

Paradise Canto 26

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[Christianity Index](#) [Divine Comedy Index](#) [Previous: Paradise Canto 25](#) [Next: Paradise Canto 27](#)

Canto XXVI

Argument

St. John examines our Poet touching Charity. Afterward Adam tells when he was created, and placed in the terrestrial Paradise; how long he remained in that state; what was the occasion of his fall; when he was admitted into Heaven; and what language he spake.

With dazzled eyes, whilst wondering I remain'd;
Forth of the beamy flame,[1] which dazzled me,
Issued a breath, that in attention mute
Detain'd me; and these words it spake: "'Twere well
That, long as till thy vision, on my form
O'erspent, regain its virtue, with discourse
Thou compensate the brief delay. Say then,
Beginning, to what point thy soul aspires:
And meanwhile rest assured, that sight in thee
Is but o'erpower'd a space, not wholly quench'd;
Since thy fair guide and lovely, in her look
Hath potency, the like to that, which dwelt
In Ananias' hand." [2] I answering thus:
"Be to mine eyes the remedy, or late
Or early, at her pleasure; for they were
The gates, at which she enter'd, and did light
Her never - dying fire. My wishes here
Are centred: in this palace is the weal,
That Alpha and Omega is, to all

[1: "The beamy flame." St. John.]

[2: "Ananias' hand." Who, by putting his hand on St. Paul, restored his sight. Acts, ix. 17.]

The lessons love can read me." Yet again
The voice, which had dispersed my fear when dazed
With that excess, to converse urged, and spake:
"Behoves thee sift more narrowly thy terms;
And say, who level'd at this scope thy bow."
"Philosophy," said I, "hath arguments,
And this place hath authority enough,
To imprint in me such love: for, of constraint,
Good, inasmuch as we perceive the good,

Kindles our love; and in degree the more,
As it comprises more of goodness in 't.
The essence then, where such advantage is,
That each good, found without it, is naught else
But of His light the beam, must needs attract
The soul of each one, loving, who the truth
Discerns, on which this proof is built. Such truth
Learn I from Him, who shows me the first love
Of all intelligential substances
Eternal: from His voice I learn, whose word
Is truth; that of Himself to Moses saith,
'I will make all My good before thee pass:'
Lastly, from thee I learn, who chief proclaim'st,
E'en at the outset^[3] of thy heralding,
In mortal ears the mystery of Heaven."

[3: "At the outset." John i. I, etc.]

"Through human wisdom, and the authority
Therewith agreeing," heard I answer'd, "keep
The choicest of thy love for God. But say,
If thou yet other cords within thee feel'st,
That draw thee towards Him; so that thou report
How many are the fangs, with which this love
Is grappled to thy soul." I did not miss,
To what intent the eagle of our Lord^[4]
Had pointed his demand; yea, noted well
The avowal which he led to; and resumed:
"All grappling bonds, that knit the heart to God,
Confederate to make fast our charity.
The being of the world; and mine own being;
The death which He endured, that I should live;
And that, which all the faithful hope, as I do;

[4: "The eagle of our Lord." St. John.]

To the foremention'd lively knowledge join'd;
Have from the sea of ill love saved my bark,
And on the coast secured it of the right.
As for the leaves,^[5] that in the garden bloom,
My love for them is great, as is the good
Dealt by the eternal hand, that tends them all."

[5: "The leaves." Created beings.]

I ended: and therewith a song most sweet
Rang through the spheres; and "Holy, holy, holy,"
Accordant with the rest, my lady sang.
And as a sleep is broken and dispersed
Through sharp encounter of the nimble light,

With the eye's spirit running forth to meet
The ray, from membrane on to membrane urged;
And the upstartled wight loathes that he sees;
So, at his sudden waking, he misdeems
Of all around him, till assurance waits
On better judgment: thus the saintly dame
Drove from before mine eyes the motes away,
With the resplendence of her own, that cast
Their brightness downward, thousand miles below.
Whence I my vision, clearer than before,
Recover'd; and well nigh astounded, ask'd
Of a fourth light, that now with us I saw.

And Beatrice: "The first living soul,[6]
That ever the first Virtue framed, admires
Within these rays his Maker." Like the leaf,
That bows its lithe top till the blast is blown;
By its own virtue rear'd, then stands aloof:
So I, the whilst she said, awe - stricken bow'd.
Then eagerness to speak embolden'd me;
And I began: "O fruit! that wast alone
Mature, when first engender'd; ancient father!
That doubly seest in every wedded bride
Thy daughter, by affinity and blood;
Devoutly as I may, I pray thee hold
Converse with me: my will thou seest: and I,
More speedily to hear thee, tell it not."

[6: "The first living soul." Adam.]

It chanceth oft some animal bewrays,
Through the sleek covering of his furry coat,

The fondness, that stirs in him, and conforms
His outside seeming to the cheer within:
And in like guise was Adam's spirit moved
To joyous mood, that through the covering shone,
Transparent, when to pleasure me it spake:
"No need thy will be told, which I untold
Better discern, than thou whatever thing
Thou hold'st most certain: for that will I see
In Him, who is truth's mirror; and Himself,
Parhelion unto all things, and naught else,
To Him. This wouldst thou hear: how long since, God
Placed me in that high garden, from whose bounds
She led thee up this ladder, steep and long;
What space endured my season of delight;
Whence truly sprang the wrath that banish'd me;
And what the language, which I spake and framed.

Not that I tasted of the tree, my son,
Was in itself the cause of that exile,
But only my transgressing of the mark
Assign'd me. There, whence^[7] at thy lady's hest
The Mantuan moved him, still was I debarr'd
This council, till the sun had made complete,
Four thousand and three hundred rounds and twice,
His annual journey; and, through every light
In his broad pathway, saw I him return,
Thousand save seventy times, the whilst I dwelt
Upon the earth. The language I did use
Was worn away, or ever Nimrod's race
Their unaccomplishable work began.
For naught, that man inclines to, e'er was lasting;
Left by his reason free, and variable
As is the sky that sways him. That he speaks,
Is nature's prompting: whether thus, or thus,
She leaves to you, as ye do most affect it.
Ere I descended into Hell's abyss,
Eli was the name on earth of the Chief Good,
Whose joy enfolds me: Eli then 'twas call'd.

[7: "Whence." That is, from Limbo. See Hell, Canto ii. 53. Adam says that 5,232 years elapsed from his creation to the time of his deliverance, which followed the death of Christ.]

And so beseemeth: for, in mortals, use
Is as the leaf upon the bough: that goes,
And other comes instead. Upon the mount
Most high above the waters, all my life,
Both innocent and guilty, did but reach
From the first hour, to that which cometh next
(As the sun changes quarter) to the sixth."