

The natural thirst, ne'er quench'd but from the well,  
Whereof the woman of Samaria crav'd,  
Excited: haste along the cumber'd path,  
After my guide, impell'd; and pity mov'd  
My bosom for the 'vengeful deed, though just.  
When lo! even as Luke relates, that Christ  
Appear'd unto the two upon their way,  
New-risen from his vaulted grave; to us  
A shade appear'd, and after us approach'd,  
Contemplating the crowd beneath its feet.  
We were not ware of it; so first it spake,  
Saying, "God give you peace, my brethren!" then  
Sudden we turn'd: and Virgil such salute,  
As fitted that kind greeting, gave, and cried:  
"Peace in the blessed council be thy lot  
Awarded by that righteous court, which me  
To everlasting banishment exiles!"

"How!" he exclaim'd, nor from his speed meanwhile  
Desisting, "If that ye be spirits, whom God  
Vouchsafes not room above, who up the height  
Has been thus far your guide?" To whom the bard:  
"If thou observe the tokens, which this man  
Trac'd by the finger of the angel bears,  
'Tis plain that in the kingdom of the just  
He needs must share. But sithence she, whose wheel  
Spins day and night, for him not yet had drawn

That yarn, which, on the fatal distaff pil'd,  
Clotho apportions to each wight that breathes,  
His soul, that sister is to mine and thine,  
Not of herself could mount, for not like ours  
Her ken: whence I, from forth the ample gulf  
Of hell was ta'en, to lead him, and will lead  
Far as my lore avails. But, if thou know,  
Instruct us for what cause, the mount erewhile  
Thus shook and trembled: wherefore all at once  
Seem'd shouting, even from his wave-wash'd foot."

That questioning so tallied with my wish,  
The thirst did feel abatement of its edge  
E'en from expectance. He forthwith replied,  
"In its devotion nought irregular  
This mount can witness, or by punctual rule  
Unsanction'd; here from every change exempt.  
Other than that, which heaven in itself  
Doth of itself receive, no influence  
Can reach us. Tempest none, shower, hail or snow,  
Hoar frost or dewy moistness, higher falls  
Than that brief scale of threefold steps: thick clouds  
Nor scudding rack are ever seen: swift glance  
Ne'er lightens, nor Thaumantian Iris gleams,  
That yonder often shift on each side heav'n.  
Vapour adust doth never mount above  
The highest of the trinal stairs, whereon

Peter's vicegerent stands. Lower perchance,  
With various motion rock'd, trembles the soil:  
But here, through wind in earth's deep hollow pent,  
I know not how, yet never trembled: then  
Trembles, when any spirit feels itself  
So purified, that it may rise, or move  
For rising, and such loud acclaim ensues.  
Purification by the will alone  
Is prov'd, that free to change society  
Seizes the soul rejoicing in her will.  
Desire of bliss is present from the first;  
But strong propension hinders, to that wish  
By the just ordinance of heav'n oppos'd;  
Propension now as eager to fulfil  
Th' allotted torment, as erewhile to sin.  
And I who in this punishment had lain  
Five hundred years and more, but now have felt  
Free wish for happier clime. Therefore thou felt'st  
The mountain tremble, and the spirits devout  
Heard'st, over all his limits, utter praise  
To that liege Lord, whom I entreat their joy  
To hasten." Thus he spake: and since the draught  
Is grateful ever as the thirst is keen,  
No words may speak my fullness of content.

"Now," said the instructor sage, "I see the net  
That takes ye here, and how the toils are loos'd,

Why rocks the mountain and why ye rejoice.  
Vouchsafe, that from thy lips I next may learn,  
Who on the earth thou wast, and wherefore here  
So many an age wert prostrate.” —“In that time,  
When the good Titus, with Heav’n’s King to help,  
Aveng’d those piteous gashes, whence the blood  
By Judas sold did issue, with the name  
Most lasting and most honour’d there was I  
Abundantly renown’d,” the shade reply’d,  
“Not yet with faith endued. So passing sweet  
My vocal Spirit, from Tolosa, Rome  
To herself drew me, where I merited  
A myrtle garland to inwreath my brow.  
Statius they name me still. Of Thebes I sang,  
And next of great Achilles: but i’ th’ way  
Fell with the second burthen. Of my flame  
Those sparkles were the seeds, which I deriv’d  
From the bright fountain of celestial fire  
That feeds unnumber’d lamps, the song I mean  
Which sounds Aeneas’ wand’rings: that the breast  
I hung at, that the nurse, from whom my veins  
Drank inspiration: whose authority  
Was ever sacred with me. To have liv’d  
Coeval with the Mantuan, I would bide  
The revolution of another sun  
Beyond my stated years in banishment.”

The Mantuan, when he heard him, turn'd to me,  
And holding silence: by his countenance  
Enjoin'd me silence but the power which wills,  
Bears not supreme control: laughter and tears  
Follow so closely on the passion prompts them,  
They wait not for the motions of the will  
In natures most sincere. I did but smile,  
As one who winks; and thereupon the shade  
Broke off, and peer'd into mine eyes, where best  
Our looks interpret. "So to good event  
Mayst thou conduct such great emprize," he cried,  
"Say, why across thy visage beam'd, but now,  
The lightning of a smile!" On either part  
Now am I straiten'd; one conjures me speak,  
Th' other to silence binds me: whence a sigh  
I utter, and the sigh is heard. "Speak on;"  
The teacher cried; "and do not fear to speak,  
But tell him what so earnestly he asks."  
Whereon I thus: "Perchance, O ancient spirit!  
Thou marvel'st at my smiling. There is room  
For yet more wonder. He who guides my ken  
On high, he is that Mantuan, led by whom  
Thou didst presume of men and gods to sing.  
If other cause thou deem'dst for which I smil'd,  
Leave it as not the true one; and believe  
Those words, thou spak'st of him, indeed the cause."

Now down he bent t' embrace my teacher's feet;

But he forbade him: "Brother! do it not:

Thou art a shadow, and behold'st a shade."

He rising answer'd thus: "Now hast thou prov'd

The force and ardour of the love I bear thee,

When I forget we are but things of air,

And as a substance treat an empty shade."