

PURGATORIO

CANTO XXVIII

Eager to explore the sacred forest's boundaries
and its depth, now that its thick and verdant foliage
had softened the new day's glare before my eyes, 3
I left the bank without delay
and wandered oh so slowly through the countryside
that filled the air around with fragrance. 6
A steady gentle breeze,
no stronger than the softest wind,
caressed and fanned my brow. 9
It made the trembling boughs
bend eagerly toward the shade
the holy mountain casts at dawn, 12
yet they were not so much bent down
that small birds in the highest branches
were not still practicing their every craft, 15
meeting the morning breeze
with songs of joy among the leaves,
which rustled such accompaniment to their rhymes 18
as builds from branch to branch
throughout the pine wood at the shore of Classe
when Aeolus unleashes his Sirocco. 21
Already my slow steps had carried me
so deep into the ancient forest
I could not see where I had entered, 24
when I was stopped from going farther by a stream.
Its lapping waves were bending to the left
the grasses that sprang up along the bank. 27
All the streams that run the purest here on earth
would seem defiled beside that stream,
which reveals all that it contains, 30

even though it flows in darkness,
 dark beneath perpetual shade
 that never lets the sun or moon shine through. 33
 Though my feet stopped, my eyes passed on
 beyond the rivulet to contemplate
 the great variety of blooming boughs, 36
 and there appeared to me, as suddenly appears
 a thing so marvelous
 it drives away all other thoughts, 39
 a lady, who went her way alone, singing
 and picking flowers from among the blossoms
 that were painted all along her way. 42
 'Pray, fair lady, warming yourself in rays of love--
 if I am to believe the features
 that as a rule bear witness to the heart,' 45
 I said to her, 'may it please you
 to come closer to this stream,
 near enough that I may hear what you are singing. 48
 'You make me remember where and what
 Proserpina was, there when her mother
 lost her and she lost the spring.' 51
 As a lady turns in the dance
 keeping her feet together on the ground,
 and hardly puts one foot before the other, 54
 on the red and yellow flowers
 she turned in my direction,
 lowering her modest eyes, as does a virgin, 57
 and, attending to my plea, came closer
 so that the sound of her sweet song
 reached me together with its meaning. 60
 As soon as she was where the grass is merely
 moistened by the waters of the lovely stream,
 she granted me the gift of raising up her eyes. 63
 I do not think such radiant light blazed out
 beneath the lids of Venus when her son by chance,
 against his custom, pierced her with his arrow. 66
 Straightening up, she smiled from the other shore,
 arranging in her hands the many colors
 that grow, unplanted, on that high terrain. 69

The river kept us just three steps apart,
 yet the Hellespont where Xerxes crossed--
 a bridle still on human pride-- 72
 was not more hated by Leander for its tossing waves
 between Sestos and Abydos than I did hate
 that rivulet for not parting then. 75
 'You are new here,' she began, 'and,
 perhaps because I'm smiling in this place
 chosen for mankind as its nest, 78
 'you are perplexed and filled with wonder,
 but the psalm *Delectasti* offers light
 that may disperse the clouds within your minds. 81
 'And you who stand in front and who entreated me,
 say if you'd hear more, for I've come ready
 to give sufficient answer to your every question.' 84
 'The water and the sound of wind among the trees
 contradict what I was told and had accepted,'
 I said, 'about the nature of this place.' 87
 And she: 'I will explain that what you marvel at
 has its own special cause
 and thus disperse the fog assailing you. 90
 'Supreme Goodness, pleased in Itself alone,
 made man good and to do good only. This place
 He gave to him as token of eternal peace. 93
 'Through his own fault his sojourn here was brief.
 Through his own fault he changed lighthearted frolic
 and unblemished joy for toil and tears. 96
 'So that the turbulence below,
 created by the vapors rising both from land and sea
 toward the sun's heat as far as they can rise, 99
 'should do no harm to man,
 this mountain rose just high enough toward heaven
 to tower free of it above the bolted gate. 102
 'Now, since all the air revolves in a circuit
 with the first circling, unless
 its revolution is at some point blocked, 105
 'that movement strikes upon this summit,
 standing free in the living air, and makes
 the forest, because it is so dense, resound. 108

'The wind-lashed plants have such fecundity
that with their power they pollinate the air,
which after, in its circling, scatters seed abroad. 111

'Your earth below, according to its qualities
and climate, conceives and then brings forth
from various properties its various plants. 114

'If this were understood, it would not seem
so marvelous on earth each time a plant
takes root without its seedling being known. 117

'And you should know the holy ground
on which you stand is filled with every kind of seed
and gives forth fruit that is not plucked on earth. 120

'The water you see here does not spring from a vein
that is restored by vapor when condensed by cold,
like a river that gains and loses flow, 123

'but issues from a sure, unchanging source,
which by God's will regains as much
as it pours forth to either side. 126

'On this side it descends and has the power
to take from men the memory of sin.
On the other it restores that of good deeds. 129

'Here it is called Lethe and on the other side
Eünoè, but its water has no effect
until they both are tasted. 132

'The second surpasses every sweetness.
And even though your thirst might have been slaked
were I to reveal no more to you, 135

'I will offer a corollary as a further gift,
nor do I think my words will be less welcome
if they extend beyond the promise that I made. 138

'Those who in ancient times called up in verse
the age of gold and sang its happy state
dreamed on Parnassus of perhaps this very place. 141

'Here the root of humankind was innocent,
here it is always spring, with every fruit in season.
This is the nectar of which the ancients tell.' 144

I turned around then to my poets
and saw that they had listened
to her final utterance with a smile. 147

Then I turned back to the fair lady.

148