

Paradise Canto 5

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Canto V

Argument

The question proposed in the last Canto is answered. Dante ascends with Beatrice to the planet Mercury, which is the second heaven; and here he finds a multitude of spirits, one of whom offers to satisfy him of anything he may desire to know from them.

"If beyond earthly wont,[1] the flame of love
Illume me, so that I o'ercome thy power
Of vision, marvel not: but learn the cause
In that perfection of the sight, which, soon
As apprehending, hasteneth on to reach
The good it apprehends. I well discern,
How in thine intellect already shines
The light eternal, which to view alone
Ne'er fails to kindle love; and if aught else
Your love seduces, 'tis but that it shows
Some ill - mark'd vestige of that primal beam.

[1: "If beyond earthly wont." Dante having been unable to sustain the splendor of Beatrice, as we have seen at the end of the last Canto, she tells him to attribute her increase of brightness to the place in which they were.]

"This wouldst thou know: if failure of the vow
By other service may be so supplied,
As from self - question to assure the soul."

Thus she her words, not heedless of my wish,
Began; and thus, as one who breaks not off

Discourse, continued in her saintly strain.

"Supreme of gifts,[2] which God, creating, gave
Of His free bounty, sign most evident
Of goodness, and in His account most prized
Was liberty of will; the boon, wherewith
All intellectual creatures, and them sole,
He hath endow'd. Hence now thou mayst infer
Of what high worth the vow, which so is framed
That when man offers, God well - pleased accepts:
For in the compact between God and him,
This treasure, such as I describe it to thee,
He makes the victim; and of his own act.

What compensation therefore may he find?
If that, whereof thou hast oblation made,
By using well thou think'st to consecrate,
Thou wouldst of theft do charitable deed.
Thus I resolve thee of the greater point.

[2: "Supreme of gifts." So in the "De Monarchia," lib. i. pp. 107 and 108. "If then the judgment altogether move the appetite, and is in no wise prevented by it, it is free. But if the judgment be moved by the appetite in any way preventing it, it cannot be free: because it acts not of itself, but is led captive by another. And hence it is that brutes cannot have free judgment, because their judgments are always prevented by appetite. And hence it may also appear manifest that intellectual substances, whose wills are immutable, and likewise souls separated from the body, and departing from it well and holily, lose not the liberty of choice on account of the immutability of the will, but retain it most perfectly and powerfully. This being discerned, it is again plain that this liberty, or principle of all our liberty, is the greatest good conferred on human nature by God; because by this very thing we are here made happy, as men; by this we are elsewhere happy, as divine beings."]

"But forasmuch as holy Church, herein
Dispensing, seems to contradict the truth
I have discover'd to thee, yet behoves
Thou rest a little longer at the board,
Ere the crude aliment which thou hast ta'en,
Digested fitly, to nutrition turn.
Open thy mind to what I now unfold;
And give it inward keeping. Knowledge comes
Of learning well retain'd, unfruitful else.

"This sacrifice, in essence, of two things
Consisteth: one is that, whereof 'tis made;
The covenant, the other[3]. For the last,

[3: The one, the substance of the vow, as of a single life, or of keeping fast; the other, the compact.]

It ne'er is cancel'd, if not kept: and hence
I spake, erewhile, so strictly of its force.
For this it was enjoin'd the Israelites[4], [change
Though leave were given them, as thou know'st, to
The offering, still to offer. The other part,
The matter and the substance of the vow,
May well be such, as that, without offence,
It may for other substance be exchanged.
But, at his own discretion, none may shift
The burden on his shoulders; unreleased
By either key,[5] the yellow and the white.

Nor deem of any change, as less than vain,
If the last bond[6] be not within the new
Included, as the quatre in the six.
No satisfaction therefore can be paid
For what so precious in the balance weighs,
That all in counterpoise must kick the beam.
Take then no vow at random: ta'en, with faith
Preserve it; yet not bent, as Jephthah once,
Blindly to execute a rash resolve,
Whom better it had suited to exclaim,
'I have done ill,' than to redeem his pledge
By doing worse: or, not unlike to him
In folly, that great leader of the Greeks;
Whence, on the altar, Iphigenia mourn'd
Her virgin beauty, and hath since made mourn
Both wise and simple, even all, who hear
Of so fell sacrifice. Be ye more staid,
O Christians! not, like feather, by each wind
Removable; nor think to cleanse yourselves
In every water. Either testament,
The old and new, is yours: and for your guide,
The shepherd of the Church. Let this suffice
To save you. When by evil lust enticed,
Remember ye be men, not senseless beasts;
Nor let the Jew, who dwelleth in your streets,
Hold you in mockery. Be not, as the lamb,
That, fickle wanton, leaves its mother's milk,

[4: See Lev. c. xii. and xxvii.]

[5: Purgatory, Canto ix. 108.]

[6: If the thing substituted be not more precious than the thing released.]

To dally with itself in idle play."

Such were the words that Beatrice spake:
These ended, to that region, where the world
Is liveliest, full of fond desire she turn'd.

Though mainly prompt new question to propose,
Her silence and changed look did keep me dumb.
And as the arrow, ere the cord is still,
Leapeth unto its mark; so on we sped
Into the second realm. There I beheld
The dame, so joyous, enter, that the orb
Grew brighter at her smiles; and, if the star
Were moved to gladness, what then was my cheer,
Whom nature hath made apt for every change!

As in a quiet and clear lake the fish,
If aught approach them from without, do draw
Toward it, deeming it their food; so drew
Full more than thousand splendours toward us;
And in each one was heard: "Lo! one arrived
To multiply our loves!" and as each came,
The shadow, streaming forth effulgence new,
Witness'd augmented joy. Here, Reader! think,
If thou didst miss the sequel of my tale,
To know the rest how sorely thou wouldst crave;
And thou shalt see what vehement desire
Possess'd me, soon as these had met my view,
To know their state. "O born in happy hour!
Thou, to whom grace vouchsafes, or e'er thy close
Of fleshly warfare, to behold the thrones
Of that eternal triumph; know, to us
The light communicated, which through Heaven
Expatriates without bound. Therefore, if aught
Thou of our beams wouldst borrow for thine aid,
Spare not; and, of our radiance, take thy fill."

Thus of those piteous spirits one bespake me;
And Beatrice next: "Say on; and trust
As unto gods." - "How in the light supreme
Thou harbour'st, and from thence the virtue bring'st,
That, sparkling in thine eyes, denotes thy joy,
I mark; but, who thou art, am still to seek;
Or wherefore, worthy spirit! for thy lot
This sphere^[7] assign'd, that oft from mortal ken
Is veil'd by other's beams." I said; and turn'd
Toward the lustre, that with greeting kind
Erewhile had hail'd me. Forthwith, brighter far
Than erst, it wax'd: and, as himself the sun
Hides through excess of light, when his warm gaze^[8]
Hath on the mantle of thick vapours prey'd;
Within its proper ray the saintly shape
Was, through increase of gladness, thus conceal'd;
And, shrouded so in splendour, answer'd me,
E'en as the tenour of my song declares.

[7: "This sphere." The planet Mercury, which being nearest to the sun, is oftenest hidden by that luminary.]

[8: "When his warm gaze." When the sun has dried up the vapors that shaded his brightness.]