

INFERNO

CANTO XV

Now one of the stony borders bears us on
and vapor from the stream arose as mist
protecting banks and water from the flames. 3

As the Flemings between Wissant and Bruges,
fearing the tide that rushes in upon them,
erect a bulwark to repel the sea, 6

and as the Paduans build dikes along the Brenta,
to protect their towns and castles
before the heat brings floods to Carentana -- 9

in just that way these banks were formed,
except the architect, whoever he was,
had made them not as lofty nor as thick. 12

By now we were so distant from the wood
that I could not have made it out,
even had I turned in its direction. 15

Here we met a troop of souls
coming up along the bank, and each
gazed at us as men at dusk will sometimes do, 18

eyeing one another under the new moon.
They peered at us with knitted brows
like an old tailor at his needle's eye. 21

Thus scrutinized by such a company,
I was known to one of them who caught me
by the hem and then cried out, 'What a wonder!' 24

And while he held his arm outstretched to me,
I fixed my eyes on his scorched face
until beneath the charred disfigurement 27

I could discern the features that I knew
and, lowering my hand toward his face,
said: 'Are You here, Ser Brunetto?' 30

And he: 'O my son, let it not displease you
if Brunetto Latini for a while turns back
with you and lets the troop go on.' 33

I said to him: 'With all my heart, I pray You,
 and if You would have me sit with You, I will,
 if he who leads me through allows.' 36

'O son,' he said 'whoever of this flock stops
 even for an instant has to lie a hundred years,
 unable to fend off the fire when it strikes. 39

'Therefore, go on. I shall follow at your hem
 and later will rejoin my band,
 who go lamenting their eternal pain.' 42

I did not dare to leave the higher path
 to walk the lower with him, but I kept
 my head bowed, like one who walks in reverence. 45

He began: 'What chance or fate is it
 that brings you here before your final hour,
 and who is this that shows the way?' 48

'In the sunlit life above,' I answered,
 'in a valley there, I lost my way
 before I reached the zenith of my days. 51

'Only yesterday morning did I leave it,
 but had turned back when he appeared,
 and now along this road he leads me home.' 54

And he to me: 'By following your star
 you cannot fail to reach a glorious port,
 if I saw clearly in the happy life. 57

'Had I not died too soon,
 seeing that Heaven so favors you,
 I would have lent you comfort in your work. 60

'But that malignant, thankless rabble
 that came down from Fiesole long ago
 and still smacks of the mountain and the rock 63

'rightly shall become, because of your good deeds,
 your enemy: among the bitter sorbs
 it is not fit the sweet fig come to fruit. 66

'The world has long believed them to be blind,
 a people greedy, envious and proud.
 Be sure you stay untainted by their habits. 69

'Your destiny reserves for you such honor
 both parties shall be hungry to devour you,
 but the grass shall be far from the goat. 72

'Let the Fiesolan beasts make forage
 of themselves but spare the plant,
 if on their dung-heap any still springs up, 75
 'the plant in which lives on the holy seed
 of those few Romans who remained
 when it became the home of so much malice.' 78
 'If all my prayers were answered,'
 I said to him, 'You would not yet
 be banished from mankind. 81
 'For I remember well and now lament
 the cherished, kind, paternal image of You
 when, there in the world, from time to time, 84
 'You taught me how man makes himself immortal.
 And how much gratitude I owe for that
 my tongue, while I still live, must give report.' 87
 'What You tell of my future I record
 and keep for glossing, along with other texts,
 by a lady of discernment, should I reach her. 90
 'This much I would have You know:
 as long as conscience does not chide,
 I am prepared for Fortune as she wills. 93
 'Such prophecy is not unknown to me.
 Let Fortune spin her wheel just as she pleases,
 and let the loutish peasant ply his hoe.' 96
 At that I saw the right side of my master's face
 turned back in my direction. And he said:
 'He listens well who takes in what he hears.' 99
 Nonetheless, I go on speaking
 with ser Brunetto, asking who, of his companions,
 are most eminent, most worthy to be known. 102
 And he: "Some of them it is good to know.
 Others it is better not to mention,
 for the time would be too short for so much talk. 105
 'In sum, note that all of them were clerics
 or great and famous scholars, befouled
 in the world above by a single sin. 108
 'Priscian goes with that wretched crowd,
 and Francesco d'Accorso too. And, had you had
 a hankering for such filth, you might have seen 111

the one transferred by the Servant of Servants
from the Arno to the Bacchiglione,
where he left his sin-stretched sinews. 114

'I would say more, but I cannot stay,
cannot continue talking, for over there I see
new smoke rising from the sand. 117

'People are coming with whom I must not be.
Let my Treasure, in which I still live on,
be in your mind -- I ask for nothing more.' 120

After he turned back he seemed like one
who races for the green cloth on the plain
beyond Verona. And he looked more the winner 123
than the one who trails the field. 124