

PURGATORIO

CANTO II

The sun was nearly joined to that horizon
where the meridian circle at its zenith
stands straight above Jerusalem, 3
and night, circling on the other side,
was rising from the Ganges with the Scales
she drops when she is longer than the day, 6
so that, where I was,
the white and rosy cheeks of fair Aurora
were turning golden with time's ripening. 9
As yet we tarried by the seashore, like those
who think about the way and in their hearts go on--
while still their bodies linger. 12
And now, as in the haze of morning,
Mars, low on the western stretch of ocean,
sheds reddish light through those thick vapors, 15
there appeared to me--may I see it again!--
a light advancing swiftly on the sea:
no flight can match its rapid motion. 18
And in the moment I had turned away
to ask a question of my leader,
I saw it now enlarged and brighter. 21
Then on either side of it appeared
a whiteness--I knew not what--and just below,
little by little, another showed there too. 24
Still my master did not say a word
while the first whiteness took the shape of wings.
Then, once he saw the nature of the steersman, 27
he cried: 'Bend, bend your knees! Behold
the angel of the Lord and fold your hands in prayer.
From now on you shall see such ministers. 30
'Look how he scorns all human instruments
and wants no oar, nor other sail
beside his wings, between such distant shores. 33

'Look how those wings are raised into the sky,
 fanning the air with his eternal pinions
 which do not change like mortal plumage.' 36

Then, as the heavenly bird approached,
 closer and closer, he appeared more radiant,
 so that my eyes could not sustain his splendor, 39
 and I looked down as he came shoreward
 with a boat so swift and light
 the water did not part to take it in. 42

At the stern stood the heavenly pilot--
 his mere description would bring to bliss.
 And more than a hundred souls were with him. 45

'In exitu Israël de Aegypto'
 they sang together with one voice,
 and went on, singing the entire psalm. 48

Then he blessed them with the sign of Holy Cross.
 They flung themselves upon the beach,
 and he went off as swiftly as he came. 51

The crowd that stayed there had the look
 of strangers to the place, gazing about
 as though encountering new things. 54

Having driven Capricorn from mid-heaven,
 the sun, darting his rays in all directions,
 brought on the day with his unfailing arrows 57
 when the new people raised their faces
 toward us, saying: 'If you know,
 show us the road that leads up to the mountain.' 60

And Virgil answered: 'Perhaps you think
 we are familiar with this place,
 but we are strangers like yourselves. 63

'We came but now, a little while before you,
 by another road so rough and harsh
 that now the climb to us will seem a pastime.' 66

The souls, who at my taking breath
 could see that I was still alive,
 turned pale with wonder, 69
 and as people crowd to hear the news
 around a messenger who bears an olive-branch,
 and no one minds the crush, 72

so all these fortunate souls
 kept their eyes fastened on my face,
 as though forgetful of the road to beauty. 75

I saw one of them come forward
 with such affection to embrace me
 that I was moved to do the same. 78

Oh empty shades, except in seeming!
 Three times I clasped my hands behind him
 only to find them clasped to my own chest. 81

Surprise must have been painted on my face,
 at which the shade smiled and drew back
 and I, pursuing him, moved forward. 84

Gently he requested that I stop.
 Then I knew him. And I asked him
 to stay a while and speak with me. 87

'Even as I loved you in my mortal flesh,' he said,
 'so do I love you freed from it--yes, I will stay.
 And you, what takes you on this journey?' 90

'O Casella, I make this voyage to return
 another time,' I said, 'here where I've come.
 But why did it cost you so much time to get here?' 93

To which he answered: 'No wrong is done me
 if he, who takes up whom it pleases him and when,
 has many times denied me passage, 96

'for righteous is the will that fashioned his.
 It is three months now that he has taken,
 acquiescent, all who would embark. 99

'And I, finally moving toward the shore
 where Tiber's waters take on salt,
 was kindly gathered in by him. 102

'To that estuary he now has set his wings,
 for there the souls collect
 that do not sink to Acheron.' 105

And I: 'If a new law does not take from you
 memory or practice of the songs of love
 that used to soothe my every sorrow, 108

'please let me hear one now to ease my soul,
 for it is out of breath and spent,
 joined to my body coming here.' 111

'Love that converses with me in my mind,'
 he then began, so sweetly
 that the sweetness sounds within me still. 114
 My master and I and all those standing
 near Casella seemed untroubled,
 as if we had no other care. 117
 We were spellbound, listening to his notes,
 when that venerable old man appeared and cried:
 'What is this, laggard spirits? 120
 'What carelessness, what delay is this?
 Hurry to the mountain and there shed the slough
 that lets not God be known to you.' 123
 As when doves, gathered at their feeding,
 pecking here and there at wheat or tares,
 without their usual display of pride-- 126
 should something suddenly make them afraid--
 will all at once forget their food
 because they are assailed by greater care, 129
 thus I saw these new arrivals, their song cut short,
 fleeing toward the mountain's slope
 like those who take an unfamiliar road. 132
 And we, with no less haste, departed. 133