

Paradise Canto 6

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Canto VI

Argument

The spirit, who had offered to satisfy the inquiries of Dante, declares himself to be the Emperor Justinian; and after speaking of his own actions, recounts the victories, before him, obtained under the Roman Eagle. He then informs our Poet that the soul of Romeo the pilgrim is in the same star.

"After that Constantine the eagle turn'd[1]
Against the motions of the Heaven, that roll'd
Consenting with its course, when he of yore,
Lavinia's spouse, was leader of the flight;
A hundred years twice told and more,[2] his seat
At Europe's extreme point,[3] the bird of Jove
Held, near the mountains, whence he issued first;
There under shadow of his sacred plumes
Swaying the world, till through successive hands
To mine he came devolved. Caesar I was
And am Justinian; destined by the will
Of that prime love, whose influence I feel,

[1: Constantine, in transferring the seat of empire from Rome to Byzantium, carried the eagle, the imperial ensign, from the west to the east. Aeneas, on the contrary, had, with better augury, moved along with the sun's course, when he passed from Troy to Italy.]

[2: "A hundred years twice told and more." The Emperor Constantine entered Byzantium in 324; and Justinian began his reign in 527.]

[3: "At Europe's extreme point." Constantine being situated at the extreme of Europe, and on the borders of Asia, near those mountains in the neighborhood of Troy, from whence the first founders of Rome had emigrated.]

From vain excess to clear the incumber'd laws.[4]
Or e'er that work engaged me, I did hold
In Christ one nature only;[5] with such faith
Contented. But the blessed Agapete,[6]
Who was chief shepherd, he with warning voice
To the true faith recall'd me. I believed
His words: and what he taught, now plainly see,
As thou in every contradiction seest
The true and false opposed. Soon as my feet
Were to the Church reclaim'd, to my great task,

By inspiration of God's grace impell'd,
I gave me wholly; and consign'd mine arms
To Belisarius, with whom Heaven's right hand
Was link'd in such conjointment, 'twas a sign
That I should rest. To thy first question thus
I shape mine answer, which were ended here,
But that its tendency doth prompt perforce
To some addition; that thou well mayst mark,
What reason on each side they have to plead,
By whom that holiest banner is withstood,
Both who pretend its power[7] and who oppose.[8]

[4: The code of laws was abridged and reformed by Justinian.]

[5: Justinian is said to have been a follower of heretical opinions held by Eutyches, "who taught that in Christ there was but one nature, viz., that of the incarnate Word." Maclaine's Mosheim.]

[6: "Agapete." "Agapetus, Bishop of Rome, whose Scheda Regia, addressed to the Emperor Justinian, procured him a place among the wisest and most judicious writers of this country." Ibid.]

[7: The Ghibellines.]

[8: The Guelfs.]

"Beginning from that hour, when Pallas died
To give it rule, behold the valorous deeds
Have made it worthy reverence. Not unknown
To thee, how for three hundred years and more
It dwelt in Alba, up to those fell lists
Where, for its sake, were met the rival three:[9]
Nor aught unknown to thee, which it achieved
Down[10] from the Sabines' wrong to Lucrece' woe,
With its seven kings conquering the nations round;
Nor all it wrought, by Roman worthies borne
'Gainst Brennus and the Epirot prince,[11] and hosts
Of single chiefs, or states in league combined

[9: The Horatii and Curiatii.]

[10: "From the rape of the Sabine women to the violation of Lucretia."]

[11: King Pyrrhus.]

Of social warfare: hence, Torquatus stern,
And Quintius[12] named of his neglected locks,
The Decii, and the Fabii hence acquired
Their fame, which I with duteous zeal embalm.
By it the pride of Arab hordes[13] was quell'd,
When they, led on by Hannibal, o'erpass'd

The Alpine rocks, whence glide thy currents, Po!
Beneath its guidance, in their prime of days
Scipio and Pompey triumph'd; and that hill[14]
Under whose summit[15] thou didst see the light,
Rued its stern bearing. After, near the hour,[16]
When Heaven was minded that o'er all the world
His own deep calm should brood, to Caesar's hand
Did Rome consign it; and what then it wrought[17]
From Var unto the Rhine, saw Isere's flood,
Saw Loire and Seine, and every vale, that fills
The torrent Rhone. What after that it wrought,
When from Ravenna it came forth, and leap'd
The Rubicon, was of so bold a flight,
That tongue nor pen may follow it. Toward Spain
It wheel'd its bands, then toward Dyrrachium smote,
And on Pharsalia, with so fierce a plunge,
E'en the warm Nile was conscious to the pang;
Its native shores Antandros, and the streams
Of Simois revisited, and there
Where Hector lies; then ill for Ptolemy
His pennons shook again; lightening thence fell
On Juba, and the next, upon your west,
At sound of the Pompeian trump, return'd.

[12: Quintius Cincinnatus.]

[13: The Arabians seem to be put for the barbarians in general.]

[14: "That hill." The city of Fiesole, which was sacked by the Romans after the defeat of Catiline.]

[15: "Under whose summit." "At the foot of which is situated Florence, thy birth - place."]

[16: "Near the hour." Of our Saviour's birth.]

[17: "What then it wrought." In the following fifteen lines the Poet has comprised the exploits of Julius Caesar, for which, and for the allusions in the greater part of this speech of Justinian's, I must refer my reader to the history of Rome.]

"What following, and in its next bearer's gripe,[18]
It wrought, is now by Cassius and Brutus
Bark'd of in Hell; and by Perugia's sons,
And Modena's, was mourn'd. Hence weepeth still

[18: With Augustus Caesar.]

Sad Cleopatra, who pursued by it,
Took from the adder black and sudden death.
With him it ran e'en to the Red Sea coast;

With him composed the world to such a peace,
That of his temple Janus barr'd the door.

"But all the mighty standard yet had wrought,
And was appointed to perform thereafter,
Throughout the mortal kingdom which it sway'd,
Falls in appearance dwindled and obscured,
If one with steady eye and perfect thought
On the third Caesar[19] look; for to his hands,
The living Justice, in whose breath I move,
Committed glory, e'en into his hands,
To execute the vengeance of its wrath.

[19: "The third Caesar." The eagle in the hand of Tiberius, the third of the Caesars, outdid all its achievements, both past and future, by becoming the instrument of that mighty and mysterious act of satisfaction made to the divine justice in the crucifixion of our Lord.]

"Hear now, and wonder at, what next I tell.
After with Titus it was sent to wreak
Vengeance for vengeance of the ancient sin.
And, when the Lombard tooth, with fang impure,
Did gore the bosom of the holy Church,
Under its wings, victorious Charlemain[20]
Sped to her rescue. Judge then for thyself
Of those, whom I erewhile accused to thee,
What they are, and how grievous their offending,
Who are the cause of all your ills. The one[21]
Against the universal ensign rears
The yellow lilies;[22] and with partial aim,
That, to himself, the other[23] arrogates:
So that 'tis hard to see who most offends.
Be yours, ye Ghibellines, to veil your hearts
Beneath another standard: ill is this
Follow'd of him, who severs it and justice:
And let not with his Guelfs the new - crown'd Charles

[20: "Charlemain." Dante could not be ignorant that the reign of Justinian was long prior to that of Charlemagne; but the spirit of the former emperor is represented, both in this instance and in what follows, as conscious of the events that had taken place after his own time.]

[21: "The one." The Guelf party.]

[22: The French ensign.]

[23: The Ghibelline party.]

Assail it;[24] but those talons hold in dread,
Which from a lion of more lofty port
Have rent the casing. Many a time ere now

The sons have for the sire's transgression wail'd:
Nor let him trust the fond belief, that Heaven
Will truck its armour for his liliated shield.

[24: "Charles." The commentators explain this to mean Charles II, King of Naples and Sicily. Is it not more likely to allude to Charles of Valois, son of Philip III of France, who was sent for, about this time, into Italy by Pope Boniface, with the promise of being made Emperor? See G. Villani, lib. viii. cap. xlii.]

"This little star is furnish'd with good spirits,
Whose mortal lives were busied to that end,
That honour and renown might wait on them:
And, when desires[25] thus err in their intention,
True love must needs ascend with slacker beam.
But it is part of our delight, to measure
Our wages with the merit; and admire
The close proportion. Hence doth heavenly justice
Temper so evenly affection in us,
It ne'er can warp to any wrongfulness.
Of diverse voices is sweet music made:
So in our life the different degrees
Render sweet harmony among these wheels.

[25: When honour and fame are the chief motives to action, the love for Heaven must become less fervent.]

"Within the pearl, that now encloseth us,
Shines Romeo's light,[26] whose goodly deed and fair
Met ill acceptance. But the Provincals,
That were his foes, have little cause for mirth.
Ill shapes that man his course, who makes his wrong
Of other's worth. Four daughters[27] were there born
To Raymond Berenger; and every one
Became a queen: and this for him did Romeo,
Though of mean state and from a foreign land.

[26: After he had long been faithful steward to Raymond Berenger, Count of Provence, and last of the house of Barcelona, who died 1245, when an account was required from him of the revenues which his master had lavishly disbursed, he demanded the little mule, the staff, and the scrip, with which he had first entered into the Count's service, a stranger pilgrim from the shrine of St. James, in Galicia, and parted as he came.]

[27: Of the four daughters of Raymond, Margaret, the eldest, was married to Louis IX of France; Eleanor to Henry III of England; Sancha to Richard, Henry's brother, and King of the Romans; and the youngest, Beatrix, to Charles I, King of Naples and Sicily, and brother to Louis.]

Yet envious tongues incited him to ask

A reckoning of that just one, who return'd
Twelve fold to him for ten. Aged and poor
He parted thence: and if the world did know
The heart he had, begging his life by morsels,
'Twould deem the praise, it yields him, scantly dealt."

— Paradise Canto 6