

PARADISO

CANTO XXI

Now my eyes were fixed again
upon my lady's face. And with my eyes,
my mind drew back from any other thought. 3

She was not smiling. 'If I smiled,'
she said, 'you would become what Semele became
when she was turned to ashes, 6

'for my beauty, which you have seen
flame up more brilliantly the higher we ascend
the stairs of this eternal palace, 9

'is so resplendent that, were it not tempered
in its blazing, your mortal powers would be
like tree limbs rent and scorched by lightning. 12

'We have risen to the seventh splendor,
which, beneath the burning Lion's breast,
sends down its rays, now mingled with his power. 15

'Set your mind behind your eyes
so that they may become the mirrors for the shape
that in this heaven's mirror will appear to you.' 18

When I was told to set my mind on other things,
only one who knew how much my eyes could feast
upon that blessed countenance 21

would understand what joy it was to me
but to obey my heavenly guide,
weighing one side of the scale against the other. 24

Within the crystal, circling our earth,
that bears the name of the world's beloved king,
under whose rule all wickedness lay dead, 27

the color of gold in a ray of sunlight,
I saw a ladder, rising to so great a height
my eyesight could not rise along with it. 30

I also saw, descending on its rungs,
so many splendors that I thought that every light
shining in the heavens was pouring down. 33

And as, following their native instinct,
 rooks rise up together at the break of day,
 warming their feathers, stiffened by the cold, 36
 and some of them fly off, not to return,
 while some turn back to where they had set out,
 and some keep wheeling overhead, 39
 just such varied motions did I observe
 within that sparkling throng, which came as one,
 as soon as it had reached a certain rung. 42
 And the one that stayed the closest there to us
 grew so shining bright I said, but not aloud,
 'This sign makes clear your love for me. 45
 'But she, upon whose word I wait to know
 when and how to speak or to be silent, she keeps still
 and I do well, against my will, to ask no question.' 48
 She, therefore, who could see my silence plain
 in the sight of Him whose sight beholds all things,
 then said: 'Satisfy the ardent wish that burns within you.' 51
 And I: 'My merit does not make me worthy
 of your answer, but for the sake of her
 who gives me leave to ask, 54
 'blessèd living soul, still hidden
 in the radiance of your joy, make known to me
 the cause that made you draw so near 57
 'and tell me why, within this wheel,
 the sweet symphony of Paradise falls silent,
 which lower down resounds with such devotion.' 60
 'Your hearing is as mortal as your sight,'
 he answered. 'Thus here there is no song
 for the very reason Beatrice has not smiled. 63
 'I have come down the sacred ladder's rungs this far
 only to bid you welcome with my words
 and with the light that wraps me in its glow. 66
 'It was not greater love that made me come more swiftly,
 for as much and more love burns above,
 as that flaming luminescence shows, 69
 'but the profound affection prompting us
 to serve the Wisdom governing the world
 has brought about the outcome you perceive.' 72

'I see indeed, O sacred light,' I said,
 'how acts of love, unbidden, serve this court
 in concord with that knowledge which foresees, 75
 'but it is hard for me to understand
 why you alone among your peers
 were foreordained to act upon this charge.' 78
 I had not yet quite finished with my words
 when the light began to spin around its core,
 whirling like a quickly turning millstone. 81
 Then the love that was within it spoke:
 'Divine light focuses on me, piercing
 the radiance that holds me in its womb. 84
 'Its power, conjoined with my own sight,
 raises me so far above myself that I can see
 the Highest Essence, the source from which it flows. 87
 'And this inflames the joy with which I burn:
 for, in the clarity of my sight,
 I match the clearness of my flame. 90
 'Nonetheless, the most enlightened soul in Heaven,
 that seraph who fixes most his eye on God,
 could not produce an answer to your question, 93
 'for what you ask is hidden in the depths
 of the abyss of God's eternal law, so that the sight
 of any being He created is cut off from it. 96
 'And to the mortal world, when you return,
 bear this report, so that it shall no more presume
 to set its steps toward such a goal. 99
 'The mind, here bright, is dimmed by smoke on earth.
 Ask yourself, then, how could it do down there
 what it cannot, though Heaven raise it to itself?' 102
 His words so reined me in
 that I withdrew the question, limiting myself
 to asking humbly who he was. 105
 'Between Italy's two shores
 and not far distant from your homeland,
 crags rise so high that thunder rolls below them. 108
 'They form a ridge called Càtria.
 A consecrated monastery stands below,
 once dedicated wholly to God's worship.' 111

Thus a third time he began,
 addressing me, and then went on:
 'There I became so constant serving God, 114
 'my simple fare seasoned with olive oil alone,
 that I readily endured the heat and frost,
 content in contemplation. 117
 'That cloister which used to yield abundant harvest
 to these heavens now is barren,
 but soon its barrenness must be revealed. 120
 'In that place I was known as Peter Damian,
 but Peter the Sinner in the House
 of Our Lady on the Adriatic shore. 123
 'Little of mortal life on earth was left to me
 when I was singled out and dragged to that red hat
 which now is passed from bad to worse. 126
 'Cephas came, and the exalted vessel
 of the Holy Spirit came, lean and barefoot,
 receiving their food at any doorway. 129
 'Now our modern shepherds call for one on this side,
 one on that, to support them, they are so bloated,
 and one to go before, one to boost them from behind. 132
 'Their fur-lined mantles hang upon their horses' flanks
 so that two beasts go underneath one skin.
 O patience, what a heavy load you bear!' 135
 As he spoke, I saw more flickering flames
 descend, spinning from rung to rung,
 at every turn more lovely. 138
 They thronged around him and then stopped and raised
 a cry so loud that nothing here
 could be compared to it -- nor could I make it out, 141
 so did its thunder overwhelm me. 142