

## Canto X



THE STORY. *As Peter's Gate clangs to behind them, the Poets begin climbing the steep and narrow zigzag cleft in the rock which leads to the First Cornice. This, when they get there, turns out to be a ledge some eighteen feet wide running all round the Mountain, and, at the moment of their arrival, quite empty from end to end. The face of the cliff opposite the mouth of the hollow way is adorned with sculptured examples of the Great Humilities: and while they are examining these, they see a company of the Proud approaching, each one bent double beneath the weight of an enormous stone.*

When we had crossed the threshold of that gate <sup>1</sup>  
Which the soul's evil loves put out of use,  
Because they make the crooked path seem straight,

I heard its closing clang ring clamorous, <sup>4</sup>  
And had I then turned back my eyes to it  
How could my fault have found the least excuse?

We had to climb now through a rocky slit <sup>7</sup>  
Which ran from side to side in many a swerve,  
As runs the wave in onset and retreat.

"Now here," the master said, "we must observe <sup>xo</sup> <sup>10</sup>  
Some little caution, hugging now this wall,  
Now that, upon the far side of the curve."

These labours made our steps so slow and small <sup>13</sup>  
That the diminished moon from out the sky

l. 114: *within there*: i.e. within the Gate, in Purgatory.

l. 119: *with the white first*: the penitent's disposition must be right before the authority to pardon is exercised.

ll. 127-9: *who bade me err*, etc.: we need not make heavy weather about the possibility of the Angel's "erring". The meaning is that, provided the penitent has whole-heartedly submitted to the Church's authority (l. 29), the most merciful and generous view is to be taken of his case.

l. 131-2: *back outside he goes*, etc.: in the *literal* sense it is not possible that a saved soul should "look behind him" (i.e. falter in his purpose of purification): the *allegorical* sense has here taken charge of the passage. (But see Introduction, .)

l. 135: *they cried aloud*: the pivots are rusty because so few men take the way of salvation ("strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." *Matt.* vii. 14: and cf. *Purg.* x. 2).

l. 136-8: *Tarpeia*, etc.: the Roman treasury was kept in the Temple of Saturn on the Tarpeian Hill. Lucan (see *Inf.* iv. 90 and Glossary) in his *Pharsalia* tells how the tribune Metellus was prevented by a colleague from holding it against Julius Caesar, when he entered Rome in 49 B.C. (see Glossary: Caesar, Julius): "When Metellus had been led away, forthwith the temple was flung open. Then did the Tarpeian Rock re-echo, and with a loud peal bear witness to the opening of the doors" (*Phars.* iii. 153-68).

l. 141: *Te Deum laudamus*: "We praise thee, O God": the great hymn written by St Ambrose on the occasion of St Augustine's conversion. It is usually sung on Festival, not on penitential, occasions. Here it is perhaps chosen with reference to *Luke* xv. 10; though some writers suggest that it is sung, not by any angel (cf. xxvii. 58 and note) but by the spirits in Purgatory for joy that a new soul has entered on the way of purification, just as they sing the *Gloria in excelsis* whenever a purified soul is released from his pains (*Purg.* xxi. 58-60).

Back to her restful bed had time to fall

Before we'd threaded through that needle's eye. 16  
But when we had come up and out to where  
The hill's face was set back, there he and I

Stood still, I weary, both quite unaware 19  
Which way to turn us, on a level place  
Bare as a desert track, and lonelier.

From where the brink verges on empty space 22  
Back to the foot of the still-soaring height,  
'Twould measure thrice a man's length more or less;

And far as e'er my eye could wing its flight, 25  
Still just the same, throughout its whole extent,  
The Cornice seemed, whether to left or right.

Now, while we stood up there, and ere we went 28  
One step, I saw how that rock-bastion  
Which, rising sheer, showed no means of ascent,

Was pure white marble, and had carved thereon 31  
Sculptures so rare, that Polyclète — nay, more —  
Nature might blush there, being so outdone.

The angel that to earth came down and bore 34  
The edict of the age-long wept-for peace  
Which broke the long ban and unbarred Heaven's door,

Appeared to us, with such a lively ease 37  
Carved, and so gracious there in act to move,

It seemed not one of your dumb images;

You'd swear an *Ave* from his lips breathed off, 40  
For she was shown there too, who turned the key  
To unlock the treasure of the most high love;

And in her mien those words stood plain to see: 43  
*Ecce ancilla Dei*, stamped by art  
Express as any seal on wax could be.

"Do not restrict thy gaze to this one part," 46  
Prompted my gentle guide, who had me now  
That side of him on which men wear the heart.

Wherefore I turned mine eyes and witnessed how, 49  
At Mary's back, to right of me, where stayed  
He who thus urged me on, the mountain's brow

Showed a new story carven and portrayed; 52  
So, passing across Virgil, I drew near,  
The better to observe the scene displayed.

And sculptured in the living marble here 55  
Oxen and wain that holy Ark were bringing,  
Whence all who snatch at office should learn fear;

And here the folk in seven great choirs went singing 58  
Ahead, so that two wits of mine contended:  
One said, "No, no," the other, "Yes, they're singing."

So likewise from the thuribles ascended 61  
Such pictured smoke as brought from eyes and nose

Their ay and no contrarily blended.

Before the sacred vessel, girded close, <sup>64</sup>  
His dancing feet the humble Psalmist plied,  
And more than king in this and less he was.

Here Michal's image, on the other side, <sup>67</sup>  
Looked on from a great palace window, seeming  
A scornful lady and a mortified.

I moved from where I stood, to scan this limning <sup>70</sup>  
More close at hand, and saw another story  
Behind the back of Michal whitely gleaming.

And there in stone narrated was the glory <sup>73</sup>  
Of the great Roman prince, whose virtues wooed  
Gregory to conquer Heaven with oratory;

I mean the Emperor Trajan; there he rode; <sup>76</sup>  
And a poor widow to his bridle clung,  
Tears and bereavement in her attitude.

Horsemen surged round him in a trampling throng, <sup>79</sup>  
And visibly above him in the breeze  
The golden-fielded eagles flapped and swung.

There the distressful wretch amid all these <sup>82</sup>  
Appeared to say: "Avenge me, lord! my son  
Is slain, my heart cracked through with miseries."

"Wait now," he seemed to answer, "and anon <sup>85</sup>  
I shall return." And, "O my lord," again

She seemed to cry, like one whom grief goads on,

"If thou return not?" He: "My heir shall then <sup>88</sup>  
Do all." But she: "If thou canst so forget  
Good faith, what boots thee that of other men?"

He therefore: "Be consoled; it is right meet <sup>91</sup>  
I do my duty ere I quit this spot;  
Justice requires it, reverence stays my feet."

He unto whom no sight is strange thus wrought <sup>94</sup>  
Visible speech, a strange thing in our eyes,  
Since in this world of ours we find it not.

The image of the great humilities <sup>97</sup>  
Still held me thrall'd — a sight beyond compare  
And, for the Craftsman's sake, beyond all price,

When, "Look!" the poet murmured, "over there <sup>100</sup>  
Comes on, but very slowly, quite a throng;  
They will direct us to the upward stair."

My eyes turned promptly toward him, for a strong <sup>103</sup>  
Desire possessed them (it's the way I'm made)  
To see whate'er new thing might come along.

Reader, I would not have you turn dismayed <sup>106</sup>  
From good resolves, for having heard me say  
How God ordains our debt should be repaid;

Heed not the form of the affliction — nay, <sup>109</sup>  
Think of what follows; pray you, think, this woe

Cannot, at worst, outlast the Judgement Day.

“Master,” I faltered, “that which creeps so slow 112  
This way — it does not look to me like men;  
It’s like — my sight’s at fault — I just don’t know.”

And he to me: “Their heavy load of pain 115  
So bows them down that I was doubtful quite  
Myself at first and could not see them plain.

Look hard, and disentangle with thy sight 118  
What walks beneath those stones; they’re clear to thee  
By now — thou seest them on their bosoms smite.”

Alas, proud Christians, faint with misery, 121  
So warped of vision in the inward sense  
You trust in your backslidings! Don’t you see

That we are worms, whose insignificance 124  
Lives but to form the angelic butterfly  
That flits to judgement naked of defence?

Why do you let pretension soar so high, 127  
Being as it were but larvae — grubs that lack  
The finished form that shall be by and by?

As, for a corbel, holding on its back 130  
Ceiling or roof, one sometimes sees a figure  
Cramped knees to chest, so that real twinges rack

One’s joints at sight of that unreal rigour, 133  
So did I see those spirits in distress

When I surveyed them with my mind’s full vigour,

And true it is, they were cramped more or less 136  
As more or less upon their backs they bore;  
Even he who showed most patience in duress

Seeming to say with tears: “I can no more.” 139

*The Images.*

(1) *Lower Purgatory: Love Perverted.* (See Introduction, p-7.)

*Cornice 1: Pride.* Taken in its wider aspect, *Pride (Superbia)* is the head and root of all sin, both original and actual. It is the endeavour to be “as God”, making self, instead of God, the centre about which the will and desire revolve. In its narrower and more specific aspect, pride exhibits itself as *Vainglory (Vana gloria)* — an egotism so overweening that it cannot bear to occupy any place but the first, and hates and despises all fellow-creatures out of sheer lust of domination. Some theologians separate these two aspects, placing *Pride* in a class by itself, as the generic sin of which *Vainglory* and the rest are the species: but Dante follows the more usual arrangement which puts *Pride* and *Vainglory* together as the first of the Seven Capital Sins.

*Notes.*

1. 2: *the soul’s evil loves*: in this phrase Dante adumbrates the definition which Virgil will give later, of love as the root of all vice as well as of all virtue (see Introduction, ).

1. 3: *they make the crooked path seem straight*: the pursuit of a fancied good, which we take to be the true good, makes us mistake our aberrations for the *diritta via*, the road, in Bunyan’s words “straight as a rule can make it”.

11. 7-12: *we had to climb*: that the poets were scrambling up a steep, zigzag cleft or “chimney” in the rock, everybody agrees: but of the details of

the performance there are as many explanations as there are translators and commentators. (See Appendix.)

l. 14-16: *the diminished moon*, etc.: the moon, which had been full on the night of Good Friday, and was now three days on the wane, had set by the time they emerged from the cleft: i.e. it was after 9.30 a.m.

l. 16: *that needle's eye*: Ref. *Matt.* xix. 24, *Mark* x. 25, *Luke* xvii, 25.

l. 28: *ere we went one step*: the poets are standing with their backs to the cleft by which they have just ascended, with Dante on Virgil's left (l. 48), facing the wall of the cornice, some 15-18 feet away *Q.* 24). At l. 53, Dante crosses to stand on Virgil's right.

l. 32: *sculptures*: these are the "Whip of Pride" (see Introduction, p-8), exhibiting examples of Humility. *Polyclete* (Polycletus) the Greek sculptor, who *fl.* about 480 B.C., is frequently mentioned by Aristotle.

l. 34 *sqq.*: *the angel*, etc.: The first example, from the life of the B.V.M., is the Annunciation; it exhibits (a) God's humility in stooping to become Man, (b) Mary's humility in accepting her Divine burden.

l. 40: *Ave* (Hail): the opening word of the Angel's salutation: "Hail, thou that art highly favoured" (*Luke* i. 28).

l. 41: *the key*: "*The key of David opens and no man shuts* (*Rev.* iii. 7). The Son of David is the Key of David, Christ Jesus; He hath opened Heaven for us all" (John Donne: *Sermon for Easter Day*, 1629). The anthem *O clavis David* ("O Key of David") is sung at the end of Advent.

l. 44: *ecce ancilla Dei* (for *Domini*): "behold the handmaid of God" (*Luke* i. 38).

ll. 56 *sqq.*: *oxen and wain*, etc.: The next two examples, from the O.T. and classical history respectively, exhibit Humility towards man. For King David, dancing before the Ark of the Covenant, and the contempt of his wife Michal, see 2 *Sam.* vi.

l. 57: *all who snatch at office*: Uzzah, who officiously laid his hand on the sacrosanct Ark to steady it, was struck dead (2 *Sam.* vi. 6-7).

l. 64: *girded close*: "and David danced before the Lord with all his might: and David was girded with a linen ephod" (2 *Sam.* vi. 14).

ll. 74 *sqq.*: *the great Roman prince*, etc.: The legend of Trajan (see Glossary) and the poor widow exists in various medieval versions, which also relate how St Gregory brought the dead emperor back from Hell by his prayers and baptized him to salvation. In *Para.* xx. 43-5 we meet Trajan in the Heaven of the Just.

l. 81: *the golden-fielded eagles*: Dante imagined the Roman imperial standards (actually poles surmounted by bronze figures) as flags of the modern type showing a black eagle on a gold field. They are so depicted, some hundred years after Dante's death, by Piero della Francesca in his great murals of the victories of Heraclius and Constantine in the church of S. Francesca at Arezzo.

l. 93: *reverence*: Dante's word is *pietà* — not here, I think, "pity", as it is usually translated, but "piety" (Lat. *pietas*): the religious reverence which dictates a sense of duty. The line is thus an echo of Cicero's phrase, "*pietas et justitia*".

l. 95: *visible speech*: It will be observed that, whereas the modern art critic is apt to praise the art of the Middle Ages for its symbolism and stylization, the medieval critic himself tended to rejoice in an almost photographic realism. This is not merely because, with Dante, we are drawing on towards the Second Renaissance; the preference is equally marked in, say, a poem like the *Tristan* of Thomas, in the middle of the twelfth century. It is, however, not quite fair to say that Dante's artistic ideal would have been that bunch of grapes which was so deceptively lifelike that a fly came and settled on it; for he mentions expressly that the reliefs were

not naturalistically coloured, but executed in white marble. The quality he admires is not so much realism as a (literally) supernatural *expressiveness*.

I. 99 *for the Craftsman's sake*: the reliefs are carved by God's own hand — or (more probably, on the analogy of the engineering works of Hell, *Inf.* xv. 11 and note) by an Intelligence under His direction.

I. 101: *a throng*: these are the Proud, whose penance will presently be described. (See Images for Canto xi.)

II. 110-11: *this woe cannot, at worst, outlive the Judgement Day*: Purgatory is temporal, and its pains end when time ends (though for most souls they will, of course, end long before that).

l. 124-9: *that we are worms*, etc.: “we have nothing in this world to be proud about, since we are but half-finished beings — grubs existing only to produce the butterfly (emblem of the soul), which, when it leaves the body, must fly to stand naked and defenceless before the judgement-seat.”

## Canto XI



THE STORY. *THE penitent Proud draw near, saying the Lord's Prayer. Virgil inquires the way, and is told by Humbert Aldobrandesco to turn right and go along with them until the stair is reached. While Humbert is telling his own story and asking for prayers, Dante hears another soul calling him and recognizes the painter Oderisi, who discourses upon the vanity of earthly fame. Oderisi then points out his fellow-penitent, Provenzano Salvani, who by one great act of humility performed for loves sake obtained release from the place of waiting and immediate admission to Purgatory.*

“Our Father, dwelling in the Heavens, nowise 1  
As circumscribed, but as the things above,  
Thy first effects, are dearest in Thine eyes,

Hallowed Thy name be and the Power thereof, 4  
By every creature, as right meet it is  
We praise the tender effluence of Thy Love.

Let come to us, let come Thy Kingdom's peace; 7  
If it come not, we've no power of our own  
To come to it, for all our subtleties.

Like as with glad Hosannas at Thy throne 10  
Thine angels offer up their wills always,  
So let men offer theirs, that Thine be done.

Our daily manna give to us this day, 13  
Without which he that through this desert wild