

INFERNO

CANTO II

Day was departing and the darkened air
released the creatures of the earth
from their labor, and I, alone, 3
prepared to face the struggle --
of the way and of the pity of it --
which memory, unerring, shall retrace. 6
O Muses, O lofty genius, aid me now!
O memory, that set down what I saw,
here shall your worth be shown. 9
I began: 'Poet, you who guide me,
consider if my powers will suffice
before you trust me to this arduous passage. 12
'You tell of the father of Sylvius
that he, still subject to corruption, went
to the eternal world while in the flesh. 15
'But that the adversary of all evil showed
such favor to him, considering who and what he was,
and the high sequel that would spring from him, 18
'seems not unfitting to a man who understands.
For in the Empyrean he was chosen
to father holy Rome and her dominion, 21
'both of these established -- if we would speak
the truth -- to be the sacred precinct where
successors of great Peter have their throne. 24
'On this journey, for which you grant him glory,
he heard the words that prompted him
to victory and prepared the Papal mantle. 27
'Later, the Chosen Vessel went there
to bring back confirmation of our faith,
the first step in our journey to salvation. 30

'But why should I go there? who allows it?
 I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul.
 Neither I nor any think me fit for this. 33

'And so, if I commit myself to come,
 I fear it may be madness. You are wise,
 you understand what I cannot express.' 36

And as one who unwills what he has willed,
 changing his intent on second thought
 so that he quite gives over what he has begun, 39
 such a man was I on that dark slope.
 With too much thinking I had undone
 the enterprise so quick in its inception. 42

'If I have rightly understood your words,'
 replied the shade of that great soul,
 'your spirit is assailed by cowardice, 45
 'which many a time so weighs upon a man
 it turns him back from noble enterprise,
 the way a beast shies from a shadow. 48

'To free you from this fear
 I'll tell you why I came and what I heard
 when first I felt compassion for you. 51

'I was among the ones who are suspended
 when a lady called me, so blessed and so fair
 that I implored her to command me. 54

'Her eyes shone brighter than the stars.
 Gentle and clear, the words she spoke to me --
 an angel's voice was in her speech: 57

"'O courteous Mantuan spirit,
 whose fame continues in the world
 and shall continue while the world endures, 60

"'my friend, who is no friend of Fortune,
 is so hindered on his way upon the desert slope
 that, in his terror, he has turned back, 63

"'and, from what I hear of him in Heaven,
 I fear he has gone so far astray
 that I arose too late to help him. 66

"'Set out, and with your polished words
 and whatever else is needed for his safety,
 go to his aid, that I may be consoled. 69

"I who bid you go am Beatrice.
 I come from where I most desire to return.
 The love that moved me makes me speak. 72

"And when I am before my Lord
 often will I offer praise of you to Him."
 Then she fell silent. And I began: 75

"O lady of such virtue that by it alone
 the human race surpasses all that lies
 within the smallest compass of the heavens, 78

"so pleased am I at your command that my consent,
 were it already given, would be given late.
 You have but to make your desire known. 81

"But tell me why you do not hesitate
 to descend into the center of the earth
 from the unbounded space you long for." 84

"Since you are so eager to know more,"
 she answered, "I shall be brief in telling you
 why I am not afraid to enter here. 87

"We should fear those things alone
 that have the power to harm.
 Nothing else is fearsome. 90

"I am made such by God's grace
 that your affliction does not touch,
 nor can these fires assail me. 93

"There is a gracious lady in Heaven so moved
 by pity at his peril, she breaks stern judgment
 there above and bids me send you to him. 96

"She summoned Lucy and made this request:
 *Your faithful one is now in need of you
 and I commend him to your care.+ 99

"Lucy, the enemy of every cruelty,
 arose and came to where I sat
 at venerable Rachel's side, 102

"and said: *Beatrice, true praise of God,
 why do you not help the one who loved you so
 that for your sake he left the vulgar herd? 105

""*Do you not hear the anguish in his tears?
 Do you not see the death besetting him
 on the swollen river where the sea cannot prevail?+ 108

"Never were men on earth so swift to seek their good or to escape their harm as I, after these words were spoken,	111
"to descend here from my blessed seat, trusting to the noble speech that honors you and those who have paid it heed."	114
'After she had said these things to me, she turned away her eyes, now bright with tears, making me more eager to set out.	117
'And so I came to you just as she wished. I saved you from the beast denying you the short way to the mountain of delight.	120
'What then? Why, why do you delay? Why do you let such cowardice rule your heart? Why are you not more spirited and sure,	123
'when three such blessed ladies care for you in Heaven's court and my words promise so much good?'	126
As little flowers, bent and closed with chill of night, when the sun lights them, stand all open on their stems,	129
such, in my failing strength, did I become. And so much courage poured into my heart that I began, as one made resolute:	132
'O how compassionate was she to help me, how courteous were you, so ready to obey the truthful words she spoke to you!	135
'Your words have made my heart so eager for the journey that I've returned to my first intent.	138
'Set out then, for one will prompt us both. You are my leader, you my lord and master,' I said to him, and when he moved ahead	141
I entered on the deep and savage way.	142