

Purgatory Canto 12

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Canto XII

Argument

Dante, being desired by Virgil to look down on the ground which they are treading, observes that it is wrought over with imagery exhibiting various instances of pride recorded in history and fable. They leave the first cornice, and are ushered to the next by an angel who points out the way.

With equal pace, as oxen in the yoke,
I, with that laden spirit, journey'd on,
Long as the mild instructor suffer'd me;
But, when he bade me quit him, and proceed,
(For "Here," said he, "behoves with sail and oars
Each man, as best he may, push on his bark,")
Upright, as one disposed for speed, I raised
My body, still in thought submissive bow'd.

I now my leader's track not loth pursued;
And each had shown how light we fared along,
When thus he warn'd me: "Bend thine eyesight down,
For thou, to ease the way, shalt find it good
To ruminare the bed beneath thy feet."

As, in memorial of the buried, drawn
Upon earth - level tombs, the sculptured form
Of what was once, appears, (at sight whereof
Tears often stream forth, by remembrance waked,
Whose sacred stings the piteous often feel),
So saw I there, but with more curious skill
Of portraiture o'erwrought, whate'er of space
From forth the mountain stretches. On one part
Him I beheld, above all creatures erst
Created noblest, lightening fall from Heaven:
On the other side, with bolt celestial pierced,
Briareus; cumbering earth he lay, through dint
Of mortal ice - stroke. The Thymbraean god,[1]
With Mars, I saw, and Pallas, round their sire,
Arm'd still, and gazing on the giants' limbs
Strewn o'er the ethereal field. Nimrod I saw:
At foot of the stupendous work he stood,
As if bewilder'd, looking on the crowd
Leagued in his proud attempt on Sennaar's plain.

[1: "The Thymbraean god." Apollo.]

O Niobe! in what a trance of woe

Thee I beheld, upon that highway drawn,
Seven sons on either side thee slain. O Saul!
How ghastly didst thou look, on thine own sword
Expiring, in Gilboa, from that hour
Ne'er visited with rain from heaven, or dew.

O fond Arachne! thee I also saw,
Half spider now, in anguish, crawling up
The unfinish'd web thou weaved'st to thy bane.

O Rehoboam! here thy shape doth seem
Louring no more defiance; but fear - smote,
With none to chase him, in his chariot whirl'd.

Was shown beside upon the solid floor,
How dear Alcmaeon forced his mother rate
That ornament, in evil hour received:
How, in the temple, on Sennacherib fell
His sons, and how a corpse they left him there.
Was shown the scath, and cruel mangling made
By Tomyris on Cyrus, when she cried,
"Blood thou didst thirst for: take thy fill of blood."
Was shown how routed in the battle fled
The Assyrians, Holofernes slain, and e'en
The relics of the carnage. Troy I mark'd,
In ashes and in caverns. Oh! how fallen,
How abject, Ilion, was thy semblance there.

What master of the pencil or the style
Had traced the shades and lines, that might have made
The subtlest workman wonder? Dead, the dead;
The living seem'd alive: with clearer view,
His eye beheld not, who beheld the truth,
Than mine what I did tread on, while I went
Low bending. Now swell out, and with stiff necks
Pass on, ye sons of Eve! vale not your looks,
Lest they descry the evil of your path.

I noted not (so busied was my thought)
How much we now had circled of the mount;
And of his course yet more the sun had spent;
When he, who with still wakeful caution went,
Admonish'd: "Raise thou up thy head: for know
Time is not now for slow suspense. Behold,
That way, an Angel hastening toward us. Lo,
When duly the sixth handmaid doth return

From service on the day. Wear thou, in look
And gesture, seemly grace of reverent awe;
That gladly he may forward us aloft.
Consider that this day ne'er dawns again."

Time's loss he had so often warn'd me 'gainst,
I could not miss the scope at which he aim'd.

The goodly shape approach'd us, snowy white
In vesture, and with visage casting streams
Of tremulous lustre like the matin star.
His arms he open'd, then his wings; and spake:
"Onward! the steps, behold, are near; and now
The ascent is without difficulty gain'd."

A scanty few are they, who, when they hear
Such tidings, hasten. O, ye race of men!
Though born to soar, why suffer ye a wind
So slight to baffle ye? He led us on
Where the rock parted; here, against my front,
Did beat his wings; then promised I should fare
In safety on my way. As to ascend
That steep, upon whose brow the chapel stands,[2]
(O'er Rubaconte, looking lordly down
On the well - guided city[3]), up the right
The impetuous rise is broken by the steps
Carved in that old and simple age, when still
The registry[4] and label rested safe;
Thus is the acclivity relieved, which here,
Precipitous, from the other circuit falls:
But, on each hand, the tall cliff presses close.

[2: "The chapel stands." The church of San Miniato in Florence, situated on a height that overlooks the Arno, where it is crossed by the bridge Rubaconte, so called from Messer Rubaconte da Mandella, of Milan, chief magistrate of Florence, by whom the bridge was founded in 1237. [The bridge is now generally known as the Ponte alle Grazie. - Ed.]]

[3: "The well - guided city." This is said ironically of Florence.]

[4: "The registry." In allusion to certain instances of fraud committed in Dante's time with respect to the public accounts and measures.]

As, entering, there we turn'd, voices, in strain
Ineffable, sang: "Blessed[5] are the poor
In spirit." Ah! how far unlike to these

[5: "Blessed." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matt. v. 3.]

The straits of Hell: here songs to usher us,

There shrieks of woe. We climb the holy stairs:
And lighter to myself by far I seem'd
Than on the plain before; whence thus I spake:
"Say, master, of what heavy thing have I
Been lighten'd; that scarce aught the sense of toil
Affects me journeying?" He in few replied:
"When sin's broad characters,[6] that yet remain
Upon thy temples, though well nigh effaced,
Shall be, as one is, all clean razed out;
Then shall thy feet by heartiness of will
Be so o'ercome, they not alone shall feel
No sense of labor, but delight much more
Shall wait them, urged along their upward way."

[6: "Sin's broad characters." Of the seven P's, that denoted the same number of sins (Peccata) whereof he was to be cleansed (see Canto ix. 100), the first had now vanished in consequence of his having passed the place where the sin of pride, the chief of them, was expiated.]

Then like to one, upon whose head is placed
Somewhat he deems not of, but from the becks
Of others, as they pass him by; his hand
Lends therefore help to assure him, searches, finds,
And well performs such office as the eye
Wants power to execute; so stretching forth
The fingers of my right hand, did I find
Six only of the letters, which his sword,
Who bare the keys, had traced upon my brow.
The leader, as he mark'd mine action, smiled.