

Paradise Canto 8

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Canto VIII

Argument

The Poet ascends with Beatrice to the third heaven, the planet Venus; and here finds the soul of Charles Martel, King of Hungary, who had been Dante's friend on earth, and who now, after speaking of the realms to which he was heir, unfolds the cause why children differ in disposition from their parents.

The world[1] was, in its day of peril dark,
Wont to believe the dotage of fond love,
From the fair Cyprian deity, who rolls
In her third epicycle, shed on men
By stream of potent radiance: therefore they
Of elder time, in their old error blind,
Not her alone with sacrifice adored
And invocation, but like honours paid
To Cupid and Dione, deem'd of them
Her mother, and her son, him whom they feign'd
To sit in Dido's bosom: and from her,
Whom I have sung preluding, borrow'd they
The appellation of that star, which views
Now obvious, and now averse, the sun.

[1: The Poet, on his arrival at the third Heaven, tells us that the world, in its days of heathen darkness, believed the influence of sensual love to proceed from the star, to which, under the name of Venus, they paid divine honors; as they worshipped the supposed mother and son of Venus, under the names of Dione and Cupid.]

I was not ware that I was wafted up
Into its orb; but the new loveliness,
That graced my lady, gave me ample proof
That we had enter'd there. And as in flame
A sparkle is distinct, or voice in voice
Discern'd, when one its even tenour keeps,
The other comes and goes; so in that light
I other luminaries saw, that coursed
In circling motion, rapid more or less,
As their eternal vision each impels.

Never was blast from vapour charged with cold,
Whether invisible to eye or no,

Descended with such speed, it had not seem'd
To linger in dull tardiness, compared
To those celestial lights, that toward us came,
Leaving the circuit of their joyous ring,
Conducted by the lofty Seraphim.
And after them, who in the van appear'd,
Such an Hossana sounded as hath left
Desire, ne'er since extinct in me, to hear
Renew'd the strain. Then, parting from the rest,
One near us drew, and sole began: "We all
Are ready at thy pleasure, well disposed
To do thee gentle service. We are they
To whom thou in the world erewhile didst sing;
'O ye! whose intellectual ministry
Moves the third Heaven:' and in one orb we roll,
One motion, one impulse, with those who rule
Princedom in Heaven; yet are of love so full,
That to please thee 'twill be as sweet to rest."

After mine eyes had with meek reverence
Sought the celestial guide, and were by her
Assured, they turn'd again unto the light,
Who had so largely promised; and with voice
That bare the lively pressure of my zeal,
"Tell who ye are," I cried. Forthwith it grew
In size and splendour, through augmented joy;
And thus it answer'd: "A short date, below,
The world possess'd me.[2] Had the time been more,
Much evil, that will come, had never chanced.
My gladness hides thee from me, which doth shine
Around, and shroud me, as an animal
In its own silk enswathed. Thou lovedst me well,[3]
And hadst good cause; for had my sojourning
Been longer on the earth, the love I bare thee
Had put forth more than blossoms. The left bank,[4]
That Rhone, when he hath mix'd with Sorga, laves,
In me its lord expected, and that horn
Of fair Ausonia,[5] with its boroughs old,
Bari, and Croton, and Gaeta piled,
From where the Trento disembogues his waves
With Verde mingled, to the salt - sea flood.
Already on my temples beam'd the crown,
Which gave me sovereignty over the land[6]
By Danube wash'd, whenas he strays beyond
The limits of his German shores. The realm,
Where, on the gulf by stormy Eurus lash'd,
Betwixt Pelorus and Pachynian heights,

The beautiful Trinacria[7] lies in gloom,
(Not through Typhoeus,[8] but the vapoury cloud
Bituminous upsteam'd), that too did look
To have its sceptre wielded by a race [Rodolph,[9]
Of monarchs, sprung through me from Charles and
Had not ill - lording,[10] which doth desperate make

[2: The spirit now speaking is Charles Martel, crowned King of Hungary, and son of Charles II, King of Naples and Sicily, to which throne, dying in his father's lifetime, he did not succeed. The evil, that would have been prevented by the longer life of Charles Martel, was that resistance which his brother Robert, King of Sicily, who succeeded him, made to the Emperor Henry VII.]

[3: Charles Martel might have been known to our Poet at Florence, whither he came to meet his father in 1259, the year of his death. G. Villani says that "he remained more than twenty days in Florence, waiting for his father, King Charles, and his brothers." Lib. vii. cap. xiii. His brother Robert, King of Naples, was the friend of Petrarch.]

[4: "The left bank." Provence.]

[5: The kingdom of Naples.]

[6: "The land." Hungary.]

[7: Sicily; so called from its three promontories of which Pachynus and Pelorus, here mentioned, are two.]

[8: The giant, whom Jupiter overwhelmed under Mount Aetna, whence he vomited forth smoke and flame.]

[9: "Sicily would be still ruled by monarchs, descended through me from Charles I and Rodolph I, the former my grandfather, King of Naples and Sicily; the latter, Emperor of Germany, my father - in - law;" both celebrated in the "Purgatory," Canto vii.]

[10: If the ill - conduct of our governors in Sicily had not excited the people to that dreadful massacre at the Sicilian vespers in consequence of which the kingdom fell into the hands of Peter III of Arragon, in 1282.]

The people ever, in Palermo raised
The shout of 'death,' re - echoed loud and long.
Had but my brother's foresight[11] kenn'd as much,
He had been warier, that the greedy want
Of Catalonia might not work his bale.
And truly need there is that he forecast,
Or other for him, lest more freight be laid
On his already over - laden bark.
Nature in him, from bounty fallen to thrift,
Would ask the guard of braver arms, than such
As only care to have their coffers fill'd."

[11: He seems to tax his brother Robert with employing necessitous and greedy Catalonians to administer the affairs of his kingdom.]

"My liege! it doth enhance the joy thy words
Infuse into me, mighty as it is,
To think my gladness manifest to thee,
As to myself, who own it, when thou look'st
Into the source and limit of all good,
There, where thou markest that which thou dost speak,
Thence prized of me the more. Glad thou hast made
Now make intelligent, clearing the doubt [me:
Thy speech hath raised in me; for much I muse,
How bitter can spring up,[12] when sweet is sown."

[12: "How a covetous son can spring from a liberal father." Yet that father has himself been accused of avarice in the "Purgatory," Canto xx. 78; though his general character was that of a bounteous prince.]

I thus inquiring; he forthwith replied:

"If I have power to show one truth, soon that
Shall face thee, which thy questioning declares
Behind thee now conceal'd. The Good,[13] that guides

[13: The Supreme Being uses these spheres as the intelligent instruments of His providence in the conduct of terrestrial natures; so that these natures cannot but be conducted aright, unless these heavenly bodies should themselves fail from not having been made perfect at first, or the Creator of them should fail. To this Dante replies, that Nature, he is satisfied, thus directed must do her part. Charles Martel then reminds him that he had learned from Aristotle that human society requires a variety of conditions, and consequently a variety of qualifications in its members. Accordingly, men are born with different powers and capacities, caused by the influence of the heavenly bodies at the time of their nativity; on which influence, and not on their parents, those powers and capacities depend. Charles Martel adds, by way of corollary, that the want of observing their natural bent, in the destination of men to their several offices in life, is the occasion of much of the disorder that prevails in the world.]

And blessed makes this realm which thou dost mount,
Ordains its providence to be the virtue
In these great bodies: nor the natures only
The all - perfect Mind provides for, but with them
That which preserves them too; for naught, that lies
Within the range of that unerring bow,
But is as level with the destined aim,
As ever mark to arrow's point opposed.
Were it not thus, these Heavens, thou dost visit,
Would their effect so work, it would not be
Art, but destruction; and this may not chance,

If the intellectual powers, that move these stars,
Fail not, and who, first faulty made them, fail.
Wilt thou this truth more clearly evidenced?"

To whom I thus: "It is enough: no fear,
I see, lest nature in her part should tire."

He straight rejoin'd: "Say, were it worse for man,
If he lived not in fellowship on earth?"

"Yea," answer'd I; "nor here a reason needs."

"And may that be, if different estates
Grow not of different duties in your life?
Consult your teacher,[14] and he tells you 'no.'"

[14: Aristotle, De Rep., lib. iii. cap. 4: Since a state is made up of members differing from one another (for even as an animal, in the first instance, consists of soul and body; and the soul, of reason and desire; and a family, of man and woman; and property, of master and slave; in like manner a state consists both of all these, and besides these of other dissimilar kinds); it necessarily follows that the excellence of all the members of the state cannot be one and the same.]

Thus did he come, deducing to this point,
And then concluded: "For this cause behoves,
The roots, from whence your operations come,
Must differ. Therefore one is Solon born;
Another, Xerxes; and Melchisedec
A third; and he a fourth, whose airy voyage
Cost him his son.[15] In her circuitous course,
Nature, that is the seal to mortal wax,
Doth well her art, but no distinction owns
'Twixt one or other household. Hence befalls
That Esau is so wide of Jacob: hence
Quirinus[16] of so base a father springs,

[15: Daedalus.]

[16: "Quirinus." Romulus, born of so obscure a father that his parentage was attributed to Mars.]

He dates from Mars his lineage. Were it not
That Providence celestial overruled,
Nature, in generation, must the path
Traced by the generator still pursue
Unswervingly. Thus place I in thy sight
That, which was late behind thee. But, in sign
Of more affection for thee, 'tis my will
Thou wear this corollary. Nature ever,
Finding discordant fortune, like all seed

Out of its proper climate, thrives but ill.
And were the world below content to mark
And work on the foundation nature lays,
I would not lack supply of excellence.
But ye perversely to religion strain
Him, who was born to gird on him the sword,
And of the fluent phraseman make your king:
Therefore your steps have wander'd from the path."

— Paradise Canto 8