

# Purgatory Canto 4

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## Canto IV

### Argument

Dante and Virgil ascend the mountain of Purgatory, by a steep and narrow path pent in on each side by rock, till they reach a part of it that opens into a ledge or cornice. There seating themselves, and turning to the east, Dante wonders at seeing the sun on their left, the cause of which is explained to him by Virgil; and while they continue their discourse, a voice addresses them, at which they turn, and find several spirits behind the rock, and among the rest one named Belacqua, who had been known to our Poet on earth, and who tells that he is doomed to linger there on account of his having delayed his repentance to the last.

When by sensations of delight or pain,  
That any of our faculties hath seized,  
Entire the soul collects herself, it seems  
She is intent upon that power alone;  
And thus the error is disproved, which holds  
The soul not singly lighted in the breast.  
And therefore whenas aught is heard or seen,  
That firmly keeps the soul toward it turn'd,  
Time passes, and a man perceives it not.  
For that, whereby we hearken, is one power;  
Another that, which the whole spirit hath:  
This is as it were bound, while that is free.

This found I true by proof, hearing that spirit  
And wondering; for full fifty steps<sup>[1]</sup> aloft  
The sun had measured, unobserved of me,  
When we arrived where all with one accord  
The spirits shouted, "Here is what ye ask."

[1: Three hours twenty minutes; fifteen degrees being reckoned to an hour.]

A larger aperture oft - times is stopt,  
With forked stake of thorn by villager,  
When the ripe grape imbrowns, than was the path,

By which my guide, and I behind him close,  
Ascended solitary, when that troop  
Departing left us. On Sanleo's<sup>[2]</sup> road  
Who journeys, or to Noli<sup>[3]</sup> low descends,

Or mounts Bismantua's[4] height, must use his feet;  
But here a man had need to fly, I mean  
With the swift wing and plumes of high desire,  
Conducted by his aid, who gave me hope,  
And with light furnish'd to direct my way.

[2: "Sanleo." A fortress on the summit of Montefeltro. The situation is described by Troya, *Veltro Allegorico*, p. 11. It is a conspicuous object to travellers along the cornice on the Riviera di Genoa.]

[3: "Noli". In the Genoese territory, between Finale and Savona.]

[4: "Bismantua." A steep mountain in the territory of Reggio.]

We through the broken rock ascended, close  
Pent on each side, while underneath the ground  
Ask'd help of hands and feet. When we arrived  
Near on the highest ridge of the steep bank,  
Where the plain level open'd, I exclaim'd,  
"O Master! say, which way can we proceed."

He answer'd, "Let no step of thine recede.  
Behind me gain the mountain, till to us  
Some practised guide appear." That eminence  
Was lofty, that no eye might reach its point;  
And the side proudly rising, more than line  
From the mid quadrant to the centre drawn.  
I, wearied, thus began: "Parent beloved!  
Turn and behold how I remain alone,  
If thou stay not." - "My son!" he straight replied,  
"Thus far put forth thy strength;" and to a track  
Pointed, that, on this side projecting, round  
Circles the hill. His words so spurr'd me on,  
That I, behind him, clambering, forced myself,  
Till my feet press'd the circuit plain beneath.  
There both together seated, turn'd we round  
To eastward, whence was our ascent: and oft  
Many beside have with delight look'd back.

First on the nether shores I turn'd mine eyes,  
Then raised them to the sun, and wondering mark'd  
That from the left it smote us. Soon perceived  
That poet sage, how at the car of light

Amazed[5] I stood, where 'twixt us and the north  
Its course it enter'd. Whence he thus to me:  
"Were Leda's offspring[6] now in company  
Of that broad mirror, that high up and low  
Imparts his light beneath, thou mightst behold  
The ruddy Zodiac nearer to the Bears

Wheel, if its ancient course it not forsook.  
How that may be, if thou wouldst think; within  
Pondering, imagine Sion with this mount  
Placed on the earth, so that to both be one  
Horizon, and two hemispheres apart,  
Where lies the path[7] that Phaeton ill knew  
To guide his erring chariot: thou wilt see[8]  
How of necessity by this, on one,  
He passes, while by that on the other side;  
If with clear view thine intellect attend."

[5: "Amazed." He wonders that being turned to the east he should see the sun on his left, since in all the regions on this side of the tropic of Cancer it is seen on the right of one who turns his face toward the east; not recollecting that he was now antipodal to Europe, from whence he had seen the sun taking an opposite course.]

[6: "As the constellation of the Gemini is nearer the Bears than Aries is, it is certain that if the sun, instead of being in Aries, had been in Gemini, both the sun and that portion of the Zodiac made 'ruddy' by the sun, would have been seen to 'wheel nearer to the Bears,' By the 'ruddy Zodiac' must necessarily be understood that portion of the Zodiac affected or made red by the sun; for the whole of the Zodiac never changes, nor appears to change, with respect to the remainder of the heavens." - Lombardi.]

[7: "The path." The ecliptic.]

[8: "Thou, wilt see." "If you consider that this mountain of Purgatory, and that of Sion, are antipodal to each other, you will perceive that the sun must rise on opposite sides of the respective eminences."]

"Of truth, kind teacher! I exclaim'd, "so clear  
Aught saw I never, as I now discern,  
Where seem'd my ken to fail, that the mid orb[9]  
Of the supernal motion (which in terms  
Of art is call'd the Equator, and remains  
Still 'twixt the sun and winter) for the cause  
Thou hast assign'd, from hence toward the north  
Departs, when those, who in the Hebrew land  
Were dwellers, saw it towards the warmer part.  
But if it please thee, I would gladly know,

[9: "That the mid orb." "That the equator (which is always situated between that part where, when the sun is, he causes summer, and the other where his absence produces winter) recedes from this mountain toward the north, at the time when the Jews inhabiting Mount Sion saw it depart toward the south." - Lombardi.]

How far we have to journey: for the hill  
Mounts higher, than this sight of mine can mount."

He thus to me: "Such is this steep ascent,  
That it is ever difficult at first,  
But more a man proceeds, less evil grows.[10]  
When pleasant it shall seem to thee, so much  
That upward going shall be easy to thee  
As in a vessel to go down the tide,  
Then of this path thou wilt have reach'd the end.  
There hope to rest thee from thy toil. No more  
I answer, and thus far from certain know."  
As he his words had spoken, near to us  
A voice there sounded: "Yet ye first perchance  
May to repose you by constraint be led."  
At sound thereof each turn'd; and on the left  
A huge stone we beheld, of which nor I  
Nor he before was ware. Thither we drew;  
And there were some, who in the shady place  
Behind the rock were standing, as a man  
Through idleness might stand. Among them one,  
Who seem'd to be much wearied, sat him down,  
And with his arms did fold his knees about,  
Holding his face between them downward bent.

[10: Because in ascending he gets rid of the weight of his sins.]

"Sweet Sir!" I cried, "behold that man who shows  
Himself more idle than if laziness  
Were sister to him." Straight he turn'd to us,  
And, o'er the thigh lifting his face, observed,  
Then in these accents spake: "Up then, proceed,  
Thou valiant one." Straight who it was I knew;  
Nor could the pain I felt (for want of breath  
Still somewhat urged me) hinder my approach.  
And when I came to him, he scarce his head  
Uplifted, saying, "Well has thou discern'd,  
How from the left the sun his chariot leads?"

His lazy acts and broken words my lips  
To laughter somewhat moved; when I began:  
"Belacqua,[11] now for thee I grieve no more.

[11: In the margin of the Monte Casino Ms. there is found this brief  
notice: "This Belacqua was an excellent master of the harp and lute, but very  
negligent in his affairs both spiritual and temporal."]

But tell, why thou art seated upright there.  
Waitest thou escort to conduct thee hence?  
Or blame I only thine accustom'd ways?"  
Then he: "My brother! of what use to mount,  
When, to my suffering, would not let me pass

The bird of God, who at the portal sits?  
Behoves so long that Heaven first bear me round  
Without its limits, as in life it bore;  
Because I, to the end, repentant sighs  
Delay'd; if prayer do not aid me first,  
That riseth up from heart which lives in grace.  
What other kind avails, not heard in Heaven?"

Before me now the poet, up the mount  
Ascending, cried: "Haste thee: for see the sun  
Has touch'd the point meridian; and the night  
Now covers with her foot Marocco's shore."