

Inferno Canto 4

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Canto IV

Argument

The Poet, being roused by a clap of thunder, and following his guide onward, descends into Limbo, which is the first circle of Hell, where he finds the souls of those, who although they have lived virtuously and have not to suffer for great sins, nevertheless, through lack of baptism, merit not the bliss of Paradise. Hence he is led on by Virgil to descend into the second circle.

Broke the deep slumber in my brain a crash
Of heavy thunder, that I shook myself,
As one by main force roused. Risen upright,
My rested eyes I moved around, and search'd
With fixed ken, to know what place it was
Wherein I stood. For certain, on the brink
I found me of the lamentable vale,
The dread abyss, that joins a thunderous sound
Of plaints innumerable. Dark and deep,

And thick with clouds o'erspread, mine eye in vain
Explored its bottom, nor could aught discern.

"Now let us to the blind world there beneath
Descend," the bard began, all pale of look:
"I go the first, and thou shalt follow next."

Then I, his alter'd hue perceiving, thus:
"How may I speed, if thou yieldest to dread,
Who still art wont to comfort me in doubt?"

He then: "The anguish of that race below
With pity stains my cheek, which thou for fear
Mistakest. Let us on. Our length of way
Urges to haste." Onward, this said, he moved;
And entering led me with him, on the bounds
Of the first circle that surrounds the abyss.

Here, as mine ear could note, no plaint was heard
Except of sighs, that made the eternal air
Tremble, not caused by tortures, but from grief
Felt by those multitudes, many and vast,
Of men, women, and infants. Then to me

The gentle guide: "Inquirest thou not what spirits
Are these which thou beholdest? Ere thou pass
Farther, I would tkou know, that these of sin
Were blameless; and if aught they merited,
If profits not, since baptism was not heirs,
The portal[1] to thy faith. If they before
The Gospel lived, they served not God aright;
And among such am I. For these defects,
And for no other evil, we are lost;
Only so far afflicted, that we live
Desiring without hope." Sore grief assail'd
My heart at hearing this, for well I knew
Suspended in that Limbo many a soul
Of mighty worth. "O tell me, sire revered!
Tell me, my master!" I began, through wish
Of full assurance in that holy faith
Which vanquishes all error; "say, did e'er
Any, or through his own or other's merit,
Come forth from thence, who afterward was blest?"

[1: "Portal." "Porta della fede." This was an alteration made in the text by the Academicians della Crusca, on the authority, as it would appear, of only two manuscripts. The other reading is, "parte della fede," "part of the faith."]

Piercing the secret purport[2] of my speech,
He answer'd: "I was new to that estate
When I beheld a puissant one[3] arrive
Amongst us, with victorious trophy crown'd.
He forth the shade of our first parent drew,
Abel, his child, and Noah righteous man,
Of Moses lawgiver for faith approved,
Of patriarch Abraham, and David king,
Israel with his sire and with his sons,
Nor without Rachel whom so hard he won,
And others many more, whom He to bliss
Exalted. Before these, be thou assured,
No spirit of human kind was ever saved."

[2: "Secret purport." Lombardi well observes that Dante seems to have been restrained by awe and reverence from uttering the name of Christ in this place of torment; and that for the same cause, probably, it does not occur once throughout the whole of this first part of the poem.]

[3: "A puissant one." Our Savior.]

We, while he spake, ceased not our onward road,
Still passing through the wood; for so I name
Those spirits thick beset. We were not far

On this side from the summit, when I kenn'd
A flame, that o'er the darken'd hemisphere
Prevailing shined. Yet we a little space
Were distant, not so far but I in part
Discover'd that a tribe in honour high
That placed possess'd. "O thou, who every art
And science valuest! who are these, that boast
Such honor, separate from all the rest?"

He answer'd: "The renown of their great names,
That echoes through your world above, acquires
Favor in Heaven, which holds them thus advanced."
Meantime a voice I heard: "Honor the bard
Sublime! his shade returns, that left us late!"
No sooner ceased the sound, that I beheld
Four mighty spirits toward us bend their steps,
Of semblance neither sorrowful nor glad.

When thus my master kind began: "Mark him,
Who in his right hand bears that falchion keen,
The other three preceding, as their lord.

This is that Homer, of all bards supreme:
Flaccus the next, in satire's vein excelling;
The third is Naso; Lucan is the last.
Because they all that appellation own,
With which the voice singly accosted me,
Honouring they greet me thus, and well they judge."

So I beheld united the bright school
Of him the monarch of sublimest song,[4]
That o'er the others like an eagle soars.

[4: "The monarch of sublimest song." Homer.]

When they together short discourse had held,
They turn'd to me, with salutation kind
Beckoning me; at the which my master smiled:
Nor was this all; but greater honour still
They gave me, for they made me of their tribe;
And I was sixth amid so learn'd a band.

Far as the luminous beacon on we pass'd,
Speaking of matters, then befitting well
To speak, now fitter left untold. At foot
Of a magnificent castle we arrived,
Seven times with lofty walls begirt, and around
Defended by a pleasant stream. O'er this
As o'er dry land we pass'd. Next, through seven gates,
I with those sages enter'd, and we came

Into a mead with lively verdure fresh.

There dwelt a race, who slow their eyes around
Majestically moved, and in their port
Bore eminent authority: they spake
Seldom, but all their words were tuneful sweet.

We to one side retired, into a place
Open and bright and lofty, whence each one
Stood manifest to view. Incontinent,
There on the green enamel of the plain
Were shown me the great spirits, by whose sight
I am exalted in my own esteem.

Electra[5] there I saw accompanied
By many, among whom Hector I knew,
Anchises' pious son, and with hawk's eye
Caesar all arm'd, and by Camilla there
Penthesilea. On the other side,
Old King Latinus seated by his child
Lavinia, and that Brutus I beheld
Who Tarquin chased, Lucretia, Cato's wife
Marcia, with Julia[6] and Cornelia there;
And sole apart retired, the Soldan fierce.[7]

[5: Daughter of Atlas, and mother of Dardanus, founder of Troy.]

[6: "Julia." The daughter of Julius Caesar, and wife of Pompey.]

[7: "The Soldan fierce." Saladin, or Salaheddin, the rival of Richard
Coeur de Lion.]

Then when a little more I raised my brow,
I spied the master of the sapient throng,[8]
Seated amid the philosophic train.
Him all admire, all pay him reverence due.
There Socrates and Plato both I mark'd
Nearest to him in rank, Democritus,
Who sets the world at chance,[9] Diogenes,
With Heraclitus, and Empedocles,
And Anaxagoras, and Thales sage,
Zeno, and Dioscorides well read
In nature's secret lore. Orpheus I mark'd
And Linus, Tully and moral Seneca,
Euclid and Ptolemy, Hippocrates,
Galenus, Avicen, and him who made
That commentary vast, Averroes.[10]

[8: "The master of the sapient throng." "Maestro di color che sanno."
Aristotle.]

[9: "Who sets the world at chance." Democritus, who maintained the world to have been formed by the fortuitous concourse of atoms.]

[10: Averroes, called by the Arabians Ibn Roschd, translated and commented on the works of Aristotle.]

Of all to speak at full were vain attempt;
For my wide theme so urges, that oft - times
My words fall short of what bechanced. In two
The six associates part. Another way
My sage guide leads me, from that air serene,
Into a climate ever vex'd with storms:
And to a part I come, where no light shines.

— Inferno Canto 4