

Inferno: Canto XVI

Now was I where was heard the reverberation  
Of water falling into the next round,  
Like to that humming which the beehives make,

When shadows three together started forth,  
Running, from out a company that passed  
Beneath the rain of the sharp martyrdom.

Towards us came they, and each one cried out:  
"Stop, thou; for by thy garb to us thou seemest  
To be some one of our depraved city."

Ah me! what wounds I saw upon their limbs,  
Recent and ancient by the flames burnt in!  
It pains me still but to remember it.

Unto their cries my Teacher paused attentive;  
He turned his face towards me, and "Now wait,"  
He said; "to these we should be courteous.

And if it were not for the fire that darts  
The nature of this region, I should say  
That haste were more becoming thee than them."

As soon as we stood still, they recommenced  
The old refrain, and when they overtook us,  
Formed of themselves a wheel, all three of them.

As champions stripped and oiled are wont to do,  
Watching for their advantage and their hold,  
Before they come to blows and thrusts between them,

Thus, wheeling round, did every one his visage  
Direct to me, so that in opposite wise  
His neck and feet continual journey made.

And, "If the misery of this soft place  
Bring in disdain ourselves and our entreaties,"  
Began one, "and our aspect black and blistered,

Let the renown of us thy mind incline  
To tell us who thou art, who thus securely  
Thy living feet dost move along through Hell.

He in whose footprints thou dost see me treading,  
Naked and skinless though he now may go,  
Was of a greater rank than thou dost think;

He was the grandson of the good Gualdrada;  
His name was Guidoguerra, and in life  
Much did he with his wisdom and his sword.

The other, who close by me treads the sand,  
Tegghiaio Aldobrandi is, whose fame  
Above there in the world should welcome be.

And I, who with them on the cross am placed,

Jacopo Rusticucci was; and truly  
My savage wife, more than aught else, doth harm me."

Could I have been protected from the fire,  
Below I should have thrown myself among them,  
And think the Teacher would have suffered it;

But as I should have burned and baked myself,  
My terror overmastered my good will,  
Which made me greedy of embracing them.

Then I began: "Sorrow and not disdain  
Did your condition fix within me so,  
That tardily it wholly is stripped off,

As soon as this my Lord said unto me  
Words, on account of which I thought within me  
That people such as you are were approaching.

I of your city am; and evermore  
Your labours and your honourable names  
I with affection have retraced and heard.

I leave the gall, and go for the sweet fruits  
Promised to me by the veracious Leader;  
But to the centre first I needs must plunge."

"So may the soul for a long while conduct  
Those limbs of thine," did he make answer then,  
"And so may thy renown shine after thee,

Valour and courtesy, say if they dwell  
Within our city, as they used to do,  
Or if they wholly have gone out of it;

For Guglielmo Borsier, who is in torment  
With us of late, and goes there with his comrades,  
Doth greatly mortify us with his words."

"The new inhabitants and the sudden gains,  
Pride and extravagance have in thee engendered,  
Florence, so that thou weep'st thereat already!"

In this wise I exclaimed with face uplifted;  
And the three, taking that for my reply,  
Looked at each other, as one looks at truth.

"If other times so little it doth cost thee,"  
Replied they all, "to satisfy another,  
Happy art thou, thus speaking at thy will!

Therefore, if thou escape from these dark places,  
And come to rebehold the beauteous stars,  
When it shall pleasure thee to say, 'I was,'

See that thou speak of us unto the people."  
Then they broke up the wheel, and in their flight  
It seemed as if their agile legs were wings.

Not an Amen could possibly be said

So rapidly as they had disappeared;  
Wherefore the Master deemed best to depart.

I followed him, and little had we gone,  
Before the sound of water was so near us,  
That speaking we should hardly have been heard.

Even as that stream which holdeth its own course  
The first from Monte Veso tow'rds the East,  
Upon the left-hand slope of Apennine,

Which is above called Acquacheta, ere  
It down descendeth into its low bed,  
And at Forli is vacant of that name,

Reverberates there above San Benedetto  
From Alps, by falling at a single leap,  
Where for a thousand there were room enough;

Thus downward from a bank precipitate,  
We found resounding that dark-tinted water,  
So that it soon the ear would have offended.

I had a cord around about me girt,  
And therewithal I whilom had designed  
To take the panther with the painted skin.

After I this had all from me unloosed,  
As my Conductor had commanded me,  
I reached it to him, gathered up and coiled,

Whereat he turned himself to the right side,  
And at a little distance from the verge,  
He cast it down into that deep abyss.

"It must needs be some novelty respond,"  
I said within myself, "to the new signal  
The Master with his eye is following so."

Ah me! how very cautious men should be  
With those who not alone behold the act,  
But with their wisdom look into the thoughts!

He said to me: "Soon there will upward come  
What I await; and what thy thought is dreaming  
Must soon reveal itself unto thy sight."

Aye to that truth which has the face of falsehood,  
A man should close his lips as far as may be,  
Because without his fault it causes shame;

But here I cannot; and, Reader, by the notes  
Of this my Comedy to thee I swear,  
So may they not be void of lasting favour,

Athwart that dense and darksome atmosphere  
I saw a figure swimming upward come,  
Marvellous unto every steadfast heart,

Even as he returns who goeth down

Sometimes to clear an anchor, which has grappled  
Reef, or aught else that in the sea is hidden,

Who upward stretches, and draws in his feet.

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*Retyping of this page commenced on Wednesday October 21 2009 at 10:13:05.*

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*1269 letters were needed to retype this page.*

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