

INFERNO

CANTO XVI

I had arrived where I could hear the distant roar
of water falling to the lower circle,
like the rumbling hum of bees around a hive, 3
when three shades at a run
broke from a passing crowd
under that rain of bitter torment. 6
Together they came toward us, each calling:
'Stop, you, who by your garb appear to be
a man from our degenerate city.' 9
Oh, what sores I noticed on their limbs,
both old and new ones, branded by the flames!
It pains me still, when I remember them. 12
My teacher was attentive to their cries,
then turned his face to me and said:
'Now wait: to these one must show courtesy. 15
'And were it not for the fire that the nature
of this place draws down, I would say
haste befits you more than it does them.' 18
When we stopped, they took up again
their old refrain, but once they reached us
all three had joined into a single wheel. 21
As combatants, oiled and naked, are wont to do,
watching for their hold and their advantage,
before the exchange of thrusts and blows, 24
wheeling, each fixed his eyes on me,
so that their feet moved forward
while their necks were straining back. 27
One began: 'If the squalor of this shifting sand
and our blackened, hairless faces
put us and our petitions in contempt, 30

'let our fame prevail on you
 to tell us who you are, who fearless
 move on living feet through Hell. 33

'He in whose steps you see me tread,
 though he go naked, peeled hairless by the fire,
 was of a higher rank than you imagine. 36

'He was grandson of the good Gualdrada.
 Guido Guerra was his name. In his life
 he did much with good sense, much with the sword. 39

'This other, squinching sand behind me,
 is Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, whose voice
 deserved a better welcome in the world. 42

'And I, who am put to torment with them,
 was Jacopo Rusticucci. It was my bestial wife,
 more than all else, who brought me to this pass.' 45

Had I been sheltered from the fire
 I would have thrown myself among them,
 and I believe my teacher would have let me. 48

But because I would have burned and baked,
 fright overcame the good intentions
 that made me hunger to embrace them. 51

Then I began: 'Not contempt, but sadness,
 fixed your condition in my heart so deep --
 it will be long before it leaves me -- 54

'the moment that my master's words
 made me consider that such worthy men
 as you were coming near. 57

'I am of your city. How many times
 I've heard your deeds, your honored names resound!
 And I, too, named you with affection. 60

'I leave bitterness behind for the sweet fruits
 promised by my truthful leader.
 But first I must go down into the very core.' 63

'That your spirit may long quicken
 your limbs,' he replied once more,
 'and your renown shine after you, 66

'tell us if valor and courtesy still live
 there in our city, as once they used to do,
 or have they utterly forsaken her? 69

'Guglielmo Borsiere, grieving with us here so short a time, goes yonder with our company and makes us worry greatly with his words.'	72
'The new crowd with their sudden profits have begot in you, Florence, such excess and arrogance that you already weep.'	75
This, my face uplifted, I cried out. And the three, taking it for answer, looked at one another as men do when they face the truth.	78
'If at other times it costs so little for you to give clear answers,' they replied in turn, 'happy are you to speak so free.	81
'Therefore, so may you escape from these dark regions to see again the beauty of the stars, when you shall rejoice in saying "I was there,"	84
'see that you speak of us to others.' Then they broke their circle and as they fled their nimble legs seemed wings.	87
'Amen' could not have been said as quickly as they vanished. And then my master thought it time to leave.	90
I followed him, and we had not gone far before the roar of water was so close we hardly could have heard each other speak.	93
As the river that is the first to hold its course from Monte Viso eastward on the left slope of the Apennines,	96
and up there is called the Acquacheta, before it pours into its lower bed and, having lost that name at Forlì,	99
reverberates above San Benedetto dell'Alpe, falling in one cataract where there might well have been a thousand,	102
so, down from a precipitous bank, the flood of that dark water coming down resounded in our ears and almost stunned us.	105
I had a cord around my waist, with which I once had meant to take the leopard with the painted pelt.	108

After I had undone it,	
as my leader had commanded,	
I gave it to him coiled and knotted.	111
Then, swinging round on his right side,	
he flung it out some distance from the edge,	
down into the depth of that abyss.	114
'Surely,' I said to myself, 'something new	
and strange will answer this strange signal	
the master follows with his eye.'	117
Ah, how cautious we should be with those	
who do not see our actions only,	
but with their wisdom peer into our thoughts!	120
He said to me: 'Soon what I expect	
and your mind only dreams of will appear.	
Soon it shall appear before your eyes.'	123
To a truth that bears the face of falsehood	
a man should seal his lips if he is able,	
for it might shame him, through no fault of his,	126
but here I can't be silent. And by the strains	
of this Comedy -- so may they soon succeed	
in finding favor -- I swear to you, reader,	129
that I saw come swimming up	
through that dense and murky air a shape	
to cause amazement in the stoutest heart,	132
a shape most like one who, having plunged	
to loose the anchor caught fast in a reef	
or something other hidden in the sea, now rises,	135
reaching upward and drawing in his feet.	136