

Paradise Canto 27

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Canto XXVII

Argument

St. Peter bitterly rebukes the covetousness of his successors in the Apostolic See, while all the heavenly host sympathize in his indignation; they then vanish upward. Beatrice bids Dante again cast his view below. Afterward they are borne into the ninth heaven, of which she shows him the nature and properties; blaming the perverseness of man, who places his will on low and perishable things.

Then "Glory to the Father, to the Son,
And to the Holy Spirit," rang aloud
Throughout all Paradise; that with the song
My spirit reel'd, so passing sweet the strain.
And what I saw was equal ecstasy:
One universal smile it seem'd of all things;
Joy past compare; gladness unutterable;
Imperishable life of peace and love;
Exhaustless riches, and unmeasured bliss.

Before mine eyes stood the four torches^[1] lit:
And that,^[2] which first had come, began to wax
In brightness; and, in semblance, such became,
As Jove might be, if he and Mars were birds,
And interchanged their plumes. Silence ensued,
Through the blest quire; by Him, who here appoints
Vicissitude of ministry, enjoin'd;
When thus I heard: "Wonder not, if my hue
Be changed; for, while I speak, these shalt thou see
All in like manner change with me. My place
He^[3] who usurps on earth, (my place, ay, mine,
Which in the presence of the Son of God
Is void,) the same hath made my cemetery
A common sewer of puddle and of blood:

[1: "Four torches." St. Peter, St. James, St. John, and Adam.]

[2: "That." St. Peter, who looked as the planet Jupiter would, if it assumed the sanguine appearance of Mars.]

[3: "He." Boniface VIII.]

The more below his triumph, who from hence

Malignant fell." Such colour, as the sun,
At eve or morning, paints an adverse cloud,
Then saw I sprinkled over all the sky.
And as the unblemish'd dame, who, in herself
Secure of censure, yet at bare report
Of other's failing, shrinks with maiden fear;
So Beatrice, in her semblance, changed:
And such eclipse in Heaven, methinks, was seen,
When the Most Holy suffer'd. Then the words
Proceeded, with voice, alter'd from itself
So clean, the semblance did not alter more.
"Not to this end was Christ's spouse with my blood,
With that of Linus, and of Cletus,[4] fed;
That she might serve for purchase of base gold:
But for the purchase of this happy life,
Did Sextus, Pius, and Callixtus bleed,
And Urban:[5] they, whose doom was not without
Much weeping seal'd. No purpose was of ours,[6]
That on the right hand of our successors,
Part of the Christian people should be set,
And part upon their left; nor that the keys,
Which were vouchsafed me, should for ensign serve
Unto the banners, that do levy war
On the baptized; nor I, for sigil - mark,
Set upon sold and lying privileges:
Which makes me oft to bicker and turn red.
In shepherd's clothing, greedy wolves[7] below
Range wide o'er all the pastures. Arm of God!
Why longer sleep'st thou? Cahorsines and Gascons[8]
Prepare to quaff our blood. O good beginning!
To what a vile conclusion must thou stoop.
But the high Providence, which did defend,

[4: Bishops of Rome in the first century.]

[5: The former two, bishops of the same see, in the second; and the others, in the fourth century.]

[6: "We did not intend that our successors should take any part in the political divisions among Christians; or that my figure (the seal of St. Peter) should serve as a mark to authorize iniquitous grants and privileges."]

[7: "Wolves shall succeed to teachers, grievous wolves." - Milton, "Paradise Lost," b. xii 508.]

[8: He alludes to Jacques d'Ossa, a native of Cahors, pope, as John XXII, in 1316, after the chair had been two years vacant, and to Clement V, a Gascon.]

Through Scipio, the world's empery for Rome,

Will not delay its succour: and thou, son,
Who through thy mortal weight shalt yet again
Return below, open thy lips, nor hide
What is by me not hidden." As a flood
Of frozen vapours streams adown the air,
What time the she - goat[9] with her skiey horn
Touches the sun; so saw I there stream wide
The vapours, who with us had linger'd late,
And with glad triumph deck the ethereal cope.
Onward my sight their semblances pursued;
So far pursued, as till the space between
From its reach sever'd them: whereat the guide
Celestial, marking me no more intent
On upward gazing, said, "Look down, and see
What circuit thou hast compast." From the hour[10]
When I before had cast my view beneath,
All the first region overpast I saw,
Which from the midmost to the boundary winds;
That onward, thence, from Gades,[11] I beheld
The unwise passage of Laertes' son;
And hitherward the shore,[12] where thou Europa,
Madest thee a joyful burden; and yet more
Of this dim spot had seen, but that the sun,[13]
A constellation off and more, had ta'en
His progress in the zodiac underneath.

[9: When the sun is in Capricorn.]

[10: "From the hour." Since he had last looked (see Canto xxii) he perceived that he had passed from the meridian circle to the eastern horizon; the half of our hemisphere, and a quarter of the heaven.]

[11: See Hell, Canto xxvi. 106.]

[12: Phoenicia, where Europa, daughter of Agenor, mounted on the back of Jupiter, in his shape of a bull.]

[13: "The sun." Dante was in the constellation of Gemini, and the sun in Aries. There was, therefore, part of those two constellations, and the whole of Taurus, between them.]

Then by the spirit, that doth never leave
Its amorous dalliance with my lady's looks,
Back with redoubled ardour were mine eyes
Led unto her: and from her radiant smiles,
Whenas I turn'd me, pleasure so divine
Did lighten on me, that whatever bait
Or art or nature in the human flesh,
Or in its limn'd resemblance, can combine

Through greedy eyes to take the soul withal,
Were, to her beauty, nothing. Its boon influence
From the fair nest of Leda[14] rapt me forth,
And wafted on into the swiftest Heaven.

[14: "The fair nest of Leda." From the Gemini; thus called, because
Leda was the mother of the twins, Castor and Pollux.]

What place for entrance Beatrice chose,
I may not say; so uniform was all,
Liveliest and loftiest. She my secret wish
Divined; and, with such gladness, that God's love
Seem'd from her visage shining, thus began:
"Here is the goal, whence motion on his race
Starts: motionless the centre, and the rest
All moved around. Except the soul divine.
Place in this Heaven is none; the soul divine,
Wherein the love, which ruleth o'er its orb,
Is kindled, and the virtue, that it sheds:
One circle, light and love, enclasping it,
As this doth clasp the others; and to Him,
Who draws the bound, its limit only known.
Measured itself by none, it doth divide
Motion to all, counted unto them forth,
As by the fifth or half ye count forth ten.
The vase, wherein time's roots are plunged, thou seest:
Look elsewhere for the leaves. O mortal lust!
That canst not lift thy head above the waves
Which whelm and sink thee down. The will in man
Bears goodly blossoms; but its ruddy promise
Is, by the dripping of perpetual rain,
Made mere abortion: faith and innocence
Are met with but in babes; each taking leave,
Ere cheeks with down are sprinkled: he, that fasts
While yet a stammerer, with his tongue let loose
Gluts every food alike in every moon:
One, yet a babbler, loves and listens to
His mother; but no sooner hath free use
Of speech, than he doth wish her in her grave.
So suddenly doth the fair child of him,
Whose welcome is the morn and eve his parting,
To negro blackness change her virgin white.
"Thou, to abate thy wonder, note, that none
Bears rule in earth; and its frail family
Are therefore wanderers. Yet before the date,
When through the hundredth in his reckoning dropt,
Pale January must be shoved aside

From winter's calendar, these heavenly spheres
Shall roar so loud, that fortune shall be fain[15]
To turn the poop, where she hath now the prow;
So that the fleet run onward: and true fruit,
Expected long, shall crown at last the bloom."

[15: "Fortune shall be fain." The commentators in general suppose that our Poet here augurs that great reform which he vainly hoped would follow on the arrival of the Emperor Henry VII in Italy.]