

INFERNO

CANTO XXVII

The flame now stood erect and still,
meaning to speak no more, and was departing
with the gentle poet's leave, 3
when another flame, coming close behind,
caused our eyes to fix upon its tip,
drawn by the gibberish that came from it. 6
As the Sicilian bull that bellowed first
with the cries of him whose instrument
had fashioned it -- and that was only just -- 9
used to bellow with the victim's voice
so that, although the bull was made of brass,
it seemed transfixed by pain, 12
thus, having first no course or outlet
through the flame, the mournful words
were changed into a language all their own. 15
But once the words had made their way
up to the tip, making it flicker
as the voice had done when it had formed them, 18
we heard it say: 'O you at whom I aim my voice
and who, just now, said in the Lombard tongue:
'Now go your way, I ask you nothing more,' 21
'though I've arrived, perhaps, a little late,
let it not trouble you to stay and speak with me.
Though I am in the flame, as you can see, it irks me not. 24
'If you are only a short while fallen
into this blind world from that sweet land
of Italy, from which I bring down all my sins, 27
'tell me if Romagna lives in peace or war.
I came from where the mountains stand between
Urbino and the ridge from which the Tiber springs.' 30
I still stood bending down to hear,
when my leader nudged my side and said:
'It's up to you to speak -- this one is Italian.' 33

And I, who had my answer ready,
 without delay began to speak:
 'O soul that is hidden from my sight down there, 36
 'your Romagna is not, and never was,
 free of warfare in her rulers' hearts.
 Still, no open warfare have I left behind. 39
 'Ravenna remains as it has been for years.
 The eagle of Polenta broods over it
 so that he covers Cervia with his wings. 42
 'The town that once withstood the lengthy siege,
 making of the French a bloody heap,
 is now again beneath the green claws of the lion. 45
 'The elder mastiff of Verrucchio and the younger,
 who between them had harsh dealing with Montagna,
 sharpen their teeth to augers in the customary place. 48
 The young lion on a field of white,
 who rules Lamone's and Santerno's cities,
 changes sides between the summer and the snows. 51
 'And the city whose flank the Savio bathes:
 as she lives between tyranny and freedom,
 so she lies between the mountain and the plain. 54
 'But now, I beg you, tell us who you are.
 Be no more grudging than another's been to you,
 so may your name continue in the world.' 57
 When the fire had done its roaring for a while,
 after its fashion, the point began to flicker
 this way and that, and then gave breath to this: 60
 'If I but thought that my response were made
 to one perhaps returning to the world,
 this tongue of flame would cease to flicker. 63
 'But since, up from these depths, no one has yet
 returned alive, if what I hear is true,
 I answer without fear of being shamed. 66
 'A warrior was I, and then a corded friar,
 thinking, cinctured so, to make amends.
 And surely would my hopes have come to pass 69
 'but for the Great Priest -- the devil take him! --
 who drew me back to my old ways.
 And I would like to tell you how and why. 72

'While I still kept the form in flesh and bones
my mother gave me, my deeds were not
a lion's but the actions of a fox. 75

'Cunning stratagems and covert schemes,
I knew them all, and was so skilled in them
my fame rang out to the far confines of the earth. 78

'When I saw I had reached that stage of life
when all men ought to think
of lowering sail and coiling up the ropes, 81

'I grew displeased with what had pleased before.
Repentant and shriven, I became a friar.
And woe is me! it would have served. 84

'But he, Prince of the latter-day Pharisees,
engaged in battle near the Lateran
and not with either Saracen or Jew, 87

'for all his enemies were Christian --
not one of them had gone to conquer Acre
or traffic in the Sultan's lands -- 90

'paid no heed, for his part, to the highest office
or his holy orders, nor, for mine,
to the cord that used to keep its wearers lean. 93

'As Constantine once had Sylvester summoned
from Soracte to cure his leprous sores,
so this man called on me to be his doctor 96

'and cure him of the fever of his pride.
He asked me for advice, but I kept silent
because his words were like a drunkard's words. 99

'And then he spoke again: "Let not your heart mistrust:
I absolve you here and now if you will teach me
how I can bring Praeneste to the ground. 102

"I have the power, as well you know, to lock
and unlock Heaven, because the keys are two
for which the pope before me had no care." 105

'His threatening tactics brought me to the point
at which the worse course seemed the one of silence.
And so I said: "Father, since you cleanse me 108

"of the sin that I must even now commit:
Promising much with scant observance
will seal your triumph on the lofty throne." 111

'The moment I was dead, Francis came for me.	
But one of the dark Cherubim cried out:	
"No, wrong me not by bearing that one off.	114
"He must come down to serve among my minions	
because he gave that fraudulent advice.	
From then till now I've dogged his footsteps.	117
"One may not be absolved without repentance,	
nor repent and wish to sin concurrently --	
a simple contradiction not allowed."	120
'Oh, wretch that I am, how I shuddered	
when he seized me and said: "Perhaps	
you didn't reckon I'd be versed in logic."	123
'He carried me to Minos, who coiled his tail	
eight times around his scaly back	
and, having gnawed it in his awful rage,	126
'said: "Here comes a sinner for the thieving fire."	
And so, just as you see me, I am damned,	
cloaked as I am. And as I go, I grieve.'	129
Once he had brought his words to this conclusion,	
the weeping flame departed,	
twisting and tossing its pointed horn.	132
We continued on our way, my guide and I,	
over the ridge and up the arch that spans	
the ditch where those are paid their due	135
who, for disjoining, gather up their load.	136