

PURGATORIO

CANTO XXV

It was the hour when the ascent did not permit delay,
for the sun had left the meridian to the Bull,
and night had left it to the Scorpion. 3

Therefore, like one who does not stop
but, pricked by the spur of need,
plods along his way no matter what, 6

we thrust into the gap, one before the other,
single file, up stairs so narrow
they separate those who climb them. 9

And as a baby stork may raise a wing,
longing to fly, but does not dare
to leave its nest and lowers it again, 12

such was I, my desire to question kindled
and then put out, moving my mouth
as does a man who sets himself to speak. 15

Despite our rapid pace, my gentle father said:
'Release the bent bow of your speech,
now stretched to the arrow's iron point.' 18

At that, with confidence I opened my mouth to ask:
'How can it be that one grows thin
here where there is no need for nourishment?' 21

'If you recall how Meleager was consumed
in the time it took to burn a log-end,' he said,
'this will not be difficult for you to understand. 24

'And if you consider how at your slightest motion
your image moves within the glass,
a concept that seems hard would then seem easy. 27

'But, to soothe you and to grant your wish,
here is Statius. I call on him, I beg him,
to be the healer of your wounds.' 30

'If I unfold the eternal plan before him
in your presence,' answered Statius,
'let my excuse be that I cannot refuse you.' 33

Then he began: 'Son, if your mind treasures
 and takes in my words,
 they will explain how what you ask may be. 36

'The perfect blood, which is never drunk
 by the thirsty veins and remains untouched,
 like the food one removes from the table, 39

'gathers in the heart and carries
 formative power to all members, like the blood
 that, flowing through, becomes a part of them. 42

'Again digested, it descends where silence
 is more fit than speech and from there later
 drops into the natural vessel on another's blood. 45

'There the one is mingled with the other,
 one fitted to be passive and the other active,
 owing to the perfect place from which it springs, 48

'and this one, so conjoined, begins to function,
 first coagulating, then quickening that which,
 as its future matter, it has already thickened. 51

'The active force, having now become a soul--
 like a plant's but differing in this: it is still
 on its way, while the plant has come to shore-- 54

'next functions, moving now and feeling,
 like a sea-sponge, and from that goes on, producing
 organs for the faculties of which it is the seed. 57

'Now unfurls, now spreads the force, my son,
 that comes straight from the heart of the begetter,
 there where nature makes provision for all members. 60

'But how from animal it turns to human
 you do not see as yet. This is the point
 at which a wiser man than you has stumbled 63

'in that his teaching rendered separate
 the possible intellect from the soul,
 because he could not find the organ it could live in. 66

'Open your heart to the truth that follows
 and know that, once the brain's articulation
 in the embryo arrives at its perfection, 69

'the First Mover turns to it, rejoicing
 in such handiwork of nature, and breathes
 into it a spirit, new and full of power, 72

'which then draws to its substance
all it there finds active and becomes a single soul
that lives, and feels, and reflects upon itself. 75

'And, that you may be less bewildered by my words,
consider the sun's heat, which, blended with the sap
pressed from the vine, turns into wine. 78

'When Lachesis runs short of thread, the soul
unfastens from the flesh, carrying with it
potential faculties, both human and divine. 81

'The lower faculties now inert,
memory, intellect, and the will remain
in action, and are far keener than before. 84

'Without pausing, the soul falls, miraculously,
of itself, to one or to the other shore.
There first it comes to know its road. 87

'As soon as space surrounds it there,
the formative force radiates upon it,
giving shape and measure as though to living members. 90

'And as the air, when it is full of rain,
is adorned with rainbow hues not of its making
but reflecting the brightness of another, 93

'so here the neighboring air is shaped
into that form the soul, which stays with it,
imprints upon it by its powers. 96

'And, like the flame that imitates its fire,
wherever that may shift and flicker,
its new form imitates the spirit. 99

'A shade we call it, since the insubstantial soul
is visible this way, which from the same air forms
organs for each sense, even that of sight. 102

'Through this we speak and through this smile.
Thus we shed tears and make the sighs
you may have heard here on the mountain. 105

'And, as we feel affections or desires,
the shade will change its form, and this
is the cause of that at which you marvel.' 108

But now we had come to the final circling
and, turning to the right,
we were attentive to another care. 111

There the bank discharges surging flames
 and, where the terrace ends, a blast of wind shoots up
 which makes the flames recoil and clear the edge, 114
 so that we had to pass along the open side,
 one by one, and here I feared the fire
 but also was afraid I'd fall below. 117
 My leader said: 'Along this path
 a tight rein must be kept upon the eyes,
 for here it would be easy to misstep.' 120
 '*Summae Deus clementiae*' I then heard sung
 in the heart of that great burning,
 which made me no less eager to turn back, 123
 and I saw spirits walking in the flames,
 so that I watched them and my footsteps,
 dividing my attention, now there, now here. 126
 After the hymn was sung through to its end
 they cried aloud: '*Virum non cognosco*,'
 then, in softer tones, began the hymn again. 129
 When it was finished, next they cried:
 'Diana kept to the woods and drove Callisto out
 for having felt the poisoned sting of Venus.' 132
 Then they again began to sing,
 calling on wives and husbands who were chaste,
 even as virtue and matrimony urge. 135
 And this way they go on, I think,
 for as long as the fire burns them.
 With such treatment and with just such diet 138
 must the last of all the wounds be healed. 139