

Paradise Canto 17

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Canto XVII

Argument

Cacciaguida predicts to our Poet his exile and the calamities he had to infer; and, lastly, exhorts him to write the present poem.

Such as the youth,[1] who came to Clymene,
To certify himself of that reproach
Which had been fasten'd on him, (he whose end,
Still makes the fathers chary to their sons),
E'en such was I; nor unobserved was such
Of Beatrice, and that saintly lamp,[2]
Who had erewhile for me his station moved;
When thus my lady: "Give thy wish free vent,
That it may issue, bearing true report
Of the mind's impress: not that aught thy words
May to our knowledge add, but to the end
That thou mayst use thyself to own thy thirst,[3]
And men may mingle for thee when they hear."

[1: Phaeton, who came to his mother Clymene, to inquire if he were indeed the son of Apollo.]

[2: Cacciaguida.]

[3: "That thou mayst obtain from others a solution of any doubt that may occur to thee."]

"O plant, from whence I spring! revered and loved!
Who soar'st so high a pitch, that thou as clear,[4]
As earthly thought determines two obtuse
In one triangle not contain'd, so clear
Dost see contingencies, ere in themselves
Existent, looking at the point[5] whereto
All times are present; I, the whilst I scaled
With Virgil the soul - purifying mount
And visited the nether world of woe,
Touching my future destiny have heard
Words grievous, though I feel me on all sides
Well squared to fortune's blows. Therefore my will
Were satisfied to know the lot awaits me;
The arrow, seen beforehand, slacks his flight."

[4: "Thou beholdest future events with the same clearness of evidence that we discern the simplest mathematical demonstrations."]

[5: The divine nature.]

So said I to the brightness, which erewhile
To me had spoken; and my will declared,
As Beatrice will'd, explicitly.
Nor with oracular response obscure,
Such as, or e'er the Lamb of God was slain,
Beguiled the credulous nations: but, in terms
Precise, and unambiguous lore, replied
The spirit of paternal love, enshrined,
Yet in his smile apparent; and thus spake:
"Contingency,[6] whose verge extendeth not
Beyond the tablet of your mortal mold,
Is all depicted in the eternal sight;
But hence deriveth not necessity,[7]
More than the tall ship, hurried down the flood,
Is driven by the eye that looks on it.
From thence,[8] as to the ear sweet harmony
From organ comes, so comes before mine eye
The time prepared for thee. Such as driven out
From Athens, by his cruel stepdame's[9] wiles,
Hippolytus departed; such must thou
Depart from Florence. This they wish, and this
Contrive, and will ere long effectuate, there,[10]
Where gainful merchandize is made of Christ
Throughout the live - long day. The common cry,[11]
Will, as 'tis ever wont, affix the blame

[6: "Contingency." Contingency, which has no place beyond the limits of the material world.]

[7: "The evidence with which we see casual events portrayed in the source of all truth, no more necessitates those events, than does the image, reflected in the sight by a ship sailing down a stream, necessitate the motion of the vessel."]

[8: From the view of the Deity Himself.]

[9: Phaedra.]

[10: "There." At Rome, where the expulsion of Dante's party from Florence was then plotting, in 1300.]

[11: The multitude will, as usual, be ready to blame those who are sufferers, whose cause will at last be vindicated by the overthrow of their enemies.]

Unto the party injured: but the truth

Shall, in the vengeance it dispenseth, find
A faithful witness. Thou shalt leave each thing
Beloved most dearly: this is the first shaft
Shot from the bow of exile. Thou shalt prove
How salt the savour is of other's bread;
How hard the passage, to descend and climb
By other's stairs. But that shall gall thee most,
Will be the worthless and vile company,
With whom thou must be thrown into these straits.
For all ungrateful, impious all, and mad,
Shall turn 'gainst thee: but in a little while,
Theirs,[12] and not thine, shall be the crimson'd brow.
Their course shall so evince their brutishness,
To have ta'en thy stand apart shall well become thee.

[12: "They shall be ashamed of the part they have taken against thee."]

"First refuge thou must find, first place of rest,
In the great Lombard's[13] courtesy, who bears,
Upon the ladder perch'd, the sacred bird.
He shall behold thee with such kind regard,
That 'twixt ye two, the contrary to that
Which 'falls 'twixt other men, the granting shall
Forerun the asking. With him shalt thou see
That mortal,[14] who was at his birth imprest
So strongly from this star, that of his deeds
The nations shall take note. His unripe age
Yet holds him from observance; for these wheels
Only nine years have compass'd him about.
But, ere the Gascon[15] practise on great Harry,[16]
Sparkles of virtue shall shoot forth in him,
In equal scorn of labours and of gold
His bounty shall be spread abroad so widely,
As not to let the tongues, e'en of his foes,
Be idle in its praise. Look thou to him,
And his beneficence: for he shall cause
Reversal of their lot to many people;

[13: Either Bartolommeo della Scala or Alboino his brother. Their coat-of-arms was a ladder and an eagle.]

[14: "That mortal." Can Grande della Scala, born under the influence of Mars, but at this time only nine years old. He was a son of Alberto della Scala.]

[15: "The Gascon." Pope Clement V.]

[16: The Emperor Henry VII.]

Rich men and beggars interchanging fortunes.
And thou shalt bear this written in thy soul'
Of him, but tell it not:" and things he told
Incredible to those who witness them;
Then added: "So interpret thou, my son,
What hath been told thee. - Lo! the ambushment
That a few circling seasons hide for thee.
Yet envy not thy neighbours: time extends
Thy span beyond their treason's chastisement."

Soon as the saintly spirit, by silence, mark'd
Completion of that web, which I had stretch'd
Before it, warp'd for weaving; I began,
As one, who in perplexity desires
Counsel of other, wise, benign and friendly:
"My father! well I mark how time spurs on
Toward me, ready to inflict the blow,
Which falls most heavily on him who most
Abandoneth himself. Therefore 'tis good
I should forecast, that, driven from the place[17]
Most dear to me, I may not lose myself[18]
All other by my song. Down through the world
Of infinite mourning; and along the mount,
From whose fair height my lady's eyes did lift me;
And, after, through this Heaven, from light to light;
Have I learnt that, which if I tell again,
It may with many wofully disrelish:
And, if I am a timid friend to truth,
I fear my life may perish among those,
To whom these days shall be of ancient date."

[17: "The place." Our poet here discovers both that Florence, much as he inveighs against it, was still the dearest object of his affections, and that it was not without some scruple he indulged his satirical vein.]

[18: "That being driven out of my country, I may not deprive myself of every other place by the boldness with which I expose in my writings the vices of mankind."]

The brightness, where enclosed the treasure[19] smiled,
Which I had found there, first shone glisteringly,
Like to a golden mirror in the sun;
Next answer'd: "Conscience, dimm'd or by its own
Or other's shame, will feel thy saying sharp.
Thou, notwithstanding, all deceit removed,

[19: "The treasure." Cacciaguida.]

See the whole vision be made manifest;
And let them wince, who have their withers wrung.

What though, when tasted first, thy voice shall prove
Unwelcome: on digestion, it will turn
To vital nourishment. The cry thou raisest,
Shall, as the wind doth, smite the proudest summits;
Which is of honour no light argument.
For this, there only have been shown to thee,
Throughout these orbs, the mountain, and the deep,
Spirits, whom fame hath note of. For the mind
Of him, who hears, is loth to acquiesce
And fix its faith, unless the instance brought
Be palpable, and proof apparent urge."

— Paradise Canto 17