

INFERNO

CANTO IX

The pallor cowardice had painted on my face
when I saw my leader turning back
made him hasten to compose his features. 3

He stopped, like a man intent on listening,
for the eye could not probe far
through that dim air and murky fog. 6

'Yet we must win this fight,' he began,
'or else Such help was promised us.
How long it seems to me till someone comes!' 9

I clearly saw that he had covered up
his first words with the others that came after,
words so different in meaning. 12

Still, I was filled with fear by what he said.
Perhaps I understood his broken phrase
to hold worse meaning than it did. 15

'Does ever anyone from the first circle,
where the only penalty is hope cut off,
descend so deep into this dismal pit?' 18

I put this question and he answered:
'It seldom happens that a soul from Limbo
undertakes the journey I am on. 21

'It is true I came here once before,
conjured by pitiless Erichtho,
who could call shades back to their bodies. 24

'I had not long been naked of my flesh
when she forced me to go inside that wall
to fetch a spirit from the circle of Judas. 27

'That is the lowest place, the darkest,
and furthest from the heaven that encircles all.
Well do I know the way -- so have no fear. 30

'This swamp, which belches forth such noxious stench,
hems in the woeful city, circles it.
Now we cannot enter without wrath.' 33

And he said more, but I do not remember,
for my eyes and thoughts were drawn
to the high tower's blazing peak 36
where all at once, erect, had risen
three hellish, blood-stained Furies:
they had the limbs and shape of women, 39
their waists encircled by green hydras.
Thin serpents and horned snakes entwined,
in place of hair, their savage brows. 42
And he, who knew full well the handmaids
to the queen of endless lamentation,
said to me: 'See the fierce Erinyes. 45
'That is Megaera on the left. On the right
Alecto wails. In the middle
is Tisiphone.' And with that he fell silent. 48
Each rent her breast with her own nails.
And with their palms they struck themselves, shrieking.
In fear I pressed close to the poet. 51
'Let Medusa come and we'll turn him to stone,'
they cried, looking down. 'To our cost,
we failed to avenge the assault of Theseus.' 54
'Turn your back and keep your eyes shut,
for if the Gorgon head appears and should you see it,
all chance for your return above is lost.' 57
While my master spoke he turned me round
and, still not trusting to my hands,
covered my face with his hands also. 60
O you who have sound intellects,
consider the teaching that is hidden
behind the veil of these strange verses. 63
And now there came, over the turbid waves,
a dreadful, crashing sound
that set both shores to trembling. 66
It sounded like a mighty wind,
made violent by waves of heat,
that strikes the forest and with unchecked force 69
shatters the branches, hurls them away, and,
magnificent in its roiling cloud of dust, drives on,
putting beast and shepherd to flight. 72

He freed my eyes and said: 'Now look
across the scum of that primeval swamp
to where the vapor is most dense and harsh.' 75

As frogs, before their enemy the snake,
all scatter through the water
till each sits huddled on the bank, 78

I saw more than a thousand lost souls flee
before one who so lightly passed across the Styx
he did not touch the water with his feet. 81

He cleared the thick air from his face,
his left hand moving it away,
as if that murky air alone had wearied him. 84

It was clear that he was sent from Heaven,
and I turned to the master, who signaled me
to keep silent and bow down before him. 87

Ah, how full of high disdain he seemed to me!
He came up to the gate and with a wand
opened it, and there was no resistance. 90

'O outcasts of Heaven, race despised,'
he began on the terrible threshold, 'whence
comes this insolence you harbor in your souls? 93

'Why do you kick against that will
which never can be severed from its purpose,
and has so many times increased your pain? 96

'What profits it to fight against the fates?
Remember your own Cerberus still bears
the wounds of that around his chin and neck.' 99

Then he turned back along the wretched way
without a word for us, and he seemed pressed,
spurred on by greater cares 102

than those of the man who stands before him.
We turned our steps toward the city,
emboldened by his holy words. 105

We entered without further struggle.
And I, in my great need to see
what such a guarded fortress holds, 108

as soon as I had entered eagerly surveyed
the wide plain stretching on all sides,
so filled with bitter torment and despair. 111

Just as at Arles where the Rhone goes shallow,
just as at Pola, near Quarnero's gulf,
which hems in Italy and bathes her borders, 114
the sepulchers make the land uneven,
so all around me in this landscape
the many tombs held even greater sorrow. 117
For here the graves were strewn with flames
that made them glow with heat
hotter than iron is before it's worked. 120
All their covers were propped open and from them
issued such dire lamentation it was clear
it came from wretches in despair and pain. 123
And I: 'Master, who are these souls
entombed within these chests and who make known
their plight with sighs of sorrow?' 126
And he: 'Here, with all their followers,
are the arch-heretics of every sect.
The tombs are far more laden than you think. 129
'Like is buried here with like,
though the graves burn with an unlike heat.'
Then, after he turned to the right, 132
we passed between the torments and the lofty ramparts. 133