

# PURGATORIO

## CANTO IX

The concubine of old Tithonus,  
fresh from her doting lover's arms,  
was glowing white at the window of the east, 3  
her forehead glittering with gems  
set in the shape of that cold-blooded creature  
that strikes men with its tail. 6

Where we were, night had climbed  
two steps of her ascent and now the wings  
of the third were already drooping, 9  
when I, who had with me something of Adam,  
lay down, overcome by sleep, there on the grass  
where the five of us were seated. 12

At the hour near the verge of morning,  
when the swallow begins her plaintive song,  
remembering, perhaps, her woes of long ago, 15  
and when our mind, more pilgrim  
from the flesh and less caught up in thoughts,  
is more prophetic in its visions, 18  
in a dream I seemed to see an eagle,  
with golden feathers, hovering in the sky,  
his wings spread wide, ready to swoop. 21

And to me it seemed I was in the very place  
where Ganymede abandoned his own kind  
when he was carried up to the highest council. 24

And I pondered: --'Perhaps it is its habit  
to strike only here, disdainingly to pluck  
from elsewhere any in its talons.' 27

Then it seemed to me that after wheeling awhile  
it plunged down terrible as lightning,  
and carried me straight to the sphere of fire. 30

There it seemed that it and I were both aflame,  
and the imagined burning was so hot  
my sleep was broken and gave way. 33

Not otherwise Achilles started up,  
moving his startled eyes in a wide circle,  
not knowing where he was 36  
that time his mother carried him,  
sleeping in her arms, from Chiron to Scyros,  
where later the Greeks would take him away-- 39  
than I awoke, the sleep gone from my eyes,  
and then went pale,  
like a man frozen in his terror. 42  
At my side there was no one but my comfort,  
the sun more than two hours high.  
My face was turned toward the sea. 45  
'Do not be frightened,' said my lord,  
'have confidence, for all is well with us.  
Do not hold back, but rally all your strength. 48  
'Now you have come to Purgatory:  
there you see the rock wall that encloses it  
and, where that seems breached, the entrance. 51  
'A short time ago, in the early light of dawn,  
when your soul was asleep within you,  
on the flowers that adorn the place below 54  
'there came a lady who said: "I am Lucy.  
Let me gather up this sleeping man  
so I may speed him on his way." 57  
'Sordello stayed, as did the other noble souls,  
and she took you and, as soon as it was day,  
went up, and I then followed in her steps. 60  
'Here she set you down, but first her lovely eyes  
showed me that entrance, standing open.  
Then she and sleep, as one, departed.' 63  
Like a man who comes to see the truth  
when he has been in doubt and now is reassured,  
confidence replacing what in him was fear, 66  
so was I changed. When my leader saw  
that I was free of care, he started up the path,  
and I behind him, heading for the height. 69  
Reader, you surely understand that I am raising  
the level of my subject here. Do not wonder,  
therefore, if I sustain it with more artifice. 72

We drew closer until we reached a place  
where what at first had seemed a gap,  
a breach that rends a wall, 75  
I now saw was a gate, with three steps leading  
up to it, each one of a different color.  
The keeper of that gate as yet said not a word. 78  
And, when my eyes could make him out more clearly,  
I saw that he was seated above the topmost step,  
his face so bright I could not bear to look. 81  
In his hand he held a naked sword,  
which so reflected his bright rays  
I often had to turn my eager eyes away. 84  
'Say it from there, what do you want,'  
he began, 'and where is your escort?  
Beware lest your arrival cause you grief.' 87  
'A lady from Heaven, who knows about such things,'  
my master replied, 'said to us just now,  
"Go that way, that way lies the gate."' 90  
'And may she speed your steps to good,'  
continued the courteous keeper of the gate.  
'Come forward, then, to these our stairs.' 93  
At that we moved ahead. The first step  
was of clear white marble, so polished  
that my image was reflected in true likeness. 96  
The second was darker than the deepest purple,  
of unhewn stone, looking as if it had been burned,  
cracked through its length and breadth. 99  
The third, resting its heavy mass above,  
seemed to me porphyry, as flaming red  
as blood that spurts out from a vein. 102  
On this, seated on the threshold,  
which seemed to be of adamant,  
the angel of God rested both his feet. 105  
Up the three steps my leader drew me  
and I was glad for that. Then he said:  
'Humbly petition him to slide the bolt.' 108  
Devoutly I cast myself down at his holy feet.  
I begged him for mercy and to let me enter,  
but first, three times, I smote my breast. 111

With the point of his sword he traced seven P's  
 upon my forehead, then said: 'Once you are inside,  
 see that you wash away these wounds.' 114

Ashes or earth, when it is dug up dry,  
 would be the very color of his vestments.  
 Out from under them he drew two keys, 117  
 one of gold, the other one of silver.

He touched the door, first with the white,  
 then the yellow, and thus my wish was satisfied. 120

'Any time one of these keys should fail  
 so that it does not turn inside the lock,'  
 he said to us, 'this portal does not open. 123

'One is more precious, but the other one requires  
 much skill and understanding before it will unlock,  
 for it is this one that unties the knot. 126

'From Peter do I hold them, and his instruction was  
 to err in opening rather than in keeping locked,  
 if but the soul fall prostrate at my feet.' 129

Then he pushed one door of the sacred portal open,  
 saying: 'Enter, but I warn you  
 he who looks back must then return outside.' 132

And when the hinges of that sacred door,  
 which are of heavy and resounding metal,  
 were turning on their linchpins, 135  
 the Tarpeian rock roared not so loud  
 nor proved so strident when good Metellus  
 was drawn away and it was then left bare. 138

I turned, intent on a new sound,  
 and thought I heard '*Te Deum laudamus*'  
 in voices mingled with sweet counterpoint, 141  
 giving me the same impression  
 one has when listening to singers  
 accompanied by an organ and the words 144  
 are sometimes clear and sometimes lost. 145