

Purgatory Canto 29

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Canto XXIX

Argument

The lady, who in a following Canto is called Matilda, moves along the side of the stream in a contrary direction to the current, and Dante keeps equal pace with her on the opposite bank. A marvellous sight, preceded by music, appears in view.

Singing, as if enamour'd, she resumed
And closed the song, with "Blessed they^[1] whose sins
Are cover'd." Like the wood - nymphs then, that
Singly across the sylvan shadows; one [tripp'd
Eager to view, and one to escape the sun;
So moved she on, against the current, up
The verdant rivage. I, her mincing step
Observing, with as tardy step pursued.

[1: "Blessed they." - Psalm xxxii. 1.]

Between us not an hundred paces trod,
The bank, on each side bending equally,
Gave me to face the orient. Nor our way
Far onward brought us, when to me at once
She turn'd, and cried: "My brother! look, and hearken."
And lo! a sudden lustre ran across
Through the great forest on all parts, so bright,
I doubted whether lightning were abroad;
But that, expiring ever in the spleen

That doth unfold it, and this during still,
And waxing still in splendour, made me question
What it might be: and a sweet melody
Ran through the luminous air. Then did I chide,
With warrantable zeal, the hardihood
Of our first, parent; for that there, where earth,
Stood in obedience to the Heavens, she only,
Woman, the creature of an hour, endured not
Restraint of any veil, which had she borne
Devoutly, joys, ineffable as these,
Had from the first, and long time since, been mine.

While, through that wilderness of primly sweets
That never fade, suspense I walk'd, and yet

Expectant of beatitude more high;
Before us, like a blazing fire, the air
Under the green boughs glow'd; and, for a song,
Distinct the sound of melody was heard.

O ye thrice holy virgins! for your sakes
If e'er I suffer'd hunger, cold, and watching,
Occasion calls on me to crave your bounty.
Now through my breast let Helicon his stream
Pour copious, and Urania[2] with her choir
Arise to aid me; while the verse unfolds
Things, that do almost mock the grasp of thought.

[2: "Urania." Landino observes, that intending to sing of heavenly things, he rightly invokes Urania. Thus Milton: "Descend from Heaven, Urania, by that name If rightly thou art call'd." *Paradise Lost*, b. vii. 1.]

Onward a space, what seem'd seven trees of gold
The intervening distance to mine eye
Falsely presented; but, when I was come
So near them, that no lineament was lost
Of those, with which a doubtful object, seen
Remotely, plays on the misdeeming sense;
Then did the faculty, that ministers
Discourse to reason, these for tapers of gold[3]
Distinguish; and i' the singing trace the sound
"Hosanna!" Above, their beauteous garniture
Flamed with more ample lustre, than the moon
Through cloudless sky at midnight, in her noon.

[3: See *Rev.* i. 12.]

I turn'd me, full of wonder, to my guide;
And he did answer with a countenance
Charged with no less amazement: whence my view
Reverted to those lofty things, which came
So slowly moving toward us, that the bride
Would have outstript them on her bridal day.

The lady call'd aloud: "Why thus yet burns
Affection in thee for these living lights,
And dost not look on that which follows them?"

I straightway mark'd a tribe behind them walk,
As if attendant on their leaders, clothed
With raiment of such whiteness, as on earth
Was never. On my left, the watery gleam
Borrow'd, and gave me back, when there I look'd,
As in a mirror, my left side portray'd.

When I had chosen on the river's edge

Such station, that the distance of the stream
Alone did separate me; there I stay'd
My steps for clearer prospect, and beheld
The flames go onward, leaving, as they went,
The air behind them painted as with trail
Of liveliest pencils; so distinct were mark'd
All those seven listed colours, whence the sun
Maketh his bow, and Cynthia her zone.
These streaming gonfalons did flow beyond
My vision; and ten paces, as I guess,
Parted the outermost. Beneath a sky
So beautiful, came four and twenty elders[4],
By two and two, with flower - de - lucas crown'd.
All sang one song: "Blessed be thou[5] among
The daughters of Adam! and thy loveliness
Blessed forever!" After that the flowers,
And the fresh herblets, on the opposite brink,
Were free from that elected race; as light
In heaven doth second light, came after them
Four[6] animals, each crown'd with verdurous leaf.
With six wings each was plumed; the plumage full

[4: "Upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting." - Rev. iv. 4.]

[5: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." - Luke 1. 42.]

[6: "Four." The four evangelists.]

Of eyes; and the eyes of Argus would be such,
Were they endued with life. Reader! more rhymes
I will not waste in shadowing forth their form:
For other need so straitens, that in this
I may not give my bounty room. But read
Ezekiel;[7] for he paints them, from the north
How he beheld them come by Chebar's flood,
In whirlwind, cloud, and fire; and even such
As thou shalt find them character'd by him,
Here were they; save as to the pennons: there,
From him departing, John[8] accords with me.

[7: "Ezekiel." "And I looked, and behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the color of amber, out of the midst of fire. Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings." - Ezekiel, i. 4, 5, 6.]

[8: "John." "And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him." - Rev. iv. 8.]

The space, surrounded by the four, enclosed
A car triumphal:[9] on two wheels it came,
Drawn at a Gryphon's[10] neck; and he above
Stretch'd either wing uplifted, 'tween the midst
And the three listed hues, on each side, three;
So that the wings did cleave or injure none;
And out of sight they rose. The members, far
As he was bird, were golden; white the rest,
with vermeil interven'd. So beautiful
A car, in Rome, ne'er graced Augustus' pomp,
Or Africanus': e'en the sun's itself
Were poor to this; that chariot of the sun,
Erroneous, which in blazing ruin fell
At Tellus' prayer devout, by the just doom
Mysterious of all - seeing Jove. Three nymphs[11],
At the right wheel, came circling in smooth dance:
The one so ruddy, that her form had scarce
Been known within a furnace of clear flame;

[9: Either the Christian Church or perhaps the papal chair.]

[10: Under the griffin (gryphon), an imaginary creature, the fore - part of which is an eagle, and the hinder a lion, is shadowed forth the union of the divine and the human nature in Jesus Christ.]

[11: The three evangelical virtues: Charity, Hope, and Faith. Faith may be produced by charity, or charity by faith, but the inducements to hope must arise either from one or other of these.]

The next did look, as if the flesh and bones
Were emerald; snow new - fallen seem'd the third.
Now seem'd the white to lead, the ruddy now;
And from her song who led, the others took
Their measure, swift or slow. At the other wheel,
A band quaternion[12], each in purple clad,
Advanced with festal step, as, of them, one
The rest conducted:[13] one, upon whose front
Three eyes were seen. In rear of all this group,
Two old men[14] I beheld, dissimilar
In raiment, but in port and gesture like,
Solid and mainly grave; of whom, the one
Did show himself some favor'd counsellor
Of the great Coan,[15] him, whom nature made
To serve the costliest creature of her tribe:
His fellow mark'd an opposite intent;
Bearing a sword, whose glitterance and keen edge,

E'en as I viewed it with the flood between,
Appall'd me. Next, four others[16] I beheld
Of humble seeming: and, behind them all,
One single old man,[17] sleeping as he came,
With a shrewd visage. And these seven, each
Like the first troop were habited; but wore
No braid of lilies on their temples wreathed.
Rather, with roses and each vermeil flower,
A sight, but little distant, might have sworn,
That they were all on fire above their brow.

[12: The four moral virtues, of whom Prudence directs the others.]

[13: Prudence, described with three eyes, because she regards the past, the present, and the future.]

[14: "Two old men." St. Luke, the physician, characterized as the writer of the Acts of the Apostles, and St. Paul, represented with a sword, on account, as it should seem, of the power of his style.]

[15: Hippocrates, "whom nature made for the benefit of her favorite creature, man."]

[16: "The commentators," says Venturi, "suppose these four to be the four evangelists; but I should rather take them to be four principal doctors of the Church." Yet both Landino and Vellutello expressly call them the authors of the epistles, James, Peter, John, and Jude.]

[17: As some say, St. John, under the character of the author of the Apocalypse.]

When as the car was o'er against me, straight
Was heard a thundering, at whose voice it seem'd
The chosen multitude were stay'd; for there,
With the first ensigns, made they solemn halt.