

Paradise Canto 23

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Canto XXIII

Argument

He sees Christ triumphing with his Church. The Saviour ascends followed by his Virgin Mother. The others remain with St. Peter.

E'en as the bird, who midst the leafy bower
Has, in her nest, sat darkling through the night,
With her sweet brood; impatient to descry
Their wished looks, and to bring home their food,
In the fond quest unconscious of her toil:
She, of the time prevenient, on the spray,
That overhangs their couch, with wakeful gaze
Expects the sun; nor ever, till the dawn,
Removeth from the east her eager ken:
So stood the dame erect, and bent her glance
Wistfully on that region,[1] where the sun
Abateth most his speed; that, seeing her
Suspense and wondering, I became as one,
In whom desire is waken'd, and the hope
Of somewhat new to come fills with delight.

[1: "That region." Toward the south, where the course of the sun appears less rapid, than when he is in the east or the west.]

Short space ensued; I was not held, I say,
Long in expectance, when I saw the Heaven
Wax more and more resplendent; and, "Behold,"
Cried Beatrice, "the triumphal hosts
Of Christ, and all the harvest gather'd in,
Made ripe by these revolving spheres." Meseem'd,
That, while she spake, her image all did burn;
And in her eyes such fulness was of joy,
As I am fain to pass unconstrued by.

As in the calm full moon, when Trivia[2] smiles,
In peerless beauty, 'mid the eternal nymphs,[3]
That paint through all its gulfs the blue profound;
In bright pre - eminence so saw I there
O'er million lamps a Sun, from whom all drew
Their radiance, as from ours the starry train:
And, through the living light, so lustrous glow'd

The substance, that my ken endured it not.

[2: "Trivia." A name of Diana.]

[3: "The eternal nymphs." The stars. Those starry nymphs which dance about the pole. Drummond Sonnet.]

O Beatrice! sweet and precious guide,
Who cheer'd me with her comfortable words:
"Against the virtue, that o'erpowereth thee,
Avails not to resist. Here is the Might,[4]
And here the Wisdom, which did open lay
The path, that had been yearned for so long,
Betwixt the Heaven and earth." Like to the fire,
That, in a cloud imprison'd, doth break out
Expansive, so that from its womb enlarged,
It falleth against nature to the ground;
Thus, in that heavenly banqueting, my soul
Outgrew herself; and, in the transport lost,
Holds now remembrance none of what she was.

[4: "The Might." Our Saviour.]

"Ope thou thine eyes, and mark me: thou hast seen
Things, that empower thee to sustain my smile."

I was as one, when a forgotten dream
Doth come across him, and he strives in vain
To shape it in his fantasy again:
Whenas that gracious boon was proffer'd me,
Which never may be cancel'd from the book
Wherein the past is written. Now were all
Those tongues to sound, that have, on sweetest milk
Of Polyhymnia and her sisters, fed
And fatten'd; not with all their help to boot,
Unto the thousandth parcel of the truth,
My song might shadow forth that saintly smile,
How merely, in her saintly looks, it wrought.
And, with such figuring of Paradise,
The sacred strain must leap, like one that meets
A sudden interruption to his road.
But he, who thinks how ponderous the theme,
And that 'tis laid upon a mortal shoulder,
May pardon, if it tremble with the burden.
The track, our venturous keel must furrow, brooks
No unribb'd pinnacle, no self - sparing pilot.

"Why doth my face," said Beatrice, "thus
Enamour thee, as that thou dost not turn
Unto the beautiful garden, blossoming

Beneath the rays of Christ? Here is the Rose,[5]
 Wherein the Word Divine was made incarnate;
 And here the lilies,..[6] by whose odour known
 The way of life was follow'd." Prompt I heard
 Her bidding, and encounter'd once again
 The strife of aching vision. As, erewhile, [cloud,
 Through glance of sun - light, stream'd through broken
 Mine eyes a flower - besprinkled mead have seen;
 Though veil'd themselves in shade: so saw I there
 Legions of splendours, on whom burning rays
 Shed lightnings from above; yet saw I not
 The fountain whence they flow'd. O gracious Virtue
 Thou, whose broad stamp is on them, higher up
 Thou didst exalt Thy glory,[7] to give room
 To my o'erlabour'd sight; when at the name
 Of that fair flower,[8] whom duly I invoke
 Both morn and eve, my soul with all her might
 Collected, on the goodliest ardour fix'd.
 And, as the bright dimensions of the star
 In Heaven excelling, as once here on earth,
 Were, in my eye - balls livelily pourtray'd;
 Lo! from within the sky a cresset[9] fell,
 Circling in fashion of a diadem;
 And girt the star; and, hovering, round it wheel'd.

[5: "The rose." The Virgin Mary, who is termed by the Church, "Rosa Mystica." "I was exalted like a palm - tree in Engaddi, and as a rose - plant in Jericho." - Ecclesiasticus, xxiv. 14.]

[6: "The lilies." The Apostles. "And give ye a sweet savour as frankincense, and flourish as a lily." - Ecclesiasticus, xxxix. 14.]

[7: "Thou didst exalt thy glory." The divine light retired upward, to render the eyes of Dante more capable of enduring the spectacle which now presented itself.]

[8: "_____ the name Of that fair flower." The name of the Virgin.]

[9: "A cresset." The angel Gabriel.]

Whatever melody sounds sweetest here,
 And draws the spirit most onto itself,
 Might seem a rent cloud, when it grates the thunder;
 Compared unto the sounding of that lyre,[10]
 Wherewith the goodliest sapphire,[11] that inlays
 The floor of Heaven was crown'd. "Angelic Love
 I am, who thus with hovering flight enwheel
 The lofty rapture from that womb inspired,
 Where our desire did dwell: and round thee so,
 Lady of Heaven! will hover; long as thou

Thy Son shalt follow, and diviner joy
Shall from thy presence gild the highest sphere."

[10: "That lyre." By synecdoche, the lyre is put for the angel.]

[11: The Virgin.]

Such close was to the circling melody:
And, as it ended, all the other lights
Took up the strain, and echoed Mary's name.

The robe,[12] that with its regal folds enwraps
The world, and with the nearer breath of God
Doth burn and quiver, held so far retired
Its inner hem and skirting over us,
That yet no glimmer of its majesty
Had stream'd unto me: therefore were mine eyes
Unequal to pursue the crowned flame,[13]
That towering rose, and sought the seed[14] it bore.
And like to babe, that stretches forth its arms
For every eagerness toward the breast,
After the milk is taken; so outstretch'd
Their wavy summits all the fervent band,
Through zealous love to Mary: then, in view,
There halted; and "Regina Coeli"[15] sang
So sweetly, the delight hath left me never.

[12: "The robe." The ninth heaven, the primum mobile, that enfolds
and moves the eight lower heavens.]

[13: "The crowned flame." The Virgin, with the angel hovering over
her.]

[14: "The seed." Our Saviour.]

[15: "Regina Coeli." "The beginning of an anthem, sung by the Church
at Easter, in honor of Our Lady."]

Oh! what o'erflowing plenty is up - piled
In those rich - laden coffers,[16] which below
Sow'd the good seed, whose harvest now they keep.
Here are the treasures tasted, that with tears
Were in the Babylonian exile[17] won,
When gold had fail'd them. Here, in synod high
Of ancient council with the new convened,
Under the Son of Mary and of God,
Victorious he[18] his mighty triumph holds,
To whom the keys of glory were assign'd.

[16: "Those rich - laden coffers." Those spirits, who, having sown
the seed of good works on earth, now contain the fruit of their pious
endeavors.]

[17: "In the Babylonian exile." During their abode in this world.]

[18: "He." St. Peter, with the other holy men of the Old and New Testaments.]

— Paradise Canto 23