

INFERNO

CANTO XVII

'Behold the beast with pointed tail, that leaps
past mountains, shatters walls and weapons!
Behold the one whose stench afflicts the world!' 3
was how my guide began.
Then he signaled to the beast to come ashore
close to the border of our stony pathway. 6
And that foul effigy of fraud came forward,
beached its head and chest
but did not draw its tail up on the bank. 9
It had the features of a righteous man,
benevolent in countenance,
but all the rest of it was serpent. 12
Its had forepaws, hairy to the armpits,
and back and chest and both its flanks
were painted and inscribed with rings and curlicues. 15
So many vivid colors Turk or Tartar never wove
in warp and woof or in embroidery on top,
nor were such colors patterned on Arachne's loom. 18
As sometimes barges lie ashore,
partly in water, partly on the land,
and as among the guzzling Germans 21
the beaver sets itself to catch its prey,
so lay this worst of brutes upon the stony rim
that makes a boundary for the sandy soil. 24
Its length of tail lashed in the void,
twisting up its forked, envenomed tip,
armed like a scorpion's tail. 27
My leader said: 'Now we must change
direction for a moment till we reach
that evil beast stretched out down there.' 30
We descended, therefore, to our right,
and took ten steps along the edge to keep
our distance from the sand and flames. 33

And, when we reached the beast,
 I see some people sitting on the sand
 a short way off, near where it falls away. 36
 Then the master said to me: 'So that nothing
 in this circle escape your understanding,
 go over and examine their condition. 39
 'Let your talk be brief.
 While you are gone, I'll ask the beast
 to lend us its strong shoulders.' 42
 Thus, on the seventh circle's edge,
 still farther out, I went alone
 to where the downcast souls were seated. 45
 Their grief came bursting from their eyes.
 With restless hands they sought relief,
 now from the flame and now from burning sand. 48
 Not otherwise do dogs in summer gnaw and scratch,
 now with muzzle, now with paw,
 when flies or fleas or horseflies bite them. 51
 Although I searched some of the faces
 of those on whom the painful fire descends,
 I knew not one, but I could see 54
 the pouches hanging from their necks
 were different colors, each with its coat of arms.
 On these they seemed to feast their eyes. 57
 And when I came among them and looked closer,
 on a yellow purse I could make out
 a lion's countenance and form in blue. 60
 Then, farther on, my wandering gaze
 made out another crest, blood-red,
 marked by a goose more white than butter. 63
 And one, who had a pregnant sow, in azure,
 embossed on his white wallet, said to me:
 'What are you doing in this ditch? 66
 'Get out of here. Wait, since you're still alive,
 know that my neighbor Vitaliano
 shall soon be seated to my left. 69
 'Among these Florentines, I come from Padua.
 Many a time they deafen me with shouting:
 "May the sovereign knight come soon, 72

"who brings the pouch with three goats on it!"
 Then he twisted his mouth and stuck out his tongue
 like an ox that licks its nose. 75
 And I, fearing my delay might anger him
 who had warned me to keep my stay brief,
 turned back and left those weary souls. 78
 I found my leader mounted
 on the shoulders of the savage beast.
 He said to me: 'Now be strong and resolute. 81
 'From here on we descend such stairs as these.
 You mount in front and I will take the middle
 so that the tail may do no harm.' 84
 As a man in a shivering-fit of quartan fever,
 so ill his nails have lost all color,
 trembles all over at the sight of shade, 87
 so was I stricken at his words.
 Rebuked by shame, which, in the presence
 of a worthy master, makes a servant bold, 90
 I mounted on those huge and ugly shoulders.
 I wanted to say -- though my voice did not come out
 as I intended -- 'Make sure you hold me fast!' 93
 But he who had helped me many times before,
 in other perils, clasped me in his arms
 and steadied me as soon as I was mounted, 96
 then said: 'Geryon, move on now. Let your circles
 be wide and your descending slow.
 Keep in mind your unaccustomed burden.' 99
 As a bark backs slowly from its mooring,
 so the beast backed off the ledge,
 and when it felt itself adrift, 102
 turned its tail to where its chest had been and,
 extending it, made it wriggle like an eel's,
 while with its paws it gathered in the air. 105
 Phaeton, I think, felt no greater fear
 when he released the reins and the whole sky
 was scorched, as we still see, 108
 nor wretched Icarus when he felt the melting wax
 unfeathering the wings along his back
 and heard his father shout: 'Not that way!' 111

than was my terror when I saw
 air everywhere around
 and all things gone from sight except the beast. 114
 On it goes, swimming slowly, slowly
 wheeling, descending, but I feel only
 the wind in my face and blowing from below. 117
 Now on our right I heard the torrent's hideous roar
 below us, so that I thrust my head forward
 and dared to look down the abyss. 120
 Then I was even more afraid of being dropped,
 for I saw fire and heard wailing,
 and so, trembling, I hold on tighter with my legs. 123
 And for the first time I became aware
 of our descent and wheeling when I saw
 the torments drawing closer all around me. 126
 As the falcon that has long been on the wing --
 and, without sight of lure or bird
 makes the falconer cry out: 'Oh, you're coming down!' -- 129
 descends, weary, with many a wheeling,
 to where it set out swiftly, and alights,
 angry and sullen, far from its master, 132
 so Geryon set us down at the bottom,
 at the very foot of the jagged cliff,
 and, disburdened of our persons, 135
 vanished like an arrow from the string. 136