





Purgatorio XXVII and Paradiso XVIII

By Mabel Garrison Poundstone

Purgatorio XXVII is one of my favorite cantos in the whole *Commedia*. In it Dante, Virgil, and Statius brave the wall of fire which burns at the top of the mountain. It is the final trial of Purgatory before reaching the Earthly Paradise. Just as the Poets come through to the other side, the sun sets. They can no longer travel upwards, so they spend the night just outside the garden. The scene of the Poets asleep on the topmost steps is depicted in my first illustration. The peace and comfort of this part of the poem always astounds me. All the nights in Purgatory are welcome rests on the long journey, but there is something that stands out to me about this one. Maybe it is the knowledge of what comes next—of how close we, and Dante, are to losing Virgil—that makes this canto so poignant.

But we are so close to Heaven at this point, too. These top steps of Purgatory are almost an inverse Limbo, a liminal space of waiting where the looked-for end will come and the promise will be fulfilled. It is a still point between the chaos of Hell and constant movement of Purgatory, and the promised, but yet untasted glory of Heaven.

In my second piece, Dante and Beatrice are ascending from the Heaven of Mars to the Heaven of Jupiter. Most of the transitions from heaven to heaven are too fast for there to be much for Dante to tell or for an artist to depict. But the change in *Paradiso XVIII* is different. The difference in color is what struck me most. Dante, comparing it the blush of a face, puts it like this:

And such an instant change as when release
From some embarrassment transforms a fair-
complexioned lady, and her blushes cease,

Greeted me when I looked around, for there
Shone the sixth planet, temperate, and of sheen
Pure white, which had received me in its care.

(*Par.XVII.64-69*)

This is one of many instances of Dante's use of earthly images to communicate the unimaginable. We have all seen someone's face go red and then return to its normal color. Dante takes advantage of this visual to create a vivid and moving picture. I used graphite pencil in both my pieces, so the startling change from red to white is not as obvious in my illustration, but I tried to capture a similar effect using lights and darks. Both of these scenes are parts of the story which stuck with me, each for its own reason, making me want to recreate them as an homage to Dante and his brilliant work.

Work Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *Paradise*. Translated by Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, Penguin Classics, 1962.