

PURGATORIO

CANTO XVI

Gloom of hell or of a night deprived
of all the stars, beneath a barren sky
which everywhere was overcast with clouds, 3
had never put so dark a veil across my eyes
or been so harsh and stinging to my sight
as was the smoke that covered us 6
so that I could not keep my eyelids open.
And then my wise and trusted escort
came up and offered me his shoulder. 9
Just as the blind man walks behind his guide
so that he does not stray or strike against
something that might hurt or even kill him, 12
thus did I move through that foul, bitter air
and listened to my leader, who kept urging:
'Make sure that you are not cut off from me.' 15
I heard voices and each seemed to pray
for peace and mercy to the Lamb of God
who bears away our sins. 18
They all began with *Agnus Dei*,
and with one voice and intonation sang the words
so that they seemed to share complete accord. 21
I asked, 'Master, are these spirits that I hear?'
And he: 'You have it right. Here they undo
the knot that was their wrath.' 24
'But who are you that cleave our smoke?
You speak of us as though, even now,
you measured time in months and days,' 27
I heard a voice say.
Then my master urged: 'Answer him,
and ask him if the way goes up from here.' 30
And I: 'O creature who purify yourself
to return in beauty to the One who made you,
you'll hear a wondrous story if you follow me.' 33

'I will follow as far as is permitted,'
 he replied, 'and if the smoke keeps us from seeing,
 hearing will keep us joined instead.' 36

And I began: 'With the very swaddling clothes
 that death unwinds I make my way above,
 and I have come through agony of Hell. 39

'Since God has so received me in His grace
 that He has willed that I shall see His court
 in ways unknown to modern custom, 42

'do not conceal from me the life you led
 before you died: tell it, and tell me if I'm headed
 for the passage--your words shall be our escort.' 45

'I was a Lombard, known as Marco.
 I knew the world and loved that valor
 at which today all aim a slackened bow. 48

'You are on the path that leads you up.'
 Thus he replied, then added: 'I pray you,
 say a prayer for me once you are above.' 51

And I to him: 'I pledge to do your bidding.
 But I will burst with my unspoken doubts
 if I don't speak and free myself of them. 54

'A single doubt before, it now is paired
 by what you said, which here confirms
 what elsewhere I have heard, to which I couple it. 57

'The world is barren now
 of every virtue, as you state,
 and heavy with and overgrown by evil. 60

'Please point out to me the cause
 that I may know it and make it known to others,
 for both the heavens and the earth receive the blame.' 63

First he heaved a heavy sigh, which grief wrung
 to a groan, and then began: 'Brother,
 the world is blind and indeed you come from it. 66

'You who are still alive assign each cause
 only to the heavens, as though they drew
 all things along upon their necessary paths. 69

'If that were so, free choice would be denied you,
 and there would be no justice when one feels
 joy for doing good or misery for evil. 72

'Yes, the heavens give motion to your inclinations.
 I don't say all of them, but, even if I did,
 you still possess a light to winnow good from evil, 75
 'and you have free will. Should it bear the strain
 in its first struggles with the heavens,
 then, rightly nurtured, it will conquer all. 78
 'To a greater power and a better nature you, free,
 are subject, and these create the mind in you
 the heavens have not in their charge. 81
 'Therefore, if the world around you goes astray,
 in you is the cause and in you let it be sought.
 In this I will now be your informant. 84
 'From the hand of Him who looks on it with love
 before it lives, comes forth, like a little girl
 who weeps one moment and as quickly laughs, 87
 'the simple infant soul that has no knowledge
 but, moved by a joyous maker,
 gladly turns to what delights it. 90
 'At first it tastes the savor of a trifling good.
 It is beguiled by that and follows in pursuit
 if guide or rein do not deflect its love. 93
 'Therefore, there was need that laws be set
 to act as curbs, need for a ruler to discern
 at least the tower above the one true city. 96
 'Yes, there are laws, but who takes them in hand?
 No one, because the shepherd who precedes
 may chew his cud, but does not have cleft hooves. 99
 'The people, then, who see their leader lunge
 only at the good for which they themselves are greedy,
 graze on that and ask for nothing more. 102
 'As you can plainly see, failed guidance
 is the cause the world is steeped in vice,
 and not your inner nature that has grown corrupt. 105
 'Rome, which formed the world for good,
 once held two suns that lit the one road
 and the other, the world's and that to God. 108
 'The one has snuffed the other out, the sword
 is fastened to the crook, and these two,
 forced to be together, must perforce go ill, 111

'since, joined, the one fears not the other.
If you don't believe me, think of a grain of wheat,
for by its seed each plant is known. 114

'In the land watered both by the Àdige and Po
valor and courtesy could once be found
before Frederick encountered opposition. 117

'Now it may with impunity be crossed by anyone
who for shame would shun all discourse
with the virtuous or even coming near them. 120

'Three old men are left on earth,
longing for the better life when God will take them,
in whom the ancient times rebuke the new: 123

'Currado da Palazzo and the good Gherardo
and Guido da Castel, better called,
as say the French, the simple, honest Lombard. 126

'Spread the word, then, that the Church of Rome,
confounding in herself two governments, stumbles
in the mud, befouling herself and her burden.' 129

'O Marco mine,' I said, 'you reason well,
and now I understand just why the sons of Levi
were disbarred from their inheritance. 132

'But who is this Gherardo who, you say,
is left as an example of a race extinct,
rebuking this barbaric age?' 135

'Either your speech deceives me,' he replied,
'or it puts me to the test, for, speaking Tuscan,
how is it you know nothing of the good Gherardo? 138

'I know him by no other name unless
I were to take one from his daughter, Gaia.
May God be with you. I come with you no farther. 141

'You see the brightness shining through the smoke
already whitens, and I must take my leave
before the angel waiting there can see me.' 144

Then he turned back and would not hear me more. 145