

# Purgatory Canto 21

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Canto XXI

Argument

The two Poets are overtaken by the spirit of Statius, who, being cleansed, is on his way to Paradise, and who explains the cause of the mountain shaking, and of the hymn; his joy at beholding Virgil.

The natural thirst, ne'er quench'd but from the well[1]  
Whereof the woman of Samaria craved,  
Excited; haste, along the cumber'd path,  
After my guide, impell'd; and pity moved  
My bosom for the 'vengeful doom though just.  
When lo! even as Luke[2] relates, that Christ  
Appear'd unto the two upon their way,  
New - risen from His vaulted grave; to us  
A shade appear'd, and after us approach'd,  
Contemplating the crowd beneath its feet.  
We were not ware of it; so first it spake,  
Saying, "God give you peace, my brethren!" then  
Sudden we turn'd: and Virgil such salute,  
As fitted that kind greeting, gave; and cried:  
"Peace in the blessed council be thy lot,  
Awarded by that righteous court which me  
To everlasting banishment exiles."

[1: "The well." "The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not." - John, iv. 15.]

[2: "Luke." Chapter xxiv. 13.]

"How!" he exclaim'd, nor from his speed meanwhile  
Desisting; "If that ye be spirits whom God  
Vouchsafes not room above; who up the height  
Has been thus far your guide?" To whom the bard:  
"If thou observe the tokens,[3] which this man,  
Traced by the finger of the Angel, bears;  
'Tis plain that in the kingdom of the just  
He needs must share. But sithence she,[4] whose wheel  
Spins day and night, for him not yet had drawn  
That yarn, which on the fatal distaff piled,  
Clotho apportions to each wight that breathes;  
His soul, that sister is to mine and thine,

Not of herself could mount; for not like ours

[3: "The tokens." The letter P for Peccata, sins, inscribed upon his forehead by the Angel, in order to his being cleared of them in his passage through Purgatory to Paradise.]

[4: "She." Lachesis, one of the three fates.]

Her ken: whence I, from forth the ample gulf  
Of Hell, was ta'en, to lead him, and will lead  
Far as my lore avails. But, if thou know,  
Instruct us for what cause, the mount erewhile  
Thus shook, and trembled: wherefore all at once  
Seem'd shouting, even from his wave - wash'd foot."

That questioning so tallied with my wish,  
The thirst did feel abatement of its edge  
E'en from expectance. He forthwith replied:  
"In its devotion, nought irregular  
This mount can witness, or by punctual rule  
Unsanction'd; here from every change exempt,  
Other than that, which Heaven in itself  
Doth of itself receive, no influence  
Can reach us. Tempest none, shower, hail, or snow,  
Hoar frost, or dewy moistness, higher falls  
Than that brief scale of threefold steps: thick clouds,  
Nor scudding rack, are ever seen: swift glance  
Ne'er lightens; nor Thaumantian Iris gleams,  
That yonder often shifts on each side Heaven.  
Vapour adust doth never mount above  
The highest of the trinal stairs, whereon  
Peter's vicegerent stands. Lower perchance,  
With various motion rock'd, trembles the soil:  
But here, through wind in earth's deep hollow pent,  
I know not how, yet never trembled: then  
Trembles, when any spirit feels itself  
So purified, that it may rise, or move  
For rising; and such loud acclaim ensues.  
Purification, by the will alone,  
Is proved, that free to change society  
Seizes the soul rejoicing in her will.  
Desire of bliss is present from the first;  
But strong propension hinders, to that wish  
By the just ordinance of Heaven opposed;  
Propension now as eager to fulfill  
The allotted torment, as erewhile to sin.  
And I, who in this punishment had lain  
Five hundred years and more, but now have felt  
Free wish for happier clime. Therefore thou felt'st

The mountain tremble; and the spirits devout  
Heard'st, over all his limits, utter praise  
To that liege Lord, whom I entreat their joy  
To hasten." Thus he spake: and, since the draught  
Is grateful ever as the thirst is keen,  
No words may speak my fullness of content.

"Now," said the instructor sage, "I see the net  
That takes ye here; and how the toils are loosed;  
Why rocks the mountain, and why ye rejoice.  
Vouchsafe, that from thy lips I next may learn  
Who on the earth thou wast; and wherefore here,  
So many an age, wert prostrate." - "In that time,  
When the good Titus,[5] with Heaven's King to help,  
Avenge those piteous gashes, whence the blood  
By Judas sold did issue; with the name[6]  
Most lasting and most honor'd, there, was I  
Abundantly renown'd," the shade replied,  
"Nor yet with faith endued. So passing sweet  
My vocal spirit; from Tolosa, Rome  
To herself drew me, where I merited  
A myrtle garland to inwreath my brow.  
Statius they name me still. Of Thebes I sang,  
And next of great Achilles; but i' the way  
Fell with the second burden. Of my flame  
Those sparkles were the seeds, which I derived  
From the bright fountain of celestial fire  
That feeds unnumber'd lamps; the song I mean  
Which sounds Aeneas' wanderings: that the breast  
I hung at; that the nurse, from whom my veins  
Drank inspiration: whose authority  
Was ever sacred with me. To have lived  
Coeval with the Mantuan, I would bide  
The revolution of another sun  
Beyond my stated years in banishment."

[5: "When the good Titus." When it was so ordered by the divine  
Providence that Titus, by the destruction of Jerusalem, should avenge the  
death of our Saviour on the Jews.]

[6: "The name." The name of Poet.]

The Mantuan, when he heard him, turn'd to me;  
And holding silence, by his countenance  
Enjoin'd me silence: but the power, which wills,  
  
Bears not supreme control: laughter and tears  
Follow so closely on the passion prompts them,  
They wait not for the motions of the will

In natures most sincere. I did but smile,  
As one who winks; and thereupon the shade  
Broke off, and peer'd into mine eyes, where best  
Our looks interpret. "So to good event  
Mayst thou conduct such great emprise," he cried,  
"Say, why across thy visage beam'd, but now,  
The lightning of a smile." On either part  
Now am I straiten'd; one conjures me speak,  
The other to silence binds me: whence a sigh  
I utter, and the sigh is heard. "Speak on,"  
The teacher cried: "and do not fear to speak;  
But tell him what so earnestly he asks."  
Whereon I thus: "Perchance, O ancient spirit!  
Thou marvel'st at my smiling. There is room  
For yet more wonder. He, who guides my ken  
On high, he is that Mantuan, led by whom  
Thou didst presume of men and gods to sing.  
If other cause thou deem'dst for which I smiled,  
Leave it as not the true one: and believe  
Those words, thou spakest of him, indeed the cause."

Now down he bent to embrace my teacher's feet;  
But he forbade him: "Brother! do it not:  
Thou art a shadow, and behold'st a shade."  
He, rising, answer'd thus: "Now hast thou proved  
The force and ardour of the love I bear thee,  
When I forget we are but things of air,  
And, as a substance, treat an empty shade."