

ll. 133-8: *in full mid-splendour ... his very blood*: In order to procure the ransom of a friend (probably Mino dei Mini) who had been taken prisoner (? at Tagliacozzo) by Charles of Anjou, Provenzan took his stand in the public square at Siena and begged from the passers-by.

l. 140: *thy neighbours shall do so to thee*: Oderisi hints that Dante himself will soon experience, in the days of his exile and ruin, the humiliation of having to ask for money.

## Canto XII



THE STORY. *As he goes along, Dante sees graven upon the floor of the Cornice images representing the sin and fall of Pride. The Poets are met by the Angel of Humility, who erases the first P from Dante's forehead and, pronouncing the appropriate Beatitude, guides them up by the Pass of Pardon. Already, with the purging of Pride, the penitent's feet move more lightly.*

So, step for step, like oxen in the yoke, <sup>1</sup>  
Beside that burdened soul I held my way  
So long as my kind schoolmaster would brook;

But when he said: "Now leave him; come, I say, <sup>4</sup>  
Press on; for here must each with sail and oar  
Urge the ship forward strongly as he may,"

I raised me, as good walkers should, and bore <sup>7</sup>  
My body upright, though the thoughts in me  
Remained bowed down and shrunken as before.

I'd put on speed and was most willingly <sup>10</sup>  
Following my master's footsteps, he and I  
Showing how fleet of foot we both could be,

When he addressed me: "Downward cast thine eye; <sup>13</sup>  
For solace of the way, 'twere good thou fall  
To scanning what beneath thy feet may be."

And as, to give the dead memorial, 16  
We trace on many an earthly sepulchre  
Figures that may their living forms recall,

The sight of which will very often stir 19  
Men to lament them, memory being still  
Piety's sharpest, or its only, spur:

So there, with livelier likeness, due to skill 22  
Of craftsmanship, I saw the whole ledge graven  
Where, for a road, it juts out from the hill.

Mine eyes beheld there him to whom was given 25  
The noblest form of any creature made  
On one side fall like lightning down from heaven.

Mine eyes beheld Briareus, breast and blade 28  
Riven by the bolt divine, on the other side  
Lie on the earth, heavy and cold and dead.

Mine eyes beheld Thymbraeus, they espied 31  
Pallas and Mars in arms about their sire  
Viewing the Giants' limbs flung far and wide.

Mine eyes beheld Nimrod, beneath his dire 34  
High handiwork, look stunned upon the men  
That shared in Shinar his proud heart's desire.

Ah, Niobe, with eyes how full of pain 37  
I saw thine image on the roadway scored  
Set between seven and seven thy children slain I

Ah, Saul, how fallen, and by thine own sword, 40  
Didst thou appear, dead on Gilboa, where  
Nor rain nor dew fell ever afterward!

Ah, mad Arachne! I beheld thee there, 43  
Already half turned spider, on the shreds  
Of that sad web thou wov'st to thy despair.

Ah, Rehoboam! now there's none that dreads 46  
Thy face; it threatens no more; the chariot flies  
Though none pursue; terror behind thee treads.

Now showed the stubborn pavement in what wise 49  
Alcmaeon made his hapless mother pay  
For that curst gaud, and at how dear a price.

Now showed it how his sons rushed in to slay 52  
Sennacherib in the temple where he stood,  
And slew, and left him there, and went their way.

Now showed it how with carnage all imbrued 55  
Queen Tomyris made mock of Cyrus, saying:  
"Blood hast thou craved — I'll fill thee full with blood."

Now showed it the Assyrian host's dismaying 58  
And rout, when Holofernes was undone,  
And showed the grisly relics of his slaying.

Mine eyes beheld Troy Town in ashes strown; 61  
Ah, sacred Ilium, how vile and mean  
Now showed thine image in the carven stone!

What master of the graver or the pen <sup>64</sup>  
Such lines as these, such shading could contrive  
For subtle minds to find amazement in?

The dead seemed dead, the living seemed alive; <sup>67</sup>  
Who saw the fact saw not more clear than I  
Those scenes I trod, leaned down contemplative.

Be proud, then, march with haughty heads held high, <sup>70</sup>  
Children of Eve, nor bend them toward the ground  
To see the evil road you travel by!

Farther about the mount our way had wound, <sup>73</sup>  
And more of the sun's course by now was spent  
Than one could judge with faculties thus bound,

When he who all the time alertly went <sup>76</sup>  
In front of me began: "Lift up thy brow,  
The time is past to go thus ruminant.

Look at the angel over there, and how <sup>79</sup>  
He moves to come to us; look how the day's  
Sixth handmaiden resigns her office now.

Adorn with reverence both thy mien and face, <sup>82</sup>  
That he may joy to speed us up the mount;  
Think that it dawns but once, this day of grace."

So oft he'd urged me — well I knew his wont — <sup>85</sup>  
Never to waste a moment, that I might  
Scarcely mistake his meaning on that count.

On came the beauteous creature, clothed in white, <sup>88</sup>  
And seeming as he came in countenance  
A star of dawn all tremulous with light.

He spread his arms abroad, and spread his vans, <sup>91</sup>  
And, "Come," said he, "the stairs are nigh; henceforth  
An easier climb is yours and every man's."

Glad summons — but with few to prize its worth! <sup>94</sup>  
O human race, born to take flight and soar,  
Why fall ye, for one breath of wind, to earth?

He brought us to the rock's cleft aperture, <sup>97</sup>  
And there he brushed my forehead with his wings;  
Then promised me a journey safe and sure.

As, where the road over Rubaconte swings <sup>100</sup>  
Up to the height and the church whose walls command  
The city that so discreetly orders things,

The steep grade's eased by steps on the dexter hand, <sup>103</sup>  
Hewn out in times that kept inviolate  
The bushel-stave, and let the audit stand,

So is the cliff, which drops precipitate <sup>106</sup>  
Here from the upper cornice, made less sheer,  
Though either side the high rock-walls are strait.

As we turned thither, voices in our ear <sup>109</sup>  
Sang out *Beati pauperes spiritu*:  
No tongue could tell how sweet they were to hear,

What different passes these from those we knew 112  
In Hell! for there with hideous howls of pain,  
But here with singing, we are ushered through.

When by the sacred stair we now again 115  
Were climbing, lighter far meseemed I trod  
Than I had done upon the level plain;

Wherefore I said: "Master, what heavy load 118  
Has slipped from me, so that I walk with ease,  
And scarcely feel fatigue upon the road?"

And he: "When from thy forehead all the P's 121  
Which, half-effaced and dim, remain there yet  
Are rubbed clean out, as one already is,

Then shall good-will so over-rule thy feet, 124  
That they will climb, and not be merely strong  
And uncomplaining, but delight in it."

Then I behaved like one who goes along 127  
Quite unaware of something on his head,  
Till winks and smiles make him suspect what's wrong;

And, to make sure, the hand must lend its aid, 130  
And feels, and finds, for when the doors are shut  
On sight, the touch does duty there instead;

So, with my right-hand fingers all spread out, 133  
I found those letters only six, which he  
Who bare the keys had on my temples cut;

And, as he watched, my leader smiled at me. 136

#### *The Images.*

*The Pass of Pardon and the P of Pride:* The passage from one Cornice to the next is by way of a staircase cut in the rock. Dante particularly emphasizes that by these steps "the steep grade's eased" and "the cliff made less sheer", by contrast with the painful scramble up the Terraces and, particularly with the zigzag and difficult "needle's eye" leading to the First Cornice. This is because when Pride, the root of all sin, is overcome, the conquest of the rest is easier. For the same reason he emphasizes the freedom and lightness which the pilgrim feels when the P of Pride has been rased out.

#### *Notes.*

l. 1: *so, step for step:* In xi. 78 Dante mentions that in order to converse with the burdened spirits he "paced with them, bent double toward the ground", and he continues to share their stooping posture until summoned by Virgil to desist (l. 7). Only on three of the Cornices does Dante thus associate himself with the punishment of the spirits, viz. on those of Pride, Wrath, and Lust. Since these are precisely the three failings of which Dante has always been accused, one may perhaps infer that he knew his own weaknesses as well as anybody. He says himself (xiii. 133-8) that though he dreads the punishment of Pride, he believes himself fairly free from the sin of Envy; we know from Boccaccio that he was an abstemious man and not given to Gluttony; Avarice he particularly hates, and nothing in his history suggests that he was either a hoarder or a spendthrift; and the last sin anybody would lay to his charge is Sloth; on these four Cornices he remains, therefore, merely a spectator.

l. 25-63: *Mine eyes beheld, etc.:* The images carved upon the pavement constitute the "Bridle" of Pride (see Introduction, p-8), and, like the "Whip", are drawn partly from sacred and partly from classical sources. They are divided into three groups of four examples (each group providing a contrast

to the corresponding image in the “Whip”), followed by a concluding example.

Each example occupies one *terzain*; each *terzain* of the first group begins with the word *Vedea* = I saw; each *terzain* of the second group begins with the word: O; and each *terzain* of the third group begins with the word *Mostrava* = showed; while the three lines of the final *terzain* begin with *Vedea*, O, *Mostrava* respectively. Thus the initial letters of the three groups, as also of the concluding *terzain*, if read as an acrostic, display the word VOM or (since V and U in medieval script are the same letter) UOM, which is the Italian for MAN. This may, of course, be an accident; but such an acrostic would be entirely in the taste of the period, and the probability is that the poet did it deliberately. I have accordingly reproduced the acrostic in the translation, and the operative letters have been printed in larger type so as to make it clear.

This is by far the most elaborate set of “examples” in the *Purgatory*.

l. 25-36: *Mine eyes beheld*: This first group, which contrasts with the humility of God Himself in being made Man of the Blessed Virgin, shows the Creature thrusting himself into the place of God.

l. 25-7: *him to whom was given the noblest form*: Satan (“fairest once of the sons of light” *Inf.* xxxiv. 18) who led the rebel angels in their attempt against God’s throne. “I beheld Satan fall as lightning from Heaven,” *Luke* x. 18.

l. 28-30: *Briareus*: a giant who attempted to overthrow the Gods of Olympus (see *Inf.* xxxi. 99 and note); a profane parallel to Lucifer.

l. 31-3: *the Giants*: these also attempted to scale Olympus, but upon a different occasion; they were overthrown by Apollo (Thymbraeus, so called from his temple at Thymbra). The picture of Apollo, Pallas (Minerva), and Mars standing in triumph beside their father Jove is borrowed from Statius *Theb.* ii. 597-9, where, however, it is related to the victory over Briareus.

l. 34-6: *Nimrod*, who endeavoured to scale heaven by building the Tower of Babel in the plain of Shinar (*Gen.* x. 8, xi. 1-9; and cf. *Inf.* xxxi. 46-81), is the sacred parallel to the Giants.

l. 37-48: *Ah!*: The second group, which contrasts with David’s joyful humility in the presence of the Ark of God, shows that arrogance in the face of Heaven which in Greek is called *hubris*, and in English presumption or overweening.

l. 37-9: *Niobe*: wife of Amphion (see *Inf.* xxxii. 16 and note) King of Thebes, had fourteen children, and boasted herself superior to Latona, who had borne to Jove only Apollo and Diana. The archer god and goddess in revenge killed all fourteen children with their arrows, and Niobe was turned to an ever-weeping stone statue.

l. 40-2: *Saul*: The presumption of Saul, first king of Israel, and the gradual deterioration of his character is told in the *First Book of Samuel* (v. es *Sam.* xiii. 13, 1 *Sam.* xv. II, 35 in their context). He was defeated by the Philistines on Mount Gilboa and fell upon his own sword (1 *Sam.* xxxi. 1-4). *Nor rain nor dew*: (see 2 *Sam.* i. 21).

l. 43-5: *Arachne* of Lydia boastfully challenged Minerva to a contest in weaving, and was changed into a spider (*Ovid: Metam.* vi. I-145).

ll. 46-8: *Rehoboam*: king of Israel, despising the advice of his old counsellors, boasted that he would prove a greater tyrant even than his father Solomon; the people rebelled against him and he “made speed to get him up to his chariot to flee to Jerusalem,” His story is told in 1 *Kings* xii.

l. 49-60: *Now showed*: the third group, which contrasts with Trajan’s humility before the poor widow, shows examples of pride in the face of man.

l. 49-51: *Alcmaeon*: The “curst gaud” is the necklace with which Eriphyle, the wife of Amphiaraus, was bribed to betray his hiding-place so that he went to his death in the Theban war (see *Inf.* xx. 34 and note).

Alcmaeon his son slew Eriphyle by his father's instructions. This example displays that particular type of Vainglory which is called Vanity.

l. 52-4: *Sennacherib*, king of Assyria, was a proud tyrant who, after his defeat by Hezekiah, was slain by his own sons (2 *Kings* xix. 37).

ll. 55-7: *Cyrus* the Persian tyrant (560-529 B.C.) murdered the son of Tomyris Queen of Scythia; she defeated and slew him, and throwing his head into a vessel of blood said mockingly: "Drink thy fill of the blood for which thou hast insatiably thirsted these thirty years."

l. 58-60: *Holofernes*, captain of the army of Nebuchadnezzar, was contemptuous of the Jews and of their God, and, disregarding the advice of Achior, went up to besiege them at Bethulia. But he was outwitted and slain by the beautiful widow Judith, who cut off his head and had it displayed on the walls of the town ("the grisly relics of his slaying": *Judith* vi, viii-xiv).

l. 61-3: *Troy Town*: the series is summed up in the image of Troy ("proud Ilium" *Aen.* iii. 2-3), whose ruin was the great classical example of the fall of pride.

l. 79: *the angel*: this is the Angel of Humility. This virtue is so little prized to-day, and interpreted in so negative a sense, that to understand the shimmering radiance of its angel one needs to study all the contexts in which Dante uses the words *umile*, *umiltá*, especially, perhaps, in the *Vita Nuova*. "[When I beheld Beatrice] there smote into me a flame of charity [so that] if anyone had asked me about anything whatsoever, my reply would have been simply, *Love*, with a countenance clothed in *umiltá*" (*V.N.* xi). "She bore about her so true an *umiltá*, that she seemed to say, *I am in peace*." (KN. xxiii). "She goes upon her way, hearing herself praised, benignly clothed with *umiltá*, and seems a thing come from heaven to earth to show forth a miracle" (KN. xxvi). "Therefore, when [love] so deprives me of power that my spirits seem to desert me, my frail soul tastes such sweetness that my cheeks grow pale. Then [my sighs beseech] my lady to grant me yet further

*salute* (salutation, salvation). This happens every time she looks upon me, and is a thing so *until* that it passes belief" (*V.N.* xxviii). The connotation is always of peace, sweetness, and a kind of suspension of the heart in a delighted tranquillity.

ll. 80-1: *the day's sixth handmaiden*: the sixth hour of the day: i.e. it is just past noon.

l. 91: *he ... spread his vans*: the gesture of salutation: his angelic humility receives them as honoured guests.

l. 98: *he brushed my forehead with his wings*: with this gesture (as we see a few lines later) he erases the P of Pride.

l. 100-3: *the road over Rubaconte*, etc.: the church of San Miniato commands Florence from the far side of the Arno, and is approached from the city by way of the Rubaconte Bridge (now called the Ponte alle Grazie). A flight of shallow stone steps, each about six feet wide, leads up the side of the hill for the convenience of worshippers. The commendation in l. 103 is, of course, an irony on a par with the conclusion of Canto vi.

l. 105: *the bushel-stave and ... the audit*: the allusion is to two public frauds committed in Florence in Dante's time: one official, at the head of the Salt Import Department, reduced the size of the bushel-measure by one stave, and appropriated the balance of the salt; another pair of rogues tore a leaf out of the public ledger to conceal their pilferings. (These delinquents are referred to again in *Para.* xvi.)

. no: *Beati pauperes spiritu*: "Blessed are the poor in spirit": This, taken from the Beatitudes, *Matt.* v. 3, is the Benediction of the First Cornice.

l. 116: *lighter far meseemed I trod*: see Images.