

PURGATORIO

CANTO X

Once we had crossed the threshold of the gate
not used by souls whose twisted love
tries to make the crooked way seem straight, 3
I knew that it had shut by its resounding.
And had I turned my eyes to look,
how could I have excused my fault? 6
We were climbing through a crevice in the rock,
which first bent one way, then another,
like a wave that ebbs and then comes rushing back, 9
when my leader said: 'Here we must use skill
in keeping close to one side or the other,
hewing to the side where the rock gives way.' 12
This so hindered our slow steps
the waning moon had gained its bed
and sunken to its rest 15
before we issued from that needle's eye.
But free above, out in the open
where the cliff draws back to leave a space-- 18
I weary and both of us uncertain of our path--
we stopped at a flat and open spot
more solitary than a desert track. 21
From its edge, which borders on the void,
to the foot of the lofty bank in its sheer rise,
would measure thrice the body of a man, 24
and as far as my eye could wing its flight,
now toward the left, now toward the other side,
the terrace stretched before me. 27
Our feet had not yet stepped on it
when I perceived that the encircling bank,
steep and impossible to climb, 30
was of white marble carved with so much art
that Polycletus and nature herself
would there be put to shame. 33

The angel who came to earth with the decree of peace
 that had been wept and yearned for all those years,
 which opened Heaven, ending God's long ban, 36
 appeared before us so vividly engraved
 in gracious attitude
 it did not seem an image, carved and silent. 39
 One would have sworn he was saying 'Ave,'
 for she as well was pictured there
 who turned the key to love on high. 42
 And in her attitude imprinted were
 the words: '*Ecce ancilla Dei*'
 as clearly as a figure stamped in wax. 45
 'Do not fix your mind on one part only,'
 said the kind master, who had me
 on that side of him where we have our hearts. 48
 At that I turned my face
 and, looking beyond Mary, saw,
 on the same side as he that prompted me, 51
 another story set into the rock.
 I went past Virgil and drew near
 so that my eyes might better take it in. 54
 There, carved into the marble, were the cart
 and oxen, drawing the sacred ark that makes men fear
 to assume an office not entrusted to them. 57
 The foreground, peopled by figures grouped
 in seven choirs, made one sense argue 'No'
 and the other: 'Yes, they sing.' 60
 In the same way, the smoke of incense
 sculpted there put eyes and nose
 in discord, caught between yes and no. 63
 There the humble psalmist leaped in dance
 before the blessed vessel with his robe hitched up--
 and was at once both more and less than king. 66
 Opposite, a figure at the window
 of a splendid palace, Michal looked on,
 like a woman vexed and scornful. 69
 I moved some steps from where I stood
 to look more closely at another story
 that I saw gleaming white beyond Michal. 72

Depicted there was the glorious act of the Roman prince whose worth urged Gregory on to his great victory--	75
I speak of the emperor Trajan, with the poor widow at his bridle, weeping, in a pose of grief--	78
the soil all trampled by the thronging knights. Above, the eagles fixed in gold seemed to flutter in the wind.	81
In their midst, one could almost hear the plea of that unhappy creature: 'My lord, avenge my murdered son for me. It is for him I grieve,'	84
and his answer: 'Wait till I return,' and she: 'My lord,' like one whose grief is urgent, 'and if you don't return?' and his answer:	87
'He who will take my place will do it,' and she: 'What use is another's goodness to you if you are unmindful of your own?'	90
And he then: 'Now take comfort, for I must discharge my debt to you before I go to war. Justice wills it and compassion bids me stay.'	93
He in whose sight nothing can be new wrought this speech made visible, new to us because it is not found on earth.	96
While I took pleasure in the sight of images of such humility, the lovelier to look at for their maker's sake,	99
'Here they come, though with slow steps,' the poet murmured.	
'They will direct us to the next ascent.'	102
My eyes, glad to gaze upon the marble, quickly turned in his direction, eager at the promise of new things.	105
Reader, I would not have you fall away from good intentions when you hear the way God wills the debt be paid.	108
Do not dwell upon the nature of the suffering. Think what is to follow, think that at the worst it cannot last beyond the final Judgment.	111

'Master,' I began, 'those that I see
moving toward us do not look like people--
whatever they may be, I cannot make them out.' 114

And he answered: 'The grave nature
of their torment contorts their bodies to a crouch,
so that at first my eyes were undecided. 117

'But look closer, disentangle
the figures bent beneath them from the stones.
Then you can see how each one beats his breast.' 120

O vainglorious Christians, miserable wretches!
Sick in the visions engendered in your minds,
you put your trust in backward steps. 123

Do you not see that we are born as worms,
though able to transform into angelic butterflies
that unimpeded soar to justice? 126

What makes your mind rear up so high?
You are, as it were, defective creatures,
like the unformed worm, shaped from the mud. 129

To hold up roof or ceiling, as a corbel does,
we sometimes see a crouching figure,
its knees pushed up against its chest, 132

and that unreal depiction may arouse
in him who sees it real distress,
such were these shapes when I could make them out. 135

They were indeed hunched over more or less,
depending on the burdens on their backs,
and even he that showed the greatest patience, 138

weeping, seemed to say: 'I can no more.' 139