

Paradise Canto 22

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Canto XXII

Argument

He beholds many other spirits of the devout and contemplative; and among these is addressed by St. Benedict, who, after disclosing his own name and the names of certain of his companions in bliss, replies to the request made by our Poet that he might look on the form of the saint, without that covering of splendor, which then invested it; and then proceeds, lastly, to inveigh against the corruption of the monks. Next Dante mounts with his heavenly conductress to the eighth heaven, or that of the fixed stars, which he enters at the constellation of the Twins; and thence looking back, reviews all the space he has passed between his present station and the earth.

Astounded, to the guardian of my steps
I turn'd me, like the child, who always runs
Thither for succour, where he trusteth most:
And she was like the mother, who her son
Beholding pale and breathless, with her voice
Soothes him, and he is cheer'd; for thus she spake,
Soothing me: "Know'st not thou, thou art in Heaven?
And know'st not thou, whatever is in Heaven,
Is holy; and that nothing there is done,
But is done zealously and well? Deem now,
What change in thee the song, and what my smile
Had wrought, since thus the shout had power to move thee;
In which, couldst thou have understood their prayers,
The vengeance[1] were already known to thee,
Which thou must witness ere thy mortal hour.

[1: "The vengeance." Beatrice, it is supposed, intimates the approaching fate of Boniface VIII. See Purgatory, Canto xx. 86.]

The sword of Heaven is not in haste to smite,
Nor yet doth linger; save unto his seeming,
Who, in desire or fear, doth look for it.
But elsewhere now I bid thee turn thy view;
So shalt thou many a famous spirit behold."

Mine eyes directing, as she will'd, I saw
A hundred little spheres, that fairer grew
By interchange of splendour. I remain'd,
As one, who fearful of o'er - much presuming,

Abates in him the keenness of desire,
Nor dares to question; when, amid those pearls,
One largest and most lustrous onward drew,
That it might yield contentment to my wish;
And, from within it, these the sounds I heard.

"If thou, like me, beheld'st the charity
That burns amongst us; what thy mind conceives
Were utter'd. But that, ere the lofty bound
Thou reach, expectance may not weary thee;
I will make answer even to the thought,
Which thou hast such respect of. In old days,
That mountain, at whose sidehCassino[2] rests,
Was, on its height, frequented by a race
Deceived and ill - disposed: and I it was,[3]
Who thither carried first the name of Him,
Who brought the soul - subliming truth to man.
And such a speeding grace shone over me,
That from their impious worship I reclaim'd
The dwellers round about, who with the world
Were in delusion lost. These other flames,
The spirits of men contemplative, were all
Enliven'd by that warmth, whose kindly force
Gives birth to flowers and fruits of holiness.
Here is Macarius;[4] Romoaldo[5] here;

[2: A castle in the Terra di Lavoro.]

[3: "A new order of monks, which in a manner absorbed all the others that were established in the west, was instituted, 529, by Benedict of Nursia, a man of piety and reputation for the age he lived in." Maclaine's Mosheim, Eccles. Hist.]

[4: "Macarius, an Egyptian monk, deserves the first rank among the practical writers of the fourth century, as his works displayed, some few things excepted, the brightest and most lovely portraiture of sanctity and virtue." Ibid.]

[5: S. Romoaldo, a native of Ravenna, and the founder of the order of Camaldoli, died in 1027. He was the author of a commentary on the Psalms.]

And here my brethren, who their steps refrain'd
Within the cloisters, and held firm their heart."

I answering thus: "Thy gentle words and kind,
And this the cheerful semblance I behold,
Not unobservant, beaming in ye all,
Have raised assurance in me; wakening it
Full - blossom'd in my bosom, as a rose
Before the sun, when the consummate flower

Has spread to utmost amplitude. Of thee
Therefore intreat I, father, to declare
If I may gain such favour, as to gaze
Upon thine image by no covering veil'd."

"Brother!" he thus rejoin'd, "in the last sphere[6]
Expect completion of thy lofty aim:
For there on each desire completion waits,
And there on mine; where every aim is found
Perfect, entire, and for fulfillment ripe.
There all things are as they have ever been:
For space is none to bound; nor pole divides.
Our ladder reaches even to that clime;
And so, at giddy distance, mocks thy view.
Thither the patriarch Jacob[7] saw it stretch
Its topmost round; when it appear'd to him
With Angels laden. But to mount it now
None lifts his foot from earth: and hence my rule
Is left a profitless stain upon the leaves;
The walls, for abbey rear'd, turn'd into dens;
The cowls, to sacks choak'd up with musty meal.
Foul usury doth not more lift itself
Against God's pleasure, than that fruit, which makes,
The hearts of monks so wanton: for whate'er
Is in the Church's keeping, all pertains
To such, as sue for Heaven's sweet sake; and not
To those, who in respect of kindred claim,
Or on more vile allowance. Mortal flesh

[6: "In the last sphere." The Empyrean, where he afterward sees St. Benedict, Canto xxxii. 30. Beatified spirits, though they have different heavens allotted them, have all their seats in that higher sphere.]

[7: "The patriarch Jacob." "And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it." - Gen. xxviii. 12.]

Is grown so dainty, good beginnings last not
From the oak's birth unto the acorn's setting.
His convent Peter founded without gold
Or silver; I, with prayers and fasting, mine;
And Francis, his in meek humility.
And if thou note the point, whence each proceeds,
Then look what it hath err'd to; thou shalt find
The white grown murky. Jordan was turn'd back:
And a less wonder, than the refluent sea,
May, at God's pleasure, work amendment here."

So saying, to his assembly back he drew:

And they together cluster'd into one;
Then all roll'd upward, like an eddying wind.

The sweet dame beckon'd me to follow them:
And, by that influence only, so prevail'd
Over my nature, that no natural motion,
Ascending or descending here below,
Had, as I mounted, with my pennon vied.

So, reader, as my hope is eo return
Unto the holy triumph, for the which
I oft - times wail my sins, and smite my breast;
Thou hadst been longer drawing out and thrusting
Thy finger in the fire, than I was, ere
The sign,[8] that followeth Taurus, I beheld,
And enter'd its precinct. O glorious stars!
O light impregnate with exceeding virtue!
To whom whate'er of genius lifteth me
Above the vulgar, grateful I refer;
With ye the parent[9] of all mortal life
Arose and set, when I did first inhale
The Tuscan air; and afterward, when grace
Vouchsafed me entrance to the lofty wheel[10]
That in its orb impels ye, fate decreed
My passage at your clime. To you my soul
Devoutly sighs, for virtue, even now,
To meet the hard emprise that draws me on.

[8: "The sign." The constellation of Gemini.]

[9: "The parent." The sun was in the constellation of the Twins at the time of Dante's birth.]

[10: "The lofty wheel." The eighth heaven; that of the fixed stars.]

"Thou art so near the sum of blessedness,"
Said Beatrice, "that behoves thy ken
Be vigilant and clear. And, to this end,
Or ever thou advance thee further, hence
Look downward, and contemplate, what a world
Already stretch'd under our feet there lies:
So as thy heart may, in its blithest mood,
Present itself to the triumphal throng,
Which, through the ethereal concave, comes rejoicing."

I straight obey'd; and with mine eye return'd
Through all the seven spheres; and saw this globe
So pitiful of semblance, that perforce
It moved my smiles: and him in truth I hold
For wisest, who esteems it least; whose thoughts

Elsewhere are fix'd, him worthiest call and best.
I saw the daughter of Latona shine
Without the shadow,[11] whereof late I deem'd
That dense and rare were cause. Here I sustain'd
The visage, Hyperion, of thy son;[12]
And mark'd, how near him with their circles, round
Move Maia and Dione;[13] here discern'd
Jove's tempering 'twixt his sire and son;[14] and hence,
Their changes and their various aspects,
Distinctly scann'd. Nor might I not descry
Of all the seven, how bulky each, how swift;
Nor, of their several distances, not learn.
This petty area, (o'er the which we stride
So fiercely), as along the eternal Twins
I wound my way, appear'd before me all,
Forth from the havens stretch'd unto the hills.
Then, to the beauteous eyes, mine eyes return'd.

[11: "Without the shadow." See Canto ii. 71.]

[12: "Of thy son." The sun.]

[13: "Maia and Dione." The planets Mercury and Venus, Dione being the mother of the latter, and Maia of the former deity.]

[14: "'Twixt his sire and son." Betwixt Saturn and Mars.]