

Inferno: Canto IV

Broke the deep lethargy within my head  
A heavy thunder, so that I upstarted,  
Like to a person who by force is wakened;

And round about I moved my rested eyes,  
Uprisen erect, and steadfastly I gazed,  
To recognise the place wherein I was.

True is it, that upon the verge I found me  
Of the abysmal valley dolorous,  
That gathers thunder of infinite ululations.

Obscure, profound it was, and nebulous,  
So that by fixing on its depths my sight  
Nothing whatever I discerned therein.

"Let us descend now into the blind world,"  
Began the Poet, pallid utterly;  
"I will be first, and thou shalt second be."

And I, who of his colour was aware,  
Said: "How shall I come, if thou art afraid,  
Who'rt wont to be a comfort to my fears?"

And he to me: "The anguish of the people  
Who are below here in my face depicts  
That pity which for terror thou hast taken.

Let us go on, for the long way impels us."  
Thus he went in, and thus he made me enter  
The foremost circle that surrounds the abyss.

There, as it seemed to me from listening,  
Were lamentations none, but only sighs,  
That tremble made the everlasting air.

And this arose from sorrow without torment,  
Which the crowds had, that many were and great,  
Of infants and of women and of men.

To me the Master good: "Thou dost not ask  
What spirits these, which thou beholdest, are?  
Now will I have thee know, ere thou go farther,

That they sinned not; and if they merit had,  
'Tis not enough, because they had not baptism  
Which is the portal of the Faith thou holdest;

And if they were before Christianity,  
In the right manner they adored not God;  
And among such as these am I myself.

For such defects, and not for other guilt,  
Lost are we and are only so far punished,  
That without hope we live on in desire."

Great grief seized on my heart when this I heard,

Because some people of much worthiness  
I knew, who in that Limbo were suspended.

"Tell me, my Master, tell me, thou my Lord,"  
Began I, with desire of being certain  
Of that Faith which o'ercometh every error,

"Came any one by his own merit hence,  
Or by another's, who was blessed thereafter?"  
And he, who understood my covert speech,

Replied: "I was a novice in this state,  
When I saw hither come a Mighty One,  
With sign of victory incoronate.

Hence he drew forth the shade of the First Parent,  
And that of his son Abel, and of Noah,  
Of Moses the lawgiver, and the obedient

Abraham, patriarch, and David, king,  
Israel with his father and his children,  
And Rachel, for whose sake he did so much,

And others many, and he made them blessed;  
And thou must know, that earlier than these  
Never were any human spirits saved."

We ceased not to advance because he spake,  
But still were passing onward through the forest,  
The forest, say I, of thick-crowded ghosts.

Not very far as yet our way had gone  
This side the summit, when I saw a fire  
That overcame a hemisphere of darkness.

We were a little distant from it still,  
But not so far that I in part discerned not  
That honourable people held that place.

"O thou who honourest every art and science,  
Who may these be, which such great honour have,  
That from the fashion of the rest it parts them?"

And he to me: "The honourable name,  
That sounds of them above there in thy life,  
Wins grace in Heaven, that so advances them."

In the mean time a voice was heard by me:  
"All honour be to the pre-eminent Poet;  
His shade returns again, that was departed."

After the voice had ceased and quiet was,  
Four mighty shades I saw approaching us;  
Semblance had they nor sorrowful nor glad.

To say to me began my gracious Master:  
"Him with that falchion in his hand behold,  
Who comes before the three, even as their lord.

That one is Homer, Poet sovereign;

He who comes next is Horace, the satirist;  
The third is Ovid, and the last is Lucan.

Because to each of these with me applies  
The name that solitary voice proclaimed,  
They do me honour, and in that do well."

Thus I beheld assemble the fair school  
Of that lord of the song pre-eminent,  
Who o'er the others like an eagle soars.

When they together had discoursed somewhat,  
They turned to me with signs of salutation,  
And on beholding this, my Master smiled;

And more of honour still, much more, they did me,  
In that they made me one of their own band;  
So that the sixth was I, 'mid so much wit.

Thus we went on as far as to the light,  
Things saying 'tis becoming to keep silent,  
As was the saying of them where I was.

We came unto a noble castle's foot,  
Seven times encompassed with lofty walls,  
Defended round by a fair rivulet;

This we passed over even as firm ground;  
Through portals seven I entered with these Sages;  
We came into a meadow of fresh verdure.

People were there with solemn eyes and slow,  
Of great authority in their countenance;  
They spake but seldom, and with gentle voices.

Thus we withdrew ourselves upon one side  
Into an opening luminous and lofty,  
So that they all of them were visible.

There opposite, upon the green enamel,  
Were pointed out to me the mighty spirits,  
Whom to have seen I feel myself exalted.

I saw Electra with companions many,  
'Mongst whom I knew both Hector and Aeneas,  
Caesar in armour with gerfalcon eyes;

I saw Camilla and Penthesilea  
On the other side, and saw the King Latinus,  
Who with Lavinia his daughter sat;

I saw that Brutus who drove Tarquin forth,  
Lucretia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia,  
And saw alone, apart, the Saladin.

When I had lifted up my brows a little,  
The Master I beheld of those who know,  
Sit with his philosophic family.

All gaze upon him, and all do him honour.

There I beheld both Socrates and Plato,  
Who nearer him before the others stand;

Democritus, who puts the world on chance,  
Diogenes, Anaxagoras, and Thales,  
Zeno, Empedocles, and Heraclitus;

Of qualities I saw the good collector,  
Hight Dioscorides; and Orpheus saw I,  
Tully and Livy, and moral Seneca,

Euclid, geometrician, and Ptolemy,  
Galen, Hippocrates, and Avicenna,  
Averroes, who the great Comment made.

I cannot all of them pourtray in full,  
Because so drives me onward the long theme,  
That many times the word comes short of fact.

The sixfold company in two divides;  
Another way my sapient Guide conducts me  
Forth from the quiet to the air that trembles;

And to a place I come where nothing shines.