

Canto IV



THE STORY. *THE Poets accompany the spirits of the Excommunicate till they reach a steep cranny in the rock-face. Here, quitting their guides, they climb to the Second Terrace of Ante-Purgatory. Virgil explains to Dante why, at the Antipodes, they see the Sun in the North. They meet with a group of the Late-Repentant, one of whom, the lazy Belacqua, tells them of the rule which governs that Terrace.*

When some one faculty, by its apprehension 1
Of pain or pleasure, grows so clamorous
That it commands the soul's entire attention,

Of all powers else the soul's oblivious — 4
Which goes to show how false is the surmise
That soul is kindled above soul in us.

Thus, when such things engage our ears or eyes 7
As bend the soul towards them totally,
Time passes, and we mark not how it flies;

For that which marks it is one faculty; 10
Another, that which masters the whole soul;
This one is bound, as 'twere, and that one free.

This truth I now experienced to the full, 13
While to that spirit I hearkened marvelling;
For lo! the sun had mounted up a whole

Fifty degrees without my noticing, 16
When we arrived at where those souls all cried:
“Here's what you seek!” in one voice chorussing.

Often the labourer fills a gap more wide 19
With a little forkful of thorns, when the purple dye
Darkens upon the grape toward vintage-tide,

A wider gap than the cleft my guide and I, 22
He first, I after him, had to climb alone
When that flock left us, bidding us good-bye.

You can mount up to San Leo, or to Noli scramble down, 25
You can tackle tall Bismantova and clamber to the top
On your two flat feet; but this way has to be flown;

You must fly with the plumes, I mean, and be lifted up 28
On the wings of desire, still following at the back
Of that great leader who gave to me light and hope.

So in we went and up through the stony crack, 31
Wedged either side between the rock-walls sheer,
Needing both hands and feet to grip the track.

And when we had scaled the cranny and got out clear 34
At the high cliff's top on the slope of the open hill:
“Master,” said I, “where do we go from here?”

And he: “Let not one foot fall back, but still 37
Follow on up the mountain, till we light
On some good escort to assist our skill.”

So high the summit, it outsoared the sight; 40
So steep the slope, the line from centre straight
Up to mid-quadrant is far less upright.

Soon I grew tired: “Don’t go at such a rate,” 43
I cried; “Dear father — see! I shall get stuck
All by myself here if thou wilt not wait.”

“My son,” said he, “drag thyself onward — look! 46
As far as there”; and, pointing up, he showed,
Running all round that side, a ledge of rock

Not far above. His words were such a goad, 49
I strained to follow, and with desperate pressure
Crawled on — crawled up — and on the terrace stood.

Here we sat down, both facing East, to measure 52
Our climb from where it started — for it’s grand
Thus to look back, and gives all travellers pleasure.

I turned mine eyes first downward to the strand, 55
Then to the sun — and stared to see him go
So that he smote us on the leftward hand.

The poet saw me gaping there, as though 58
Dumbfounded, at the chariot of the day
Driving its course ‘twixt us and Aquilo;

Wherefore: “If Castor,” he began to say, 61
“And Pollux were in consort with that burning
Mirror which up and downward casts its ray,

Thou wouldst behold the kindled Zodiac turning 64
Yet closer to the Bears; if it did not,
It would have strayed, its ancient path unlearning.

Come, recollect thyself and work it out — 67
So: think of Zion and this mountain here
As being so placed on earth that they have got

A separate hemisphere for each, but share 70
The same horizon; thus, that road ill-tried
By Phaeton the luckless charioteer,

Must, when it passes Zion on one side 73
Pass this upon the other, as, if thou
Hast a clear brain, thou wilt be satisfied.”

“Master of mine.” said I, “indeed I vow 76
’Tis plain as plain, and never yet saw I
So well what first perplexed me; namely, how

What one art calls the Equator of the sky, 79
The median circle of the moving spheres,
Which still ‘twixt winter and the sun doth lie,

Stands North from hence as far as in past years 82
The Hebrews saw it toward the Southern heat —
For just that cause which in thy speech appears.

But let me ask thee now, how far our feet 85
Have yet to walk; the hill soars up and goes
Higher than my sight can soar to follow it.”

“This mount is such,” he answered, “that to those 88
Starting at the foot it’s hard in the extreme;
The more they climb, the easier it grows;

Therefore, when the ascent of it shall seem 91
Right pleasant to thee, and the going smooth
As when a boat floats downward with the stream,

That will be journey’s end, and then in sooth 94
After long toil look thou for ease at last;
More I can’t say, but this I know for truth.”

He’d hardly spoken when, from somewhere fast 97
Beside us, came a voice which said: “Maybe
Thou’lt need to sit ere all that road is passed.”

At this we both glanced round inquiringly, 100
And on our left observed a massive boulder,
Which up till then we had not chanced to see.

This, when explored, revealed to the beholder 103
A group of persons lounging in the shade,
As lazy people lounge, behind its shoulder.

And one of them, whose attitude displayed 106
Extreme fatigue, sat there and clasped his knees,
Drooping between them his exhausted head.

“O good my lord,” said I, “pray look at this 109
Bone-lazy lad, content to sit and settle
Like sloth’s own brother taking of his ease!”

Then he gave heed, and turning just a little 112
Only his face upon his thigh, he grunted:
“Go up then, thou, thou mighty man of mettle.”

I knew him then; and proved that, though I panted 115
Still from the climb, I was not so bereft
Of breath, I could not reach him if I wanted.

When I drew near him he would scarcely shift 118
His head to say: “Nay, hast thou, really though,
Grasped why the sun’s car drives upon thy left?”

My lips twitched at the grudging speech, and slow 121
Gestures. “Belacqua,” I began, “I see
I need not grieve for thee henceforward; no,

But tell me: why dost thou resignedly 124
Sit here? Is it for escort thou must wait?
Or have old habits overtaken thee?”

“Brother,” said he, “what use to go up yet? 127
He’d not admit me to the cleansing pain,
That bird of God who perches at the gate.

My lifetime long the heavens must wheel again 130
Round me, that to my parting hour put off
My healing sighs; and I meanwhile remain

Outside, unless prayer hasten my remove — 133
Prayer from a heart in grace; for who sets store
By other kinds, which are not heard above?”

But now the poet was going on before; ¹³⁶
“Forward!” said he; “look how the sun doth stand
Meridian-high, while on the Western shore
Night sets her foot upon Morocco’s strand.” ¹³⁹

The Images.

The Late-Repentant: (1) *The Indolent* The whole of the Second Terrace is occupied by those who, while remaining in the fold of the Church, yet for one reason or another postponed repentance until their last hour (*in articulo mortis*). Like the Excommunicate, they are punished by a delay, extending in this case for a period equal to the length of their earthly lives. This first and lowest group comprises those who have their own laziness to blame for their procrastination, and who therefore spend their time sitting about, enduring the indolence in which they used to indulge. Like the Excommunicate, they have no prayer allotted to them: even in this they must remain idle.

Notes.

l. 6: *that soul is kindled above soul in us:* Dante is here repudiating the theory (ascribed to Plato, and reproduced with some modifications by the Manichaeans) that man possesses a plurality of souls, each with its own organs. Aristotle combats this theory; and so does St Thomas Aquinas (*S.T. I.I^o, q. 26, a. 3*) giving among other reasons, the fact that “when one operation of the mind is intense, it impedes others, a thing which could nowise happen unless the principle of actions was essentially one”. This is Dante’s argument here. (For the full Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine of the three powers, Nutritive, Sensitive, and Intellectual, blended to form “one single soul complete”, see *Purg. xxv. 52 sqq.* and notes.)

l. 10-12: *that which marks it, etc.:* The general sense of the passage is clear, but there is some ambiguity in the use of the words *questa* (this) and *quella* (that). If, as in modern usage, *questa* means “the latter” and *quella*

“the former”, the sense is: “the faculty which by its apprehension engages our whole attention is bound, or yoked, to the soul, and that which marks the passage of time is disengaged”. (Using a twentieth-century analogy, we might say that the one is “in gear”, the other “ticking over idly in neutral”.) But if, as in *Purg. xxv. 52-4*, *questa* means “the first-mentioned”, then the sense is: “the time-sense is impeded and the other (the apprehending faculty) free to function.”

l. 16: *fifty degrees:* the sun passes over 15 every hour; it is now 50 above the horizon; therefore, sunrise being at 6 a.m., it is now about 9.30 a.m.

l. 24: *when that flock left us: the* Excommunicate could not, of course, go up with the Poets, but had to wander round the first Terrace till their allotted time was accomplished.

l. 25-6: *You can mount up, etc.:* *San Leo:* a small town on a precipitous ridge, in the ancient Duchy of Urbino; *Noli:* a little town v the foot of the Capo di Noli, which is now on the Corniche road, but in Dante’s time could be reached only from the sea or by scrambling down steps cut in the rocks above it; *Bismantova:* on the highest peak of the mountains near Reggio, in Emilia.

l. 41: *the line from centre ... to mid-quadrant:* the angle of the quadrant is 90; the gradient was therefore steeper than 45.

l. 48: *a ledge of rock:* this is the Second Terrace.

l. 57: *so that he smote us on the leftward hand:* they were south of the equator, so that they saw the sun passing to the north of them; i.e. to their left, since they were looking east.

l. 60: *Aquilo:* the (quarter of the) North wind.

ll. 61-2: *Castor ... and Pollux:* “If it were June instead of March, and the Sun therefore in Gemini (the sign of the Twins, Castor and Pollux), which is further north of the equator than Aries, where the Sun is now, the kindled Zodiac (i.e. that part of the Zodiac in which the Sun is) would lie still nearer

to the Great and Little Bears (*Ursa Major* and *Ursa Minor*, indicating the N. Pole) than it does at present.” Just as in the N. Hemisphere the sun is lower in the sky (i.e. further *south*) in December, so in the S. Hemisphere it is lower (i.e. further *north*) in June (the antipodean winter) than it is at the equinoxes (March and September). See diagram, .

l. 62-3: *that burning mirror*: the Sun, which receives the divine light from above (i.e. from the Empyrean) and reflects it upward to God and downward to the earth.

l. 68-70: *think of Zion*, etc.: “Think of Purgatory as being at the exact antipodes of Zion (Jerusalem).” The horizon is here not, of course, the *visible* but the *astronomical* horizon: “a great circle of the celestial sphere, the plane of which passes through the centre of the earth and is parallel to the sensible [visible] horizon of a given place.” (O.E.D.)

l. 71: *that road ill-tried by Phaeton*: the ecliptic, the sun’s path along the Zodiac. (For *Phaeton*, see *Inf.* xvii. 107 and note.) The ecliptic always lies midway between any point on the earth and its antipodes.

ll. 79-84: *the Equator of the sky*, etc.: “The celestial equator (for we are now speaking in terms of the astronomical ‘art’), always lies between winter and the sun (summer); so that when it is summer in one hemisphere it is winter in the other.” Dante now grasps that he is at the antipodes of Jerusalem, with all the astronomical implications which Virgil has pointed out. He has confused the matter for us slightly by introducing an irrelevant time-element: “the equator is as far north of *us now* in Purgatory as it was south of the *ancient Hebrews in past years* at Jerusalem.” It would, naturally, be equally far south of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in 1300 or at any other time. I suspect that Dante was not quite sure what to call the contemporary population of Jerusalem, in view of the Dispersion of the Jews and the Moslem occupation of Palestine.

l. 88 *sqq.*: *This mount is such*, etc.: Virgil’s generalization (that the life of penitence gets easier as it goes along) is elucidated in Cantos xii and xxvii.

l. 122: *Belacqua*: according to the old commentators, a Florentine maker of musical instruments notorious for his indolence, for which Dante, who knew him well, often used to rebuke him.

l. 129: *that bird of God*: the angel who guards the entrance to Purgatory proper (see Canto ix. 78 *sqq.*).

ll. 137-9: *the sun doth stand meridian-high*, etc.: it is noon in Purgatory, and in the N. Hemisphere Night stretches right across the inhabited world to its western limit in Morocco (see clock diagram between pages 350 and 351).