

PURGATORIO

CANTO XXI

The natural thirst that never can be quenched
except with that water the Samaritan woman
begged to be given as a special grace 3
tormented me. And in haste I followed my leader
over bodies strewn along the way,
still grieved at their just punishment. 6
And lo, as Luke sets down for us that Christ,
just risen from the cave that was his sepulcher,
revealed himself to two He walked with on the road, 9
there appeared a shade who had come up behind us
while we, intent upon the crowd prone at our feet,
were not aware of him until he spoke 12
and said: 'O my brothers, may God grant you peace.'
We turned at once and Virgil answered him
with the gesture that befits this greeting 15
and then began: 'May the unerring court
that confines me in eternal exile
bring you in peace to the assembly of the blessed.' 18
'What?' the other asked--even as we hurried on--
'if you are shades whom God does not deem worthy,
who has led you up so far along His stairs?' 21
And my teacher said: 'If you look at the signs
that this man bears, traced by the angel,
you will know that he must reign among the good. 24
'Since she that spins both day and night
had not used up the flax that for each mortal
Clotho loads and winds upon the distaff, 27
'his soul, which is your sister--mine as well,
could not attempt the climb unaided
because it cannot see things quite as we do. 30
'I, for this reason, was drawn from Hell's wide jaws
to be his guide, and I shall guide him
as far as my own teaching will allow. 33

'But tell us, if you can, why did the mountain shake
so hard just now and why did it emit
such clamor, down to its wave-washed base.' 36

With this question he threaded the needle of my wish
with such precision that, with but a hope
for an answer, he made my thirst less parching. 39

The other offered this response:
'The mountain's holy law does not allow
anything disordered or that violates its rule. 42

'Here nothing ever changes.
Only by that which Heaven gathers from Itself,
and from nothing else, can any change be wrought, 45

'so that not rain nor hail nor snow
nor dew nor hoarfrost falls above
the gentle rise of those three steps below. 48

'Clouds, dense or broken, do not appear,
nor lightning-flash, nor Thaumás' daughter,
who appears in many places in the sky down there, 51

'nor does dry vapor rise beyond the highest
of those three steps of which I spoke,
where Peter's vicar sets his feet. 54

'Lower down, perhaps, it trembles more or less,
but from the wind concealed in earth
it has never, I know not why, trembled here above. 57

'Here it trembles when a soul feels it is pure,
ready to rise, to set out on its ascent,
and next there follows that great cry. 60

'Of its purity the will alone gives proof,
and the soul, wholly free to change its convent,
is taken by surprise and allows the will its way. 63

'It wills the same before, but holy Justice sets
the soul's desire against its will,
and, as once it longed to sin, it now seeks penance. 66

'And I, who have been prostrate in this pain
five hundred years and more, just now felt
my freed will seek a better threshold. 69

'That is why you felt the earth shake
and heard the pious spirits of this mountain
praise the Lord--may He soon raise them!' 72

Thus he spoke to us, and since it is true that
 the greater the thirst the more the drinking pleases,
 I cannot begin to tell the benefit to me. 75

And my wise leader said: 'Now I see the net
 that here ensnares you and how you are released,
 why the earth trembled and why you rejoiced. 78

'May it please you to tell me who you were
 and to let me understand from your own words
 why you have lain here for so many centuries.' 81

'In the time when worthy Titus,
 aided by the King most high, avenged the wounds
 from which had poured the blood that Judas sold, 84

'on earth I bore the name that most endures
 and honors most,' replied that spirit.
 'Fame I had found, but not yet faith. 87

'So sweet was my poetic recitation that Rome
 drew me from Toulouse and deemed me worthy
 to have my brows adorned with myrtle. 90

'My name is Staius. On earth men often speak it.
 I sang of Thebes and then of great Achilles,
 but fell along the way with the second burden. 93

'The sparks that kindled the fire in me
 came from the holy flame
 from which more than a thousand have been lit-- 96

'I mean the *Aeneid*. When I wrote poetry
 it was my *mamma* and my nurse.
 Without it, I would not have weighed a dram. 99

'To have lived on earth when Virgil lived
 I would have stayed one year's sun longer than I owed
 before I came forth from my exile.' 102

These words made Virgil turn to me
 with a look that, silent, said: 'Keep silent.'
 But the power that wills cannot do all it wills, 105

for laughter and tears so closely follow feelings
 from which they spring, they least can be controlled
 in those who are most truthful. 108

I only smiled, like one who gives a hint,
 at which the shade was silent, probing my eyes,
 where the soul's expression is most clearly fixed. 111

'So your great labor may end in good,'
he said, 'why did your face just now
give off the sudden glimmer of a smile?' 114

Now I am caught between one side and the other:
one bids me hold my tongue,
the other urges me to speak, 117

so that I sigh and my master understands.
'Don't be afraid to speak,' he says to me,
'yes, speak--tell him what he is so keen to know.' 120

And I begin: 'Perhaps you wonder,
ancient spirit, at my smiling,
but I would have a greater wonder seize you. 123

'This one who guides my eyes on high
is the very Virgil from whom you took the power
to sing of men and of the gods. 126

'If you believed another reason caused my smile,
dismiss that as untrue and understand
it was those words you spoke of him.' 129

Already he was stooping to embrace my teacher's feet,
but Virgil said: 'Brother, do not do so,
for you are a shade and you behold a shade.' 132

And the other, rising: 'Now you can understand
the measure of the love for you that warms me,
when I forget our emptiness 135

and treat our shades as bodied things.' 136