

PURGATORIO

CANTO XII

As oxen go beneath their yoke
that overladen soul and I went side by side
as long as my dear escort granted. 3

But when he said: 'Leave him and hurry on,
for it is fitting here, with all your strength,
to speed your ship with wings and oars,' 6

I straightened up, erect,
as one should walk, but still my thoughts
remained bowed down and shrunken. 9

I set out, following gladly
in my master's steps, and our easy stride
made clear how light we felt. 12

And he to me: 'Cast down your eyes.
It will be good for you and calm you on your way
to look down at the bed beneath your feet.' 15

As gravestones set above the buried dead
bear witness to what once they were,
their carven images recalling them to mind, 18

making us grieve with frequent tears
when recollection pricks and spurs
the faithful heart with memories, 21

so were these figures sculpted there
along that road carved from the mountainside,
but in their artistry more true in their resemblance. 24

My eyes beheld the one, created nobler
than any other creature, fall like lightning
from the sky, over to one side. 27

My eyes beheld Briarèus, on the other,
transfixed by the celestial bolt,
now heavy on the earth in chill of death. 30

My eyes beheld Thymbraeus, Pallas, and Mars,
still armed, together with their father,
astounded by the giants' scattered limbs. 33

My eyes beheld Nimrod at the base of his great work,
 as though bewildered, and the people,
 who in Shinar shared his pride, all looking on. 36

Ah, Niobe, I saw you sculpted in the roadway,
 your eyes welling up with grief,
 amidst your dead, seven sons and seven daughters. 39

Ah, Saul, you too appeared there, dead
 on your own sword in the mountains of Gilboa,
 which never after knew the rain or dew. 42

Ah, mad Arachne, I saw you all but turned
 to spider, wretched on the strands
 you spun, which did you so much harm. 45

Ah, Rehoboam, now your image does not seem
 to menace but to cower. A chariot bears it off--
 and there is no one giving chase. 48

Now was shown, on that hard floor,
 how Alcmaeon made that necklace, ill-omened,
 seem not worth the price his mother paid. 51

Now was shown how his sons fell upon
 Sennacherib inside the temple,
 and how, slain, they left him there. 54

Now was shown the destruction and cruel slaughter
 wrought by Tomyris when she said to Cyrus:
 'You thirsted for blood. Now drink your fill.' 57

Now was shown the Assyrians routed and in flight
 after the slaying of Holofernes
 and the leavings of that slaughter. 60

My eyes beheld Troy in ashes and in ruins.
 Ah, Ilion, how reduced and shamed you were
 now was shown within the carving. 63

What master of the brush and stylus
 could have designed these forms and outlines
 that would astound even the truest talent? 66

Dead seemed the dead, living seemed the living.
 He who beheld the real events on which I walked,
 head bent, saw them no better than did I. 69

Wax proud then, go your way with head held high,
 you sons of Eve, and no, do not bend down your face
 and so reflect upon your evil path! 72

We had done more of the mountain's circle
 and the sun had sped along its track
 more than my mind, being bound, had reckoned, 75
 when he, who always looked before him
 as he went, spoke out: 'Raise your head!
 This is not the time for walking so absorbed. 78
 'See the angel over there, preparing
 to approach. See the sixth handmaid who returns
 from her service of the day. 81
 'Show reverence in your face and bearing
 so that he may be pleased to send us upward.
 Consider that this day will never dawn again.' 84
 I was accustomed to his admonitions
 not to waste my time, so that on this matter
 his speech was not obscure. 87
 The fair creature, garbed in white,
 came toward us. In his face there was what seemed
 the shimmering of the morning star. 90
 Opening his arms, he spread his wings
 and said: 'Come, the steps are here at hand.
 From here on up the climb is easy. 93
 'They are very few who answer to this bidding.
 O race of man, born to fly on high,
 why does a puff of wind cause you to fall?' 96
 He brought us where the rock was cleft,
 there tapped my forehead with his wings,
 then promised me that going on I would be safe. 99
 Just as, to climb the hillside where the church is set
 which, over Rubaconte, dominates
 the justly governed city, there on the right 102
 the sheer slope of the steep ascent is cut
 by stairs that were constructed in a time
 when registers and measures could be trusted, 105
 even so the bank that sharply falls away
 from the higher circle is made gentler, except
 that here and there the towering rock scrapes close. 108
 While we were moving off in that direction,
 '*Beati pauperes spiritu*' a voice was singing
 in tones that speech could not express. 111

Ah, how different these entrances from those of Hell,
 for here one's coming in is met with songs
 but there with savage lamentation! 114
 Now we were climbing on the hallowed stairs
 and I felt so much lighter than before,
 when the ground I trod was level, 117
 that I said: 'Master, tell me,
 what weight has been lifted from me
 that going on is hardly any effort?' 120
 He answered: 'When the P's that still remain
 upon your brow, though very faint, shall be,
 as one already is, erased, 123
 'your legs shall be so mastered by good will,
 not only will they feel no effort going up,
 but they will take delight in being urged to.' 126
 Then I did as those who go along,
 with something on their head, unknown to them,
 except the acts of others make them wonder, 129
 so that they reach up with their hand for answers.
 Touching and searching they accomplish
 the task that sight cannot achieve, 132
 and, spreading the fingers of my right hand,
 I found that, of the seven letters he of the keys
 had traced upon my forehead, only six remained. 135
 Observing this, my leader smiled. 136