

PARADISO

CANTO XX

When he who floods the whole world with his light
sinks steadily from sight within our hemisphere
until the day is spent on every side, 3
the sky, lit up before by him alone,
suddenly sparkles with a multitude of lights
which all reflect a single one. 6
I was reminded of this alteration in the sky
when the emblem of the world and of its lords
ceased speaking from within its blessed beak, 9
and all those living lights, shining
still more bright, began their songs
that slip, and fade, and fall from memory. 12
O sweet love, mantled in a smile,
how ardent did you sound within those pipes,
filled with the breath of holy thoughts alone! 15
Once the bright and precious stones of the sixth light,
which scintillated in their setting there,
had silenced their angelic tones, 18
it seemed to me I heard the murmur of a stream,
its waters falling crystal clear from rock to rock,
revealing the abundance of its source above. 21
And as a sound is given shape
at the neck of the lute or by the wind
forced through the vent-holes of a bagpipe, 24
so, holding me no longer in suspense,
the murmur of the eagle issued through its neck
as though it had been hollowed out. 27
There it became a voice and, coming from the beak,
it formed the words my heart was waiting for,
and on my heart I wrote them down. 30
'The part of me that, in mortal eagles,
sees and endures the sun, you now must watch
with fixed attention,' were its words to me, 33

'for, from the flames from which I take my form,
those that make my eye shine so brightly in my head,
those are the very highest spirits in their ranks. 36

'He that blazes as the pupil with a central spark
was the one who sang the praises of the Holy Ghost
and brought the ark from town to town. 39

'Now he knows the merit of his song,
insofar as it derived from his own thought,
by the fit reward he now enjoys. 42

'Of the five who arc to form my eyebrow,
the one who is closest to my beak
consoled the widow when she lost her son. 45

'Now he knows how dear the cost, should one fail
to follow Christ, since he has lived
both this sweet life and, long ago, that other. 48

'And he that follows on the arc of which I speak,
there on its upward curve, delayed his death
by offering up his true repentance. 51

'Now he knows God's irrevocable decree
remains unaltered even when a worthy prayer postpones
what might occur on earth today until tomorrow. 54

'The next one there, with good intent that bore bad fruit,
turned Greek, along with both the laws and me,
thus yielding his position to the shepherd. 57

'Now he knows that the evil which derived
from his good act does him no harm,
even if it brought the world to ruin. 60

'And the one you see on the downward arc was William,
for whom those lands lament which weep in woe
because of living Charles and living Frederick. 63

'Now he knows how Heaven is moved by love
for a righteous king, as the effulgence
of his aspect still makes plain. 66

'Who in the erring world below would think
that Trojan Ripheus should be the fifth
among the holy lights along this arc? 69

'Now he knows much the world cannot discern
of heavenly grace, although his sight
cannot make out the bottom of this sea.' 72

Like the lark that soars in air,
 first singing, then silent, content and rejoicing
 in the final joyous sweetness of its song, 75
 such did that image seem to me, the very imprint
 of the eternal Beauty, by whose will
 all things become that which they truly are. 78
 And even though I was as clear in my perplexity
 as color shows through glass that covers it,
 my question could not bear to wait its turn in silence, 81
 but, by the pressure of its weight,
 forced from my lips: 'What are these things I see?'
 For there I saw a glittering revelry of lights. 84
 And then, its eye lit up with greater brilliance,
 the blessed emblem, to set me free
 from suspense and wonder, gave its answer: 87
 'I see that you believe these things because I say them
 but fail to see, how, though you believe them,
 they came to pass, because their cause is hidden. 90
 'You are like the man who knows a thing by name
 but does not understand its quiddity
 unless another makes that plain to him. 93
 'Regnum celorum suffers violence
 from fervent love and living hope.
 These conquer the very will of God, 96
 'not as man may master man, but conquer it
 because it would be conquered, and,
 once conquered, itself conquers by its goodness. 99
 'The first living soul in the eyebrow and the fifth
 make you wonder to find them adorning
 the dwelling-place of angels. 102
 They left their bodies not as gentiles
 but as Christians, firm in their beliefs, the one
 before, the other after, the piercing of His feet. 105
 'For from Hell, where no one may return
 to righteous will, the one came back into his bones --
 this his reward for living hope, 108
 'the living hope that furnished power to the prayers
 addressed to God to raise him from the dead
 so that his will might find its moving force. 111

'The blessed soul of whom I speak,
 back in his flesh for but a while,
 believed in Him who had the power to help, 114
 'and, believing, was kindled to such fire
 of the one true love that, on his second death,
 he was deemed worthy to enjoy our happiness. 117
 'The other soul, through grace, which wells up
 from a source so deep there never was a creature
 who could thrust his vision to its primal spring, 120
 'set all his love below on righteousness.
 And for that reason, from grace to grace,
 God opened his eyes to our redemption yet to come, 123
 'so that he believed and, from that time on,
 endured no longer paganism's stench
 but rebuked the wayward peoples for it. 126
 'The three ladies you saw near the right-hand wheel
 served to baptize him one thousand years and more
 before the sacrament existed. 129
 'O predestination, how distant is your root
 from the gaze of those who cannot grasp
 the Primal Cause in its entirety! 132
 'And you mortals, find some restraint
 in making judgments, for we, who gaze on God,
 have yet to know all those who are elect. 135
 'And to us this very lack is sweet,
 because in this good is our good perfected,
 for that which God wills we will too.' 138
 Thus did that holy image,
 to cure the shortness of my vision,
 apply sweet medication to my eyes. 141
 And, as a practiced lute player will follow
 a practiced singer with his quivering chords,
 giving the song a sweeter sound, 144
 so, all the while the eagle spoke, as I recall,
 I kept my eyes on those two blessed lights and saw,
 just as blinking eyes keep time as one, 147
 they timed their flames' pulsations to the words. 148