

# Purgatory Canto 31

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Canto XXXI

Argument

Beatrice continues her reprehension of Dante, who confesses his error, and falls to the ground; coming to himself again, he is by Matilda drawn through the waters of Lethe, and presented first to the four virgins who figure the cardinal virtues; these in their turn lead him to the Gryphon, a symbol of our Saviour; and the three virgins, representing the evangelical virtues, intercede for him with Beatrice, that she would display to him her second beauty.

"O Thou!" her words she thus without delay  
Resuming, turn'd their point on me, to whom  
They, with but lateral edge,[1] seem'd harsh before:  
"Say thou, who stand'st beyond the holy stream,  
If this be true. A charge, so grievous, needs  
Thine own avowal." On my faculty  
Such strange amazement hung, the voice expired  
Imperfect, ere its organs gave it birth.

[1: "With but lateral edge." The words of Beatrice, when not addressed directly to himself, but spoken of him to the Angel, Dante had thought sufficiently harsh.]

A little space refraining, then she spake:  
"What dost thou muse on? Answer me. The wave  
On thy remembrances of evil yet  
Hath done no injury." A mingled sense  
Of fear and of confusion, from my lips  
Did such a "Yea" produce, as needed help  
Of vision to interpret. As when breaks,  
In act to be discharged, a cross - bow bent  
Beyond its pitch, both nerve and bow o'erstretch'd;  
The flagging weapon feebly hits the mark:  
Thus, tears and sighs forth gushing, did I burst,  
Beneath the heavy load: and thus my voice  
Was slacken'd on its way. She straight began:  
"When my desire invited thee to love  
The good, which sets a bound to our aspirings;  
What bar of thwarting foss or linked chain  
Did meet thee, that thou so shouldst quit the hope  
Of further progress? or what bait of ease,

Or promise of allurements, led thee on  
Elsewhere, that thou elsewhere shouldst rather wait?"

A bitter sigh I drew, then scarce found voice  
To answer; hardly to these sounds my lips

Gave utterance, wailing: "Thy fair looks withdrawn,  
Things present, with deceitful pleasures, turn'd  
My steps aside." She answering spake: "Hadst thou  
Been silent, or denied what thou avow'st,  
Thou hadst not hid thy sin the more; such eye  
Observes it. But whene'er the sinner's cheek  
Breaks forth into the precious - streaming tears  
Of self - accusing, in our court the wheel  
Of justice doth run counter to the edge.[2]  
Howe'er, that thou mayst profit by thy shame  
For errors past, and that henceforth more strength  
May arm thee, when thou hear'st the Syren - voice;  
Lay thou aside the motive to this grief,  
And lend attentive ear, while I unfold  
How opposite a way my buried flesh  
Should have impell'd thee. Never didst thou spy,  
In art or nature, aught so passing sweet,  
As were the limbs that in their beauteous frame  
Enclosed me, and are scatter'd now in dust.  
If sweetest thing thus fail'd thee with my death,  
What, afterward, of moral, should thy wish  
Have tempted? When thou first hadst felt the dart  
Of perishable things, in my departing  
For better realms, thy wing thou shouldst have pruned  
To follow me; and never stoop'd again,  
To 'bide a second blow, for a slight girl,[3]  
Or other gaud as transient and as vain.  
The new and inexperienced bird[4] awaits,  
Twice it may be, or thrice, the fowler's aim;  
But in the sight of one whose plumes are full,  
In vain the net is spread, the arrow wing'd."

[2: "The weapons of divine justice are blunted by the confession and sorrow of the offender."]

[3: "For a slight girl." Daniello and Venturi say that this alludes to Gentucca of Lucca, mentioned in the twenty - fourth Canto.]

[4: "Bird." "Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird." - Prov. i. 17.]

I stood, as children silent and ashamed  
Stand, listening, with their eyes upon the earth,  
Acknowledging their fault, and self - condemn'd.

And she resumed: "If, but to hear, thus pains thee,  
Raise thou thy beard, and lo! what sight shall do."

With less reluctance yields a sturdy holm,  
Rent from its fibres by a blast, that blows  
From off the pole, or from Iarbas' land,[5]  
Than I at her behest my visage raised:  
And thus the face denoting by the beard,  
I mark'd the secret sting her words convey'd.

[5: "From Iarbas' land." The south.]

No sooner lifted I mine aspect up,  
Than I perceived those primal creatures cease  
Their flowery sprinkling; and mine eyes beheld  
(Yet unassured and wavering in their view)  
Beatrice; she, who toward the mystic shape,  
That joins two natures in one form, had turn'd:  
And, even under shadow of her veil,  
And parted by the verdant rill that flow'd  
Between, in loveliness she seem'd as much  
Her former self surpassing, as on earth  
All others she surpass'd. Remorseful goads  
Shot sudden through me. Each thing else, the more  
Its love had late beguiled me, now the more  
Was loathsome. On my heart so keenly smote  
The bitter consciousness, that on the ground  
O'erpower'd I fell: and what my state was then,  
She knows, who was the cause. When now my strength  
Flow'd back, returning outward from the heart,  
The lady,[6] whom alone I first had seen,  
I found above me. "Loose me not," she cried:  
"Loose not thy hold:" and lo! had dragg'd me high  
As to my neck into the stream; while she,  
Still as she drew me after, swept along,  
Swift as a shuttle, bounding o'er the wave.

[6: "The lady." Matilda.]

The blessed shore approaching, then was heard  
So sweetly, "Tu asperges me," that I  
May not remember, much less tell the sound.

The beauteous dame, her arms expanding, clasp'd  
My temples, and immerged me where 'twas fit  
The wave should drench me: and, thence raising up,  
Within the fourfold dance of lovely nymphs  
Presented me so laved; and with their arm  
They each did cover me. "Here are we nymphs,

And in the heaven are stars. Or ever earth  
Was visited of Beatrice, we,  
Appointed for her handmaids, tended on her.  
We to her eyes will lead thee: but the light  
Of gladness, that is in them, well to scan,  
Those yonder three, of deeper ken than ours,  
Thy sight shall quicken." Thus began their song:  
And then they led me to the Gryphon's breast,  
Where, turn'd toward us, Beatrice stood.  
"Spare not thy vision. We have station'd thee  
Before the emeralds, whence love, erewhile,  
Hath drawn his weapons on thee." As they spake,  
A thousand fervent wishes riveted  
Mine eyes upon her beaming eyes, that stood,  
Still fix'd toward the Gryphon, motionless.  
As the sun strikes a mirror, even thus  
Within those orbs the twofold being shone;  
Forever varying, in one figure now  
Reflected, now in other. Reader! muse  
How wondrous in my sight it seem'd, to mark  
A thing, albeit steadfast in itself,  
Yet in its imaged semblance mutable.

Full of amaze, and joyous, while my soul  
Fed on the viand, whereof still desire  
Grows with satiety; the other three,  
With gesture that declared a loftier line,  
Advanced: to their own carol, on they came  
Dancing, in festive ring angelical.

"Turn, Beatrice!" was their song: "Oh! turn  
Thy saintly sight on this thy faithful one,  
Who, to behold thee, many a wearisome pace  
Hath measured. Gracious at our prayer, vouchsafe  
Unveiled to him thy cheeks; that he may mark  
Thy second beauty, now conceal'd." O splendour!  
O sacred light eternal! who is he,  
So pale with musing in Pierian shades,  
Or with that fount so lavishly imbued,  
Whose spirit should not fail him in the essay  
To represent thee such as thou didst seem,  
When under cope of the still - chiming Heaven  
Thou gavest to open air thy charms reveal'd?