

Freely the sage, though wrapt in musings high,  
Assum'd the teacher's part, and mild began:  
"The wound, that Mary clos'd, she open'd first,  
Who sits so beautiful at Mary's feet.  
The third in order, underneath her, lo!  
Rachel with Beatrice. Sarah next,  
Judith, Rebecca, and the gleaner maid,  
Meek ancestress of him, who sang the songs  
Of sore repentance in his sorrowful mood.  
All, as I name them, down from deaf to leaf,  
Are in gradation throned on the rose.  
And from the seventh step, successively,  
Adown the breathing tresses of the flow'r  
Still doth the file of Hebrew dames proceed.  
For these are a partition wall, whereby  
The sacred stairs are sever'd, as the faith  
In Christ divides them. On this part, where blooms  
Each leaf in full maturity, are set  
Such as in Christ, or ere he came, believ'd.  
On th' other, where an intersected space  
Yet shows the semicircle void, abide  
All they, who look'd to Christ already come.  
And as our Lady on her glorious stool,  
And they who on their stools beneath her sit,  
This way distinction make: e'en so on his,  
The mighty Baptist that way marks the line  
(He who endur'd the desert and the pains

Of martyrdom, and for two years of hell,  
Yet still continued holy), and beneath,  
Augustin, Francis, Benedict, and the rest,  
Thus far from round to round. So heav'n's decree  
Forecasts, this garden equally to fill.  
With faith in either view, past or to come,  
Learn too, that downward from the step, which cleaves  
Midway the twain compartments, none there are  
Who place obtain for merit of their own,  
But have through others' merit been advanc'd,  
On set conditions: spirits all releas'd,  
Ere for themselves they had the power to choose.  
And, if thou mark and listen to them well,  
Their childish looks and voice declare as much.

"Here, silent as thou art, I know thy doubt;  
And gladly will I loose the knot, wherein  
Thy subtle thoughts have bound thee. From this realm  
Excluded, chalice no entrance here may find,  
No more shall hunger, thirst, or sorrow can.  
A law immutable hath establish'd all;  
Nor is there aught thou seest, that doth not fit,  
Exactly, as the finger to the ring.  
It is not therefore without cause, that these,  
O'erspeedy comers to immortal life,  
Are different in their shares of excellence.  
Our Sovran Lord—that settleth this estate

In love and in delight so absolute,  
That wish can dare no further—every soul,  
Created in his joyous sight to dwell,  
With grace at pleasure variously endows.  
And for a proof th' effect may well suffice.  
And 't is moreover most expressly mark'd  
In holy scripture, where the twins are said  
To, have struggled in the womb. Therefore, as grace  
Inweaves the coronet, so every brow  
Weareth its proper hue of orient light.  
And merely in respect to his prime gift,  
Not in reward of meritorious deed,  
Hath each his several degree assign'd.  
In early times with their own innocence  
More was not wanting, than the parents' faith,  
To save them: those first ages past, behoov'd  
That circumcision in the males should imp  
The flight of innocent wings: but since the day  
Of grace hath come, without baptismal rites  
In Christ accomplish'd, innocence herself  
Must linger yet below. Now raise thy view  
Unto the visage most resembling Christ:  
For, in her splendour only, shalt thou win  
The pow'r to look on him." Forthwith I saw  
Such floods of gladness on her visage shower'd,  
From holy spirits, winging that profound;  
That, whatsoever I had yet beheld,

Had not so much suspended me with wonder,  
Or shown me such similitude of God.  
And he, who had to her descended, once,  
On earth, now hail'd in heav'n; and on pois'd wing.  
"Ave, Maria, Gratia Plena," sang:  
To whose sweet anthem all the blissful court,  
From all parts answ'ring, rang: that holier joy  
Brooded the deep serene. "Father rever'd:  
Who deign'st, for me, to quit the pleasant place,  
Wherein thou sittest, by eternal lot!  
Say, who that angel is, that with such glee  
Beholds our queen, and so enamour'd glows  
Of her high beauty, that all fire he seems."  
So I again resorted to the lore  
Of my wise teacher, he, whom Mary's charms  
Embellish'd, as the sun the morning star;  
Who thus in answer spake: "In him are summ'd,  
Whatever of buxomness and free delight  
May be in Spirit, or in angel, met:  
And so beseems: for that he bare the palm  
Down unto Mary, when the Son of God  
Vouchsaf'd to clothe him in terrestrial weeds.  
Now let thine eyes wait heedful on my words,  
And note thou of this just and pious realm  
The chiefest nobles. Those, highest in bliss,  
The twain, on each hand next our empress thron'd,  
Are as it were two roots unto this rose.

He to the left, the parent, whose rash taste  
Proves bitter to his seed; and, on the right,  
That ancient father of the holy church,  
Into whose keeping Christ did give the keys  
Of this sweet flow'r: near whom behold the seer,  
That, ere he died, saw all the grievous times  
Of the fair bride, who with the lance and nails  
Was won. And, near unto the other, rests  
The leader, under whom on manna fed  
Th' ungrateful nation, fickle and perverse.  
On th' other part, facing to Peter, lo!  
Where Anna sits, so well content to look  
On her lov'd daughter, that with moveless eye  
She chants the loud hosanna: while, oppos'd  
To the first father of your mortal kind,  
Is Lucia, at whose hest thy lady sped,  
When on the edge of ruin clos'd thine eye.

"But (for the vision hasteneth so an end)  
Here break we off, as the good workman doth,  
That shapes the cloak according to the cloth:  
And to the primal love our ken shall rise;  
That thou mayst penetrate the brightness, far  
As sight can bear thee. Yet, alas! in sooth  
Beating thy pennons, thinking to advance,  
Thou backward fall'st. Grace then must first be gain'd;  
Her grace, whose might can help thee. Thou in prayer

Seek her: and, with affection, whilst I sue,  
Attend, and yield me all thy heart." He said,  
And thus the saintly orison began.