

l. 139: *I am Aglauros*: Cecrops, king of Athens, had three daughters, Pandrace, Aglauros, and Herse. Mercury bribed Aglauros to admit him to the presence of Herse, of whom he was enamoured; but she, seized with jealousy of her sister, denied him entrance and was turned to stone (*Ovid: Metam.* ii. 70&-832).

## Canto XV



THE STORY. *THE Poets are met by the shining Angel of Generosity, who erases the second P from Dante's forehead and directs them to the Pass leading to the Third Cornice. While they are climbing the stair, Virgil delivers his First Discourse on Love. At the entrance to the Cornice, Dante is shown in a vision examples of the Virtue of Meekness; and after walking a little further they are met and enveloped by a cloud of thick Smoke rolling along the Cornice.*

As much as, 'twixt beginning of the day <sup>1</sup>  
And third hour's end, shows of the restless sphere  
That see-saws ever like a child at play,

So much by this time of the sun's career <sup>4</sup>  
Seemed left to run towards his Evening rest:  
'Twas vesper-tide out yonder, midnight here.

And as we circled round the mountain's breast, <sup>7</sup>  
Right on our noses' bridge we caught the rays,  
Being turned so far, that now we faced due west;

When lo! I felt the splendour and the blaze <sup>10</sup>  
With twofold weight my forehead overbear,  
And this new portent filled me with amaze;

So, lifting up my hands, I held them square <sup>13</sup>  
Across my eyebrows, as one does to gain  
A kind of awning when there's too much glare.

And as from water or the mirror's plane 16  
The beam reflected leaps away, to go  
In the opposed direction up again,

Just as it first descended, making so 19  
An equal angle with the plummet-line,  
As theory and experiment will show,

So, from before me, on these eyes of mine 22  
Such a reflected brilliance seemed to smite  
That they shrank promptly from the blinding shine.

"O my dear father, what is this, so bright, 25  
No effort serves to screen it off," said I,  
"And moving toward us, if I guess aright?"

"No marvel if the household of the sky 28  
Are dazzling to thee still," said he: "it is  
A herald sent to summon us on high.

Full soon, to look on beings such as this 31  
Shall be to thee no burden, but a cause  
Of all thy nature can endure of bliss."

And when we came where that blest angel was: 34  
"Enter," his glad voice cried, "to an ascent  
Less steep by far than any former pass."

Parting, we climbed, and heard the while we went 37  
"*Beati misericordes*" sung behind,  
And, "Thou that hast prevailed, be jubilant."

Now, when my guide and I were left to wind 40  
Our upward way alone, I thought to glean  
Some wayside discourse to improve my mind,

So, turning toward him, thus did I begin: 43  
"That spirit from Romagna— 'partnership'  
He mentioned, and 'forbid' — what did he mean?"

"He knows," said he, "his own sin's sore eats deep; 46  
No wonder he rebukes it, being zealous  
That it should give the world less cause to weep.

You set desire where sharing with one's fellows 49  
Means that each partner gets a smaller share,  
Wherefore you sigh, and envy works the bellows.

Did but the love of the most lofty sphere 52  
Turn your desires to take the upward way,  
Your hearts were quit of all this fearful care;

Because the more there are who there can say 55  
'Ours', the more goods each has, and charity  
Burns in that cloister with a larger ray."

"So far," said I, "is this from filling me, 58  
I famish more than if I'd held my tongue,  
And in my mind pile up perplexity.

How can it be that when a greater throng 61  
Divides the goods, there is more wealth for each  
Than if a few possessed them all along?"

And he: "Because once more thy mental reach <sup>64</sup>  
Stops short at earthly things, thy dullard mood  
From truth's own light draws darkness black as pitch.

Than infinite and unexpressive Good <sup>67</sup>  
Up there, so speeds to love as the ray speeds  
To bodies with clear lucency endued;

Lavish of self, all fires it finds it feeds; <sup>70</sup>  
And thus, as charity yet rifer runs,  
Rifer thereby the immortal vigour breeds.

The more enamoured souls dwell there at once, <sup>73</sup>  
Ever the better and the more they love,  
Each glassing each, all mirrors and all suns.

Now, should my words thy hunger not remove, <sup>76</sup>  
Beatrice shalt thou see, and she'll speak plain,  
This and all cravings else to rid thee of.

Do thou but strive that those five wounds which pain <sup>79</sup>  
Alone can heal, still marked upon thy head,  
Be rased out quickly, like the other twain."

'Twas on my lips to say: "I'm now well fed," <sup>82</sup>  
When, see! the cornice! We were up, I found,  
So that my eager eyes struck all speech dead.

Then of a sudden I was caught and drowned <sup>85</sup>  
Deep in a trance of ecstasy; and lo!  
A temple there, with people thronging round;

And through its gates I saw a Lady go, <sup>88</sup>  
Saying, with a mother's tender gesture,  
"Why, My dearest Son, hast thou dealt with us so?"

Nay — for behold now how thy father and I <sup>91</sup>  
Have sought thee sorrowing." As she ceased to speak,  
This vision that I first beheld fled by,

And next, such hot tears streaming down her cheek <sup>94</sup>  
As grief distils from rage, before me came  
Another woman, and she seemed to speak:

"If lord thou art of that high city whose name <sup>97</sup>  
Sowed strife among the gods — if lord declared  
Of that great hearth whence learning spreads its flame,

Avenge thee on the insolent arms which dared <sup>100</sup>  
Embrace our daughter, O Pisistratus!"  
And with unruffled mien that lord appeared

Thus to make answer mild and generous: <sup>103</sup>  
"What shall we do to those who wish us ill,  
If those who love us are condemned by us?"

Then I beheld a mob, who'd set their will, <sup>106</sup>  
Inflamed with wrath, to stone a lad to death,  
And each to each cried out aloud, "Kill! Kill!"

Him too I saw already crushed beneath <sup>109</sup>  
The death-stroke, sink to earth; but of his eyes  
He still made gates to Heaven, and prayed forthwith

To the high Lord, 'mid all these agonies, 112  
And with such looks as mercy opens to,  
Imploring pardon for his enemies.

Now when at length my soul returned to view 115  
Those facts which have their truth outside the soul,  
I saw my error — error not untrue;

And seeing me act like one who seeks to roll 118  
Slumber away, my lord exclaimed: "What's wrong?  
What's robbed thee of all power of self-control?"

Here hast thou come a good half-league along 121  
With thine eyes glazing and thy legs a-sprawl,  
Like one who sleeps, or finds the wine too strong."

"O my dear father, I will tell thee all, 124  
Wilt thou but listen — all the things," I cried,  
"Shown me while thus my legs were held in thrall."

And he: "Although a thousand masks were tied 127  
Upon thy face, for me 'twould all amount  
To nothing — no, nor could thy least thought hide.

Those signs were shown thee that on no account 130  
Thou find excuse to shut thy heart to peace  
Whose waters well from the eternal fount.

I did not ask 'what's wrong', as he who sees 133  
Only with eyes so ignorant and dim  
That when the body's senseless their powers cease;

I asked to strengthen thee in heart and limb, 136  
As one must prod the sluggard idling on  
After his waking hour returns to him."

So we pressed forward as the day sank down, 139  
Peering ahead as far as eyes could look  
Through the slant shining of the level sun,

When lo! by slow degrees a cloud of smoke 142  
Came rolling toward us, all as black as night;  
No room to dodge it — on it came, and took

At once from us the fresh air and our sight. 145

*The Images.*

For the *Penance of the Wrathful (the Smoke)* see Images to Canto xvi.

*Notes.*

ll. 1-6: *As much as*, etc.: the general sense of the paragraph is quite clear: the sun had as much of his course left to run as he runs between his rising and the third hour of the day: i.e. it was three hours to sunset. Opinion differs much about the sphere that "plays like a child", some thinking that the reference is simply to the diurnal motion of the heavens, playing "ring-a-ring-of-roses" about the earth, as it were: others that it is to the ecliptic which plays up and down with a see-saw motion, between summer and winter. I have adopted the latter interpretation, though with no great confidence.

l. 6: *vesper-tide out yonder; midnight here*: i.e. it was 3 p.m. in Purgatory (and consequently 3 a.m. at Jerusalem), and midnight in Italy where the poet was subsequently recording his vision.

l. 9: *that now we faced due west*: the poets have now almost reached the northernmost point of the mountain, and have the setting sun in their faces (see diagram, ).

ll. 10-11: *the blaze with twofold weight*: the Angel of the Cornice is coming towards them from the west, so that his brilliance is added to the brilliance of the sun.

l. 16-24: *and as from water ... blinding shine*: Dante, having screened his eyes from the sun, finds himself still dazzled by the yet greater brilliance of the angel which seems to beat up towards him like light reflected from water or a mirror (the angel is below the sun and sheds his brilliance all along the path); *theory* (i.e. the science of optics) and *experiment* show the angle of reflection to be equal to the angle of incidence. Some think that the simile of *reflected* light refers to the fact that the light of the angel is a reflection of the light of God; but this latter phenomenon is scarcely subject to the laws of optics.

l. 34: *that blest angel*: the Angel of the Second Cornice is often referred to (in accordance with his Benediction) as the Angel of Mercy; but since the showing of mercy (in the narrow sense) is the fruit of a generous spirit, it is perhaps preferable to call him the Angel of Generosity, and this name seems to accord better with the examples shown in the “Whip”. See also below l. 38, note.

l. 36: *less steep by far*: once the root sin of Pride is purged, the way becomes easier.

l. 38: *beati misericordes*: “blessed are the merciful”: *Matt.* v. 7: this is the Benediction of the Second Cornice. “Envy is the direct opposite of mercy ... for the envious man is saddened by his neighbour’s prosperity, whereas the merciful man is saddened by his neighbour’s misfortune; hence the envious are not merciful, and conversely” (Th. Aquinas: *S.T.* II.II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 36, a. 3). *Misericordes*, translated in the A.V. and R.V. as “merciful”, is wider in its meaning than the English word, and might be better rendered “tender-hearted”, “sympathetic”, or “generous-minded”.

l. 39: *thou that hast prevailed, be jubilant*: probably a paraphrase of *Matt.* v. 12: “Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven”; possibly an allusion to *Rev.* ii. 7: “To him that over-cometh will I give to eat of the tree of life.”

ll. 44-5: “*partnership*” ... “*forbid*”: the ref. is to Guido del Duca’s words in xiv. 86-7.

l. 49: *you*: i.e. the living.

l. 52: *the most lofty sphere*: the Empyrean, where God is. 167: *than infinite and unexpressive Good*: i.e. God.

ll. 68-9: *as the ray speeds to bodies with clear lucency endued*: the love of God is received and reflected by love as light by a shining surface.

l. 79: *those five wounds*: we are to understand that the second P has been effaced by the angel as Dante enters the Pass.

l. 82: *’twas on my lips to say*, etc.: Virgil has expounded, “so far as his school goes”, the doctrine of the increase of spiritual goods by sharing them, and of the reciprocity of love. It is probably not by accident that before Dante can express himself content with this he is shown a vision of a still more universal and Christian conception of love, extended so as to conform to the Dominical precept: “Love your enemies ... and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.” (*Matt.* v. 44-)

l. 86: *a trance of ecstasy*: this is the “Whip” of the Third Cornice, exhibiting examples of Meekness, drawn, one from the life of the Blessed Virgin, one from classical history, and one from the *Acts*.

l. 87-93: *a temple there*, etc.: the first vision, of the finding of Christ in the Temple (*Luke* ii. 41-50) is an example of meekness towards God.

l. 94-105: *and next*, etc.: the second vision is an example of meekness towards human friends. A young man who loved and wished to wed the daughter of Pisisstratus, tyrant of Athens (560-527 B.C.), unceremoniously embraced her in public. For this insult her mother would have had him

executed, but was rebuked by Pisistratus in the words quoted. The story is told by Valerius Maximus.

l. 97-9: *that high city*, etc.: Athens, the centre of ancient Greek culture and civilization. Neptune and Minerva (*Gk.* Poseidon and Athene) competed as to which of them should give the city its name. Neptune produced a salt spring out of the earth, and Minerva an olive tree; the tree was adjudged by the gods to be the better gift, and the city was named for Athene.

l. 106-14: *then I beheld a mob*, etc.: the third vision, of the stoning of Stephen (*Acts* vii. 54-60), is an example of meekness towards human foes.

l. 117: *error not untrue*: i.e. Dante realized that the things he had seen were only visions, but nevertheless visions of real events.

l. 129: *nor could thy least thought hide*: we are meant, I think, to understand that Virgil has not seen the visions directly, but read Dante's mind (as he did, for example, in *Inf.* xvi. 118-20). He explains that he asked Dante about them, not for information, but to remind him of the purpose of such visions, i.e. that a man should not lose himself in dreaming but be stimulated to fresh endeavour.

## Canto XVI



THE STORY. *As they stagger blindly through the Smoke, the Poets hear the prayer of the penitent Wrathful rising about them on all sides. Dante is addressed by the spirit of Marco Lombardo, who discourses with him on Determinism and Free Will, and on the misdirection of the Temporal Power. A thinning of the Smoke announces the imminent approach of the Angel of the Third Cornice.*

Darkness of hell, or midnight disendowed 1  
Of every planet, under a poor shred  
Of starveling sky hung thick as thick with cloud,

Never had wrapped a veil about my head 4  
So gross in grain and gritty to the touch  
As was that smoke which held us blanketed;

One's eyes could not keep open, insomuch 7  
That my good escort came up close beside,  
Offering a trusty shoulder to my clutch.

Even as a blind man goes behind his guide, 10  
Lest he should stray or, to the jeopardy  
Of life and limb, should stumble or collide,

So through that foul and acrid air went I, 13  
Harkening to him who led me: "Take good care  
We don't get parted!" was his constant cry.