

Paradise Canto 20

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Canto XX

Argument

The eagle celebrates the praise of certain kings, whose glorified spirits form the eye of the bird. In the pupil is David; and, in the circle round it, Trajan, Hezekiah, Constantine, William II of Sicily, and Ripheus. It explains to our Poet how the souls of those whom he supposed to have had no means of believing in Christ, came to be in Heaven; and concludes with an admonition against presuming to fathom the counsels of God.

When, disappearing from our hemisphere,
The world's enlightener vanishes, and day
On all sides wasteth; suddenly the sky,
Erewhile irradiate only with his beam,
Is yet again unfolded, putting forth
Innumerable lights wherein one shines.
Of such vicissitude in Heaven I thought;
As the great sign,[1] that marshaleth the world
And the world's leaders, in the blessed beak
Was silent: for that all those living lights,
Waxing in splendour, burst forth into songs,
Such as from memory glide and fall away.

[1: The eagle, the imperial ensign.]

Sweet Love, that doth apparel thee in smiles!
How lustrous was thy semblance in those sparkles,
Which merely are from holy thoughts inspired.

After[2] the precious and bright beaming stones,
That did ingem the sixth light, ceased the chiming
Of their angelic bells; methought I heard
The murmuring of a river, that doth fall
From rock to rock transpicious, making known
The richness of his spring - head: and as sound
Of cittern, at the fret - board, or of pipe,
Is, at the wind - hole, modulate and tuned;
Thus up the neck, as it were hollow, rose
That murmuring of the eagle; and forthwith
Voice there assumed; and thence along the beak
Issued in form of words, such as my heart
Did look for, on whose tables I inscribed them.

[2: "After." "After the spirits in the sixth planet (Jupiter) had ceased their singing."]

"The part in me, that sees and bears the sun
In mortal eagles," it began, "must now
Be noted steadfastly: for, of the fires
That figure me, those, glittering in mine eye,
Are chief of all the greatest. This, that shines
Midmost for pupil, was the same who[3] sang
The Holy Spirit's song, and bare about
The ark from town to town: now doth he know
The merit of his soul - impassion'd strains
By their well - fitted guerdon. Of the five,
That make the circle of the vision, he,[4]
Who to the beak is nearest, comforted
The widow for her son: now doth he know,
How dear it costeth not to follow Christ;
Both from experience of this pleasant life,
And of its opposite. He next,[5] who follows
In the circumference, for the over - arch,
By true repenting slack'd the pace of death:
Now knoweth he, that the decrees of Heaven[6]
Alter not, when, through pious prayer below,
To - day is made to - morrow's destiny.
The other following,[7] with the laws and me,
To yield the Shepherd room, pass'd o'er[8] to Greece;
From good intent, producing evil fruit:
Now knoweth he, how all the ill, derived
From his well doing, doth not harm him aught;
Though it have brought destruction on the world.
That, which thou seest in the under bow,
Was William,[9] whom that land bewails, which weeps
For Charles and Frederick living: now he knows,
How well is loved in Heaven the righteous king;
Which he betokens by his radiant seeming.
Who, in the erring world beneath, would deem

[3: "Who." David.]

[4: "Trajan. See Purgatory, x. 68.]

[5: "He next." Hezekiah.]

[6: The eternal counsels of God are indeed unmutable, though they appear to us men to be altered by the prayers of the pious.]

[7: Constantine. No passage in which Dante's opinion of the evil that had arisen from the mixture of the civil with the ecclesiastical power is more unequivocally declared.]

[8: Left the Roman State to the Pope, and transferred the seat of the empire to Constantinople.]

[9: William II, called "the Good," King of Sicily, at the latter part of the twelfth century. He was of the Norman line of sovereigns. His loss was as much the subject of regret in his dominions, as the presence of Charles II of Anjou, and Frederick of Arragon, was of sorrow.]

That Trojan Ripheus,[10] in this round, was set,
Fifth of the saintly splendours? now he knows
Enough of that, which the world cannot see;
The grace divine: albeit e'en his sight
Reach not its utmost depth." Like to the lark,
That warbling in the air expatiates long,
Then, trilling out his last sweet melody,
Drops, satiate with the sweetness; such appear'd
That image, stamp'd by the everlasting pleasure,
Which fashions, as they are, all things that be.

[10: "Then Ripheus fell, the justest far of all the sons of Troy." - Virgil, Aeneid. lib. ii. 427.]

I, though my doubting were as manifest,
As is through glass the hue that mantles it,
In silence waited not; for to my lips
"What things are these?" involuntary rush'd,
And forced a passage out: whereat I mark'd
A sudden lightening and new revelry.
The eye was kindled; and the blessed sign,
No more to keep me wondering and suspense,
Replied: "I see that thou believest these things,
Because I tell them, but discern'st not how;
So that thy knowledge waits not on thy faith:
As one, who knows the name of thing by rote,
But is a stranger to its properties,
Till other's tongue reveal them. Fervent love,
And lively hope, with violence assail
The Kingdom of the Heavens, and overcome
The will of the Most High; not in such sort
As man prevails o'er man; but conquers it,
Because 'tis willing to be conquer'd; still,
Though conquer'd, by its mercy, conquering.

"Those, in the eye who live the first and fifth,
Cause thee to marvel, in that thou behold'st
The region of the Angels deck'd with them.
They quitted not their bodies, as thou deem'st,
Gentiles, but Christians; in firm rooted faith,
This,[11] of the feet in future to be pierced,

That,[12] of feet nail'd already to the Cross.

[11: "This." Ripheus.]

[12: "That." Trajan.]

One from the barrier of the dark abyss,
Where never any with good will returns,
Came back unto his bones. Of lively hope
Such was the meed; of lively hope, that wing'd
The prayers[13] sent up to God for his release,
And put power into them to bend his will.
The glorious Spirit, of whom I speak to thee;
A little while returning to the flesh,
Believed in Him, who had the means to help;
And, in believing, nourish'd such a flame
Of holy love, that at the second death
He was made sharer in our gamesome mirth.
The other, through the riches of that grace,
Which from so deep a fountain doth distil,
As never eye created saw its rising,
Placed all his love below on just and right:
Wherefore, of grace, God oped in him the eye
To the redemption of mankind to come;
Wherein believing, he endured no more
The filth of Paganism, and for their ways
Rebuked the stubborn nations. The three nymphs,[14]
Whom at the right wheel thou beheld'st advancing,
Were sponsors for him, more than thousand years
Before baptizing. O how far removed,
Predestination! is thy root from such
As see not the First Cause entire: and ye,
O mortal men! be wary how ye judge:
For we, who see our Maker, know not yet
The number of the chosen; and esteem
Such scantiness of knowledge our delight:
For all our good is, in that Primal Good,
Concentrate; and God's will and ours are one."

[13: The prayers of St. Gregory.]

[14: "The three nymphs." Faith, Hope, and Charity. Purgatory, Canto xxix. 116.]

So, by that form divine, was given to me
Sweet medicine to clear and strengthen sight.
And, as one handling skilfully the harp,
Attendant on some skilful songster's voice
Bids the chord vibrate; and therein the song
Acquires more pleasure: so the whilst it spake.

It doth remember me, that I beheld
The pair^[15] of blessed luminaries move,
Like the accordant twinkling of two eyes,
Their beamy circlets, dancing to the sounds.

[15: Ripheus and Trajan.]

— Paradise Canto 20