DAVATE: THE INFERNO

The Immortal Drama of a Journey Through Hell

Cantos I-VIII Read by John Ciardi

(IN ENGLISH)
DAVTE: THE INFERNO
The Immortal Drama of a Journey Through Hell
DANTE ALIGHIERI

THE INFERNO

Canto I

The Dark Wood of Error

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
from the straight road and woke to find myself
alone in a dark wood. How shall I say
what wood that was I never saw so drear,
so rank, so aridous, so wild and bare
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.

Death could scarce be more bitter than that place!
But since it came to good, I will recount
all that I found revealed there by God's grace.

How I came to it I cannot rightly say,
soweeked and loose with sleep had I become
when I first wandered there from the True Way.

But at the far end of that valley of evil
whose maze had sapped my very heart with fear!
I found myself before a little hill

and lifted up my eyes: Its shoulders glowed
already with the sweet rays of that planet
whose virtue leads men straight on every road,

and the shining strengthened me against the fright
whose agony had wrecked the lake of my heart
through all the terrors of that pestiferous night.

Just as a swimmer, who with his last breath
swims shoreward from perilous seas, might turn
to memorize the wide water of his death—

so did I turn, my soul still fugitive
from death's surviving image, to stare down
that pass that none had ever left alive.

And there I lay to rest from my heart's race
till calm and breath returned to me. Then rose
and pushed up that dead slope at such a pace

each footfall rose above the last. And lo!
almost at the beginning of the rise
I faced a spotted Leopard, all tremor and flaw

and gaudy pelt. And it would not pass, but stood
so blocking my every turn that time and again
I was on the verge of turning back to the wood.

This fell at the first widening of the dawn
as the sun was climbing Aries with those stars
that rode with him to light the new creation.

Thus the holy hour and the sweet season
of commemoration did much to arm my fear
of that bright murderous beast with their good omens.

Yet not so much but what I shook with dread
at sight of a great Lion that broke upon me
raging with hunger, its enormous head

held high as if to strike a mortal terror
into the very air. And down his track,
a She-Wolf drove upon me, a starved horror

ravenging and wasted beyond all belief.
She seemed a rack for avarice, gaunt and craving.
Oh many the souls she has brought to endless grief!

She brought such heaviness upon my spirit
at sight of her savagery and desperation,
I died from every hope of that high summit.

And like a miser—eager in acquisition
but desperate in self-reproach when Fortune's wheel
turns to the hour of his loss—all tears and attrition

I wavered back; and still the beast pursued,
forcing herself against me hit by hit

till I slid back into the sunless wood.

And as I fell to my soul's ruin, a presence
gathered before me on the discolored air,
the figure of one who seemed hoarse from long silence.

At sight of him in that friendless waste I cried:
"Have pity on me, whatever thing you are,
whether shade or living man." And it replied:

"Not man, though man, I once was, and my blood
was Lombard, both my parents Mantuan,
I was born, though late, as Julio, and bred

in Rome under Augustus in the noon
of the false and lying gods. I was a poet
and sang of old Anchises' noble son

who came to Rome after the burning of Troy,
But you—why do you return to these distresses
instead of climbing that shining Mount of Joy

which is the seat and first cause of man's bliss?
"And are you then that Virgil and that fountain
of purest speech?" My voice grew tremulous:

"Glory and light of poets! now may that seal
and love's apprenticeship that I poured out
on your heroic verses serve me well.

For you are my true master and first author,
the sole maker from whom I drew the breath
of that sweet style whose measures have brought me

honour.

See there, immortal sage, the beast I flee.
For my soul's salvation, I beg you, guard me from her,
for she has struck a mortal tremor through me."

And he replied, seeing my soul in tears:
"He must go by another way who would escape
this wretchedness, for that mad beast that fevers

before you there, suffers no man to pass.
She tracks down all, kills all, and knows no glut,
but, feeding, she grows hungrier than she was.

She mates with any beast, and will mate with more
before the Greyhound comes to hunt her down.
He will not feed on lands nor loot, but honor

and love and wisdom will make straight his way.
He will rise between Felice and Felice, and in him
shall be the resurrection and new day

of that sad Italy for which Nicas died,
and Turnus, and Euryalus, and the maid Camilla.
He shall hunt her through every nation of sick pride

until she is driven back forever to Hell
whence Envy first released her on the world.
Therefore, for your own good, I think it well

you follow me and I will be your guide
and lead you forth through an eternal place.
There you shall see the ancient spirits tried

in endless pain, and hear their lamentation
as each bemoans the second death of souls.
Next you shall see upon a burning mountain

souls in fire and yet content in fire,
knowing that whenever it may be
they yet will mount into the blessed choir.

To which, if it is still your wish to climb,
a worthier spirit shall be sent to guide you.
With her shall I leave you, for the King of Time,

who reigns on high, forbids me to come there
since, living, I rebelled against his law.
He rules the waters and the land and air

and there holds court, his city and his throne.
Oh blessed are they he chooses!" And I to him:

"Poet, by that God to you unknown,
lead me this way. Beyond this present ill
and worse to dread, lead me to Peter's gate
and be my guide through the sad halls of Hell."

And he then: "Follow." And he moved ahead
in silence, and I followed where he led.

Canto II

The Descent

The light was departing. The brown air drew down
all the earth's creatures, calling them to rest
from their day-rolling, as I, one man alone,
prepared myself to face the double war
of the journey and the pity, which memory
shall here set down, nor hesitate, nor err.

O Muse! O High Genius! Be my aid!
O Memory, recorder of the vision,
here shall your true nobility be displayed!

Thus I began: "Poet, you who must guide me,
beware you trust me to that arduous passage,
look to me and look through me—can I be worthy?
You sang how the father of Sylvius, while still
in corruptible flesh won to that other world,
crossing with mortal sense the immortal sill.

But if the Adversary of all Evil
weighing his consequence and who and what
should issue from him, treated him so well—
that cannot seem unfitting to thinking men,
since he was chosen father of Mother Rome
and of her Empire by God's will and token.

Both, to speak strictly, were founded and foreseen
as the established Seat of Holiness
for the successors of Great Peter's throne.

In that quest, which your verses celebrate,
he learned those mysteries from which arose
his victory and Rome's apostolate.

There later came the chosen vessel, Paul,
bearing the confirmation of that Faith
which is the one true door to life eternal.

But I—how should I dare? By whose permission?
I am not Amenas. I am not Paul.
Who could believe me worthy of the vision?

How, then, may I presume to this high quest
and not fear my own baseness? You are wise
and will grasp what my poor words can but suggest."

As one who unwill what he wills, will stay
strong purpose with feeble second thoughts
until he spells all his first zeal away—
so I hung back and bellowed on that dim coast
still thinking had worn out my enterprise,
so stout at starting and so early lost.

"I understand from your words and the look in your
eyes,"
that shadow of magnificence answered me,
"your soul is sunken in that cowardice
that bears down many men, turning their course
and resolution by imagined perils,
as his own shadow turns the frightened horse.

To free you of this dread I will tell you all
of why I came to you and what I heard
when first I pitied you. I was a soul
among the souls of Limbo, when a Lady
so blessed and so beautiful, I prayed her
to order and command my will, called to me.

Her eyes were kindled from the lamps of Heaven.
Her voice reached through me, tender, sweet, and low.
An angel's voice, a music of its own:
'O gracious Mantuan whose melodies
live in earth's memory and shall live on
till the last motion ceases in the skies,
my dearest friend, and fortune's foe, has strayed
onto a friendless shore and stands beset
by such distresses that he turns afraid
from the True Way, and news of him in Heaven
rumors my dread he is already lost.
I come, afraid that I am too-late risen.

Fly to him and with your high counsel, pity,
and with whatever need be for his good
and soul's salvation, help him, and solace me.

It is I, Beatrice, who send you to him.
I come from the blessed height for which I yearn.
Love called me here. When amid Seraphim
I stand again before my Lord, your praises
shall sound in Heaven. She paused, and I began:

'O Lady of that only grace that raises
feeble mankind within its mortal cycle
above all other works God's will has placed
within the heaven of the smallest circle;
so welcome is your command that to my sense,
were it already fulfilled, it would yet seem tardy.
I understand, and am all obedience.

But tell me how you dare to venture thus
so far from the wide heaven of your joy
to which your thoughts years back from this abyss.'

Since what you ask,' she answered me, 'probes near
the root of all, I will say briefly only
how I have come through Hell's pit without fear.

Know then, O waiting and compassionate soul,
that is to fear which has the power to harm,
and nothing else is fearful even in Hell.

I am so made by God's all-seeing mercy
your anguish does not touch me, and the flame
of this great burning has no power upon me.

There is a Lady in Heaven so concerned
for him I send you to, that for her sake
the strict decree is broken. She has turned

and called Lucia to her wish and mercy
saying: 'Thy faithful one is sorely pressed;
in his distresses I commend him to thee.'

Lucia, that soul of light and foe of all
the cruelty, rose and came to me at once
where I was sitting with the ancient Rachel,
saying to me: 'Beatrice, true praise of God,
why dost thou not help him who loved thee so
that for thy sake k. left the vulgar crowd?'

Doth thou not hear his cries? Canst thou not see
the death he wrestles with beside that river
no ocean can surpass for rage and fury?

No soul of earth was ever as rapt to seek
its good or free its injury as I was—
when I had heard my sweet Lucia speak—
to descend from Heaven and my blessed seat
to you, laying my trust in that high speech
that honors you and all who honor it.'

She spoke and turned away to hide a tear
that, shining, urged me faster. So I came
and freed you from the beast that drove you there,
blocking the near way to the Heavenly Height.
And now what ails you? Why do you lag? Why
this heart's hesitation and pale fright
when three such blessed Ladies lean from Heaven
in their concern for you and my own pledge
of the great good that waits you has been given?'

As flowerless drooped and pucker'd in the night
turn up to the returning sun and spread
their petals wide on his new warmth and light—
just so my wilted spirits rose again
and such a heat of soul surged through my veins
that I was born anew. Thus I began:

'Blessed be that Lady of infinite pity,
and blessed be thy taxed and courteous spirit
that came so promptly on the word she gave thee.

Thy words have moved my heart to its first purpose.
My Guide! My Lord! My Master! Now lead on:
one shall serve the two of us in this.'
Canto III

The Opportunists

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOF
I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW,
SACRED JUSTICE MOVED MY ARCHITECT,
I WAS RAISED HERE BY DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE,
PRIMORDIAL LOVE AND ULTIMATE INTELLIGENCE.

ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS TIME CANNOT WEAR
WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I STAND;
ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.

These mysteries I read cut into stone
above a gate. And turning I said: “Master,
what is the meaning of this harsh inscription?”
And he then as initiate to novice:
“Here must you put by all division of spirit
and gather your soul against all cowardice.”

This is the place I told you to expect.
Here you shall pass among the fallen people,
souls who have lost the good of intellect.”

So saying, he put forth his hand to me,
and with a gentle and encouraging smile
he led me through the gate of mystery.

Here sighs and cries and walls were set and recoiled
on the starless air, spilling my soul to tears.
A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents roared
in pain and anger. Voices hoarse and shrill
and sounds of blows, all intermingled, raised
tumult and pandemonium that still
whirls on the air forever diry with it
as if a whirlwind sucked at sand. And I,
holding my head in horror, cried: “Sweet Spirit,”

what souls are these who run through this black hate?”
And he to me: “These are the newly soulless
whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise

They are mixed here with that despicable corps
of angels who were neither for God nor Satan,
but only for themselves. The High Creator
scourged them from Heaven for its perfect beauty,
and Hell will not receive them since the wicked
might feel some glory over them.” And I:

“Master, what gnaws at them so hideously
their lamentation stuns the very air!”
“They have no hope of death,” he answered me,

“and in their blind and unsustaining state
their miserable lives have sunk so low
that they must envy every other fate.”

No word of them survives their living season.
Merry and Justice deny them even a name.
Let us not speak of them: look, and pass on.”

I saw a banner there upon the mist.
Circling and circling, it seemed to scorn all pause.
So it ran on, and still behind it pressed
a never-ending rout of souls in pain.
I had not thought death had undone so many
as passed before me in that mournful train.

And some I knew among them; last of all
I recognized the shadow of that soul
who, in his cowardice, made the Great Denial.
At once I understood for certain: these
were of that retrograde and faithless crew
hateful to God and to His enemies. (80)

These wretches never born and never dead
ran naked in a swarm of wasps and hornets
that gashed them the more they flung,
and made their faces stream with bloody gouts
of pus and tears that dribbled to their feet
to be swallowed there by loathsome worms and
maggots.

Then looking onward I made out a throng
assembled on the beach of a wide river,
whereupon I turned to him: “Master, I long
to know what souls these are, and what strange usage
makes them as eager to cross as they seem to be
in this infected light.” At which the Sage:

“All this shall be made known to you when we stand
on the joyless beach of Acheron.” And I
cast down my eyes, sensing a reprimand

in what he said, and so walked at his side
in silence and ashamed until we came
through the dead cavern to that silent side.

There, steering toward us in an ancient ferry
came an old man with a white bush of hair,
bellowing: “Woe to you deprived souls! Bury
here and forever all hope of Paradise:
I come to lead you to the other shore,
into eternal dark, into fire and ice.
And you who are living yet, I say be gone
from these who are dead.” But when he saw me stand
against his violence he began again:

By other windings and by other steersage
shall you cross to that other shore. Not here! Not
here!
A lighter craft than mine must give you passage.” (90)

And my Guide to him: “Charon, bite back your spore:
this has been willed where what is willed must be,
and is not yours to ask what it may mean.”

The steersman of that marsh of ruined souls,
who wore a wheel of flame around each eye,
stifled the rage that shook his woolly jowls.
But those unmanned and naked spirits there
turned pale with fear and their teeth began to chatter
at sound of his cruel bellow. In despair
they blasphemed God, their parents, their time on earth,
the race of Adam, and the day and the hour
and place and the seed and the womb that gave
them birth.

But all together they drew to that grim shore
where all must come who lose the fear of God.
Weeping and cursing they come for evermore,

and demon Charon with eyes like burning coals
herds them in, and with a whistling his
flails up the stragglers to his wake of souls.

As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down
until the branch stands bare above its tatters
spread on the rustling ground, so one by one
the evil seed of Adam in its Fall
cast themselves, at his signal, from the shore
and streamed away like birds who hear their call.

So they are gone over that shadowy water,
and always before they reach the other shore
a new noise stirs on this, and new throngs gather.

“My son,” the courteous Master said to me,
“all who die in the shadow of God’s wrath
converge to this from every clime and country.” (100)

And all pass over eagerly, for here
Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so
their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear.

No soul in Grace comes ever to this crossing;
therefore if Charon rages at your presence
you will understand the reason for his cursing.”

When he had spoken, all the twilight country
shook so violently, the terror of it
bathes me with sweat even in memory:

the tear-soaked ground gave out a sigh of wind
that swayed itself in flame on a red sky,
and all my shattered senses left me. Blind,

like one whom sleep comes over in a swoon,
I stumbled into darkness and went down.
A monstrous clap of thunder broke apart
the swnow that studded my head; like one awakened
by violent hands, I leaped up with a start.

And having risen; rested and renewed,
I studied out the landmarks of the gloom
to find my bearings as best I could.
And I found I stood on the very brink of the valley
called the Dolorous Abyss, the desolate chasm
where rolls the thunder of Hel's eternal cry,
so depthless-deep and nebulous and dim
that stare as I might into its frightful pit
it gave me back no feature and no bottom.

Death-pale, the Poet spoke: "Now let us go
into the blind world waiting here below us.
I will lead the way and you shall follow."

And I, sick with alarm at his new pallor,
cried out, "How can I go this way when you
who are my strength in doubt turn pale with terror?"

And he: "The pain of these below us here,
drains the color from my face for pity,
and leaves this pallor you mistake for fear.

Now let us go, for a long road awaits us."
So he entered and so he led me in
to the first circle and ledge of the abyss.

No tortured wailing rose to greet us here
but sounds of sighing rose from every side,
sending a terror through the timeless air,
as a grief breathed out of unremitted sadness,
the passive state of those who dwelled apart,
men, women, children—a dim and endless congress.

And the Master said to me: "You do not question
what souls are those that suffer here before you?
I wish you to know before you travel on
that these were sinless.
And still their merits fail,
for they lacked Baptism's grace, which is the door
of the true faith you were born to. Their birth fell
before the age of the Christian mysteries,
and so they did not worship God's Trinity
in fullest duty. I am one of these.

For such defects are we lost, though spared the fire
and suffering Hell in one affliction only:
that without hope we live on in desire."

I thought how many worthy souls there were
suspended in that Limbo, and a weight
closed on my heart for what the noblest suffer.

"Instruct me, Master, and most noble Sir,"
I prayed him then, "better to understand
the perfect cred that conquers every error:
has any, by his own or another's merit,
gone ever from this place to blessedness?"
He sensed my inner question and answered it:
"I was still new to this estate of tears
when a Mighty One descended here among us,
crowned with the sign of His victorious years.
He took us from the shade of our first parent,
of Abel, his pure son, of ancient Noah,
of Moses, the bringer of law, the obedient.

Father Abraham, David the King,
Israel with his father and his children,
Rachel, the holy vessel of His blessing,
and many more He chose for elevation
among the elect. And before these, you must know,
no human soul had ever won salvation."

We had not passed as he spoke, but held our road
and passed meanwhile behind a press of souls
crowded about like trees in a thick wood.
And we had not traveled far from where I woke
when I made out a radiance before us
that struck away a hemisphere of dark.

We were still some distance back in the long night,
yet near enough that I half-saw, half-sensed,
what quality of souls lived in that light.

"O ornament of wisdom and of art,
what souls are these whose merit lights their way
even in Hell, What joy sets them apart?"

And he to me: "The signature of honor
they left on earth is recognized in Heaven
and wins them ease in Hell out of God's favor."

And as he spoke a voice rang on the air:
"Honor the Prince of Poets; the soul and glory
that went from us returns. He is here! He is here!"
The cry ceased and the echo passed from hearing;
I saw four mighty presences come toward us
with neither joy nor sorrow in their bearing.

"Note well," my Master said as they came on,
"that soul that leads the rest with sword in hand
as if he were their captain and champion.
It is Homer, singing master of the earth.
Next after him is Horace, the satirist,
Ovid in third, and Lucan is the fourth.

Since all of these have part in the high name
the voice proclaimed, calling me Prince of Poets,
the honor that they do me honors them."
So I saw gathered at the edge of light
the masters of that highest school whose song
outshines all others like an eagle's flight.
And after they had talked together a while,
they turned and welcomed me most graciously,
at which I saw my approving Master smile.
And they honored me far beyond courtesy,
for they included me in their own number,
making me sixth in that exalted company.

So we moved toward the light, and as we passed
we spoke of things as well omitted here
as it was sweet to touch on there. At last
we reached the base of a great Citadel
circled by seven towering bastlements
and by a sweet brook flowing round them all.

This we passed over as it were firm ground.
Through seven gates I entered with those sages
and came to a green meadow blooming round.
There with a solemn and majestic poise
stood many people gathered in the light,
speaking infrequently and with muted voice.
Past that enamelled green we six withdrew
into a luminous and open height
from which each soul among them stood in view.

And there directly before me on the green
the master souls of time were shown to me,
I glory in the glory I have seen!

Electra stood in a great company
among whom I saw Hector and Aeneas
and Caesar in armor with his falcon's eye.
I saw Camilla, and the Queen Amazon
across the field. I saw the Latian King
seated there with his daughter by his throne.

And the good Brutus who overthrew the Tarquin:
Lucretia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia;
and, by himself apart, the Saladin.
And raising my eyes a little I saw on high
Aristotle, the master of those who know,
ringed by the great souls of philosophy.

All wait upon him for their honor and his.
I saw Socrates and Plato at his side
before all others there. Democritus
who ascribes the world to chance, Diogenes,
and with him these Thales, Anaxagoras,
Zenon, Heraclitus, Empedocles.
And I saw the wise collector and analyst—
Dionysius I mean. I saw Orpheus there,
Tully, Linus, Seneca the moralist.
Eudox the geometer, and Plotinus,
Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna,
and Avrnhoe of the Great Commentary.

I cannot count so much nobility;
my longer theme pursues me so that often
the word falls short of the reality.
breathed on my lips the tremor of his kiss.
That book, and he who wrote it, was a pander.
That day we read no further." As she said this, 155
the other spirit, who stood by her, wept
so pitously, I felt my senses reel
and faint away with anguish. I was swept
by such a swoon as death is, and I fell,
as a corpse might fall, to the dead floor of Hell.

Canto VI

CIRCLE THREE  The Gluttons

My senses had reeled from me out of pity
for the sorrow of those kinmen and lost lovers.
Now they return, and waking gradually,
I see new tortments and new souls in pain
about me everywhere wherever I turn
away from grief I turn to grief again.

I am in the Third Circle of the torments.
Here to all time with neither pause nor change
the frozen rain of Hell descends in torrents.

Huge hailstones, dirty water, and black snow
pour from the dismal air to purify
the putrid slush that waits for them below.

Here monstrous Cerberus, the ravenous beast,
howls through his triple throats like a mad dog
over the spirits sunk in that foul past.

His eyes are red, his beard is greased with phlegm,
his belly is swollen, and his hands are claws
to rip the wretches and flay and mangle them.

And they, too, howl like dogs in the freezing storm,
turning and turning from it as if they thought
one naked side could keep the other warm.

When Cerberus discovered us in that swill
his dragon-jaws yawed wide, his lips drew back
in a grin of fangs. No limb of him was still.

My Guide bent down and seized in either fist
a clod of the stinking dirt that festered there
and flung them down the gullet of the beast.

As a hungry cur will set the echoes raving
and then fall still when he is thrown a bone,
all of his clamor being in his craving,

so the three ugly heads of Cerberus,
whose howling at those wretches deafened them,
choked on their putrid sops and stopped their rum.

We made our way across the sodden mess
of souls the rain beat down, and when our steps
fell on a body, they sank through emptiness.

All those illusions of being seemed to lie
drowned in the slush; until one wretch among them
sat up abruptly and called as I passed by:

"O you who are led this journey through the shade
of Hell's abyss, do you recall this face?
You had been made before I was unmade."

And I: "Perhaps the pain you suffer here
distorts your image from my recollection.
I do not know you as you now appear."

And he to me: "Your own city, so rife
with hatred that the bitter cup flows over
was mine too in that other, clearer life.

Your citizens nicknamed me Ciaccio, The Hog:
gluttony was my offense, and for it
I lie here rotting as a swollen log.
Nor am I lost in this alone; all these
you see about you in this painful death
have wallowed in the same indecencies."

I answered him: "Ciaccio, your agony
weighs on my heart and calls my soul to tears;
but tell me, if you can, what is to be
for the citizens of that divided state,
and whether there are honest men among them,
and for what reasons we are torn by hate."

And he then: "After many words given and taken
shall it come to blood? White shall rise over Black
and rout the dark lord's force, battered and shaken.
Then it shall come to pass within three suns
that the fallen shall arise, and by the power
of one now gripped by many hesitations
Black shall ride on White for many years,
loading it down with burdens and oppressions
and trembling of proud names and helpless tears.

Two are honest, but none will heed them. There,
pride, avarice, and envy are the tongues
men know and heed, a Babel of despair."

Here he broke off his mournful prophecy.
And I to him: "Still let me urge you on
to speak a little further and instruct me:

Farinata and Tegghianis, men of good blood,
Jacopo Rusticucci, Arrigo, Mosca,
and the others who set their hearts on doing good—
where are they now whose high deeds might be-gem
the crown of kings? I long to know their fate.
Does Heaven console or Hell envenom them?"

And he: "They lie below in a blacker lair.
A heavier guilt draws them to greater pain.
If you descend so far you may see them there.

But when you move again among the living,
oh speak my name to the memory of men!
Having answered all, I say no more." And giving
his head a shake, he looked up at my face
cross-eyed, then bowed his head and fell away
among the other blind souls of that place.

And my Guide to me: "He will not wake again
until the angel trumpet sounds the day
on which the host shall come to judge all men.

Then shall each soul before the seat of Mercy
return to its sad grave and flech and form
the edict of Eternity."

So we picked our slow way among the shades
and the filthy rain, speaking of life to come.
"Masters," I said, "when the great clarion fades
into the voice of thundering Omniscience,
what of these agonies? Will they be the same,
or more, or less, after the final sentence?"

And he to me: "Look to your science again
where it is written: the more a thing is, perfect
the more it feels of pleasure and of pain."

As for these souls, though they can never soar
to true perfection, still in the new time
they will be nearer it than they were before."

And so we walked the rim of the great ledge
speaking of pain and joy, and of much more
that I will not repeat, and reached the edge
where the descent begins. There, suddenly,
we came on Plutus, the great enemy.

Canto VII

CIRCLE FOUR  The Hoarders and the Wasters

CIRCLE FIVE  The Wrathful and the Sulien

"Papa Satán, Papa Satán, aleppyy,"
Plutus chucked and muttered in his rage;
and my all-knowing Guide, to comfort me:

"Do not be startled, for no power of his,
however he may lord it over the damned,
may hinder your descent through this abyss."

And turning to that carnival of boar
cried: "Peace, you wolf of Hell. Choke back your bile
and let its venom blister your own throat.

Our passage through this pit is willed on high
by that same Throne that bosed the angel wrath
of Michael on ambition and mutiny.

As pulled out sails fall when the mast gives way
and flutter to a self-convulsing heap—
so collapsed Plutus into that dead clay.

Thus we descended the dark scarp of Hell
to which all the evil of the Universe
comes home at last, into the Fourth Great Circle
and bode of the abyss, O Holy Justice,
who could relate the agonies I saw?
What guilt is man that he can come to this?
And this is she so railed at and reviled
that even her deities in the joys of time
blaspheme her name. Their oaths are bitter and wild,
but she in her beatitude does not hear.
Among the Primal Beings of God’s joy
she breathes her blessedness and wheels her sphere.
But the stars that marked our starting fall away.
We must go deeper into greater pain,
for it is not permitted that we stay.”

And crossing over to the channel’s edge,
we came to a spring that boiled and overflowed
through a great crevice torn into the ledge.

By that foul water, black from its very source,
we found a nightmare path among the rocks
and followed the dark stream along its course.

Beyond its rocky rale and wild descent
the river floods and forms a marsh called Styx,
a dreary swampland, vaporous and malignant.
And I, intent on all our passage touched,
made out a swarm of spirits in that bog
avage with anger, naked, slime-besmeared.
They thumped at one another in that slime
with hands and feet, and they bit, and they bit
as if each would tear the other limb from limb.

And my kind Sage: “My son, behold the souls of
those who lived in wrath. And do you see
the broken surfaces of those water-holes
on every hand, boiling as if in pain?
There are souls beneath that water. Fixed in slime
they speak their piece, and it, and start again:

’Sullen were we in the air made sweet by the Sun;
in the glory of his shining our hearts poured
a bitter smoke. Sullen were we begun;
sullen we lie forever in this ditch.’
This litany they garbled in their throats
as if they sang, but lacked the words and pitch.”

Then circling on along that filthy wallow,
we picked our way between the bank and fen,
keeping our eyes on those foul souls that swallor
the slime of Hell. And so at last we came
to foot of a Great Tower that has no name.

Canto VIII

CIRCLE FIVE: STYX

The Wretchful, Phlegyas

CIRCLE SIX: DIS

The Fallen Angels

Returning to my theme, I say we came
to the foot of a Great Tower; but long before
we reached it through the marsh, two horns of flame

flared from the summit, one from either side,
and then, far off, so far we scarce could see it
across the mist, another flame replied.

I turned to that sea of all intelligence
saying: “What is this signal and counter-signal?
Who is it speaks with fire across this distance?”

And he then: “Look across the filthy swale:
you may already see the one they summon,
if the swamp vapors do not hide him from you.”

No twanging bowstring ever shot an arrow
that bored the air it rode dead to the mark
more swiftly than the flying skiff whose prow

shot toward us over the polluted channel
with a single steersman at the helm who called:
“So, do I have you at last, you whelp of Hell!”

“Phlegyas, Phlegyas,” said my Lord and Guide,
“this time you waste your breath: you have us only
for the time it takes to cross to the other side.”

Phlegyas, the madman, blew his rage among
those muddy marshes like a cheat deceived,
or like a fool at some imagined wrong.
My Guide, whom all the fiend’s noise could not nettle, boarded the ship, motioning me to follow:
and not till I stepped aboard did it seem to settle
into the water. At once we left the shore,
that ancient hull riding more heavily
than it had ridden in all of time before. (50)

And as we ran on that dead swamp, the slime
rose before me, and from it a voice cried:
“Who are you that come here before your time?”

And I replied: “If I come, I do not remain.
But you, who are you, so fallen and so foul?”
And he: “I am one who weeps.” And I then:

“May you weep and wail to all eternity,
for I know you, hell-dog, filthy as you are.”
Then he stretched both hands to the boat, but warily
the Master shoved him back, crying, “Down! Down!
with the other dogs!” Then he embraced me saying:

“Indignant spirit, I kiss you as you frown.

Blessed be she who bore you. In world and time
this one was haughtier yet. Not one unbending
graces his memory. Here is his shadow in slime. (46)

How many living now, chancellors of wrath,
shall come to lie here yet in this pigmire,
leaving a curse to be their aftermath?”

And I: “Master, it would suit my whim
to see the wretch scrubbed down into the swill
before we leave this stinking sink and him.”

And he to me: “Before the other side
shows through the mist, you shall have all you ask.
This is a wish that should be gratified.”

And shortly after, I saw the loathsome spirit
so mangled by a swarm of muddy wraiths
that to this day I praise and thank God for it.

“After Filippo Argeniti” all cried together.
The mad dog Florentine wheeled at their cry
and bit himself for rage. I saw them gather. (60)

And there we left him. And I say no more.
But such a wailing beat upon my ears,
I strained my eyes ahead to the far shore.

“My son,” the Master said, “the City called Dia
lies just ahead, the heavy citizens,
the swarming crowds of Hell’s metropolis.”

And I then: “Master, I already see
the glow of its red mosques, as if they came
hot from the forge to smolder in this valley.”

And my all-knowing Guide: “They are eternal
flames to eternal fire that rages in them
and makes them glow across this lower Hell.”

And as he spoke we entered the vast most
of the sepulchre. Its wall seemed made of iron
and towered above us in our little boat. (75)

We circled through what seemed an endless distance
before the boatman ran his prow ashore
crying: “Out! Out! Get out! This is the entrance.”

Above the gates more than a thousand shades
of spirits purged from Heaven for its glory
cried angrily: “Who is it that invades
Death’s Kingdom in his life?” My Lord and Guide
advanced a step before me with a sign
that he wished to speak to some of them aside.

They quieted somewhat, and one called, “Come,
but come alone. And tell that other one,
who thought to walk so blithely through death’s
kingdom,

he may go back along the same fool’s way
he came by. Let him try his living luck.
You who are dead can come only to stay.” (90)

Reader, judge for yourself, how each black word
fell on my ears to sink into my heart:
I lost hope of returning to the world.

“O my beloved Master, my Guide in peril,
who time and time again have seen me safely
along this way, and turned the power of evil,
stand by me now,” I cried, “in my heart’s fright.
And if the dead forbid our journey to them,
let us go back together toward the light.”

My Guide then, in the greatness of his spirit:

“Take heart. Nothing can take our passage from us
when such a power has given warrant for it.

Wait here and feed your soul while I am gone
on comfort and good hope; I will not leave you
to wander in this underworld alone.” (105)

So the sweet Guide and Father leaves me here,
and I stay on in doubt with yes and no
dividing all my heart to hope and fear.

I could not hear my Lord’s words, but the pack
that gathered round him suddenly broke away
howling and jostling and went pouring back,

slamming the towering gate hard in his face.
That great Soul stood alone outside the wall.
Then he came back; his pain showed in his pace.

His eyes were fixed upon the ground, his brow
had sagged from its assurance. He sighed aloud:

“Who has forbidden me the halls of sorrow?”

And to me he said: “You need not be cast down
by my vacillation, for whatever plot
these fiends may lay against us, we will go on. (120)

This insolence of theirs is nothing new:
they showed it once at a lesser gate
does the same gate where you read the dead inscription;
and through it at this moment a Great One comes.
Already he has passed it and moves down
ledge by dark ledge. He is one who needs no guide,
and at his touch all gates must open aside.”

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