

Entrance to the First Circle - Good Friday Night CANTO IV

THE STORY. Recovering from his swoon, Dante finds himself across Acheron and on the edge of the actual Pit of Hell. He follows Virgil into the First Circle - the Limbo where the Unbaptized and the Virtuous Pagans dwell "suspended", knowing no torment save exclusion from the positive bliss of God's presence. Virgil tells him of Christ's Harrowing of Hell, and then shows him the habitation of the great men of antiquity poets, heroes, and philosophers.

A heavy peal of thunder came to waken me
Out of the stunning slumber that had bound me,
Startling me up as though rude hands had shaken me.

I rose, and cast my rested eyes around me, 4
Gazing intent to satisfy my wonder
Concerning the strange place wherein I found me.

Hear truth: I stood on the steep brink whereunder 7
Runs down the dolorous chasm of the Pit,
Ringing with infinite groans like gathered thunder.

Deep, dense, and by no faintest glimmer lit 10
It lay, and though I strained my sight to find
Bottom, not one thing could I see in it.

"Down must we go, to that dark world and blind," 13
The poet said, turning on me a bleak
Blanched face; "I will go first - come thou behind."

Then I, who had marked the colour of his cheek: 16
"How can I go, when even thou art white
For fear, who art wont to cheer me when I'm weak?"

But he: "Not so; the anguish infinite 19
They suffer yonder paints my countenance
With pity, which thou takest for affright;

Come, we have far to go; let us advance." 22
So, entering, he made me enter, where
The Pit's first circle makes circumference.

We heard no loud complaint, no crying there, 25
No sound of grief except the sound of sighing
Quivering for ever through the eternal air;

Grief, not for torment, but for loss undying, 28
[By women, men, and children sighed for so,](#)
Sorrowers thick-thronged, their sorrows multiplying.

Then my good guide: "Thou dost not ask me who 31
These spirits are," said he, "whom thou perceivest?
Ere going further, I would have thee know

They sinned not; yet their merit lacked its chiefest 34
Fulfilment, lacking baptism, which is
The gateway to the faith which thou believest;

Or, living before Christendom, their knees 37
Paid not aright those tributes that belong
To God; and I myself am one of these.

For such defects alone - no other wrong - 40
We are lost; yet only by this grief offended:
That, without hope, we ever live, and long."

Grief smote my heart to think, as he thus ended, 43
What souls I knew, of great and soveran
Virtue, who in that Limbo dwelt suspended.

"Tell me, sir - tell me, Master," I began 46
(In hope some fresh assurance to be gleaning
Of our sin-conquering Faith), "did any man

By his self-merit, or on another leaning, 49
Ever fare forth from hence and come to be
Among the blest?" He took my hidden meaning.

"When I was newly in this state," said he, 52
"I saw One come in majesty and awe
And on His head were crowns of victory.

Our great first father's spirit He did withdraw, 55
And righteous Abel, Noah who built the ark,
Moses who gave and who obeyed the Law,

King David, Abraham the Patriarch, 58
Israel with his father and generation,
Rachel, for whom he did such deeds of mark,

With many another of His chosen nation; 61
These did He bless; and know, that ere that day
No human soul had ever seen salvation."

While he thus spake, we still made no day, 64
But passed the wood - I mean, the wood (as 'twere)
Of souls ranged thick as trees. Being now some way -

Not far - from where I'd slept, I saw appear 67
A light, which overcame the shadowy face
Of gloom, and made a glowing hemisphere.

'Twas yet some distance on, yet I could trace 70
So much as brought conviction to my heart
[That persons of great honour held that place.](#)

"O thou that honour'st every science and art, 73
Say, who are these whose honour gives them claim
To different customs and a sphere apart?"

And he to me: "Their honourable name, 76
Still in thy world resounding as it does,
Wins here from Heaven the favour due to fame."

Meanwhile I heard a voice that cried out thus: 79
"Honour the most high poet! his great shade,
Which was departed, is returned to us."

It paused there, and was still; and lo! there made 82
Toward us, four mighty shadows of the dead
Who in their mien nor grief nor joy displayed.

"Mark well the first of these," my master said, 85
"Who in his right hand bears a naked sword
And goes before the three as chief and head;

[Homer](#) is he, the poets' sovran lord; 88
Next, [Horace](#) comes, the keen satirical;
[Ovid](#) the third; and [Lucan](#) afterward.

Because I share with these that honourable 91
Grand tide the sole voice was heard to cry
They do me honour, and therein do well."

Thus in their school assembled I, even I, 94
Looked on the lords of loftiest song, whose style
O'er all the rest goes soaring eagle-high.

When they had talked together a short while 97
They all with signs of welcome turned my way,
Which moved my master to a kindly smile;

And greater honour yet they did me - yea, 100
Into their fellowship they deigned invite
And make me sixth among such minds as they.

So we moved slowly onward toward the light 103
In talk 'twere as unfitting to repeat
Here, as to speak there was both fit and right.

And presently we reached a noble seat - 106
A castle, girt with seven high walls around,
And moated with a goodly rivulet

O'er which we went as though upon dry ground; 109
With those wise men I passed the sevenfold gate
Into a fresh green meadow, where we found

Persons with grave and tranquil eyes, and great 112
Authority in their carriage and attitude,
Who spoke but seldom and in voice sedate.

So here we walked aside a little, and stood 115
Upon an open eminence, lit serene
And clear, whence one and all might well be viewed.

Plain in my sight on the enamelled green 118
All those grand spirits were shown me one by one -
It thrills my heart to think what I have seen!

I saw Electra, saw with her anon 121
Hector, Aeneas, many a Trojan peer,
And hawk-eyed Caesar in his habergeon;

I saw Camilla and bold Penthesilea, 124
On the other hand; Latinus on his throne
Beside Lavinia his daughter dear;

Brutus, by whom proud Tarquin was o'erthrown. 127
Marcia, Cornelia, Julia, Lucrece - and
I saw great Saladin aloof, alone.

Higher I raised my brows and further scanned, 130
And saw the Master of the men who know
Seated amid the philosophic band;

All do him honour and deep reverence show; Socrates, Plato, in the nearest room To him; Diogenes, Thala and Zeno,	133
Democritus, who held that all things come By chance; Empedocles, Anaxagoras wise, And Heraclitus, him that wept for doom;	136
Dioscorides, who named the qualities, Tully and Orpheus, Linus, and thereby Good Seneca, well-skilled to moralise;	139
Euclid the geometrician, Ptolemy, Galen, Hippocrates, and Avicen, Averrhoes who made the commentary -	142
Nay, but I tell not all that I saw then; The long theme drives me hard, and everywhere The wondrous truth outstrips my staggering pen.	145
The group of six dwindles to two; we fare Forth a new way, I and my guide withal, Out from that quiet to the quivering air,	148
And reach a place where nothing shines at all.	151