

Purgatory Canto 19

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Canto XIX

Argument

The Poet, after describing his dream, relates how, at the summoning of an Angel, he ascends with Virgil to the fifth cornice, where the sin of avarice is cleansed, and where he finds Pope Adrian the fifth.

It was the hour,[1] when of diurnal heat
No reliques chafe the cold beams of the moon,
O'erpower'd by earth, or planetary sway
Of Saturn; and the geomancer[2] sees
His Greater Fortune up the east ascend,
Where gray dawn checkers first the shadowy cone,

[1: "The hour." Near the dawn.]

[2: "The geomancer." The geomancers, when they divined, drew a figure consisting of sixteen marks, named from so many stars which constitute the end of Aquarius and the beginning of Pisces. One of these they called "the greater fortune."]

When, 'fore me in my dream, a woman's shape[3]
There came, with lips that stammer'd, eyes aslant,
Distorted feet, hands maim'd, and colour pale.

[3: "A woman's shape." Worldly happiness. This allegory reminds us of the "Choice of Hercules."]

I look'd upon her: and, as sunshine cheers
Limbs numb'd by nightly cold, e'en thus my look
Unloosed her tongue; next, in brief space, her form
Decrepit raised erect, and faded face
With love's own hue illumed. Recovering speech,
She forthwith, warbling, such a strain began,
That I, how loth soe'er, could scarce have held
Attention from the song. "I," thus she sang,
"I am the Syren, she, whom mariners
On the wide sea are wilder'd when they hear;
Such fullness of delight the listener feels.
I, from his course, Ulysses[4] by my lay
Enchanted drew. Whoe'er frequents me once,
Parts seldom: so I charm him, and his heart
Contented knows no void." Or ere her mouth

Was closed, to shame her, at my side appear'd
A dame^[5] of semblance holy. With stern voice
She utter'd: "Say, O Virgil! who is this?"
Which hearing, he approach'd, with eyes still bent
Toward that goodly presence: the other seized her,
And, her robes tearing, open'd her before,
And show'd the belly to me, whence a smell,
Exhaling loathsome, waked me. Round I turn'd
Mine eyes: and thus the teacher: "At the least
Three times my voice hath call'd thee. Rise, begone.
Let us the opening find where thou mayst pass."

[4: "Ulysses." It is not easy to determine why Ulysses, contrary to the authority of Homer, is said to have been drawn aside from his course by the song of the Siren. No improbable way of accounting for the contradiction is, to suppose that she is here represented as purposely deviating from the truth. Or Dante may have followed some legend of the Middle Ages.]

[5: "A dame." Philosophy, or perhaps Truth.]

I straightway rose. Now day, pour'd down from high,
Fill'd all the circuits of the sacred mount;
And, as we journey'd, on our shoulder smote
The early ray. I follow'd, stooping low
My forehead, as a man, o'ercharged with thought,

Who bends him to the likeness of an arch
That midway spans the flood; when thus I heard,
"Come, enter here," in tone so soft and mild,
As never met the ear on mortal strand.

With swan - like wings disparted and pointing up,
Who thus had spoken marshal'd us along,
Where, each side of the solid masonry,
The sloping walls retired; then moved his plumes,
And fanning us, affirm'd that those, who mourn,^[6]
Are blessed, for that comfort shall be theirs.

[6: "Who mourn." "Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted." - Matt. v. 4]

"What aileth thee, that still thou look'st to earth?"
Began my leader; while the angelic shape
A little over us his station took.

"New vision," I replied, "hath raised in me
Surmisings strange and anxious doubts, whereon
My soul int'nt allows no other thought
Or room, or entrance." - "Hast thou seen," said he
"That old enchantress, her, whose wiles alone
The spirits o'er us weep for? Hast thou seen

How man may free him of her bonds? Enough.
Let thy heels spurn the earth; and thy raised ken
Fix on the lure, which Heaven's eternal King
Whirls in the rolling spheres." As on his feet
The falcon first looks down, then to the sky
Turns, and forth stretches eager for the food,
That woos him thither; so the call I heard:
So onward, far as the dividing rock
Gave way, I journey'd, till the plain was reach'd.

On the fifth circle when I stood at large,
A race appear'd before me, on the ground
All downward lying prone and weeping sore.
"My soul hath cleaved to the dust," I heard
With sighs so deep, they well nigh choked the words.

"O ye elect of God! whose penal woes
Both hope and justice mitigate, direct
Towards the steep rising our uncertain way."

"If ye approach secure from this our doom,
Prostration, and would urge your course with speed,
See that ye still to rightward keep the brink."

So them the bard besought; and such the words,
Beyond us some short space, in answer came.

I noted what remain'd yet hidden from them:[7]
Thence to my liege's eyes mine eyes I bent,
And he, forthwith interpreting their suit,
Beckon'd his glad assent. Free then to act
As pleased me, I drew near, and took my stand
Over that shade whose words I late had mark'd.
And, "Spirit!" I said, "in whom repentant tears
Mature that blessed hour when thou with God
Shalt find acceptance, for a while suspend
For me that mightier care. Say who thou wast;
Why thus ye grovel on your bellies prone;
And if, in aught, ye wish my service there,
Whence living I am come." He answering spake:
"The cause why Heaven our back towards his cope
Reverses, shalt thou know: but me know first,
The successor of Peter,[8] and the name
And title of my lineage, from that stream[9]
That 'twixt Chiaveri and Siestri draws
His limpid waters through the lowly glen.
A month and little more by proof I learnt,
With what a weight that robe of sovereignty
Upon his shoulder rests, who from the mire

Would guard it; that each other fardel seems
But feathers in the balance. Late, alas!
Was my conversion: but, when I became
Rome's pastor, I discerned at once the dream
And cozenage of life; saw that the heart
Rested not there, and yet no prouder height
Lured on the climber: whereof, of that life
No more enamor'd, in my bosom love
Of purer being kindled. For till then

[7: "I noted what remain'd yet hidden from them." They were ignorant,
it appeared, whether Dante was come there to be purged of his sins.]

[8: "The successor of Peter." Ottobuono, of the family of Fieschi,
Counts of Lavagno, died thirty - nine days after he became Pope, with the
title of Adrian V, in 1276.]

[9: "That stream." The river Lavagno, in the Genoese territory; to
the east of which territory are situated Siestri and Chiaveri.]

I was a soul in misery, alienate
From God, and covetous of all earthly things;
Now, as thou seest, here punish'd for my doting.
Such cleansing from the taint of avarice,
Do spirits, converted, need. This mount inflicts
No direr penalty. E'en as our eyes
Fasten'd below, nor e'er to loftier clime
Were lifted; thus hath justice level'd us,
Here on the earth. As avarice quench'd our love
Of good, without which is no working; thus
Here justice holds us prison'd, hand and foot
Chain'd down and bound, while Heaven's just Lord shall please,
So long to tarry, motionless, outstretch'd."

My knees I stoop'd, and would have spoke; but he,
Ere my beginning, by his ear perceived
I did him reverence; and "What cause," said he,
"Hath bow'd thee thus?" - "Compunction," I rejoin'd,
"And inward awe of your high dignity."

"Up," he exclaim'd, "brother! upon thy feet
Arise; err not: thy fellow - servant I,
(Thine and all others') of one Sovran Power.
If thou hast ever mark'd those holy sounds
Of gospel truth, 'nor shall be given in marriage,'
Thou mayst discern the reasons of my speech.
Go thy ways now; and linger here no more.
Thy tarrying is a let unto the tears,
With which I hasten that whereof thou spakest.
I have on earth a kinswoman;[10] her name

Alagia, worthy in herself, so ill
Example of our house corrupt her not:
And she is all remaineth of me there."

[10: "A kinswoman." Alagia is said to have been the wife of the
Marchese Marcello Malaspina, one of the Poet's protectors during his exile.
See Canto viii. 133.]

— Purgatory Canto 19