

# Inferno Canto 26

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Canto XXVI

Argument

Remounting by the steps, down which they have descended to the seventh gulf, they go forward to the arch that stretches over the eighth, and from thence behold numberless flames wherein are punished the evil counsellors, each flame containing a sinner, save one, in which were Diomede and Ulysses, the latter of whom relates the manner of his death.

Florence, exult! for thou so mightily  
Hast thriven, that o'er land and sea thy wings  
Thou beatest, and thy name spreads over hell.  
Among the plunderers, such the three I found  
Thy citizens; whence shame to me thy son,  
And no proud honour to thyself redounds.

But if our minds, when dreaming near the dawn,  
Are of the truth presageful, thou ere long  
Shalt feel what Prato<sup>[1]</sup> (not to say the rest)  
Would fain might come upon thee; and that chance  
Were in good time, if it befell thee now.  
Would so it were, since it must needs befall!  
For as time wears me, I shall grieve the more.

[1: "Shalt feel what Prato." The Poet prognosticates the calamities which were soon to befall his native city, and which, he says, even her nearest neighbor, Prato, would wish her. The calamities more particularly pointed at are said to be the fall of a wooden bridge over the Arno, in May, 1304, where a large multitude were assembled to witness a representation of hell and the infernal torments, in consequence of which accident many lives were lost; and a conflagration, that in the following month destroyed more than 1,700 houses. See G. Villani, Hist. lib. viii. c. lxx. and lxxi.]

We from the depth departed; and my guide  
Remounting scaled the flinty steps, which late  
We downward traced, and drew me up the steep.  
Pursuing thus our solitary way

Among the crags and splinters of the rock,  
Sped not our feet without the help of hands.

Then sorrow seized me, which e'en now revives,  
As my thought turns again to what I saw,

And, more than I am wont, I rein and curb  
The powers of nature in me, lest they run  
Where Virtue guides not; that, if aught of good  
My gentle star or something better gave me,  
I envy not myself the precious boon.

As in that season, when the sun least veils  
His face that lightens all, what time the fly  
Gives way to the shrill gnat, the peasant then,  
Upon some cliff reclined, beneath him sees  
Fire - flies innumerable spangling o'er the vale,  
Vineyard or tilth, where his day - labor lies;  
With flames so numberless throughout its space  
Shone the eighth chasm, apparent, when the depth  
Was to my view exposed. As he, whose wrongs  
The bears avenged, as its departure saw  
Elijah's chariot, when the steeds erect  
Raised their steep flight for heaven; his eyes meanwhile,  
Straining pursued them, till the flame alone,  
Upsoaring like a misty speck, he kenn'd:  
E'en thus along the gulf moves every flame,  
A sinner so enfolded close in each,  
That none exhibits token of the theft.

Upon the bridge I forward bent to look  
And grasp'd a flinty mass, or else had fallen,  
Though push'd not from the height. The guide, who mark'd  
How I did gaze attentive, thus began:  
"Within these ardours are the spirits; each  
Swatched in confining fire." "Master! thy word,"  
I answer'd, "hath assured me; yet I deem'd  
Already of the truth, already wish'd  
To ask thee who is in yon fire, that comes  
So parted at the summit, as it seem'd  
Ascending from that funeral pile<sup>[2]</sup> where lay  
The Theban brothers." He replied: "Within,

[2: The flame is said to have divided the bodies of Eteocles and Polynices, as if conscious of the enmity that actuated them while living.]

Ulysses there and Diomedes endure  
Their penal tortures, thus to vengeance now  
Together hasting, as erewhile to wrath  
These in the flame with ceaseless groans deplore  
The ambush of the horse,<sup>[3]</sup> that open'd wide  
A portal for the goodly seed to pass,  
Which sow'd imperial Rome; nor less the guile  
Lament they, whence, of her Achilles 'reft,  
Deidamia yet in death complains.

And there is rued the stratagem that Troy  
Of her Palladium spoil'd" - "If they have power  
Of utterance from within these sparks," said I,  
"O master! think my prayer a thousand - fold  
In repetition urged, that thou vouchsafe  
To pause till here the horned flame arrive.  
See, how toward it with desires I bend."

[3: The wooden horse that caused Aeneas to quit Troy and seek his fortune in Italy, where his descendants founded Rome.]

He thus: "Thy prayer is worthy of much praise,  
And I accept it therefore; but do thou  
Thy tongue refrain: to question them be mine;  
For I divine thy wish: and they perchance,  
For they were Greeks,[4] might shun discourse with thee."

[4: Perhaps implying arrogance.]

When there the flame had come, where time and place  
Seem'd fitting to my guide, he thus began:  
"O ye, who dwell two spirits in one fire!  
If, living, I of you did merit aught,  
Whate'er the measure were of that desert,  
When in the world my lofty strain I pour'd,  
Move ye not on, till one of you unfold  
In what clime death o'ertook him self - destroy'd."

Of the old flame forthwith the greater horn  
Began to roll, murmuring, as a fire  
That labors with the wind, then to and fro  
Wagging the top, as a tongue uttering sounds,  
Threw out its voice, and spake: "When I escaped  
From Circe, who beyond a circling year  
Had held me near Caieta by her charms,  
Ere thus Aeneas yet had named the shore;  
Nor fondness for my son, nor reverence

Of my old father, nor return of love,  
That should have crown'd Penelope with joy,  
Could overcome in me the zeal I had  
To explore the world, and search the ways of life,  
Man's evil and his virtue. Forth I sail'd  
Into the deep illimitable main,  
With but one bark, and the small faithful band  
That yet cleaved to me. As Iberia far,  
Far as Marocco, either shore I saw,  
And the Sardinian and each isle beside  
Which round that ocean bathes. Tardy with age  
Were I and my companions, when we came

To the strait pass,[5] where Hercules ordain'd  
The boundaries not to be o'erstepp'd by man.  
The walls of Seville to my right I left,  
On the other hand already Ceuta past.  
'O brothers!' I began, 'who to the west  
Through perils without number now have reach'd;  
To this the short remaining watch, that yet  
Our senses have to wake, refuse not proof  
Of the unpeopled world, following the track  
Of Phoebus. Call to mind from whence ye sprang:  
Ye were not form'd to live the life of brutes,  
But virtue to pursue and knowledge high.'  
With these few words I sharpen'd for the voyage  
The mind of my associates, that I then  
Could scarcely have withheld them. To the dawn  
Our poop we turn'd, and for the witless flight  
Made our oars wings, still gaining on the left.  
Each star of the other pole night now beheld,  
And ours so low, that from the ocean floor  
It rose not. Five times reillumed, as oft  
Vanish'd the light from underneath the moon,  
Since the deep way we enter'd, when from far  
Appear'd a mountain dim,[6] loftiest methought

[5: The Strait of Gibraltar.]

[6: The mountain of Purgatory. - Among various opinions respecting the situation of the terrestrial paradise, Peitro Lombardo relates, that "it was separated by a long space, either of sea or land, from the regions inhabited by men, and placed in the ocean, reaching as far as to the lunar circle, so that the waters of the deluge did not reach it." - Sent. lib. ii. dist. 17.]

Of all I e'er beheld. Joy seized us straight;  
But soon to mourning changed. From the new land  
A whirlwind sprung, and at her foremost side  
Did strike the vessel. Thrice it whirl'd her round  
With all the waves; the fourth time lifted up  
The poop, and sank the prow: so fate decreed:  
And over us the booming billow closed."[7]

[7: "Closed." Venturi refers to Pliny and Solinus for the opinion that Ulysses was the founder of Lisbon, from whence he thinks it was easy for the fancy of a poet to send him on yet further enterprises. The story (which it is not unlikely that our author borrowed from some legend of the Middle Ages) may have taken its rise partly from the obscure oracle returned by the ghost of Tiresias to Ulysses (eleventh book of the Odyssey), and partly from the fate which there was reason to suppose had befallen some adventurous explorers of the Atlantic Ocean.]

