

Purgatory Canto 8

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Canto VIII

Argument

Two Angels, with flaming swords broken at the points, descend to keep watch over the valley, into which Virgil and Dante entering by desire of Sordello, our Poet meets with joy the spirit of Nino, the judge of Gallura, one who was well known to him. Meantime three exceedingly bright stars appear near the pole, and a serpent creeps subtly into the valley, but flees at hearing the approach of those angelic guards. Lastly, Conrad Malaspina predicts to our Poet his future banishment.

Now was the hour that wakens fond desire
In men at sea, and melts their thoughtful heart
Who in the morn have bid sweet friends farewell,
And pilgrim newly on his road with love
Thrills, if he hear the vesper bell from far,
That seems to mourn for the expiring day:
When I, no longer taking heed to hear,
Began, with wonder, from those spirits to mark
One risen from its seat, which with its hand
Audience implored. Both palms it join'd and raised,
Fixing its steadfast gaze toward the east,
As telling God, "I care for naught beside."

"Te Lucis Ante,"[1] so devoutly then
Came from its lip, and in so soft a strain,
That all my sense in ravishment was lost.
And the rest after, softly and devout,
Follow'd through all the hymn, with upward gaze
Directed to the bright supernal wheels.

[1: "Te lucis ante terminum," the first verse of the hymn in the last part of the sacred office, termed "complin."]

Here, reader! for the truth make thine eyes keen:
For of so subtle texture is this veil,
That thou with ease mayst pass it through unmark'd.

I saw that gentle band silently next
Look up, as if in expectation held,
Pale and in lowly guise; and, from on high,
I saw, forth issuing descend beneath,
Two Angels, with two flame - illumined swords,

Broken and mutilated of their points.
Green as the tender leaves but newly born,
Their vesture was, the which, by wings as green
Beaten, they drew behind them, fann'd in air.
A little over us one took his stand;

The other lighted on the opposing hill;
So that the troop were in the midst contain'd.

Well I descried the whiteness on their heads;
But in their visages the dazzled eye
Was lost, as faculty that by too much
Is overpower'd. "From Mary's bosom both
Are come," exclaim'd Sordello, "as a guard
Over the vale, 'gainst him who hither tends,
The serpent." Whence, not knowing by which path
He came, I turn'd me round; and closely press'd,
All frozen, to my leader's trusted side.

Sordello paused not: "To the valley now
(For it is time) let us descend; and hold
Converse with those great shadows: haply much
Their sight may please ye." Only three steps down
Methinks I measured, ere I was beneath,
And noted one who look'd as with desire
To know me. Time was now that air grew dim;
Yet not so dim, that, 'twixt his eyes and mine,
It clear'd not up what was conceal'd before.
Mutually toward each other we advanced.
Nino, thou courteous judge!^[2] what joy I felt,
When I perceived thou wert not with the bad.

[2: Nino di Gallura de' Visconti, nephew to Count Ugolino de'
Gherardeschi, and betrayed by him.]

No salutation kind on either part
Was left unsaid. He then inquired: "How long,
Since thou arriv'd'st at the mountain's foot,
Over the distant waves?" - "Oh!" answer'd I,
"Through the sad seats of woe this morn I came;
And still in my first life, thus journeying on,
The other strive to gain." Soon as they heard
My words, he and Sordello backward drew,
As suddenly amazed. To Virgil one,
The other to a spirit turn'd, who near
Was seated, crying: "Conrad!^[3] up with speed:
Come, see what of His grace high God hath will'd."
Then turning round to me: "By that rare mark
Of honour, which thou owest to Him, who hides

So deeply His first cause it hath no ford;

[3: Father to Marcello Malaspina.]

When thou shalt be beyond the vast of waves,
Tell my Giovanna,[4] that for me she call
There, where reply to innocence is made.
Her mother,[5] I believe, loves me no more;
Since she has changed the white and wimpled folds,[6]
Which she is doom'd once more with grief to wish.
By her it easily may be perceived,
How long in woman lasts the flame of love,
If sight and touch do not relume it oft.
For her so fair a burial will not make
The viper,[7] which calls Milan to the field,
As had been made by shrill Gallura's bird." [8]

[4: The daughter of Nino, and wife of Riccardo da Camino, of Trevisi.]

[5: "Her mother." Beatrice, Marchioness of Este, wife of Nino, and after his death married to Galeazzo de' Visconti of Milan.]

[6: The weeds of widowhood.]

[7: The arms of Galeazzo and the ensign of the Milanese.]

[8: The cock was the ensign of Gallura, Nino's province in Sardinia. It is not known whether Beatrice had any further cause to regret her nuptials with Galeazzo, than a certain shame which appears, however unreasonably, to have attached to a second marriage.]

He spoke, and in his visage took the stamp
Of that right zeal, which with due temperature
Glows in the bosom. My insatiate eyes
Meanwhile to Heaven had travel'd, even there
Where the bright stars are slowest, as a wheel
Nearest the axle; when my guide inquired:
"What there aloft, my son, has caught thy gaze?"

I answer'd: "The three torches,[9] with which here
The pole is all on fire." He then to me:
"The four resplendent stars, thou saw'st this morn,
Are there beneath; and these, risen in their stead."

[9: The three evangelical virtues, Faith, Hope and Charity, are supposed to rise in the evening, to denote their belonging to the contemplative; as the four others are made to rise in the morning to signify their belonging to the active life: or perhaps it may mark the succession, in order of time, of the Gospel to the heathen system of morality.]

While yet he spoke, Sordello to himself

Drew him, and cried: "Lo there our enemy!"
And with his hand pointed that way to look.

Along the side, where barrier none arose
Around the little vale, a serpent lay,
Such haply as gave Eve the bitter food.
Between the grass and flowers, the evil snake
Came on, reverting oft his lifted head;

And, as a beast that smooths its polish'd coat,
Licking his back. I saw not, nor can tell,
How those celestial falcons from their seat
Moved, but in motion each one well described.
Hearing the air cut by their verdant plumes,
The serpent fled; and, to their stations, back
The Angels up return'd with equal flight.

The spirit, (who to Nino, when he call'd,
Had come), from viewing me with fixed ken,
Through all that conflict, loosen'd not his sight.

"So may the lamp, which leads thee up on high,
Find, in thy free resolve, of wax so much,
As may suffice thee to the enamel'd height."
It thus began: "If any certain news
Of Valdimagra and the neighbour part
Thou know'st, tell me, who once was mighty there.
They call'd me Conrad Malaspina; not
That old one, but from him I sprang. The love
I bore my people is now here refined."

"In your domains," I answer'd, "ne'er was I.
But, through all Europe, where do those men dwell,
To whom their glory is not manifest?
The fame, that honours your illustrious house,
Proclaims the nobles, and proclaims the land;
So that he knows it, who was never there.
I swear to you, so may my upward route
Prosper, your honoured nation not impairs
The value of her coffer and her sword.
Nature and use give her such privilege,
That while the world is twisted from his course
By a bad head, she only walks aright,
And has the evil way in scorn." He then:
"Now pass thee on: seven times the tired sun[10]
Revisits not the couch, which with the four feet
The forked Aries covers, ere that kind
Opinion shall be nail'd into thy brain

[10: The sun shall not enter into the constellation of Aries seven

times more, before thou shalt have still better cause for the good opinion
thou expressest of Valdimagra, in the kind reception thou shalt there meet
with." Dante was hospitably received by the Marchese Marcello, or Morello
Malaspina, during his banishment, A. D. 1307.]

With stronger nails than other's speech can drive;
If the sure course of judgment be not stay'd."

— Purgatory Canto 8