

Purgatory Canto 7

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Canto VII

Argument

The approach of night hindering further ascent, Sordello conducts our Poet apart to an eminence, from whence they behold a pleasant recess, in form of a flowery valley, scooped out of the mountain; where are many famous spirits, and among them the Emperor Rodolph, Ottocar, King of Bohemia, Philip III of France, Henry of Navarre, Peter III of Arragon, Charles I of Naples, Henry III of England, and William, Marquis of Montferrat.

After their courteous greetings joyfully
Seven times exchanged, Sordello backward drew
Exclaiming, "Who are ye?" - "Before this amount
By spirits worthy of ascent to God
Was sought, my bones had by Octavius' care
Been buried. I am Virgil; for no sin
Deprived of Heaven, except for lack of faith."
So answer'd him in few my gentle guide.

As one, who aught before him suddenly
Beholding, whence his wonder riseth, cries,
"It is, yet is not," wavering in belief;
Such he appear'd; then downward bent his eyes,
And, drawing near with reverential step,
Caught him, where one of mean estate might clasp
His lord. "Glory of Latium!" he exclaim'd,
"In whom our tongue its utmost power display'd;
Boast of my honor'd birth - place! what desert
Of mine, what favour, rather, undeserved,
Shows thee to me? If I to hear that voice
Am worthy, say if from below thou comest,
And from what cloister's pale." - "Through every orb
Of that sad region," he replied, "thus far
Am I arrived, by heavenly influence led:
And with such aid I come. Not for my doing,
But for not doing, have I lost the sight
Of that high Sun, whom thou desirest, and who
By me too late was known. There is a place[1]
There underneath, not made by torments sad,
But by dun shades alone; where mourning's voice
Sounds not of anguish sharp, but breathes in sighs.

There I with little innocents abide,
Who by death's fangs were bitten, ere exempt
From human taint. There I with those abide,
Who the three holy virtues[2] put not on,
But understood the rest,[3] and without blame
Follow'd them all
But, if thou know'st, and canst,
Direct us how we soonest may arrive,
Where Purgatory its true beginning takes."

[1: Limbo. See Hell, Canto iv. 24.]

[2: Faith, Hope, and Charity.]

[3: "The rest." Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance.]

He answer'd thus: "We have no certain place
Assign'd us: upward I may go, or round.
Far as I can, I join thee for thy guide.
But thou beholdest now how day declines;
And upward to proceed by night, our power
Excels: therefore it may be well to choose
A place of pleasant sojourn. To the right
Some spirits sit apart retired. If thou
Consentest, I to these will lead thy steps:
And thou wilt know th
m, not without delight,"

"How chances this?" was answer'd: "whoso wish'd
To ascend by night, would he be thence debarr'd
By other, or through his own weakness fail?"

The good Sordello then, along the ground
Trailing his finger, spoke: "Only this line
Thou shalt not overpass, soon as the sun
Hath disappear'd; not that aught else impedes
Thy going upward, save the shades of night.
These, with the want of power, perplex the will.

With them thou haply mightst return beneath,
Or to and fro around the mountain's side
Wander, while day is in the horizon shut."

My master straight, as wondering at his speech,
Exclaim'd: "Then lead us quickly, where thou sayst
That, while we stay, we may enjoy delight."

A little space we were removed from thence,
When I perceived the mountain hollow'd out,
Even as large valleys hollow'd out on earth.

"That way," the escorting spirit cried, "we go,

Where in a bosom the high bank recedes:
And thou await renewal of the day."

Betwixt the steep and plain, a crooked path
Led us traverse into the ridge's side,
Where more than half the sloping edge expires.
Refulgent gold, and silver thrice refined,
And scarlet grain and ceruse, Indian wood
Of lucid dye serene, fresh emeralds
But newly broken, by the herbs and flowers
Placed in that fair recess, in color all
Had been surpass'd, as great surpasses less.
Nor nature only there lavish'd her hues,
But of the sweetness of a thousand smells
A rare and undistinguish'd fragrance made.

"Salve Regina,"[4] on the grass and flowers,
Here chanting, I beheld those spirits sit,
Who not beyond the valley could be seen.

[4: "Salve Regina." The beginning of a prayer to the Virgin.]

"Before the westering sun sink to his bed,"
Began the Mantuan, who our steps had turn'd,
"Mid those, desire not that I lead ye on.
For from this eminence ye shall discern
Better the acts and visages of all,
Than, in the nether vale, among them mix'd.
He, who sits high above the rest, and seems
To have neglected that he should have done,
And to the others' song moves not his lip,
The Emperor Rodolph call, who might have heal'd
The wounds whereof fair Italy hath died,

So that by others she revives but slowly.
He, who with kindly visage comforts him,
Sway'd in that country,[5] where the water springs,
That Moldaw's river to the Elbe, and Elbe
Rolls to the ocean: Ottocar[6] his name:
Who in his swaddling - clothes was of more worth
Than Wenceslaus his son, a bearded man,
Pamper'd with rank luxuriousness and ease.
And that one with the nose deprest,[7] who close
In counsel seems with him of gentle look,[8]
Flying expired, withering the lily's flower.
Look there, how he doth knock against his breast.
The other ye behold, who for his cheek
Makes of one hand a couch, with frequent sighs.
They are the father and the father - in - law

Of Gallia's bane:[9] his vicious life they know
And foul; thence comes the grief that rends them thus.

[5: "That country." Bohemia.]

[6: "Ottocar." King of Bohemia, who was killed in the battle of Marchfield, fought with Rodolph, August 26, 1278. Wenceslaus II, his son, who succeeded him in the Kingdom of Bohemia, died in 1305. The latter is again taxed with luxury in the Paradise, xix. 123.]

[7: "That one with the nose deprest." Philip III, of France, father of Philip IV. He died in 1285, at Perpignan, in his retreat from Arragon.]

[8: "Him of gentle look." Henry of Navarre, father of Jane, married to Philip IV, of France, whom Dante calls "mal di Francia." - "Gallia's bane."]

[9: "Gallia's bane." G. Villani, lib. vii. cap. cxlvi, speaks with equal resentment of Philip IV. "In 1291, on the night of the calends of May, Philip le Bel, King of France, by advice of Biccio and Musciatto Franzesi, ordered all the Italians, who were in his country and realm, to be seized, under pretence of seizing the money - lenders, but thus he caused the good merchants also to be seized and ransomed; for which he was much blamed and held in great abhorrence. And from thenceforth the realm of France fell evermore into degradation and decline. And it is observable that between the taking of Acre and this seizure in France, the merchants of Florence received great damage and ruin of their property."]

"He, so robust of limb,[10] who measure keeps
In song with him of feature prominent,[11]
With every virtue bore his girdle braced.

[10: "He, so robust of limb." Peter III, called the Great, King of Arragon, who died in 1285, leaving four sons, Alonzo, James, Frederick, and Peter. The two former succeeded him in the Kingdom of Arragon, and Frederick in that of Sicily.]

[11: "Him of feature prominent." "Dal maschio naso" - "with the masculine nose." Charles I, King of Naples, Count of Anjou, and brother of St. Louis. He died in 1284. The annalist of Florence remarks that "there had been no sovereign of the house of France, since the time of Charlemagne, by whom Charles was surpassed either in military renown and prowess, or in the loftiness of his understanding."]

And if that stripling,[12] who behind sits,
King after him had lived, his virtue then
From vessel to like vessel had been pour'd;
Which may not of the other heirs be said.
By James and Frederick his realms are held;
Neither the better heritage obtains.
Rarely into the branches of the tree

Doth human worth mount up: and so ordains
He who bestows it, that as His free gift
It may be call'd. To Charles[13] my words apply
No less than to his brother in song;
Which Pouille and Provence now with grief confess.
So much that plant degenerates from its seed,
As, more than Beatrix and Margaret,
Costanza,[14] still boasts of her valorous spouse.

[12: "That stripling." Either (as the old commentators suppose) Alonzo III, King of Arragon, the eldest son of Peter III, who died in 1291, at the age of 27; or, according to Venturi, Peter, the youngest son. The former was a young prince of virtue sufficient to have justified the eulogium and the hopes of Dante.]

[13: "To Charles." "Al Nausto" - Charles II, King of Naples, is no less inferior to his father, Charles I, than James and Frederick to theirs, Peter III.]

[14: "Costanza." Widow of Peter III. She has been already mentioned in the third Canto, v. 112. By Beatrix and Margaret are probably meant two of the daughters of Raymond Berenger, Count of Provence; the latter married to St. Louis of France, the former to his brother Charles of Anjou, King of Naples. See Paradise, Canto vi. 135. Dante therefore considers Peter as the most illustrious of the three monarchs.]

"Behold the King of simple life and plain,
Harry of England,[15] sitting there alone:
He through his branches better issue[16] spreads.

[15: "Harry of England." Henry III. The contemporary annalist speaks of this king in similar terms. G. Villani, lib. v. cap. iv. "From Richard was born Henry, who reigned after him, who was a plain man of good faith, but of little courage."]

[16: "Better issue." Edward I, of whose glory our Poet was perhaps a witness, in his visit to England. "From the said Henry was born the good King Edward, who reigns in our times, who has done great things, whereof we shall make mention in due place." - G. Villani, *ibid.*]

"That one, who, on the ground, beneath the rest,
Sits lowest, yet his gaze directs aloft,
Is William, that brave Marquis,[17] for whose cause,
The deed of Alexandria and his war
Makes Montferrat and Canavese weep."

[17: "William, that brave Marquis." William, Marquis of Montferrat, was treacherously seized by his own subjects, at Alessandria in Lombardy, A. D. 1290, and ended his life in prison. A war ensued between the people of Alessandria and those of Montferrat and the Canavese, now part of Piedmont.]

