

Inferno Canto 10

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Canto X

Argument

Dante, having obtained permission from his guide, holds discourse with Farinata degli Uberti and Cavalcante Cavalcanti, who lie in their fiery tombs that are yet open, and not to be closed up till after the last judgment. Farinata predicts the Poet's exile from Florence; and shows him that the condemned have knowledge of future things, but are ignorant of what is at present passing, unless it be revealed by some newcomer from earth.

Now by a secret pathway we proceed,
Between the walls, that hem the region round,
And the tormented souls: my master first,
I close behind his steps. "Virtue supreme!"
I thus began: "Who through these ample orbs
In circuit lead'st me, even as thou will'st;
Speak thou, and satisfy my wish. May those,
Who lie within these sepulchres, be seen?
Already all the lids are raised, and none
O'er them keeps watch." He thus in answer spake:
"They shall be closed all, what - time they here
From Josaphat[1] return'd shall come, and bring
Their bodies, which above they now have left.
The cemetery on this part obtain,
With Epicurus, all his followers,
Who with the body make the spirit die.
Here therefore satisfaction shall be soon,
Both to the question ask'd, and to the wish[2]
Which thou conceal'st in silence." I replied:
"I keep not, guide beloved! from thee my heart
Secreted, but to shun vain length of words;
A lesson erewhile taught me by thyself."

[1: "Josaphat." It seems to have been a common opinion among the Jews, as well as among many Christians, that the general judgment will be held in the valley of Josaphat, or Jehoshaphat. "I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people, and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land." - Joel, iii. 2.]

[2: "The wish." The wish that Dante had not expressed was to see and converse with the followers of Epicurus; among whom, we shall see, were

Farinata degli Uberti and Cavalcante Cavalcanti.]

"O Tuscan! thou, who through the city of fire
Alive art passing, so discreet of speech:
Here, please thee, stay awhile. Thy utterance
Declares the place of thy nativity
To be that noble land, with which perchance

I too severely dealt." Sudden that sound
Forth issued from a vault, whereat, in fear,
I somewhat closer to my leader's side
Approaching, he thus spake: "What dost thou? Turn:
Lo! Farinata^[3] there, who hath himself
Uplifted: from his girdle upwards, all
Exposed, behold him." On his face was mine
Already fix'd: his breast and forehead there
Erecting, seem'd as in high scorn he held
E'en Hell. Between the sepulchres, to him
My guide thrust me, with fearless hands and prompt;
This warning added: "See thy words be clear."

[3: "Farinata." Farinata degli Uberti, a noble Florentine, was the leader of the Ghibelline faction, when they obtained a signal victory over the Guelfi at Montaperto, near the river Arbia. Macchiavelli calls him "a man of exalted soul, and great military talents." - "Hist. of Flor." b. ii. His grandson, Bonifacio, commonly called Fazio degli Uberti, wrote a poem, entitled the "Dittamonodo," in imitation of Dante.]

He, soon as there I stood at the tomb's foot,
Eyed me a space; then in disdainful mood
Address'd me: "Say what ancestors were thine."

I, willing to obey him, straight reveal'd
The whole, nor kept back aught: whence he, his brow
Somewhat uplifting, cried: "Fiercely were they
Adverse to me, my party, and the blood
From whence I sprang: twice,^[4] therefore, I abroad
Scatter'd them." "Though driven out, yet they each time
From all parts," answer'd I, "return'd; an art
Which yours have shown they are not skill'd to learn."

[4: "Twice." The first time in 1248, when they were driven out by Frederick the Second. See G. Villani, lib. vi. c. xxxiv.; and the second time in 1260. See note to v. 83.]

Then, peering forth from the unclosed jaw,
Rose from his side a shade,^[5] high as the chin,
Leaning, methought, upon its knees upraised.
It look'd around, as eager to explore
If there were other with me; but perceiving

That fond imagination quench'd, with tears
Thus spake: "If thou through this blind prison go'st,
Led by thy lofty genius and profound,

[5: "A shade." The spirit of Cavalcante Cavalcanti, a noble Florentine, of the Guelf party.]

Where is my son?[6] and wherefore not with thee?"
I straight replied: "Not of myself I come;
By him, who there expects me, through this clime
Conducted, whom perchance Guido thy son
Had in contempt." [7] Already had his words
And mode of punishment read me his name,
Whence I so fully answer'd. He at once
Exclaim'd, up starting, "How! said'st thou, he had?
No longer lives he? Strikes not on his eye
The blessed daylight?" Then, of some delay
I made ere my reply, aware, down fell
Supine, nor after forth appear'd he more.
Meanwhile the other, great of soul, near whom
I yet was station'd, changed not countenance stern,
Nor moved the neck, nor bent his ribbed side.
"And if," continuing the first discourse,
"They in this art," he cried, "small skill have shown;
That doth torment me more e'en than this bed.
But not yet fifty times[8] shall be relumed
Her aspect, who reigns here queen of this realm,[9]
Ere thou shalt know the full weight of that art.
So to the pleasant world mayst thou return,
As thou shalt tell me why, in all their laws,
Against my kin this people is so fell."

"The slaughter[10] and great havoc," I replied,
"That color'd Arbia's flood with crimson stain -

[6: "My son." Guido, the son of Cavalcante Cavalcanti; "he whom I call the first of my friends," says Dante in his "Vita Nuova" where the commencement of their friendship is related. From the character given of him by contemporary writers, his temper was well formed to assimilate with that of our Poet. "He was," according to G. Villani, lib. viii. c. xli., "of a philosophical and elegant mind, if he had not been too delicate and fastidious."]

[7: "_____ Guido they soon Had in contempt." Guido Cavalcanti, being more given to philosophy than poetry, was perhaps no great admirer of Virgil.]

[8: "Not yet fifty times." "Not fifty months shall be passed, before thou shalt learn, by woeful experience, the difficulty of returning from banishment to thy native city."]

[9: "Queen of this realm." The moon, one of whose titles in heathen mythology was Proserpine, queen of the shades below.]

[10: "The slaughter." "By means of Farinata degli Uberti, the Guelfi were conquered by the army of King Manfredi, near the river Arbia, with so great a slaughter, that those who escaped from that defeat took refuge, not in Florence, which city they considered as lost to them, but in Lucca." - Macchiavelli, "Hist. of Flor." b. ii. and G. Villani, lib. vi. c. lxxx. and lxxxi.]

To these impute, that in our hallow'd dome
Such orisons[11] ascend." Sighing he shook
The head, then thus resumed: "In that affray
I stood not singly, nor, without just cause,
Assuredly, should with the rest have stirr'd;
But singly there I stood,[12] when, by consent
Of all, Florence had to the ground been razed,
The one who openly forbade the deed."

[11: "Such orisons." This appears to allude to certain prayers which were offered up in the churches of Florence, for deliverance from the hostile attempts of the Uberti; or, it may be that the public councils being held in churches, the speeches delivered in them against the Uberti are termed "orisons," or prayers.]

[12: "Singly there I stood." Guido Novello assembled a council of the Ghibellini at Empoli; where it was agreed by all, that, in order to maintain the ascendancy of the Ghibelline party in Tuscany, it was necessary to destroy Florence, which could serve only (the people of that city being Guelfi) to enable the party attached to the church to recover its strength. This cruel sentence, passed upon so noble a city, met with no opposition from any of its citizens or friends, except Farinata degli Uberti, who openly and without reserve forbade the measure; affirming, that he had endured so many hardships, with no other view than that of being able to pass his days in his own country. Macchiavelli, Hist. of Flor. b. ii.]

"So may thy lineage find at last repose,"
I thus adjured him, "as thou solve this knot,
Which now involves my mind. If right I hear,
Ye seem to view beforehand that which time
Leads with him, of the present uninform'd."

"We view, as one who hath an evil sight,"
He answer'd, "plainly, objects far remote;
So much of his large splendor yet imparts
The Almighty Ruler: but when they approach,
Or actually exist, our intellect
Then wholly fails; nor of your human state,
Except what others bring us, know we aught.
Hence therefore mayst thou understand, that all

Our knowledge in that instant shall expire,
When on futurity the portals close."

Then conscious of my fault,[13] and by remorse
Smitten, I added thus: "Now shalt thou say
To him there fallen, that his offspring still
Is to the living join'd; and bid him know,
That if from answer, silent, I abstain'd,

[13: "My fault." Dante felt remorse for not having returned an immediate answer to the inquiry of Cavalcante, from which delay he was led to believe that his son Guido was no longer living.]

'Twas that my thought was occupied, intent
Upon that error, which thy help hath solved."

But now my master summoning me back
I heard, and with more eager haste besought
The spirit to inform me, who with him
Partook his lot. He answer thus return'd:
"More than a thousand with me here are laid.
Within is Frederick,[14] second of that name,
And the Lord Cardinal,[15] and of the rest
I speak not." He, this said, from sight withdrew.
But I my steps toward the ancient bard
Reverting, remunated on the words
Betokening me such ill. Onward he moved,
And thus, in going, question'd: "Whence the amaze
That holds thy senses wrapt?" I satisfied
The inquiry, and the sage enjoin'd me straight:
"Let thy safe memory store what thou hast heard,
To thee importing harm; and note thou this,"
With his raised finger bidding me take heed,
"When thou shalt stand before her gracious beam,[16]
Whose bright eye all surveys, she of thy life
The future tenor will to thee unfold."

[14: "Frederick." The Emperor Frederick II., who died in 1250. See notes to Canto xiii.]

[15: "The Lord Cardinal." Ottaviano Ubaldini, a Florentine, made cardinal in 1245, and deceased about 1273. On account of his great influence, he was generally known by the appellation of "the Cardinal." It is reported of him that he declared if there were any such thing as a human soul he had lost his for the Ghibellini.]

[16: "Her gracious beam." Beatrice.]

Forthwith he to the left hand turn'd his feet:
We left the wall, and toward the middle space
Went by a path that to a valley strikes,

Which e'en thus high exhaled its noisome steam.

— Inferno Canto 10