

PARADISO

CANTO V

'If I flame at you with a heat of love
beyond all measure known on earth
so that I overcome your power of sight, 3
'do not wonder, for this is the result
of perfect vision, which, even as it apprehends,
moves its foot toward the apprehended good. 6
'I see clearly how, reflected in your mind,
the eternal light that, once beheld,
alone and always kindles love, is shining. 9
'And, if anything else beguiles your mortal love,
it is nothing but a remnant of that light, which,
incompletely understood, still shines in it. 12
'You want to know if a vow left unfulfilled
may be redeemed by some exchange
that then secures the soul from challenge.' 15
Thus did Beatrice begin this canto and,
like a man who does not interrupt his speech,
continued thus her holy discourse: 18
'The greatest gift that God in His largesse
gave to creation, the most attuned
to His goodness and that He accounts most dear, 21
'was the freedom of the will:
all creatures possessed of intellect,
all of them and they alone, were and are so endowed. 24
'Now will be clear to you, reasoning from this,
the lofty worth of vows, as long as they are such
that God consent when you consent. 27
'For when man makes a pact with God,
this treasure, as I have suggested, then becomes
the sacrificial pledge, an action freely chosen. 30
'What, then, may you render in its place?
If you think of doing good with what you've offered,
you would do good works with gains ill-gotten. 33

'Now you may be certain of the major point.
Since Holy Church gives dispensation in this matter --
which seems to contradict the truth I have declared -- 36

'you'll have to linger longer over dinner,
for the tough food that you have swallowed
still requires some aid for your digesting. 39

'Open your mind to what I now explain
and fix it in your memory, for to hear
and not remember does not lead to knowledge. 42

Two things compose the essence
of this sacrificial act,
first that which is promised, then the pact itself. 45

'This pact can never be annulled
until it is fulfilled. It was of this
I spoke just now with such precision. 48

'Thus it was incumbent on the Hebrews
still to offer sacrifice, even if some offerings
allowed for substitution, as surely you must know. 51

'The first part, as has been explained, is the object
of the vow. It may indeed be such there is no fault
in substituting other objects for it. 54

'But let no man shift the burden on his shoulders
at the call of his own will, for such change requires
that both the white and yellow keys be turned. 57

'Let each exchange be reckoned vain
unless the burden laid aside is found,
as four is found in six, in the one assumed. 60

'Whatever, therefore, has such worth
as would unbalance any scale
shall not be replaced, no matter what the cost. 63

'Let not mortals take vows lightly.
Be faithful and, as well, not injudicious,
as was Jephthah, offering up what first he saw, 66

'who had done better had he said "I have done ill"
than keeping faith and doing worse. And you can find
this sort of folly in the leader of the Greeks, 69

'who made Iphigenia lament the beauty of her face
and who made all those, whether wise or foolish,
who heard reports of such a rite lament as well. 72

'Be more grave, Christians, in your endeavors. Do not resemble feathers in the wind, nor think all waters have the power to wash you clean.	75
'You have the Testaments, both New and Old, and the shepherd of the Church to guide you. Let these suffice for your salvation.	78
'If wicked greed should call you elsewhere, be men, not maddened sheep, lest the Jew there in your midst make mock of you.	81
'Be not like the lamb that leaves its mother's milk and, silly and wanton, pretends to battle with itself in play.'	84
Just as I am writing, thus did Beatrice speak. And then, still filled with longing, she turned to where the universe shines brightest.	87
Her falling silent and her transformed look imposed a silence on my eager mind, which was already teeming with new questions.	90
And next, like a shaft that strikes its target before the cord is still, we sped into the second realm.	93
There I saw my lady so radiant with joy as she passed into that heaven's brightness that the planet shone the brighter for it.	96
And if even that star then changed and smiled, what did I become who by my very nature am subject to each and every kind of change?	99
As to the surface of a fish-pond, calm and clear, the fish draw close to what they see above them, believing it to be their food,	102
so I saw more than a thousand splendors drawing toward us, and from each was heard: 'Oh, here is one who will increase our loves!'	105
And as these shades approached, each one of them seemed filled with joy, so brilliant was the light that shone from them.	108
Merely consider, reader, if what I here begin went on no farther, how keen would be your anguished craving to know more.	111

But you shall see for yourself what great desire I felt to hear about their state from them as soon as they appeared to me.	114
'O spirit born for bliss, whom grace allows to see the thrones of the eternal triumph before you leave the battlefield,	117
'we are on fire with the light that fills all Heaven. And so, if you would like us to enlighten you, content yourself as you desire.'	120
This came to me from one of those good spirits. And Beatrice began: 'Speak, speak with confidence, having faith in them as you would trust in gods.'	123
'I clearly see you nest in your own light, and that you flash it from your eyes, because it sparkles when you smile.	126
'But I know not who you are, nor why, worthy soul, you take your rank here from the sphere most veiled from mortals in another's rays,'	129
I said, addressing myself to the radiance that had been first to speak, which then became more brilliant than before.	132
As the sun, once its heat has gnawed away the dense and tempering vapors, hides itself in its own excess of light,	135
so, with increasing joy, the holy form concealed itself from me within its rays and, thus concealed, it made response	138
in the very manner that the next song sings.	139