

CANTO XXVIII

THE PILGRIM WANDERS in the heavenly forest until his path is blocked by a stream. On the other side of the stream he sees a lady singing and gathering flowers. At the Pilgrim's request, she approaches him, and, smiling from the opposite bank, tells him that this forest is the Earthly Paradise, the Garden of Eden, whence sprang the human race. She explains that the constantly moving gentle breeze is due to the earth's rotation, and she discusses the dissemination of plant life from the garden, carried on the moving air to all the lands of the earth. She further speaks of the two inexhaustible streams of the garden, Lethe and Eunoë, of which the former washes away all memory of sin and the latter restores the memory of good deeds. This lady, who, as yet, has not been named, concludes by telling the Pilgrim that the poets who sang of the Golden Age and of Parnassus perhaps had this place in mind.

Now eager to explore on every side
the heavenly forest thick with living green,
which made the bright new morning light more soft, 3
without delay I left the bank behind
and slowly made my way across the plain,
whose soil gave its own fragrance to the air. 6
My forehead felt the stirring of sweet air,
whose flowing rhythm always stayed the same,
and struck no harder than the gentlest breeze; 9
and, in the constant, moving air, each branch
with trembling leaves was bending to one side
toward where the holy mount first casts its shade; 12
they did not curve so sharply toward the ground
that little birds among the topmost leaves
could not continue practicing their art: 15
they welcomed in full-throated joyful sound
the day's beginning to their leafy boughs
whose sighing sound accompanied their song— 18

that sound we hear passed on from branch to branch,
 in the pine forest on the shore of Chiassi
 when Aeolus sets free Sirocco winds. 21

By now, although my steps were slow, I found
 myself so deep within the ancient wood
 I could not see the place where I came in; 24

then suddenly, I saw blocking my way
 a stream whose little waves kept pushing back,
 leftwards, the grass that grew along its bank. 27

The clearest of all waters on our earth
 would seem to have, somehow, a cloudy tinge
 compared to this flowing transparency— 30

transparent though it flows dark, very dark
 beneath an everlasting shade, which will
 never admit a ray of sun or moon. 33

I had to stop, but with my eyes I crossed
 beyond the rivulet to contemplate
 the many-colored splendors of the boughs, 36

and there appeared—as sometimes will appear
 an unexpected sight so marvelous,
 all other thoughts are driven from the mind— 39

a solitary lady wandering there,
 and she was singing as she gathered flowers
 from the abundance painted on her path. 42

“Oh, lovely lady, glowing with the warmth
 and strength of Love’s own rays—if I may trust
 your look, which should bear witness of the heart— 45

be kind enough,” I said to her, “to come
 a little nearer to the river’s bank,
 that I may understand the words you sing. 48

You bring to mind what Proserpine was like,
 and where she was, that day her mother lost her,
 and she, in her turn, lost eternal Spring.” 51

Just as a lady in the dance will turn,
 keeping her feet together on the ground,
 and one before the other hardly moves, 54

- so she, among the red and yellow flowers,
turned round toward me, her virgin modesty
enjoining her to look with downcast eyes, 57
- and, satisfying my desire, she started
moving toward me and, with the melody,
there came to me the sweetness of the words. 60
- When she had come to where the tender grass
is barely touched by ripples from that stream,
she graciously did raise her eyes to mine. 63
- The eyes of Venus surely were not lit
so radiantly that day her loving son
quite innocently pierced her with his dart. 66
- Smiling, she stood there on the other bank,
arranging in her hands the many colors
that grew from no seeds planted on that height. 69
- The stream kept us only three feet apart,
but Hellespont, where it was crossed by Xerxes
(whose fate should be a lesson to the proud), 72
- hurling its waves from Sestos to Abydos,
was hated by Leander less than I
hated this one: it would not open up! 75
- "This place is new to each of you," she said,
"it could be that you find yourself amazed,
perplexed to see me smiling in this place 78
- once chosen as the cradle of mankind;
but let the *Delectasti me* shed light
and clear away the mist that clouds your minds. 81
- And you who are in front and spoke to me,
if there is something more you want to know,
I came prepared to tell you what you wish." 84
- "The flowing water and the woodland sounds
seem to be inconsistent," I began,
"with what I have been told about the mount." 87
- She said, "I shall explain the logical
necessity of what perplexes you,
and thus remove what has obscured your mind. 90

That Highest Good, Himself pleasing Himself, made Adam good, to do good, then gave this place as earnest of eternal peace.	93
Because he sinned, he could not stay here long; because he sinned, he changed his childlike mirth, his playful joy, for anguish and for toil.	96
In order that the storms that form below (caused by the vapors from the earth and sea as they are drawn upwards to solar heat)	99
should not disturb the garden's peacefulness, this mount was made to rise so high toward Heaven that past the gate no storm is possible.	102
Now, since the air is moving constantly, moving as primal revolution moves (unless its circulation is disturbed),	105
here on the mountain's height, completely free in the encircling air, this movement strikes and makes the dense leaves of the forest sing;	108
and every smitten plant begins to make the pure air pregnant with its special power, which, then, the whirling scatters everywhere;	111
all lands elsewhere conceive and bring to flower the different plants endowed with different powers, according to the climate and the soil.	114
If they knew down on earth what you know now, no one would be surprised to see a plant start growing where no seed was sown before.	117
And know, the holy land you stand on now is rich in every species and brings forth fruit that no man has ever plucked on earth.	120
The water here does not spring from a source that needs to be restored by changing mists, like streams on earth that lose, then gain, their force:	123
it issues from a spring of constant flow, immutable, which, by the will of God, regains what it pours forth on either side.	126

The water here on this side flows with power
 to erase sin's memory; and on that side
 the memory of good deeds is restored; 129
 it is called Lethe here, Eunoë there
 beyond, and if one does not first drink here,
 he will not come to know its powers there— 132
 the sweet taste of its waters has no peer.
 And even though your thirst may now be quenched
 by what you know already of this place, 135
 I offer you a corollary gift:
 I think you will not cherish my words less
 if you learn more than I first promised you. 138
 Perhaps those poets of long ago who sang
 the Age of Gold, its pristine happiness,
 were dreaming on Parnassus of this place. 141
 The root of mankind's tree was guiltless here;
 here, in an endless Spring, was every fruit,
 such is the nectar praised by all these poets." 144
 As she said this, I quickly turned around
 to my two poets: I saw, still lingering,
 the smile her final words brought to their lips. 147
 Then I turned back to face her loveliness.

NOTES

I-21

According to Carroll (p. 373), Ruskin in his *Modern Painters* has said that these lines represent "the sweetest passage of wood description which exists in literature." Already in Canto VII, when treating of the Valley of the Princes, I compared their habitat, with its elaborately contrived artificial beauty, with the Earthly Paradise, whose charm consists of its natural beauty. Here for the first time birds appear onstage, no longer caged in similes as in the many previous descriptions of bird images. But while there is nothing artificial in the makeup of this landscape, there is something stylized: e.g., the wind blowing always in the same direction. Here, as will be seen, we have a touch of the supernatural.

There is another important difference between the description of the Valley of the Princes and that of the garden where the Pilgrim is: the former is presented merely as a habitat, as a background for those who dwell there; we are told not that the grass is green and the flowers beautiful but that a group of souls are sitting, singing, on the green grass among the beautiful flowers. But this garden or forest is presented as a creation in itself.

1. *Now eager to explore on every side*: Encouraged by Virgil's optimistic words of dismissal, the Pilgrim, full of enthusiasm and curiosity, begins his exploration of the new height they have just reached, whose beauty Virgil had briefly mentioned in his final words to the Pilgrim. At first he makes his way slowly, slowly (verse 4: *lento, lento* in Italian). Often in the past Virgil had upbraided him precisely for his curiosity and his slowness, but now the Pilgrim has been assured that henceforth he can do no wrong.

20. *in the pine forest on the shore of Chiassi*: In Dante's time Chiassi was the harbor of Ravenna, which today is several miles inland since the sea has long since withdrawn. The pine forest retained many of the beautiful features mentioned here until the present century.

21. *when Aeolus sets free Sirocco winds*: Aeolus, king of the winds, kept them confined in a vast, hidden cave. The Sirocco is a warm, moist wind that blows on southern Europe from North Africa.

26. *a stream*: This stream, the Pilgrim will be told later (130), is the river Lethe, whose function it is to wash away the memory of sin. In classical mythology Lethe was a river of Hades from which the souls of the dead drank forgetfulness of their first existence.

40. *a solitary lady wandering there*: This is Matelda, though her name is mentioned, and then quite casually, only in the closing canto (XXXIII, 119). Because she is given a name, much controversy has arisen over the various attempts to identify her with an historical figure. Moore (1903, p. 213) has classified several theories: (1) the Countess Matelda of Canossa, (2) some Matelda from Germany, (3) some friend or associate of the young Beatrice. Though it is difficult to see why this figure was given a name, still I believe that it is pointless to attempt to identify her with an historical person.

As to what this lady is supposed to represent, to symbolize, a

number of aspects of her personality and of her function in the garden will be revealed in the next few cantos—aspects that have given rise to considerable debate. But all critics seem to agree: she must represent, among other things, the active life, as she is clearly reminiscent of the Leah of the Pilgrim's final dream in the preceding canto. It may be noted, however, that in one point she differs in an important way from Leah: the flowers she is gathering are not exploited to enhance her charms.

Verses 40–42, with their simple description of what could be a commonplace situation, are preceded by and followed by a suggestion of the extraordinary. Before Matelda is presented—in fact, before we know that a lady is involved—we are told to expect something marvelous, a sight that holds the observer spellbound: Matelda is preceded by her own miraculousness. She can never be understood if this quality of hers is forgotten. Verses 43–45, representing the Pilgrim's immediate, spontaneous, joyful reaction to what he sees in this lady explains the miraculous effect of her appearance; she radiates the very essence of love. Later on it will be revealed just what it is that Matelda loves so intensely.

49. *Proserpine*: Proserpine was the daughter of Jupiter and Ceres. While gathering flowers in a meadow, she was carried off by Pluto to the netherworld, where she was made queen. At the urging of Ceres, Mercury was sent to fetch her back, but she had already eaten a quarter of a fateful pomegranate and so was constrained to return to the netherworld for one-fourth of the year. Proserpine thus represents the vegetative cycle, remaining on earth during spring, summer, and autumn, but returning to the land of the dead during winter (see Ovid, *Metam.* V, 385–408).

51. *and she, in her turn, lost eternal Spring*: The word “eternal” is not found in the original, but simply *primavera*, “Spring.” Most scholars, however, basing themselves on Ovid, who speaks of the “eternal Spring” that reigned in the grotto where Proserpine was picking flowers, interpret Dante's *primavera* as *primavera eterna*. It is eternal Spring that reigns in the Earthly Paradise and that Adam lost. It is easy to see some parallel between the myth of Proserpine and the Fall (see Brown).

64. *Venus*: When Venus stooped over to kiss her son Cupid, she was accidentally scratched on the breast by one of his ar-

rows and thereupon fell in love with the beautiful god Adonis (see Ovid, *Metam.* X, 325-32).

69. *that grew from no seeds planted on that height*: Later (109-20) the extraordinary richness of the soil in the Earthly Paradise will be discussed.

70. *The stream kept us only three feet apart*: The Pilgrim could easily have stepped across this narrow stream to be with Matelda, but he does not do so. He wants the waters to open up for him as the Red Sea at God's will opened up for the Israelites, and because this does not happen he *hates* the river (74). The word *hate* indicates the intensity of his desire to be walking with Matelda, but he must feel a mysterious barrier separating them: only if he were encouraged by a miracle would he dare attempt to cross that barrier.

It has been suggested that the "three feet" that separate the Pilgrim from Matelda symbolize the three stages that lead to the sacrament of Confession: *contritio cordis*, *confessio oris*, *satisfactio operis*. But only after his soul-searching talk with Beatrice and after he has drunk of the river Lethe will he have completed these stages—to find himself on the same side of the river with Matelda.

71. *Xerxes*: The son of Darius, Xerxes was the Persian king who, setting out from Sardis with a great army, crossed the Hellespont in 465 B.C. on a bridge of ships and invaded Greece. Despite his army, however, Xerxes was defeated and his navy was dispersed at the battle of Salamis, whereby he was forced to retreat.

74. *Leander*: Leander, a young man of Abydos, fell in love with the priestess Hero, who lived at Sestos across the Hellespont. Since the difference of their social positions made marriage impossible, the two met secretly at night, when Leander would swim across the channel guided by a light in Hero's tower. One night the light went out, and Leander became lost, was carried away by the current, and drowned. Later Hero found the body on the shore and threw herself into the water.

80. *but let the Delectasti me shed light*: Matelda is referring to the ninety-first psalm, and surely the lines she has in mind are: "Thou didst delight me, Lord, in Thy work / and in the works of Thy hands, I will rejoice. / How praiseworthy are Thy works, O Lord." Thus, Matelda is explaining her smile as due to

her joy over the beauties of the Earthly Paradise; her unselfish delight (see note to 40) in its beautiful flowers has twice been referred to. And the love that the Pilgrim felt radiating from her the moment he saw her face must be love for the Creator of the beauty of the universe. See Singleton (1958) pp. 206-207.

88. *I shall explain*: Here Matelda begins her speech to the three poets, which comes to an end in verse 144. What she explains is the nature of the Earthly Paradise: first, its spiritual significance: "earnest of eternal peace" (93); then the physical conditions that characterize it as a place.

102. *past the gate no storm is possible*: Matelda is in the midst of clearing up the second point that perplexed the Pilgrim since it seemed to contradict Statius. The breeze that produced the "woodland sounds" he mentioned (85) has nothing to do with the conditions of the earthly atmosphere, where the force of a wind as well as its direction may vary. In the Earthly Paradise the light wind is constant and blows always in the same direction, from east to west, the direction taken by the spheres of the heavens; it is determined by the *Primum Mobile*, that is, directly by God.

121. *The water here*: Matelda is now answering the first part of the Pilgrim's question: how can there be a river here if, according to Statius, rain never falls?

128. *to erase sin's memory*: It would be natural to infer from Matelda's words that Lethe has the power to destroy completely and forever the memory of one's sinful deeds. This, however, cannot be the case, as the Pilgrim will learn in Paradise, where he meets a number of souls who refer to their sins; in fact, Cunizza speaks almost happily of the truths she learned from her sin of Lust (*Par.* IX, 3). Perhaps it could be said that the memory of sin is lost on the emotional plane (no longer remembered as an experience) but not on the intellectual. And, then, how could souls be truly grateful to God for their salvation if they were to forget their sins?

130. *it is called Lethe here, Eunoë there*: The word "Lethe" comes from the Greek word for "oblivion" (see note to 26); "Eunoë" derives from the Greek for "well minded" (see Toynbee, 1902, p. 104). The waters of the first miraculous stream "erase sin's memory" (128), while those of the second restore "the memory of good deeds" (129).