

## CANTO XVII.

### ARGUMENT.

The Poet issues from that thick vapour; and soon after his fancy represents to him in lively portraiture some noted examples of anger. This imagination is dissipated by the appearance of an angel, who marshals them onward to the fourth cornice, on which the sin of gloominess or indifference is purged; and here Virgil shows him that this vice proceeds from a defect of love, and that all love can be only of two sorts, either natural, or of the soul; of which sorts the former is always right, but the latter may err either in respect of object or of degree.

CALL to remembrance, reader, if thou e'er  
Hast on an Alpine height<sup>1</sup> been ta'en by cloud,  
Through which thou saw'st no better than the mole  
Doth through opacous membrane; then, whene'er  
The watery vapours dense began to melt  
Into thin air, how faintly the sun's sphere  
Seem'd wading through them: so thy nimble thought  
May image, how at first I rebeheld  
The sun, that bedward now his couch o'erhung.  
Thus, with my leader's feet still equaling pace,  
From forth that cloud I came, when now expired  
The parting beams from off the nether shores.  
O quick and forgetive power! that sometimes dost  
So rob us of ourselves, we take no mark  
Though round about us thousand trumpets clang;  
What moves thee, if the senses stir not? Light  
Moves thee from heaven, spontaneous, self-inform'd;  
Or, likelier, gliding down with swift illapse

<sup>1</sup> *On an Alpine height.*—"Nell' alpe." Although the Alps, as Landino remarks, are properly those mountains which divide Italy from France, yet from them all high mountains are in the Tuscan language, though not in the Latin, termed Alps. Milton uses the word thus generally in the "Samson Agonistes:"

"Nor breath of vernal air from snowy Alp."

And this is a sufficient answer to the charge of impropriety, which is brought by Dr. Johnson, on the introduction of it into that drama. See the *Rambler*, No. 140.

By will divine. Portray'd before me came  
The traces of her dire impiety,  
Whose form was changed into the bird, that most  
Delights itself in song:<sup>1</sup> and here my mind  
Was inwardly so wrapt, it gave no place  
To aught that ask'd admittance from without.  
Next shower'd into my fantasy a shape  
As of one crucified,<sup>2</sup> whose visage spake  
Fell rancour, malice deep, wherein he died;  
And round him Ahasuerus the great king;  
Esther his bride; and Mordecai the just,  
Blameless in word and deed. As of itself  
That unsubstantial coinage of the brain  
Burst, like a bubble,<sup>3</sup> when the water fails  
That fed it; in my vision straight uprose  
A damsel weeping loud, and cried, "O queen!  
O mother! wherefore has intemperate ire  
Driven thee to loathe thy being? Not to lose  
Lavinia, desperate thou hast slain thyself.

<sup>1</sup> *The bird, that most delights itself in song.*—I cannot think, with Vellutello, that the swallow is here meant. Dante probably alludes to the story of Philomela, as it is found in Homer's "Odyssey," b. xix. 518, rather than as later poets have told it. "She intended to slay the son of her husband's brother Amphion, incited to it by the envy of his wife, who had six children, while herself had only two, but through mistake slew her own son Itylus, and for her punishment was transformed by Jupiter into a nightingale." Cowper's note on this passage. In speaking of the nightingale, let me observe, that while some have considered its song as melancholy, and others as a cheerful one, Chiabrera appears to have come nearest the truth, when he says, in the "Alcippo," act i., sc. 1:—

"Non mai si stanca d'itar le note,  
O gioconde o dogliose,  
Al sentir dilettose."

"Unwearied still reiterates her lays,  
Jocund or sad, delightful to the ear."  
See a very pleasing letter on this subject by a late illustrious statesman, "*Address to the reader prefixed to Fox's History of James II.*" edit. 1808, p. xii.;

and a beautiful poem by Mr. Coleridge. I know not whether the following lines by a neglected poet have yet been noticed, as showing the diversity of opinions that have prevailed respecting the song of this bird:

"The cheerful birds  
With sweetest notes to sing their Maker's praise,  
Among the which, the merrie nightingale  
With swete and swete, her breast against a thorn,  
Ringes out all night."

*Vallans, Tale of Two Swannes.*

<sup>2</sup> *One crucified.*—Haman. See the book of Esther, c. vii. "In the Lunetta of Haman, we owe the sublime conception of his figure (by Michael Angelo) to this passage."—*Fuseli*, Lecture iii., note.

<sup>3</sup> *Like a bubble.*—

"The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,  
And these are of them."

*Shakespeare, Macbeth*, act i., sc. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *A damsel.*—Lavinia, mourning for her mother Amata, who, impelled by grief and indignation for the supposed death of Turnus, destroyed herself.—*Aeneid*, lib. xii. 595.



Now hast thou lost me. I am she, whose tears  
Mourn, ere I fall, a mother's timeless end."

E'en as a sleep breaks off, if suddenly  
New radiance strike upon the closed lids,  
The broken slumber quivering ere it dies;<sup>1</sup>  
Thus, from before me, sunk that imagery,  
Vanishing, soon as on my face there struck  
The light, outshining far our earthly beam.  
As round I turn'd me to survey what place  
I had arrived at, "Here ye mount:" exclaim'd  
A voice, that other purpose left me none  
Save will so eager to behold who spake,  
I could not chuse but gaze. As 'fore the sun,  
That weighs our vision down, and veils his form  
In light transcendent, thus my virtue fail'd  
Unequal. "This is Spirit from above,  
Who marshals us our upward way, unsought;  
And in his own light shrouds him. As a man  
Doth for himself, so now is done for us.  
For whoso waits imploring, yet sees need  
Of his prompt aidance, sets himself prepared  
For blunt denial, ere the suit be made.  
Refuse we not to lend a ready foot  
At such inviting: haste we to ascend,  
Before it darken: for we may not then,  
Till morn again return." So spake my guide;  
And to one ladder both address'd our steps;  
And the first stair approaching, I perceived  
Near me as 't were the waving of a wing,  
That fann'd my face, and whisper'd: "Blessed they,  
The peacemakers:"<sup>2</sup> they know not evil wrath."

<sup>1</sup> *The broken slumber quivering ere it dies.*—Venturi suggests that this bold and unusual metaphor may have been formed on that in Virgil:

"Tempus erat quo prima quies mortalibus ægris  
Incipit, et dono divum gratissima serpit."

*Æneid*, lib. ii. 268.

<sup>2</sup> *The peacemakers.*—"Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God."—Matt. v. 9.

Now to such height above our heads were raised  
The last beams, follow'd close by hooded night,  
That many a star on all sides through the gloom  
Shone out. "Why partest from me, O my strength?"  
So with myself I communed; for I felt  
My o'ertoil'd sinews slacken. We had reach'd  
The summit, and were fix'd like to a bark  
Arrived at land. And waiting a short space,  
If aught should meet mine ear in that new round,  
Then to my guide I turn'd, and said: "Loved sire!  
Declare what guilt is on this circle purged.  
If our feet rest, no need thy speech should pause."

He thus to me: "The love<sup>1</sup> of good, whate'er  
Wanted of just proportion, here fulfils.  
Here plies afresh the oar, that loiter'd ill.  
But that thou mayst yet clearer understand,  
Give ear unto my words; and thou shalt cull  
Some fruit may please thee well, from this delay.

"Creator, nor created being, e'er,  
My son," he thus began, "was without love,  
Or natural,<sup>2</sup> or the free spirit's growth.  
Thou hast not that to learn. The natural still  
Is without error: but the other swerves,  
If on ill object bent, or through excess  
Of vigour, or defect. While e'er it seeks<sup>3</sup>  
The primal blessings,<sup>4</sup> or with measure due  
The inferior,<sup>5</sup> no delight, that flows from it,  
Partakes of ill. But let it warp to evil,  
Or with more ardour than behoves, or less,

<sup>1</sup> *The love.*—"A defect in our love towards God, or lukewarmness in piety, is here removed."

<sup>2</sup> *Or natural.*—Lombardi refers to the "Convito," Canz. i., Tratt. 2, cap. 3, where this subject is diffusely treated by our poet.

<sup>3</sup> *While e'er it seeks.*—So Frezzi:

"E s'egli è ben, che d'altro ben dipenda,  
Non s'ami quasi per se esistente,

Se vuoi, che quando è tolto, non t'offenda."

*Il Quadriregio*, lib. ii., cap. 14.

This Capitolo, which describes the punishment of those who give way to inordinate grief for the loss of their kindred, is marked by much power of imagination and a sublime morality.

<sup>4</sup> *The primal blessings.*—Spiritual good.

<sup>5</sup> *The inferior.*—Temporal good.