

“If beyond earthly wont, the flame of love
Illume me, so that I o’ercome thy power
Of vision, marvel not: but learn the cause
In that perfection of the sight, which soon
As apprehending, hasteneth on to reach
The good it apprehends. I well discern,
How in thine intellect already shines
The light eternal, which to view alone
Ne’er fails to kindle love; and if aught else
Your love seduces, ’t is but that it shows
Some ill-mark’d vestige of that primal beam.

“This would’st thou know, if failure of the vow
By other service may be so supplied,
As from self-question to assure the soul.”

Thus she her words, not heedless of my wish,
Began; and thus, as one who breaks not off
Discourse, continued in her saintly strain.

“Supreme of gifts, which God creating gave
Of his free bounty, sign most evident
Of goodness, and in his account most priz’d,
Was liberty of will, the boon wherewith
All intellectual creatures, and them sole
He hath endow’d. Hence now thou mayst infer
Of what high worth the vow, which so is fram’d
That when man offers, God well-pleas’d accepts;

For in the compact between God and him,
This treasure, such as I describe it to thee,
He makes the victim, and of his own act.
What compensation therefore may he find?
If that, whereof thou hast oblation made,
By using well thou think'st to consecrate,
Thou would'st of theft do charitable deed.
Thus I resolve thee of the greater point.

“But forasmuch as holy church, herein
Dispensing, seems to contradict the truth
I have discover'd to thee, yet behooves
Thou rest a little longer at the board,
Ere the crude aliment, which thou hast taken,
Digested fitly to nutrition turn.
Open thy mind to what I now unfold,
And give it inward keeping. Knowledge comes
Of learning well retain'd, unfruitful else.

“This sacrifice in essence of two things
Consisteth; one is that, whereof 't is made,
The covenant the other. For the last,
It ne'er is cancell'd if not kept: and hence
I spake erewhile so strictly of its force.
For this it was enjoin'd the Israelites,
Though leave were giv'n them, as thou know'st, to change
The offering, still to offer. Th' other part,

The matter and the substance of the vow,
May well be such, to that without offence
It may for other substance be exchang'd.
But at his own discretion none may shift
The burden on his shoulders, unreleas'd
By either key, the yellow and the white.
Nor deem of any change, as less than vain,
If the last bond be not within the new
Included, as the quatre in the six.
No satisfaction therefore can be paid
For what so precious in the balance weighs,
That all in counterpoise must kick the beam.
Take then no vow at random: ta'en, with faith
Preserve it; yet not bent, as Jephthah once,
Blindly to execute a rash resolve,
Whom better it had suited to exclaim,
'I have done ill,' than to redeem his pledge
By doing worse or, not unlike to him
In folly, that great leader of the Greeks:
Whence, on the alter, Iphigenia mourn'd
Her virgin beauty, and hath since made mourn
Both wise and simple, even all, who hear
Of so fell sacrifice. Be ye more staid,
O Christians, not, like feather, by each wind
Removable: nor think to cleanse ourselves
In every water. Either testament,
The old and new, is yours: and for your guide

The shepherd of the church let this suffice
To save you. When by evil lust entic'd,
Remember ye be men, not senseless beasts;
Nor let the Jew, who dwelleth in your streets,
Hold you in mock'ry. Be not, as the lamb,
That, fickle wanton, leaves its mother's milk,
To dally with itself in idle play."

Such were the words that Beatrice spake:
These ended, to that region, where the world
Is liveliest, full of fond desire she turn'd.

Though mainly prompt new question to propose,
Her silence and chang'd look did keep me dumb.
And as the arrow, ere the cord is still,
Leapeth unto its mark; so on we sped
Into the second realm. There I beheld
The dame, so joyous enter, that the orb
Grew brighter at her smiles; and, if the star
Were mov'd to gladness, what then was my cheer,
Whom nature hath made apt for every change!

As in a quiet and clear lake the fish,
If aught approach them from without, do draw
Towards it, deeming it their food; so drew
Full more than thousand splendours towards us,
And in each one was heard: "Lo! one arriv'd

To multiply our loves!" and as each came
The shadow, streaming forth effulgence new,
Witness'd augmented joy. Here, reader! think,
If thou didst miss the sequel of my tale,
To know the rest how sorely thou wouldst crave;
And thou shalt see what vehement desire
Possess'd me, as soon as these had met my view,
To know their state. "O born in happy hour!
Thou to whom grace vouchsafes, or ere thy close
Of fleshly warfare, to behold the thrones
Of that eternal triumph, know to us
The light communicated, which through heaven
Expatiates without bound. Therefore, if aught
Thou of our beams wouldst borrow for thine aid,
Spare not; and of our radiance take thy fill."

Thus of those piteous spirits one bespake me;
And Beatrice next: "Say on; and trust
As unto gods!"—"How in the light supreme
Thou harbour'st, and from thence the virtue bring'st,
That, sparkling in thine eyes, denotes thy joy,
I mark; but, who thou art, am still to seek;
Or wherefore, worthy spirit! for thy lot
This sphere assign'd, that oft from mortal ken
Is veil'd by others' beams." I said, and turn'd
Toward the lustre, that with greeting, kind
Erewhile had hail'd me. Forthwith brighter far

Than erst, it wax'd: and, as himself the sun
Hides through excess of light, when his warm gaze
Hath on the mantle of thick vapours prey'd;
Within its proper ray the saintly shape
Was, through increase of gladness, thus conceal'd;
And, shrouded so in splendour answer'd me,
E'en as the tenour of my song declares.