

PURGATORIO

CANTO XXIX

After she had finished speaking
like a lady touched by love she sang:
'Beati quorum tecta sunt peccata!' 3

And like the nymphs that wandered all alone
through shaded forests, one seeking to find,
another to escape, the sun, 6

she moved against the current's flow,
walking along the bank, while I on my side
tried to match her shorter steps with mine. 9

We had not taken a hundred steps between us
when the two banks curved as one around a bend
so that once more I was headed toward the east. 12

And we had not gone far in that direction
when the lady turned and faced me,
saying: 'My brother, look and listen.' 15

Suddenly a shining brightness
flared through all the forest
so that I thought it must be lightning. 18

But since lightning is gone even as it flashes
and that light, shining on, became more lustrous,
I asked myself: 'Now what is this?' 21

Through the luminous air there came a melody
so sweet that I was mastered by a worthy zeal
to reprimand the impudence of Eve: 24

there when earth and heaven were still obedient,
how she, a woman, alone and just then given shape,
could not resist, not stay beneath the veil. 27

Had she remained submissive there beneath it,
I should have tasted these ineffable delights
much sooner and a longer time. 30

While I walked on among so many first fruits,
this foretaste of eternal beauty, enchanted
though desiring joys still greater. 33

beneath the green boughs the air before us
 seemed to become a blazing fire
 and that sweet sound could now be heard as song. 36
 O sacred Virgins, if fasting, cold, or sleepless nights
 I've ever suffered for your sake,
 necessity drives me to call for my reward. 39
 Now let the springs of Helicon pour forth
 and let Urania help me with her choir
 to put in verse things hard for thought. 42
 A short way on, seven golden trees
 seemed to appear, an illusion caused
 by the space that separated them from us. 45
 But when I had come close enough,
 distance no longer could deceive the senses
 nor distort the common object's proper shape, 48
 and the faculty that readies reason for its matter
 knew them as candelabra, which indeed they were,
 and in the voices of the chant I heard 'Hosanna.' 51
 From above flared the glorious array,
 far brighter than the moon, bright
 at mid-month in a midnight sky. 54
 Full of wonder, I turned to my good Virgil
 and he answered with a look
 no less charged with amazement. 57
 Then I raised my face again to the high mysteries.
 They moved so slowly toward us
 even newly wedded brides would have outpaced them. 60
 The lady scolded: 'Why is your desire so set
 on the display of living lights
 that you have failed to note what comes behind them?' 63
 Then I saw people, clad in white, who followed,
 as though led by the lights, their garments
 of a whiteness never seen on earth. 66
 The water to my left was all aglow
 and like a shimmering glass gave back
 an image of my left side if I turned to look. 69
 When I was at a point on my edge of the bank,
 where only the river flowed between us.
 I paused to have a better view 72

and saw the flames advance,
 leaving behind them painted air
 as though they had been brushes in a painter's hand, 75
 so that above us blazed in streaks
 the seven bands in all the hues the sun
 takes for his bow and Delia for her girdle. 78
 These banners stretched beyond my sight.
 As near as I could judge,
 the outermost were set ten paces from each other. 81
 Beneath so fair a sky as I describe
 twenty-four elders, two by two,
 came crowned with lilies. 84
 All were singing: 'Blessèd are you
 among the daughters of Adam
 and blessèd is your loveliness forever!' 87
 When the flowers and the verdant grasses
 across the river on the other bank
 were left bare of those chosen people, 90
 as, in the heavens, light comes after light,
 four living creatures followed them,
 each crowned with green-leaved wreaths, 93
 and every one had six wings as his plumage,
 wings so full of eyes that the eyes of Argus,
 were they to come alive, would be just like them. 96
 To describe their forms, reader, I do not spend
 more rhymes, for other outlay so constrains me
 I cannot deal more lavishly in this. 99
 Go read Ezechiel who depicts them as he saw them,
 descending from the frigid zone
 in wind and cloud and fire. 102
 And just as you shall find them on his pages,
 such were they there--but for the wings,
 where John accords with me and not with him. 105
 These four marked off a space that held
 a two-wheeled chariot of triumph,
 drawn along behind a griffin's neck. 108
 The griffin lifted both its wings between
 the middle band of light and the two sets of three
 so that it did not cut through any band, 111

wings raised so high that they were lost to sight.
Its parts were golden where it was a bird,
and all the rest of it was white, with some vermilion. 114
Never did Rome give joy to Africanus,
nor indeed Augustus, with such a splendid car.
Compared to it, the sun's would seem but poor-- 117
the chariot of the sun, which, gone astray,
at the pious prayer of Earth
was quite consumed in Jove's mysterious justice. 120
Then came three ladies dancing in a round
near the right wheel, one so flaming red
she hardly would be noticed in a fire. 123
Another seemed as though her flesh and bones
were made of emerald, while the third
seemed white as is new-fallen snow. 126
Sometimes it seemed the white, and now the red,
led in the dance. And from the red one's song
the others took their movements, quick or slow. 129
Four other ladies, dressed in purple,
were dancing at the left, keeping to the cadence
the three-eyed one among them set. 132
Behind the group I have described
I made out two old men, unlike in their attire
but alike in bearing, honorable and grave. 135
One showed himself conjoined with those
who follow great Hippocrates,
whom nature shaped for creatures she loves most, 138
while the other showed a different disposition,
his sword so bright and sharp
that even from across the stream it made me fear. 141
Then I saw four, humble in their aspect,
and, after them, an old man came alone and walked
as though he slept, despite his keen expression. 144
All seven of these were dressed just like the group
that first appeared, except they lacked
garlands of lilies around their heads-- 147
theirs were of roses and other crimson flowers.
From just a little farther off one would have sworn
that they were all on fire above the eyebrows. 150

And when the chariot stood across the stream from me
a thunder-clap was heard and all that worthy throng,
as though forbidden to go farther, stopped 153
behind the banners that had come before them. 154