

Purgatory Canto 9

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Canto IX

Argument

Dante is carried up the mountain, asleep and dreaming, by Lucia; and, on awakening, finds himself, two hours after sunrise, with Virgil, near the gate of Purgatory, through which they are admitted by the Angel deputed by St. Peter to keep it.

Now the fair consort of Tithonus old,
Arisen from her name's beloved arms,
Look'd palely o'er the eastern cliff; her brow,
Lucent with jewels, glitter'd, set in sign
Of that chill animal,[1] who with his train
Smites fearful nations: and where then we were,
Two steps of her ascent the night had past;
And now the third was closing up its wing,[2]
When I, who had so much of Adam with me,
Sank down upon the grass, o'ercome with sleep,
There where all five[3] were seated. In that hour,
When near the dawn the swallow her sad lay,
Remembering haply ancient grief,[4] renews;
And when our minds, more wanderers from the flesh,
And less by thought restrain'd are, as 't were, full
Of holy divination in their dreams;
Then, in a vision, did I seem to view
A golden - feather'd eagle in the sky,
With open wings, and hovering for descent;
And I was in that place, methought, from whence
Young Ganymede, from his associates 'reft,
Was snatch'd aloft to the high consistory.
"Perhaps," thought I within me, "here alone
He strikes his quarry, and elsewhere disdains

[1: "Of that chill animal." The scorpion.]

[2: The third was closing up its wing." The night being divided into four watches, I think he may mean that the third was past, and the fourth and last was begun, so that there might be some faint glimmering of morning twilight; and not merely, as Lombardi supposes, that the third watch was drawing toward its close, which would still leave an insurmountable difficulty in the first verse.]

[3: "All five." Virgil, Dante, Sordello, Nino, and Corrado Malaspina.]

[4: "Remembering haply ancient grief." Progne having been changed into a swallow after the outrage done her by Tereus.]

To pounce upon the prey." Therewith, it seem'd,
A little wheeling in his aery tour,
Terrible as the lightning, rush'd he down,
And snatch'd me upward even to the fire.
There both, I thought, the eagle and myself
Did burn; and so intense the imagined flames,
That needs my sleep was broken off. As erst
Achilles shook himself, and round him roll'd
His waken'd eyeballs, wondering where he was,
Whenas his mother had from Chiron fled
To Scyros, with him sleeping in her arms;
There whence the Greeks did after sunder him;
E'en thus I shook me, soon as from my face
The slumber parted, turning deadly pale,
Like one ice - struck with dread. Sole at my side
My comfort stood: and the bright sun was now
More than two hours aloft: and to the sea
My looks were turn'd. "Fear not," my master cried,
"Assured we are at happy point. Thy strength
Shrink not, but rise dilated. Thou art come
To Purgatory now. Lo! there the cliff
That circling bounds it. Lo! the entrance there,
Where it doth seem parted. Ere the dawn
Usher'd the day - light, when thy wearied soul
Slept in thee, o'er the flowery vale beneath
A lady came, and thus bespake me: 'I
Am Lucia.[5] Suffer me to take this man,
Who slumbers. Easier so his way shall speed.'
Sordello and the other gentle shapes
Tarrying, she bare thee up: and, as day shone,
This summit reach'd: and I pursued her steps.
Here did she place thee. First, her lovely eyes
That open entrance show'd me; then at once
She vanish'd with thy sleep." Like one, whose doubts
Are chased by certainty, and terror turn'd
To comfort on discovery of the truth,
Such was the change in me: and as my guide
Beheld me fearless, up along the cliff
He moved, and I behind him, toward the height.

[5: "Lucia." See Hell, c. ii 97 and Paradise, c. xxxii. 123.]

Reader! thou markest how my theme doth rise;

Nor wonder therefore, if more artfully
I prop the structure. Nearer now we drew,
Arrived whence, in that part, where first a breach
As of a wall appear'd, I could descry
A portal, and three steps beneath, that led
For inlet there, of different colour each;
And one who watch'd, but spake not yet a word.
As more and more mine eye did stretch its view,
I mark'd him seated on the highest step,
In visage such, as past my power to bear.
Grasp'd in his hand, a naked sword glanced back
The rays so toward me, that I oft in vain
My sight directed. "Speak, from whence ye stand;"
He cried: "What would ye? Where is your escort?
Take heed your coming upward harm ye not."

"A heavenly dame, not skill - less of these things,"
Replied the instructor, "told us, even now,
'Pass that way: here the gate is.'" - "And may she,
Befriending, prosper your ascent," resumed
The courteous keeper of the gate: "Come then
Before our steps." We straightway thither came.

The lowest stair[6] was marble white, so smooth
And polish'd, that therein my mirror'd form
Distinct I saw. The next of hue more dark
Than sablest grain, a rough and singed block,
Crack'd lengthwise and across. The third, that lay
Massy above, seem'd porphyry, that flamed
Red as the life - blood spouting from a vein.
On this God's angel either foot sustain'd,
Upon the threshold seated, which appear'd
A rock of diamond. Up the trinal steps
My leader cheerly drew me. "Ask," said he,
"With humble heart, that he unbar the bolt."

[6: The white step suggests the conscience of the penitent reflecting
his offences; the burnt and cracked one, his contrition on their account; the
porphyry, the fervor with which he resolves on the future pursuit of piety and
virtue.]

Piously at his holy feet devolved
I cast me, praying him for pity's sake
That he would open to me; but first fell

Thrice on my bosom prostrate. Seven times[7]
The letter, that denotes the inward stain,
He, on my forehead, with the blunted point
Of his drawn sword, inscribed. And "Look," he cried,

"When enter'd, that thou wash these scars away."

[7: "Seven times." Seven P's, to denote the seven sins (Peccata) of which he was to be cleansed in his passage through Purgatory.]

Ashes, or earth ta'en dry out of the ground,
Were of one colour with the robe he wore.
From underneath that vestment forth he drew
Two keys,[8] of metal twain: the one was gold,
Its fellow silver. With the pallid first,
And next the burnish'd he so ply'd the gate,
As to content me well. "Whenever one
Faieth of these, that in the key - hole straight
It turn not, to this alley then expect
Access in vain." Such were the words he spake.
"One is more precious:[9] but the other needs
Skill and sagacity, large share of each,
Ere its good task to disengage the knot
Be worthily perform'd. From Peter these
I hold, of him instructed that I err
Rather in opening, than in keeping fast;
So but the suppliant at my feet implore."

[8: "Two keys." Lombardi remarks that painters have usually drawn St. Peter with two keys, the one of gold and the other of silver; but that Niccolo Alemanni, in his Dissertation de Parietinis Lateranensibus, produces instances of his being represented with one key, and with three. We have here, however, not St. Peter, but an angel deputed by him.]

[9: The golden key denotes the divine authority by which the priest absolves the sinners; the silver, the learning and judgment requisite for the due discharge of that office.]

Then of that hallow'd gate he thrust the door,
Exclaiming, "Enter, but this warning hear:
He forth again departs who looks behind."

As in the hinges of that sacred ward
The swivels turn'd, sonorous metal strong,
Harsh was the grating; nor so surlily
Roar'd the Tarpeian, when by force bereft
Of good Metellus, thenceforth from his loss
To leanness doom'd. Attentively I turn'd,
Listening the thunder that first issued forth;
And "We praise thee, O God," methought I heard,

In accents blended with sweet melody.
The strains came o'er mine ear, e'en as the sound
Of choral voices, that in solemn chant
With organ[10] mingle, and now high and clear

Come swelling, now float indistinct away.

[10: "Organ." Organs were used in Italy as early as in the sixth century. If I remember rightly there is a passage in the Emperor Julian's writings, which shows that the organ was not unknown in his time.]

— Purgatory Canto 9