes, set in four different geometrical shapes. The colours used were very intense, saturated, and their function was part naturalistic, part symbolic. The story is told with the utmost clarity, confined to the essentials. In all these respects, the windows make me think of Dante's *terzinas*, which are bound together by the rhymes—ABA, BCB, CDC and so forth, in a strict pattern—where all the lines must have neither more nor less than eleven syllables, but the syntactic structures varied and flexible, and the rhyme sounds and rhyme words are deployed like patches of intense colour, some of them being (in Dante's own terminology) 'sweet-tasting', like the blue, or 'sharp-tasting', like the reds or greens.

The second vertical window at Chartres we shall look at is placed over the West Portal, and is earlier in date—in fact, it goes back to the twelfth century, before the great fire. It looks like a ladder with seven rungs, or like the kind of wooden palier, that gardeners put on the south-facing walls of their orchards to support an exotic fruit tree. And as you can see in the detail, its frame does support a single tree—a lofty, white one which is growing from the loins of Jesse, who lies asleep wrapped in his red cloak on white sheets, spread over a green bed:

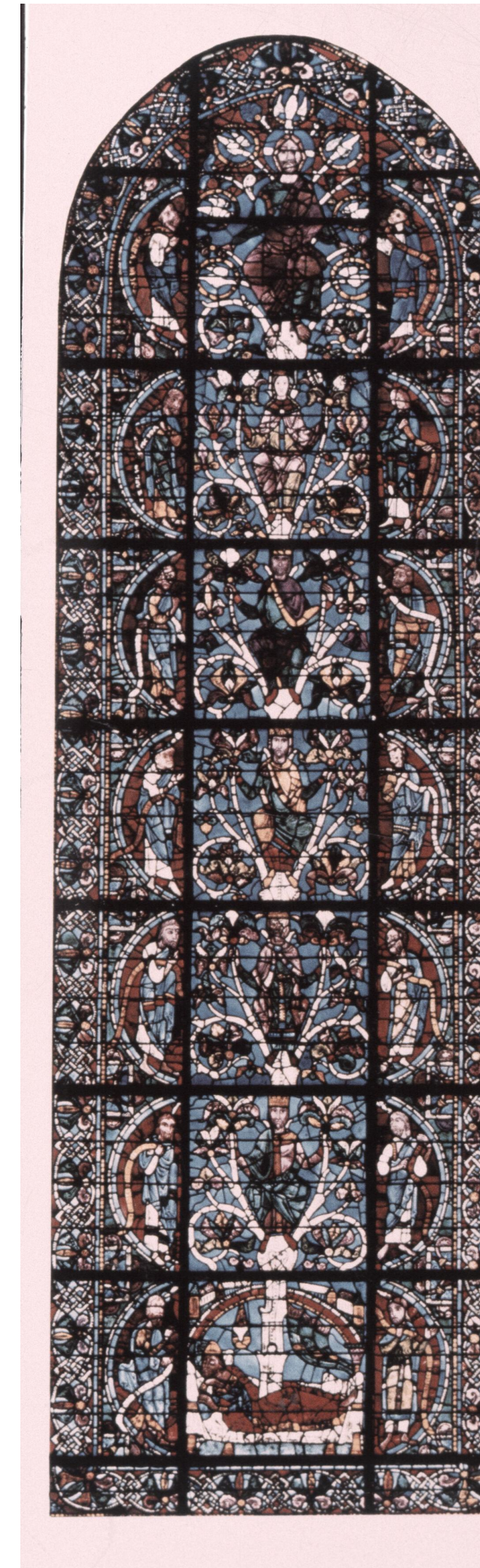


Figure 21: (P\_Pa\_21) Vertical window at Chartres, and detail



It is a so-called 'Jesse tree', a genealogical tree showing the ancestors of Christ, to whom I shall return in my fifth lecture. The trunk carries upwards the seed of the royal house of David, through the successive generations of the Kings of Judah, who are flanked (below left) in each case by the prophets who foretold the birth of the Messiah 'from the line of David'. At the very top of the tree (below right), we find not Joseph (as St Matthew reports in the opening of his Gospel), but Mary and Jesus, (as the perspective of the New Testament requires), with Christ is represented *not* as the Messiah of the Jewish tradition, the 'anointed king', but as the son of God, the king of the world, and the Saviour of the whole of mankind:



Figure 22: (P\_Pa\_22) Two details from vertical window at Chartres



When I look at this window as a whole, with its regular geometrical forms and the varying play of ‘colour and light’, it makes me think of certain cantos in the *Paradiso*, cantos 6, 11 and 12 for instance, where Dante narrates, *terzina* by *terzina* or scene by scene, the main events in the conquest of the world by the Romans, or the main events in the lives of St Francis and St Dominic.

The two windows you have looked at really are a visual correlative of Dante’s poem; of the economy, and the density, which come from his use of the *terzina* as a self-contained unit, of the interlocking effect of the rhymes, and the different ‘colours’ suggested by their contrasting sounds—all the features that make Dante’s way of telling a story so different from what you find in his classical models, Virgil and Ovid, or in the *Bible*, or in medieval romances.

We shall come back to Chartres presently, to look at the three rose windows—but before we do, we must have a quick look at the ‘source’ of the images, the ‘fountain head’ which ‘feeds’ not only Chartres and the *Paradiso*, but all medieval representations of Paradise; namely, the Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse, by St John the Evangelist.

My plan is to remind you of certain key passages which will already be familiar from the *King James Bible*, and to give you the Latin which Dante knew, that of Saint Jerome’s *Vulgate*. I want you to concentrate in particular on the italicisations, because they call attention to those words which Dante uses to speak of the *visibilia propria*, ‘lo colore e la luce’.

In the opening chapter of Revelation, St John tells how he saw ‘in the spirit’ a ‘Throne set in heaven’, and around this throne 24 other thrones, on which there sat ‘24 elders’. The elders were dressed in white garments and had on their heads crowns of gold, and in front of the throne, ‘there was a sea of glass, like crystal’:

Et in conspectu sedis tamquam mare *vitreum* simile *crystallo*; et in medio sedis, et in circuitu sedis quattuor animalia plena oculis ante et retro.  
(*Apocalypsis Johannis Apostoli*, 4, 6–7)

There were also the ‘four living things’, in Latin, *quattuor animalia*—lion, ox, man and eagle—always understood as symbols of the four Gospels, or four Evangelists, and in addition, the Lamb, the Lamb of God, always understood as Christ; though in the event, there is no trace of animals or lamb in Dante’s *celestial* Paradise:

Et vidi et ecce in medio throni et quattuor animalium, et in medio seniorum, Agnum stantem tamquam occisum...  
(*Apocalypsis Johannis Apostoli*, 5, 6)

From these short texts in the early chapters, I jump now to chapter 21, and to the far more substantial description of the Heavenly City:

Ego sum alpha et omega, initium et finis; ego sitienti dabo de fonte aquae vivae, gratis’.

Et sustuli me [*sc. angelus*] *in spiritu in montem magnum et altum, et ostendit mihi civitatem sanctam Hierusalem, descendentem de caelo a Deo, habentem claritatem\** Dei. *Lumen* eius simile *lapidi pretioso* tamquam *lapidi jaspidis* sicut *cristallum*. Et habebat\* [*civitas*] murum magnum et altum habens portas duodecim

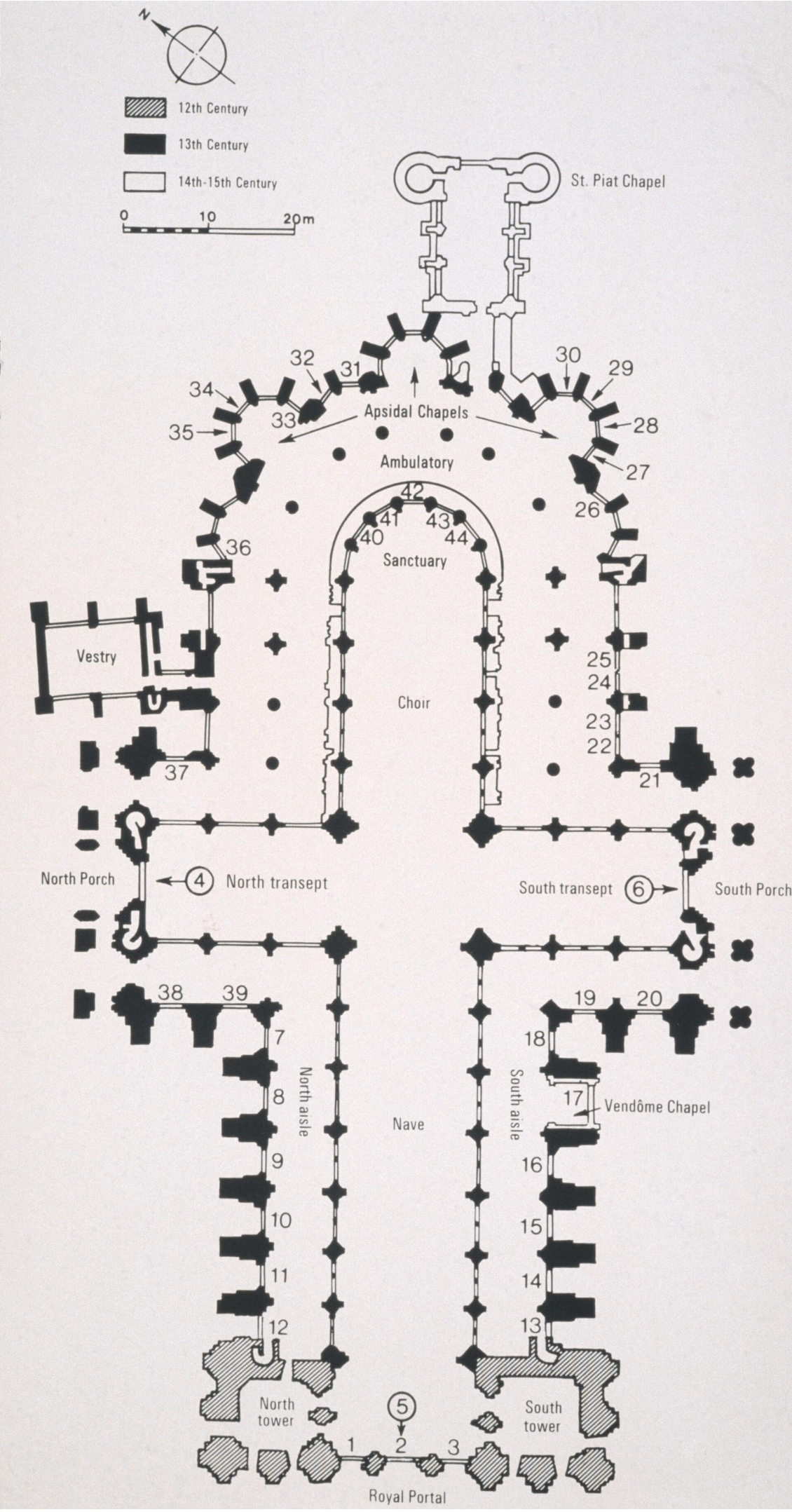


Figure 23: (P\_Pa\_23) Rose window over North Portal at Chartres; Plan of the cathedral



What I want to do in the coming paragraphs is prepare you to think about some possible connections between these circular windows—‘rose windows’, as we call them today—and what Dante called the ‘general form of heaven’, ‘la forma general di Paradiso’, as he described it in cantos 30 and 31.

The one over the north Portal, pictured, presents the same characters that we saw in the Tree of Jesse. There are twelve squares, and they contain images of the twelve Kings of Judah; these are flanked, in the semicircles, by the twelve prophets, the so-called minor prophets, who foretold the coming of the Messiah. In the centre, you can see the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child, surrounded by twelve ‘parachutes’ or segments, representing angels or doves, as you can see better in the following detail:



Figure 24: (P\_Pa\_24) Detail from rose window over North Portal at Chartres



We can examine them in order, moving outwards from the centre: Mary and Jesus, surrounded by lilies; doves; a King of Judah and a Prophet; and larger lilies.

We move on now to the West Front, pictured below both from the outside and the inside (and where I would ask you to note the layout of the windows below the rose):



Figure 25: (P\_Pa\_25) West Front of Chartres from outside and inside



In the centre of the rose is the figure of Christ as Judge, who is surrounded by the four *animalia*, who are separated by pairs of angels. Moving now to the middle circle, in the lower half are the twelve Apostles, presided over by Abraham, who is flanked by Cherubim; in the outer circle, above, there is a 'flying multitude' of angels carrying the instruments of Christ's Passion, and blowing trumpets to waken the dead for the Last Judgement.

Finally, let us pass to the South Rose, above the South Portal, where you can clearly pick out the concentric circles in the stone work, even without the colours that you see inside:

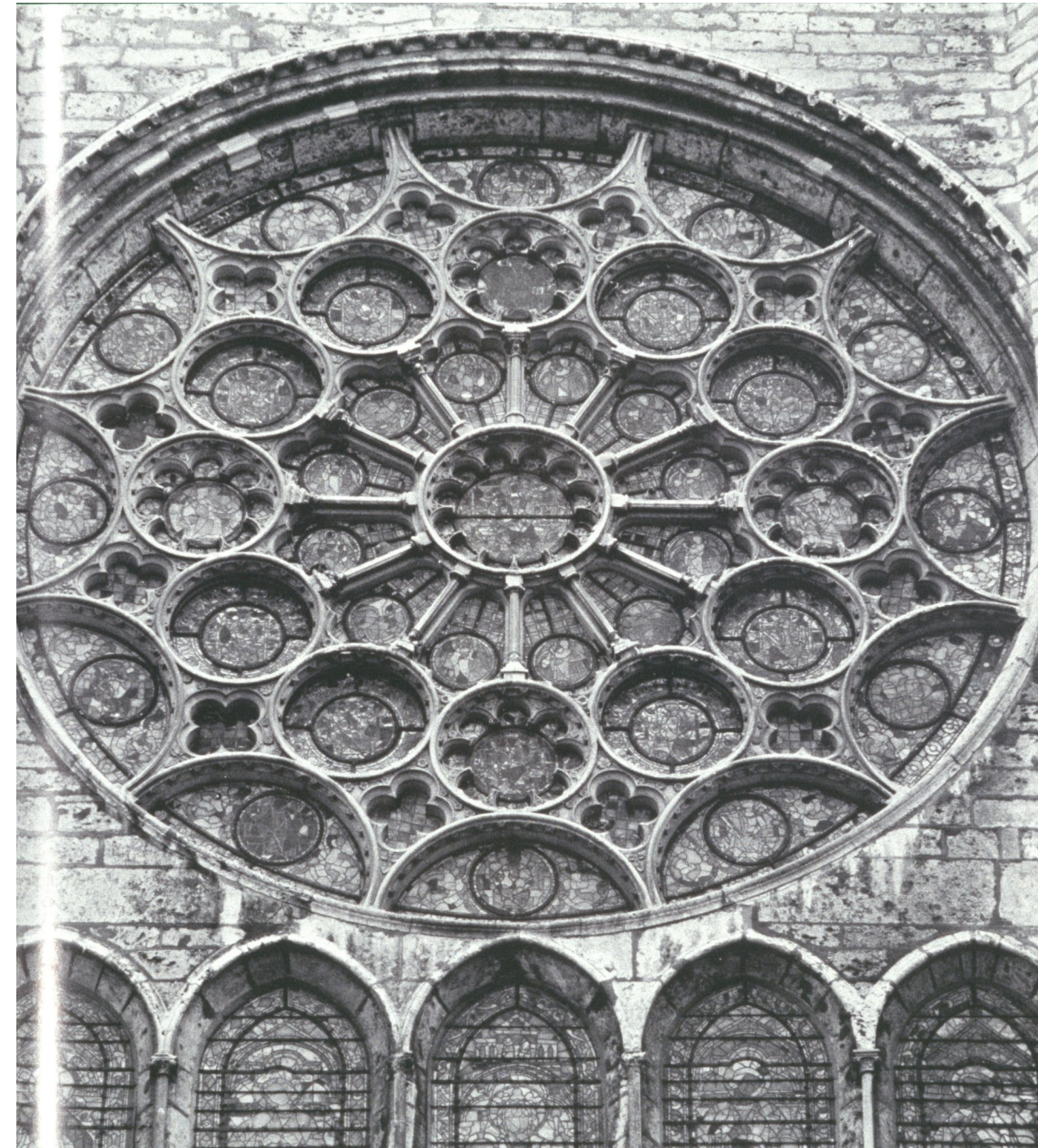


Figure 26: (P\_Pa\_26) South Rose at Chartres from outside and inside



Once again, the centre is taken up with the figure of the Son of Man as seen in Revelation, surrounded by the four *animalia* alternating with angels, as in the West Window. This time the *animalia* and angels are surrounded, in the circles *and* in the semicircles, by the twenty-four elders, *seniores*—though they are not dressed in white, and are carrying musical instruments, which makes me think of a phrase in Dante, the ‘circulated melody’, ‘circolata melodia’.

Between the circles and the semi-circles is the coat of arms of the donor, the Count of Dreux, which I have picked out in this detail, which also shows some of the *seniores* and their instruments:



Figure 27: (P\_Pa\_27) Detail from South Rose at Chartres



I come now to the last part of my lecture, in which I am going to take you through some lines from cantos of 30 and 31 of *Paradiso*. I see these lines as forming a kind of ‘Prelude and Fugue’, composed on themes derived from the *Bible*, and from the traditional iconography of the Last Judgement that Dante could have seen in frescos,

in manuscripts, or, just possibly, in the great circular windows we call ‘rose windows’.

«Noi siamo usciti fòre  
del maggior corpo al ciel ch’è pura luce:  
luce intellettual, piena d’amore;  
amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;  
letizia che trascende ogni dolzore.  
(30, 38–42)

*“We have gone beyond— from greatest sphere to heaven of pure light,  
light of the intellect, light full of love,  
love of the true good, full of ecstasy,  
ecstasy that transcends the sweetest joy.”* (The edition used here is that of F. Sanguineti, 2001; the translation is that by Mark Musa for Penguin Classics.)

At the point when we pick up the story, Dante and Beatrice have passed beyond the outer rim of the ‘primum mobile’ into the Empyrean, which Beatrice describes as a heaven of ‘pure light’, a light that is ‘intellectual’ (not accessible to the senses), filled with supreme love, joy and sweetness.

Così mi circondò luce viva,  
e lasciommi fasciato di tal velo  
del suo fulgor, che nulla m’apariva.  
«Sempre l’amor che queta questo cielo  
accoglie in sé con sì fatta salute,  
per far disposto a sua fiamma il candelò».  
(30, 49–54)

*...so glorious living light encompassed me,  
enfolding me so tightly in its veil  
of luminance that I saw only light.*  
*“The Love that calms* FIXME: complete the translation

The first thing that happens is that Dante is engulfed and enfolded by a ‘living light’, a flash of lightning, (‘fulgore’), paradoxically forming a ‘veil’ before his eyes of such intense brightness that he can see nothing whatsoever, not even his guide, Beatrice. Immediately, however, her voice comes to reassure him, explaining that this is no more than the greeting (‘salute’) given to every soul as it arrives in the Empyrean, tempering it to withstand the light of God’s glory, by which light we shall ‘see’ God.

Non fuòr più tosto dentro a me venute,  
Queste parole brevi, ch’io compresi  
Me sormontar di sopr’a mia virtute;



Figure 28: (P\_Pa\_28) Giovanni di Paolo’s [??] illumination of *Paradiso* 14



He shows us the resurrected bodies; he shows us the ‘gratuito lume’, alias the ‘light of grace’, or the ‘light of glory’ (*lumen gratiae*, or *lumen gloriae*); but he cannot *begin* to convey what Dante is saying about the ‘glorified body’, that ‘body made glorious’ which will be a ‘*lucent* body’, even more brilliant than these spirits who have appeared to Dante, and who have surpassed the lucent body of the sun which is at the very top of the scale, or ‘ladder’, of the light which appears to our senses.

We also realise the sheer *impossibility* that any visual artist working in any medium other than film could convey what Dante was trying to evoke in our imaginations, because, as we shall see, he is concerned with *changes*, with processes, with the gradual unfolding of the spectacle and his gradual understanding of what we can think of as *his* Revelation; and this he achieves by constantly focussing on his own perceptions, and on the many distinct stages by which his power of vision was strengthened, to enable him to make out ‘the general form of Heaven’.

—

Italians call them ‘rosoni’, by the way, ‘big roses’; but there is no evidence as far as I know that this expression was used in Dante’s day. However, when you look at the stone ‘petals’, even from the outside, one wonders if a pilgrim who was returning from Assisi, and was trying to describe this window to someone at home, if casting around for some familiar object with which to compare it, might not have started with a ‘wheel’, and got as far as a ‘rose’.

—

Perhaps I should have gone on, and reminded you of the woman clothed in the sun (‘mulier amicta sole’), or the description of the feet of the Son of Man, which shone like bronze in the blazing furnace (‘in camino ardenti’).

—

(By the way, the verb ‘circunfulse’ is a Latinism equivalent to *circumfulsit*, which is the verb used in the Latin *Bible* to describe the bright light that threw St Paul to the ground on the road to Damascus, and left him blind.)

—

And so we pass to the next stage, and to yet another instance of the principle that ‘by His light we see the Light’; once again Dante must expose his eyes to the very light that he wants to be able to see, but this time the image is blended with that of Baptism, when we are immersed in the Holy Water that will wash away the stain of Original Sin and make us better, and with that of drinking the Water of Grace. Dante’s eyelids drink of the water, and immediately the images change.

—

[the following section has cues for a number of slides which are not present in the carousel I had to scan; and will need reinserting]

Still faithful to the principle that by his light do we see Light, Dante now appeals to the Splendour who is God for the power to express the triumph of the true kingdom, and then goes back over the ground he has covered.

He does so firstly by giving us the concepts. God the creator, who is Light of his very nature, sends out a light which enables Man—who is his creature, his creation—to