

Paradise Canto 13

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Canto XIII

Argument

Thomas Aquinas resumes his speech. He solves the other of those doubts which he discerned in the mind of Dante, and warns him earnestly against assenting to any proposition without having duly examined it.

Let him,[1] who would conceive what now I saw,
Imagine, (and retain the image firm
As mountain rock, the whilst he hears me speak,
Of stars, fifteen, from midst the ethereal host
Selected that, with lively ray serene,
O'ercome the massiest air: thereto imagine
The wain, that, in the bosom of our sky,
Spins ever on its axle night and day,
With the bright summit of that horn, which swells
Due from the pole, round which the first wheel rolls,
To have ranged themselves in fashion of two signs
In Heaven, such as Ariadne made,
When death's chill seized her; and that one of them
Did compass in the other's beam; and both
In such sort whirl around, that each should tend
With opposite motion; and, conceiving thus,
Of that true constellation, and the dance
Twofold, that circled me, he shall attain
As 'twere the shadow; for things there as much
Surpass our usage, as the swiftest Heaven
Is swifter than the Chiana.[2] There was sung

[1: "Let him." "Whoever would conceive the sight that now presented itself to me, must imagine to himself fifteen of the brightest stars in heaven, together with seven stars of Arcturus Major and two of Arcturus Minor, ranged in two circles, one within the other, each resembling the crown of Ariadne, and moving round in opposite directions."]

[2: See Hell, Canto xxix. 45.]

No Bacchus, and no Io Paeon, but
Three Persons in the Godhead, and in one
Person that nature and the human join'd.

The song and round were measured: and to us
Those saintly lights attended, happier made

At each new ministering. Then silence brake
Amid the accordant sons of Deity,
That luminary,[3] in which the wondrous life
Of the meek man of God[4] was told to me;
And thus it spake: "One ear[5] o' the harvest thresh'd,
And its grain safely stored, sweet charity
Invites me with the other to like toil.

[3: Thomas Aquinas.]

[4: St. Francis. See Canto xi. 25.]

[5: Having solved one of thy questions, I proceed to answer the other. Thou thinkest then that Adam and Christ were both endued with all the perfection of which the human nature is capable; and therefore wonderest at what has been said concerning Solomon."]

"Thou know'st, that in the bosom,[6] whence the rib
Was ta'en to fashion that fair cheek, whose taste
All the world pays for; and in that, which pierced
By the keen lance, both after and before
Such satisfaction offer'd as outweighs
Each evil in the scale; whate'er of light
To human nature is allow'd, must all
Have by His virtue been infused, who form'd
Both one and other: and thou thence admirest
In that I told thee, of beatitudes,
A second there is none to him enclosed
In the fifth radiance. Open now thine eyes
To what I answer thee; and thou shalt see
Thy deeming and my saying meet in truth,
As centre in the round. That[7] which dies not,
And that which can die, are but each the beam
Of that idea, which our Sovereign Sire
Engendereth loving; for that lively light,[8]

[6: Thou knowest that in the breast of Adam, whence the rib was taken to make that fair cheek of Eve, which, by tasting the apple, brought death into the world; and also in the breast of Christ, which, being pierced by the lance, made satisfaction for the sins of the whole world; as much wisdom resided, as human nature was capable of: and thou dost therefore wonder that I should have spoken of Solomon as the wisest." See Canto x. 105.]

[7: "That." Things, corruptible and incorruptible, are only emanations from the archetypal idea residing in the Divine Mind.]

[8: The Word; the Son of God.]

Which passeth from His splendour, not disjoin'd
From Him, nor from His love triune with them,[9]
Doth, through His bounty, congregate itself,

Mirror'd, as 'twere, in new existences;[10]
Itself unalterable, and ever one.

[9: "His love triune with them." The Holy Ghost.]

[10: Angels and human souls.]

"Descending hence unto the lowest powers,[11]
Its energy so sinks, at last it makes
But brief contingencies; for so I name
Things generated, which the heavenly orbs
Moving, with seed or without seed, produce.
Their wax, and that which moulds it,[12] differ much:
And thence with lustre, more or less, it shows
The ideal stamp impress: so that one tree,
According to his kind, hath better fruit,
And worse: and, at your birth, ye, mortal men,
Are in your talents various. Were the wax
Moulded with nice exactness, and the heaven[13]
In its disposing influence supreme,
The brightness of the seal[14] should be complete:
But nature renders it imperfect ever;
Resembling thus the artist, in his work,
Whose faltering hand is faithless to his skill.
Therefore,[15] if fervent Love dispose, and mark
The lustrous Image of the primal Virtue,
There all perfection is vouchsafed; and such
The clay[16] was made, accomplish'd with each gift,
That life can teem with; such the burden fill'd
The Virgin's bosom: so that I commend
Thy judgment, that the human nature ne'er
Was, or can be, such as in them it was.

[11: Irrational life and brute matter.]

[12: "Their wax, and that which moulds it." Matter, and the virtue or energy that acts on it.]

[13: "The heaven." The influence of the planetary bodies.]

[14: The brightness of the Divine idea before spoken of.]

[15: "Therefore." Daniello remarks that our Poet intends this for a brief description of the Trinity: the primal virtue signifying the Father; the lustrous image, the Son; the fervent love, the Holy Ghost.]

[16: "The clay." Adam.]

"Did I advance no further than this point;
'How then had he no peer?' thou might'st reply.
But, that what now appears not, may appear

Right plainly, ponder, who he was, and what
(When he was bidden 'Ask') the motive, sway'd
To his requesting. I have spoken thus,
That thou mayst see, he was a king, who ask'd[17]
For wisdom, to the end he might be king
Sufficient: not, the number to search out
Of the celestial movers; or to know,
If necessary with contingent e'er
Have made necessity; or whether that
Be granted, that first motion[18] is; or if,
Of the mid - circle,[19] can by art be made
Triangle, with its corner blunt or sharp.

[17: "Who ask'd." "He did not desire to know the number of the celestial intelligences, or to pry into the subtleties of logical, metaphysical, or mathematical science: but asked for that wisdom which might fit him for his kingly office."]

[18: "That first motion." "If we must allow one first motion, which is not caused by other motion; a question resolved affirmatively by metaphysics, according to that principle, repugnant in causis processus in infinitum." Lombardi.]

[19: "Of the mid - circle." "If in the half of the circle a rectilinear triangle can be described, one side of which shall be the diameter of the same circle, without its forming a right angle with the other two sides; which geometry shows to be impossible." Lombardi.]

"Whence, noting that, which I have said, and this,
Thou kingly prudence and that ken mayst learn,
At which the dart of my intention aims.
And, marking clearly, that I told thee, 'Risen,'
Thou shalt discern it only hath respect
To kings, of whom are many, and the good
Are rare. With this distinction take my words;
And they may well consist with that which thou
Of the first human father dost believe,
And of our well - beloved. And let this
Henceforth be lead unto thy feet, to make
Thee slow in motion, as a weary man,
Both to the 'yea' and to the 'nay' thou seest not.
For he among the fools is down full low,
Whose affirmation, or denial, is
Without distinction, in each case alike.
Since it befalls, that in most instances
Current opinion leans to false: and then
Affection bends the judgment to her ply.

"Much more than vainly doth he loose from shore,

Since he returns not such as he set forth,
Who fishes for the truth and wanteth skill.
And open proofs of this unto the world
Have been afforded in Parmenides,
Melissus, Bryso,[20] and the crowd beside,
Who journey'd on, and knew not whither: so did
Sabellius, Arius,[21] and the other fools,
Who, like to scimitars,[22] reflected back
The scripture - image by distortion marr'd.

[20: "_____ Parmenides, Melissus, Bryso." For the singular opinions entertained by the two former of these heathen philosophers, see Diogenes Laertius, lib. ix.]

[21: "Sabellius, Arius." Well - known heretics.]

[22: "Scriminars." Bertradon de la Brocquiere, who wrote before Dante, informs us that the wandering Arabs used their scimitars as mirrors.]

"Let not the people be too swift to judge;
As one who reckons on the blades in field,
Or e'er the crop be ripe. For I have seen
The thorn frown rudely all the winter long,
And after bear the rose upon its top;
And bark, that all her way across the sea
Ran straight and speedy, perish at the last
E'en in the haven's mouth. Seeing one steal,
Another bring his offering to the priest,
Let not[23] Dame Birtha and Sir Martin[24] thence
Into Heaven's counsels deem that they can pry;
For one of these may rise, the other fall."

[23: "Let not." "Let not shortsighted mortals presume to decide on the future doom of any man, from a consideration of his present character and actions." This is meant as an answer to the doubts entertained respecting the salvation of Solomon. See Canto x. 107.]

[24: "Dame Birtha and Sir Martin." Names put generally for persons who have more curiosity than discretion.]