

INFERNO

CANTO XXVIII

Who, even in words not bound by meter,
and having told the tale many times over,
could tell the blood and wounds that I saw now? 3

Surely every tongue would fail,
for neither thought nor speech
has the capacity to hold so much. 6

Could all the wounded troops again assemble:
first from Apulia, land laid low by war,
who grieved for their lost blood 9

shed by the Trojans, then all those
of the long war, whose corpses were despoiled
of piles of rings -- as Livy writes, who does not err -- 12

together with the ones who felt the agony of blows
fighting in the fields against Guiscard,
and those whose bones still lie in heaps 15

at Ceprano, where each Apulian played it false,
and those near Tagliacozzo,
where old Alardo conquered without force of arms: 18

and should one show his limb pierced through,
another his, where it has been cut off,
it would be nothing to the ninth pit's filth. 21

No cask ever gapes so wide for loss
of mid- or side-stave as the soul I saw
cleft from the chin right down to where men fart. 24

Between the legs the entrails dangled. I saw
the innards and the loathsome sack
that turns what one has swallowed into shit. 27

While I was caught up in the sight of him,
he looked at me and, with his hands, ripped open
his chest, saying: 'See how I rend myself, 30

'see how mangled is Mohammed!
Ahead of me proceeds Alì, in tears,
his face split open from his chin to forelock. 33

'And all the others whom you see
 sowed scandal and schism while they lived,
 and that is why they here are hacked asunder. 36

'A devil's posted there behind us
 who dresses us so cruelly,
 putting each of this crew again to the sword 39
 'as soon as we have done our doleful round.
 For all our wounds have closed
 when we appear again before him. 42

'But who are you to linger on the ridge? --
 perhaps you put off going to the torment
 pronounced on your own accusation.' 45

'Death does not have him yet nor does his guilt
 lead him to torment,' replied my master,
 'but to give him greater knowledge 48

'I, who am dead indeed, must shepherd him
 from circle to circle, through this Hell down here.
 And this is as true as that I speak to you.' 51

On hearing this, more than a hundred souls
 halted in the ditch to stare at me
 in wonder, each forgetful of his pain. 54

'You, who perhaps will shortly see the sun,
 warn Fra Dolcino to provide himself --
 unless he'd like to join me here quite soon -- 57

'with stocks of victuals, lest the siege of snow
 hand the Novarese the victory
 not otherwise so easy to attain.' 60

One foot raised, halted in mid-stride,
 Mohammed spoke these words,
 then setting down that foot, went on his way. 63

Another, with his throat pierced through
 and nose hacked off just where the brows begin,
 and only one ear left upon his head, 66

stopped with the rest of them to gape in wonder
 and, before the others did, opened his windpipe,
 scarlet on the skin side as it was, 69

to say: 'O you whom guilt does not condemn
 and whom I saw above in Italy,
 if in your likeness I am not deceived, 72

'should you ever see that gentle plain again
that slopes from Vercelli down to Marcabò,
for Pier da Medicina spare a thought. 75

'And let the two chief men of Fano know,
both messer Guido and Angiolello,
that, unless our foresight here is vain, 78

'through a brutal tyrant's treachery
near La Cattolica they shall be heaved
out of their ship with weights to sink them down. 81

'Between the islands of Cyprus and Majorca
Neptune never witnessed so terrible a crime,
whether one committed by pirates or by Greeks. 84

'That traitor, who sees through one eye only
and rules the city that another down here with me
would take delight in never having seen, 87

'will have the men of Fano come to parley
and he will so deal with them that, to control
Focara's wind, they'll need no vows or prayers.' 90

And I: 'Point out to me and make him known,
if you would have me carry news of you above,
the one to whom that city's sight was bitter.' 93

Then he laid his hand upon the jaw
of one of his companions, pried his lips apart,
and cried: 'This is he, but he does not speak. 96

'Banished, he quenched the doubt in Caesar,
affirming that, to a man prepared,
delay was always harmful.' 99

Ah, how distressed he seemed to me,
his tongue sliced off deep in his throat,
Curio, who'd been so bold in speech! 102

And then another whose hands had been chopped off,
raising his stumps up in the murky air
so that the blood from them befouled his face, 105

cried out: 'Surely you'll remember Mosca also,
who said, alas: "A done deed finds its purpose."
For Tuscany, that was an evil seed.' 108

'And death to your own stock,' I added then.
At that, one sorrow piled upon another,
he made off, like a man berserk with grief. 111

But I stayed on to watch the troop	
and saw a thing I would be loath	
to mention without further proof,	114
were I not comforted by conscience,	
the bosom friend that fortifies a man	
beneath the armor of an honest heart.	117
I truly saw, and seem to see it still,	
a headless body make its way	
like all the others in that dismal flock.	120
And by its hair he held his severed head	
swinging in his hand as if it were a lantern.	
The head stared at us and said: 'Oh, woe!'	123
Of himself he made himself a lamp,	
and they were two in one and one in two.	
How this can be He knows who so ordains it.	126
When he was just at the foot of the bridge	
he raised his arm high and, with it, that head,	
so as to make his words sound more distinct:	129
'You, who view the dead with breath yet in your body,	
look upon my grievous punishment.	
Is any other terrible as this?	132
'So you may carry back the news of me,	
know I am Bertran de Born, the one	
who urged the young king on with bad advice.	135
'Father and son I set to enmity.	
Ahithophel stirred no worse ill between	
Absalom and David with his wicked goading.	138
'Because I severed persons thus conjoined,	
severed, alas, I carry my own brain	
from its starting-point here in my body.	141
In me you may observe fit punishment.'	142