

Inferno: Canto IX

That hue which cowardice brought out on me,
Beholding my Conductor backward turn,
Sooner repressed within him his new colour.

He stopped attentive, like a man who listens,
Because the eye could not conduct him far
Through the black air, and through the heavy fog.

"Still it behoveth us to win the fight,"
Began he; "Else. . .Such offered us herself. . .
O how I long that some one here arrive!"

Well I perceived, as soon as the beginning
He covered up with what came afterward,
That they were words quite different from the first;

But none the less his saying gave me fear,
Because I carried out the broken phrase,
Perhaps to a worse meaning than he had.

"Into this bottom of the doleful conch
Doth any e'er descend from the first grade,
Which for its pain has only hope cut off?"

This question put I; and he answered me:
"Seldom it comes to pass that one of us
Maketh the journey upon which I go.

True is it, once before I here below
Was conjured by that pitiless Erictho,
Who summoned back the shades unto their bodies.

Naked of me short while the flesh had been,
Before within that wall she made me enter,
To bring a spirit from the circle of Judas;

That is the lowest region and the darkest,
And farthest from the heaven which circles all.
Well know I the way; therefore be reassured.

This fen, which a prodigious stench exhales,
Encompasses about the city dolent,
Where now we cannot enter without anger."

And more he said, but not in mind I have it;
Because mine eye had altogether drawn me
Tow'rds the high tower with the red-flaming summit,

Where in a moment saw I swift uprisen
The three infernal Furies stained with blood,
Who had the limbs of women and their mien,

And with the greenest hydras were begirt;
Small serpents and cerastes were their tresses,
Wherewith their horrid temples were entwined.

And he who well the handmaids of the Queen

Of everlasting lamentation knew,
Said unto me: "Behold the fierce Erinnyes.

This is Megaera, on the left-hand side;
She who is weeping on the right, Alecto;
Tisiphone is between;" and then was silent.

Each one her breast was rending with her nails;
They beat them with their palms, and cried so loud,
That I for dread pressed close unto the Poet.

"Medusa come, so we to stone will change him!"
All shouted looking down; "in evil hour
Avenged we not on Theseus his assault!"

"Turn thyself round, and keep thine eyes close shut,
For if the Gorgon appear, and thou shouldst see it,
No more returning upward would there be."

Thus said the Master; and he turned me round
Himself, and trusted not unto my hands
So far as not to blind me with his own.

O ye who have undistempered intellects,
Observe the doctrine that conceals itself
Beneath the veil of the mysterious verses!

And now there came across the turbid waves
The clangour of a sound with terror fraught,
Because of which both of the margins trembled;

Not otherwise it was than of a wind
Impetuous on account of adverse heats,
That smites the forest, and, without restraint,

The branches rends, beats down, and bears away;
Right onward, laden with dust, it goes superb,
And puts to flight the wild beasts and the shepherds.

Mine eyes he loosed, and said: "Direct the nerve
Of vision now along that ancient foam,
There yonder where that smoke is most intense."

Even as the frogs before the hostile serpent
Across the water scatter all abroad,
Until each one is huddled in the earth.

More than a thousand ruined souls I saw,
Thus fleeing from before one who on foot
Was passing o'er the Styx with soles unwet.

From off his face he fanned that unctuous air,
Waving his left hand oft in front of him,
And only with that anguish seemed he weary.

Well I perceived one sent from Heaven was he,
And to the Master turned; and he made sign
That I should quiet stand, and bow before him.

Ah! how disdainful he appeared to me!

He reached the gate, and with a little rod
He opened it, for there was no resistance.

"O banished out of Heaven, people despised!"
Thus he began upon the horrid threshold;
"Whence is this arrogance within you couched?"

Wherefore recalcitrate against that will,
From which the end can never be cut off,
And which has many times increased your pain?

What helpeth it to butt against the fates?
Your Cerberus, if you remember well,
For that still bears his chin and gullet peeled."

Then he returned along the miry road,
And spake no word to us, but had the look
Of one whom other care constrains and goads

Than that of him who in his presence is;
And we our feet directed tow'rds the city,
After those holy words all confident.

Within we entered without any contest;
And I, who inclination had to see
What the condition such a fortress holds,

Soon as I was within, cast round mine eye,
And see on every hand an ample plain,
Full of distress and torment terrible.

Even as at Arles, where stagnant grows the Rhone,
Even as at Pola near to the Quarnaro,
That shuts in Italy and bathes its borders,

The sepulchres make all the place uneven;
So likewise did they there on every side,
Saving that there the manner was more bitter;

For flames between the sepulchres were scattered,
By which they so intensely heated were,
That iron more so asks not any art.

All of their coverings uplifted were,
And from them issued forth such dire laments,
Sooth seemed they of the wretched and tormented.

And I: "My Master, what are all those people
Who, having sepulture within those tombs,
Make themselves audible by doleful sighs?"

And he to me: "Here are the Heresiarchs,
With their disciples of all sects, and much
More than thou thinkest laden are the tombs.

Here like together with its like is buried;
And more and less the monuments are heated."
And when he to the right had turned, we passed

Between the torments and high parapets.

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