

Hell's dunnest gloom, or night unlustrous, dark,
Of every planes 'reft, and pall'd in clouds,
Did never spread before the sight a veil
In thickness like that fog, nor to the sense
So palpable and gross. Ent'ring its shade,
Mine eye endured not with unclosed lids;
Which marking, near me drew the faithful guide,
Offering me his shoulder for a stay.

As the blind man behind his leader walks,
Lest he should err, or stumble unawares
On what might harm him, or perhaps destroy,
I journey'd through that bitter air and foul,
Still list'ning to my escort's warning voice,
"Look that from me thou part not." Straight I heard
Voices, and each one seem'd to pray for peace,
And for compassion, to the Lamb of God
That taketh sins away. Their prelude still
Was "Agnus Dei," and through all the choir,
One voice, one measure ran, that perfect seem'd
The concord of their song. "Are these I hear
Spirits, O master?" I exclaim'd; and he:
"Thou aim'st aright: these loose the bonds of wrath."

"Now who art thou, that through our smoke dost cleave?
And speak'st of us, as thou thyself e'en yet
Dividest time by calends?" So one voice

Bespake me; whence my master said: "Reply;
And ask, if upward hence the passage lead."

"O being! who dost make thee pure, to stand
Beautiful once more in thy Maker's sight!
Along with me: and thou shalt hear and wonder."
Thus I, whereto the spirit answering spake:

"Long as 't is lawful for me, shall my steps
Follow on thine; and since the cloudy smoke
Forbids the seeing, hearing in its stead
Shall keep us join'd." I then forthwith began
"Yet in my mortal swathing, I ascend
To higher regions, and am hither come
Through the fearful agony of hell.
And, if so largely God hath doled his grace,
That, clean beside all modern precedent,
He wills me to behold his kingly state,
From me conceal not who thou wast, ere death
Had loos'd thee; but instruct me: and instruct
If rightly to the pass I tend; thy words
The way directing as a safe escort."

"I was of Lombardy, and Marco call'd:
Not inexperienc'd of the world, that worth
I still affected, from which all have turn'd
The nerveless bow aside. Thy course tends right

Unto the summit:" and, replying thus,
He added, "I beseech thee pray for me,
When thou shalt come aloft." And I to him:
"Accept my faith for pledge I will perform
What thou requirest. Yet one doubt remains,
That wrings me sorely, if I solve it not,
Singly before it urg'd me, doubled now
By thine opinion, when I couple that
With one elsewhere declar'd, each strength'ning other.
The world indeed is even so forlorn
Of all good as thou speak'st it and so swarms
With every evil. Yet, beseech thee, point
The cause out to me, that myself may see,
And unto others show it: for in heaven
One places it, and one on earth below."

Then heaving forth a deep and audible sigh,
"Brother!" he thus began, "the world is blind;
And thou in truth com'st from it. Ye, who live,
Do so each cause refer to heav'n above,
E'en as its motion of necessity
Drew with it all that moves. If this were so,
Free choice in you were none; nor justice would
There should be joy for virtue, woe for ill.
Your movements have their primal bent from heaven;
Not all; yet said I all; what then ensues?
Light have ye still to follow evil or good,

And of the will free power, which, if it stand
Firm and unwearied in Heav'n's first assay,
Conquers at last, so it be cherish'd well,
Triumphant over all. To mightier force,
To better nature subject, ye abide
Free, not constrain'd by that, which forms in you
The reasoning mind uninfluenc'd of the stars.
If then the present race of mankind err,
Seek in yourselves the cause, and find it there.
Herein thou shalt confess me no false spy.

"Forth from his plastic hand, who charm'd beholds
Her image ere she yet exist, the soul
Comes like a babe, that wantons sportively
Weeping and laughing in its wayward moods,
As artless and as ignorant of aught,
Save that her Maker being one who dwells
With gladness ever, willingly she turns
To whate'er yields her joy. Of some slight good
The flavour soon she tastes; and, snar'd by that,
With fondness she pursues it, if no guide
Recall, no rein direct her wand'ring course.
Hence it behov'd, the law should be a curb;
A sovereign hence behov'd, whose piercing view
Might mark at least the fortress and main tower
Of the true city. Laws indeed there are:
But who is he observes them? None; not he,

Who goes before, the shepherd of the flock,
Who chews the cud but doth not cleave the hoof.
Therefore the multitude, who see their guide
Strike at the very good they covet most,
Feed there and look no further. Thus the cause
Is not corrupted nature in yourselves,
But ill-conducting, that hath turn'd the world
To evil. Rome, that turn'd it unto good,
Was wont to boast two suns, whose several beams
Cast light on either way, the world's and God's.
One since hath quench'd the other; and the sword
Is grafted on the crook; and so conjoin'd
Each must perforce decline to worse, unaw'd
By fear of other. If thou doubt me, mark
The blade: each herb is judg'd of by its seed.
That land, through which Adice and the Po
Their waters roll, was once the residence
Of courtesy and velour, ere the day,
That frown'd on Frederick; now secure may pass
Those limits, whosoe'er hath left, for shame,
To talk with good men, or come near their haunts.
Three aged ones are still found there, in whom
The old time chides the new: these deem it long
Ere God restore them to a better world:
The good Gherardo, of Palazzo he
Conrad, and Guido of Castello, nam'd
In Gallic phrase more fitly the plain Lombard.

On this at last conclude. The church of Rome,
Mixing two governments that ill assort,
Hath miss'd her footing, fall'n into the mire,
And there herself and burden much defil'd."

"O Marco!" I replied, shine arguments
Convince me: and the cause I now discern
Why of the heritage no portion came
To Levi's offspring. But resolve me this
Who that Gherardo is, that as thou sayst
Is left a sample of the perish'd race,
And for rebuke to this untoward age?"

"Either thy words," said he, "deceive; or else
Are meant to try me; that thou, speaking Tuscan,
Appear'st not to have heard of good Gherado;
The sole addition that, by which I know him;
Unless I borrow'd from his daughter Gaia
Another name to grace him. God be with you.
I bear you company no more. Behold
The dawn with white ray glimm'ring through the mist.
I must away—the angel comes—ere he
Appear." He said, and would not hear me more.