

“The banners of Hell’s Monarch do come forth
Towards us; therefore look,” so spake my guide,
“If thou discern him.” As, when breathes a cloud
Heavy and dense, or when the shades of night
Fall on our hemisphere, seems view’d from far
A windmill, which the blast stirs briskly round,
Such was the fabric then methought I saw,

To shield me from the wind, forthwith I drew
Behind my guide: no covert else was there.

Now came I (and with fear I bid my strain
Record the marvel) where the souls were all
Whelm’d underneath, transparent, as through glass
Pellucid the frail stem. Some prone were laid,
Others stood upright, this upon the soles,
That on his head, a third with face to feet
Arch’d like a bow. When to the point we came,
Whereat my guide was pleas’d that I should see
The creature eminent in beauty once,
He from before me stepp’d and made me pause.

“Lo!” he exclaim’d, “lo Dis! and lo the place,
Where thou hast need to arm thy heart with strength.”

How frozen and how faint I then became,
Ask me not, reader! for I write it not,

Since words would fail to tell thee of my state.
I was not dead nor living. Think thyself
If quick conception work in thee at all,
How I did feel. That emperor, who sways
The realm of sorrow, at mid breast from th' ice
Stood forth; and I in stature am more like
A giant, than the giants are in his arms.
Mark now how great that whole must be, which suits
With such a part. If he were beautiful
As he is hideous now, and yet did dare
To scowl upon his Maker, well from him
May all our mis'ry flow. Oh what a sight!
How passing strange it seem'd, when I did spy
Upon his head three faces: one in front
Of hue vermilion, th' other two with this
Midway each shoulder join'd and at the crest;
The right 'twixt wan and yellow seem'd: the left
To look on, such as come from whence old Nile
Stoops to the lowlands. Under each shot forth
Two mighty wings, enormous as became
A bird so vast. Sails never such I saw
Outstretch'd on the wide sea. No plumes had they,
But were in texture like a bat, and these
He flapp'd i' th' air, that from him issued still
Three winds, wherewith Cocytus to its depth
Was frozen. At six eyes he wept: the tears
Adown three chins distill'd with bloody foam.

At every mouth his teeth a sinner champ'd
Bruis'd as with pond'rous engine, so that three
Were in this guise tormented. But far more
Than from that gnawing, was the foremost pang'd
By the fierce rending, whence ofttimes the back
Was stript of all its skin. "That upper spirit,
Who hath worse punishment," so spake my guide,
"Is Judas, he that hath his head within
And plies the feet without. Of th' other two,
Whose heads are under, from the murky jaw
Who hangs, is Brutus: lo! how he doth writhe
And speaks not! Th' other Cassius, that appears
So large of limb. But night now re-ascends,
And it is time for parting. All is seen."

I clipp'd him round the neck, for so he bade;
And noting time and place, he, when the wings
Enough were op'd, caught fast the shaggy sides,
And down from pile to pile descending stepp'd
Between the thick fell and the jagged ice.

Soon as he reach'd the point, whereat the thigh
Upon the swelling of the haunches turns,
My leader there with pain and struggling hard
Turn'd round his head, where his feet stood before,
And grappled at the fell, as one who mounts,
That into hell methought we turn'd again.

“Expect that by such stairs as these,” thus spake

The teacher, panting like a man forespent,

“We must depart from evil so extreme.”

Then at a rocky opening issued forth,

And plac’d me on a brink to sit, next join’d

With wary step my side. I rais’d mine eyes,

Believing that I Lucifer should see

Where he was lately left, but saw him now

With legs held upward. Let the grosser sort,

Who see not what the point was I had pass’d,

Bethink them if sore toil oppress’d me then.

“Arise,” my master cried, “upon thy feet.

The way is long, and much uncouth the road;

And now within one hour and half of noon

The sun returns.” It was no palace-hall

Lofty and luminous wherein we stood,

But natural dungeon where ill footing was

And scant supply of light. “Ere from th’ abyss

I sep’rate,” thus when risen I began,

“My guide! vouchsafe few words to set me free

From error’s thralldom. Where is now the ice?

How standeth he in posture thus revers’d?

And how from eve to morn in space so brief

Hath the sun made his transit?” He in few

Thus answering spake: “Thou deemest thou art still

On th' other side the centre, where I grasp'd
Th' abhorred worm, that boreth through the world.
Thou wast on th' other side, so long as I
Descended; when I turn'd, thou didst o'erpass
That point, to which from ev'ry part is dragg'd
All heavy substance. Thou art now arriv'd
Under the hemisphere opposed to that,
Which the great continent doth overspread,
And underneath whose canopy expir'd
The Man, that was born sinless, and so liv'd.
Thy feet are planted on the smallest sphere,
Whose other aspect is Judecca. Morn
Here rises, when there evening sets: and he,
Whose shaggy pile was scal'd, yet standeth fix'd,
As at the first. On this part he fell down
From heav'n; and th' earth, here prominent before,
Through fear of him did veil her with the sea,
And to our hemisphere retir'd. Perchance
To shun him was the vacant space left here
By what of firm land on this side appears,
That sprang aloof." There is a place beneath,
From Belzebub as distant, as extends
The vaulted tomb, discover'd not by sight,
But by the sound of brooklet, that descends
This way along the hollow of a rock,
Which, as it winds with no precipitous course,
The wave hath eaten. By that hidden way

My guide and I did enter, to return
To the fair world: and heedless of repose
We climbed, he first, I following his steps,
Till on our view the beautiful lights of heav'n
Dawn'd through a circular opening in the cave:
Thus issuing we again beheld the stars.

PURGATORY