

INFERNO

CANTO XXIII

Silent, alone, and unescorted
we went on, one in front, the other following,
as Friars Minor walk along the roads. 3

The brawl played out before our eyes
put me in mind of Aesop's fable
in which he told the tale of frog and mouse, 6
for 'issa' and 'mo' are not more like in meaning
than one case and the other, if we compare
with circumspection their beginnings and their ends. 9

Just as one thought issues from another,
so, from the first, another now was born
that made me twice as fearful as before. 12

I thought, 'It's our fault they have been cheated,
and with such hurt and shame
I'm sure it must enrage them. 15

'If rage is added to their malice,
they will pursue us still more cruelly
than the hound that sets his fangs into a hare.' 18

I could feel my scalp go taut with fear
and kept my thoughts fixed just behind me
as I spoke: 'Master, can't you quickly 21
'hide yourself and me? I am in terror
of the Malebranche; I sense them there behind us,
imagine them so clear I almost hear them.' 24

And he: 'If I were made of leaded glass
I could not reflect your outward likeness
in less time than I grasp the one inside you. 27

'Just now your thought commingled with my own,
alike in attitude and aspect,
so that of both I've formed a single plan. 30

'If the slope there to the right allows us
to make our way into the other ditch,
we shall escape the chase we both envision.' 33

Before he finished telling me his plan
 I saw them coming, wings outspread,
 closing in to catch us. 36

My leader in a moment snatched me up,
 like a mother who, awakened by the hubbub
 before she sees the flames that burn right near her, 39
 snatches up her child and flees,
 and, more concerned for him than for herself,
 does not delay to put a shift on. 42

Down from the rim of that stony bank,
 supine, he slid along the sloping rock
 that forms one border of the next crevasse. 45

Never did water, as it nears the paddles,
 rush down along the sluices
 cut through earth to turn a millwheel 48
 more swiftly than my master down that bank,
 bearing me along clasped to his breast
 as if I were his child, not his companion. 51

No sooner had he touched the bottom with his feet
 than the devils were above us on the ridge.
 Yet now we had no cause for feeling fear, 54
 for high Providence, which made them
 wardens of the fifth crevasse,
 deprives them of the power to leave it. 57

Down there we came upon a lacquered people
 who made their round, in tears, with listless steps.
 They seemed both weary and defeated. 60

The cloaks they wore had cowls that fell
 over their eyes, cut like the capes
 made for the monks at Cluny. 63

Gilded and dazzling on the outside,
 within they are of lead, so ponderous
 that those imposed by Frederick would seem but straw. 66

Oh what a toilsome cloak to wear forever!
 Once more we turned to the left, then went along
 beside them, intent upon their wretched wailing. 69

Their burden made that weary people
 move so slowly we had new companions
 each time we put one foot before the other. 72

And I said to my leader: 'Cast your eyes
 this way and that as we walk on.
 See if you know the names or deeds of any.' 75
 And one of them, hearing my Tuscan speech,
 cried out behind us: 'Stay your feet,
 you who race through this sullen air. 78
 'I perhaps can answer what you asked.'
 At that my leader turned around to say: 'Wait
 just a moment, then continue at his pace.' 81
 I stopped and noticed two whose looks
 showed haste of mind to reach me,
 but their load and the narrow way detained them. 84
 When they came near they looked at me askance
 for a while, without a word,
 until they turned to one another, saying: 87
 'The way his throat moves, this one must be alive.
 And if they are dead, what gives them the right
 to go uncovered by the heavy stole?' 90
 and then to me: 'O Tuscan, who have come
 to this assembly of sad hypocrites,
 do not disdain to tell us who you are.' 93
 'In the great city, by the fair river Arno,'
 I said to them, 'I was born and raised,
 and I am here in the body that was always mine. 96
 'But who are you in whom I see distilled
 the misery running down your cheeks in tears?
 And what is the grief you bear that glitters so?' 99
 And one of them answered: 'Our golden cloaks
 are made of lead, and they're so dense,
 like scales we creak beneath their weight. 102
 'We were Jovial Friars, born in Bologna.
 My name was Catalano, his, Loderingo.
 Your city made the two of us a pair, 105
 'where usually a single man was chosen,
 to keep the peace within, and we were such
 that all around Gardingo the ruins can be seen.' 108
 I began: 'O Friars, your evil deeds. . .'
 but said no more, for one there caught my eye,
 fixed cross-wise to the ground by three short stakes. 111

Seeing me, he writhed all over,
 blowing sighs into his beard,
 and Fra Catalano, observing this, said: 114
 'That man you see nailed down
 advised the Pharisees it was the better course
 that one man should be martyred for the people. 117
 'He is stretched out naked, as you see,
 across the path and he must feel
 the weight of each who passes. 120
 'Just so his father-in-law is racked with us
 down here and with the others of the council
 that was a seed of evil for the Jews.' 123
 I saw that Virgil marveled at the sight
 of this shape stretched as on a cross,
 so ignoble in his eternal exile. 126
 Then he addressed the friar with these words:
 'May it please you, if it is permitted,
 to say if on our right there is a passage 129
 'by which we two might leave this place
 without requiring help from some black angels
 to pluck us from these depths.' 132
 And he replied: 'Nearer than you hope there lies
 a rocky ridge that crosses all the savage valleys
 from the furthest circle inward. 135
 'It has fallen only here and fails to reach across.
 You can clamber up the sloping rubble
 that lies upon the bottom and piles up along the side.' 138
 My leader stood a while, his head bent down, then said:
 'He who rips the sinners in the other ditch
 misled us in his picture of this place.' 141
 And the friar: 'At one time in Bologna I heard tell
 of the Devil's many vices, and I heard
 he is a liar and the father of all lies.' 144
 At that my leader stalked off with long strides,
 a moment's look of anger on his face.
 And so I left those overburdened souls 147
 to follow in the imprints of his cherished feet. 148