

Paradise Canto 21

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Canto XXI

Argument

Dante ascends with Beatrice to the seventh heaven, which is the planet Saturn; wherein is placed a ladder, so lofty, that the top of it is out of his sight. Here are the souls of those who had passed their life in holy retirement and contemplation. Piero Damiano comes near them, and answers questions put to him by Dante; then declares who he was on earth; and ends by declaiming against the luxury of pastors and prelates in those times.

Again mine eyes were fix'd on Beatrice;
And, with mine eyes, my soul that in her looks
Found all contentment. Yet no smile she wore:
And, "Did I smile," quoth she, "thou wouldst be straight
Like Semele when into ashes turn'd;
For, mounting these eternal palace - stairs,
My beauty, which the loftier it climbs,
As thou hast noted, still doth kindle more,
So shines, that, were no tempering interposed,
Thy mortal puissance would from its rays
Shrink, as the leaf doth from the thunderbolt.
Into the seventh splendour[1] are we wafted,
That, underneath the burning lion's breast,[2]
Beams, in this hour, commingled with his might.
Thy mind be with thine eyes; and, in them, mirror'd[3]
The shape, which in this mirror shall be shown."

[1: The planet Saturn.]

[2: The constellation Leo.]

[3: "In them, mirror'd." "Let the form which thou shalt now behold in this mirror," the planet, that is, of Saturn (soon after, v. 22, called the crystal), "be reflected in the mirror of thy sight.")]

Whoso can deem, how fondly I had fed
My sight upon her blissful countenance,
May know, when to new thoughts I changed, what joy
To do the bidding of my heavenly guide;
In equal balance,[4] poising either weight.

[4: "My pleasure was as great in complying with her will, as in beholding her countenance."]

Within the crystal, which records the name
(As its remoter circle girds the world)
Of that loved monarch,[5] in whose happy reign
No ill had power to harm, I saw rear'd up,
In colour like to sun - illumined gold,
A ladder, which my ken pursued in vain,
So lofty was the summit; down whose steps
I saw the splendours in such multitude
Descending, every light in Heaven, methought,
Was shed thence. As the rooks, at dawn of day,
Bestirring them to dry their feathers chill,
Some speed their way a - field; and homeward some,
Returning, cross their flight; while some abide,
And wheel around their airy lodge: so seem'd
That glitterance,[6] wafted on alternate wing,
As upon certain stair it came, and clash'd
Its shining. And one, lingering near us, wax'd
So bright, that in my thought I said: "The love,
Which this betokens me, admits no doubt."

[5: Saturn. Compare Hell, Canto xiv. 91.]

[6: That multitude of shining spirits, who, coming to a certain point of the ladder, made those different movements, as of birds.]

Unwillingly from question I refrain;
To her, by whom my silence and my speech
Are order'd, looking for a sign: whence she,
Who in the sight of Him, that seeth all,
Saw wherefore I was silent, prompted me
To indulge the fervent wish; and I began:
"I am not worthy, of my own desert,
That thou shouldst answer me: but for her sake,
Who hath vouchsafed my asking, spirit blest,
That in thy joy art shrouded! say the cause,
Which bringeth thee so near: and wherefore, say,
Doth the sweet symphony of Paradise
Keep silence here, pervading with such sounds
Of rapt devotion every lower sphere?"
"Mortal art thou in hearing, as in sight;"
Was the reply: "and what forbade the smile[7]
Of Beatrice interrupts our song.
Only to yield thee gladness of my voice,
And of the light that vests me, I thus far
Descend these hallow'd steps; not that more love

[7: Because it would have overcome thee.]

Invites me; for, lo! there aloft,[8] as much

Or more of love is witness'd in those flames:
But such my lot by charity assign'd,
That makes us ready servants, as thou seest,
To execute the counsel of the Highest."

[8: "There aloft." Where the other souls were.]

"That in this court," said I, "O sacred lamp!
Love no compulsion needs, but follows free
The eternal Providence, I well discern:
This harder find to deem: why, of thy peers,
Thou only, to this office wert foredoom'd."

I had not ended, when, like rapid mill,
Upon its centre whirl'd the light; and then
The love that did inhabit there, replied:
"Splendour eternal, piercing through these folds,
Its virtue to my vision knits; and thus
Supported, lifts me so above myself,
That on the sovran Essence, which it wells from,
I have the power to gaze: and hence the joy,
Wherewith I sparkle, equaling with my blaze
The keenness of my sight. But not the soul,[9]
That is in Heaven most lustrous, nor the Seraph,
That hath his eyes most fix'd on God, shall solve
What thou hast ask'd: for in the abyss it lies
Of th' everlasting statute sunks so low,
That no created ken may fathom it.
And, to the mortal world when thou return'st,
Be this reported: that none henceforth dare
Direct his footsteps to so dread a bourn.
The mind, that here is radiant, on the earth
Is wrapt in mist. Look then if she may do
Below, what passeth her ability
When she is ta'en to Heaven." By words like these
Admonish'd, I the question urged no more;
And of the spirit humbly sued alone
To instruct me of its state. "'Twixt either shore[10]
Of Italy, nor distant from thy land,
A stony ridge[11] ariseth; in such sort,

[9: "Not the soul." The particular ends of Providence being concealed
from the very Angels themselves.]

[10: Between the Adriatic Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea.]

[11: A part of the Apennines.]

The thunder doth not lift his voice so high.
They call it Catria:[12] at whose foot, a cell

Is sacred to the lonely Eremite;
For worship set apart and holy rites."
A third time thus it spake; then added: "There
So firmly to God's service I adhered,
That with no costlier viands than the juice
Of olives, easily I pass'd the heats
Of summer and the winter frosts; content
In heaven - ward musings. Rich were the returns
And fertile, which that cloister once was used
To render to these Heavens: now 'tis fallen
Into a waste so empty, that ere long
Detection must lay bare its vanity.
Pietro Damiano[13] there was I y - clept:
Pietro the sinner, when before I dwelt,
Beside the Adriatic,[14] in the house
Of our blest Lady. Near upon my close
Of mortal life, through much importuning
I was constrain'd to weat the hat,[15] that still
From bad to worse is shifted. - Cephas[16] came:
He came, who was the Holy Spirit's vessel;[17]
Barefoot and lean; eating their bread, as chanced,
At the first table. Modern Shepherds need

[12: Now the Abbey of Santa Croce, in the Duchy of Urbino, about half way between Gubbio and La Pergola. Here Dante is said to have resided for some time.]

[13: "Pietro Damiano." "S. Pietro Damiano obtained a great and well - merited reputation by the pains he took to correct the abuses among the clergy. Ravenna is supposed to have been the place of his birth, about 1007. He was employed in several important missions, and rewarded by Stephen IX with the dignity of cardinal, and the bishopric of Ostia, to which, however, he preferred his former retreat in the monastery of Fonte Avellana, and prevailed on Alexander II to permit him to retire thither. Yet he did not long continue in this seclusion, before he was sent on other embassies. He died at Faenza in 1072. His letters throw much light on the obscure history of these times. Besides them, he has left several treatises on sacred and ecclesiastical subjects. His eloquence is worthy of a better age." Tiraboschi, Storia della Lett. Ital.]

[14: Some editions and manuscripts have "fu," instead of "fui."
According to the former of these readings, S. Pietro Damiano is made to distinguish himself from S. Pietro degli Onesti, surnamed "Il Peccator," founder of the monastery of S. Maria del Porto, on the Adriatic coast, near Ravenna, who died in 1119, at about eighty years of age.]

[15: "The hat." The cardinal's hat.]

[16: "Cephas." St. Peter.]

[17: St. Paul. See Hell, Canto ii. 30.]

Those who on either hand may prop and lead them,
So burly are they grown; and from behind,
Others to hoist them. Down the palfrey's sides
Spread their broad mantles, so as both the beasts
Are cover'd with one skin. O patience! thou
That look'st on this, and dost endure so long."

I at those accents saw the splendours down
From step to step alight, and wheel, and wax,
Each circuiting, more beautiful. Round this[18]
They came, and stay'd them; utter'd then a shout
So loud, it hath no likeness here: nor I
Wist what it spake, so deafening was the thunder.

[18: "Round this." Round the spirit of Pietro Damiano.]