

Inferno Canto 31

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Canto XXXI

Argument

The Poets, following the sound of a loud horn, are led by it to the ninth circle, in which there are four rounds, one enclosed within the other, and containing as many sorts of traitors; but the present Canto shows only that the circle is encompassed with Giants, one of whom, Antaeus, takes them both in his arms and places them at the bottom of the circle.

The very tongue, whose keen reproof before
Had wounded me, that either cheek was stain'd,
Now minister'd my cure. So have I heard,
Achilles' and his father's javelin caused
Pain first, and then the boon of health restored.

Turning our back upon the vale of woe,
We cross'd the encircled mound in silence. There
Was less than day and less than night, that far
Mine eye advanced not: but I heard a horn
Sounded so loud, the peal it rang had made
The thunder feeble. Following its course
The adverse way, my strained eyes were bent
On that one spot. So terrible a blast
Orlando[1] blew not, when that dismal rout
O'er threw the host of Charlemain, and quench'd
His saintly warfare. Thitherward not long
My head was raised, when many a lofty tower
Methought I spied. "Master," said I, "what land
Is this?" He answer'd straight: "Too long a space
Of intervening darkness has thine eye
To traverse: thou hast therefore widely err'd
In thy imagining. Thither arrived

[1: When Charlemain with all his peerage fell at Fontarabia." Milton, *Paradis Lost*, b. i. 586. See Warton's *Hist. of Eng. Poetry*, vol. i. sect. iii. p. 132. "This is the horn which Orlando won from the giant Jatmund, and which, as Turpin and the Islandic bards report, was endued with magical power, and might be heard at the distance of twenty miles." See the *Paradise*, Canto xviii.]

Thou well shalt see, how distance can delude
The sense. A little therefore urge thee on."

Then tenderly he caught me by the hand;
"Yet know," said he, "ere farther we advance,
That it less strange may seem, these are not towers,
But giants. In the pit they stand immersed,
Each from his navel downward, round the bank."

As when a fog disperseth gradually,
Our vision traces what the mist involves
Condensed in air; so piercing through the gross
And gloomy atmosphere, as more and more
We near'd toward the brink, mine error fled
And fear came o'er me. As with circling round
Of turrets, Monteregion^[2] crowns his walls;
E'en thus the shore, encompassing the abyss,
Was turreted with giants, half their length
Uprearing, horrible, whom Jove from Heaven
Yet threatens, when his muttering thunder rolls.

[2: A castle near Siena.]

Of one already I descried the face,
Shoulders and breast, and of the belly huge
Great part, and both arms down along his ribs.

All - teeming Nature, when her plastic hand
Left framing of these monsters, did display
Past doubt her wisdom, taking from mad War
Such slaves to do his bidding; and if she
Repent her not of the elephant and whale,
Who ponders well confesses her therein
Wiser and more discreet; for when brute force
And evil will are back'd with subtlety,
Resistance none avails. His visage seem'd
In length and bulk, as doth the pine^[3] that tops
Saint Peter's Roman fane; and the other bones
Of like proportion, so that from above
The bank, which girdled him below, such height
Arose his stature, that three Friezelanders

[3: "The pine." "The large pine of bronze, which once ornamented the top of the mole of Adrian, afterwards decorated the top of the belfry of St. Peter; and having (according to Buti) been thrown down by lightning, it was transferred to the place where it now is, in the Pope's garden, by the side of the great corridor of Belvedere. In the time of our Poet, the pine was then either on the belfry or on the steps of St. Peter's."]

Had striven in vain to reach but to his hair.
Full thirty ample palms was he exposed
Downward from whence a man his garment loops.
"Raphel^[4] bai ameth, sabi almi:"

So shouted his fierce lips, which sweeter hymns
Became not; and my guide address'd him thus:
"O senseless spirit! let thy horn for thee
Interpret: therewith vent thy rage, if rage
Or other passion wring thee. Search thy neck,
There shalt thou find the belt that binds it on.
Spirit confused! lo, on thy mighty breast
Where hangs the baldrick!" Then to me he spake:
"He doth accuse himself. Nimrod is this,
Through whose ill counsel in the world no more
One tongue prevails. But pass we on, nor waste
Our words; for so each language is to him,
As his to others, understood by none."

[4: Unmeaning sounds, meant, it is supposed, to express the confusion
at the building of Babel.]

Then to the leftward turning sped we forth,
And at a sling's throw found another shade
Far fiercer and more huge. I cannot say
What master hand had girt him; but he held
Behind the right arm fetter'd, and before,
The other, with a chain, that fasten'd him
From the neck down; and five times round his form
Apparent met the wreathed links. "This proud one
Would of his strength against almighty Jove
Make trial," said my guide: "whence he is thus
Requited: Ephialtes his they call.
Great was his prowess, when the giants brought
Fear on the gods: those arms, which then he plied,
Now moves he never." Forthwith I return'd:
"Fain would I, if't were possible, mine eyes,
Of Briareus immeasurable, gain'd
Experience next." He answered: "Thou shalt see
Not far from hence Antaeus, who both speaks
And is unfetter'd, who shall place us there
Where guilt is at its depth. Far onward stands
Whom thou wouldst fain behold, in chains, and made

Like to this spirit, save that in his looks
More fell he seems." By violent earthquake rock'd
Ne'er shook a tower, so reeling to its base,
As Ephialtes. More than ever then
I dreaded death; nor than the terror more
Had needed, if I had not seen the cords
That held him fast. We, straightway journeying on,
Came to Antaeus, who, five ells complete
Without the head, forth issued from the cave.

"O thou, who in the fortunate vale,[5] that made
Great Scipio heir of glory, when his sword
Drove back the troop of Hannibal in flight,
Who thence of old didst carry for thy spoil
An hundred lions; and if thou hadst fought
In the high conflict on thy brethren's side,
Seems as men yet believed, that through thine arm
The sons of earth had conquer'd; now vouchsafe
To place us down beneath, where numbing cold
Locks up Cocytus. Force not that we crave
Or Tityus' help or Typhon's. Here is one
Can give what in this realm ye covet. Stoop
Therefore, nor scornfully distort thy lip.
He in the upper world can yet bestow
Renown on thee; for he doth live, and looks
For life yet longer, if before the time
Grace call him not unto herself." Thus spake
The teacher. He in haste forth stretch'd his hands,
And caught my guide. Alcides[6] whilom felt
That grapple, straiten'd sore. Soon as my guide
Had felt it, he bespake me thus: "This way,
That I may clasp thee;" then so caught me up,
That we were both one burden. As appears
The tower of Carisenda,[7] from beneath
Where it doth lean, if chance a passing cloud
So sail across, that opposite it hangs;
Such then Antaeus seem'd, as at mine ease
I mark'd him stooping. I were fain at times

[5: The country near Carthage.]

[6: The combat between Hercules (Alcides) and Antaeus is adduced by the poet in his treatise "De Monarchia," lib. ii., as proof of God's judgment displayed in the duel, according to the singular superstition of those times.]

[7: The leaning tower at Bologna.]

To have past another way. Yet in the abyss,
That Lucifer with Judas low ingulfs,
Lightly he placed us; nor, there leaning, stay'd;
But rose, as in a bark the stately mast.