

D A N T E A L I G H I E R I

Inferno

FROM CANTO VII

We made our way into the fourth abyss
And gradually down that tearful road
Where all the evil of the earth's consigned.

O vengeful God! Who could cram in so tight
These novel penances and pains, and why
Do we allow our sins to lay us waste?

As every wave that breaks above Charybdis
Must crash against another's counter-force,
So must the damned perform their endless dance.

Down here the crowds were vaster than before.
On every side crept howling multitudes
Who strained to shift great boulders with their chests

And when, as every time, they clashed, they turned
And rolled their weights away again and roared:
"Why be a miser?" "Why a waster?" "Why?"

As they retraced their gloomy course to meet
Again at the exact opposing place
And there strike up again their hateful chant—

At which point, with the semi-circle done,
They turned once more to trudge the course again.
I felt my pity like a wound. I said,

“Now Master, please explain to me
Who all these people are. These tonsured ones,
For instance, on our left—can they be priests?”

“In their first life”, said Virgil, “these men here
Lacked all perspective: they could never grasp
The need for prudence in expenditure—

That is the burden of the song they bark
When they complete the semi-circles which
Divide them into two opposing sins.

They spent the last hair on their heads. Yes, these
Were clerics—cardinals and pontiffs,
Men whom avarice had made its own”.

“Then master”, I replied, “should I expect
To recognize some of these sinners, then,
Who spent their lives in these indulgent ways?”

He said: “Believe me, you will search in vain.
The lack of judgement which they showed in life
Makes them unrecognisable in death.

Now they will meet and clash eternally:
One half will greet the resurrection with
Their fists tight clenched; the other beggar-bald.

Their greed and waste have cost them Paradise
And left them nothing but this brawl. The facts
Are plain: I’ve no more words to waste on them.

My son, see what a momentary farce
Mere money is, when Fortune rules the world
In which the human race embroils itself—

For all the gold that is or ever was
Beneath the moon could not negotiate
A moment's rest for one exhausted soul".

"But Master, tell me more", I said. "Who is
This Fortune that you speak of, who appears
To keep the whole world's riches in her grasp?"

"Humanity, how ignorant you are!
What is this foolishness?" he cried.
"You need the nourishment of solid facts.

God, Whose wisdom can transcend all things,
Put up the heavens and gave to each a guide
So that each part would shed light everywhere

And thus the light is equally bestowed—
A principle applied to earth's rewards,
Where he ordained a guide and minister

Who would at intervals transfer vain wealth
From race to race and blood to blood, by means
Beyond the wit of man to tamper with:

As one race rules, another will decay,
According to her judgements, whose effects
Flow secretly, like serpents in the grass.

Your understanding is no match for hers:
She will foretell and judge, and thus sustain
Her kingdom, as would any other god.

Her only constancy consists in change
At speeds dictated by necessity,
So swiftly do the players take their turns.

She is the one so often crucified
By those who should be loudest in her praise:
Instead her name is scorned and vilified—

But being blest, she hears no word of this,
And like those other creatures God made first,
Revolves her sphere in perfect happiness.

Yet now we must descend to graver sins.
The stars that rose when we were setting out
Are sinking now, and we dare not delay”.

We walked on to the circle’s further edge,
Above a boiling spring which overflows
Into a trench that runs away from it,

And following this stream of oily beige
That rolled with waves of inky purple-black,
We found a passageway that led below

To where this dismal watercourse runs down
The grim grey slopes, then flows away at last
Into the swamp that legend calls the Styx.

I stood and looked around me carefully
And made out people rolling in the mud,
All naked, with their faces lit by rage.

They fought, not only with their fists, but used
Their feet, their breasts, their heads, and with their teeth
They tried to tear each other limb from limb.

My master said, “My son, you witness here
The souls of those whom anger overcame,
And underneath the water there are more

Who sigh and moan invisibly—so this
Explains the bubbles frothing from below,
Which you see bursting everywhere around.

Embedded in the slime, they say: ‘In life
We were too sullen for life’s sweetness: then
We bore these sluggish fumes within our hearts:

In death we lie here sunk in this black marsh’.
This is the song they gargle in their throats—
Their muddy tongues have lost the gift of words”.

We made a wide arc as we walked around
The lake between the dry land and the swamp,
Our eyes transfixed by dead men gobbling mud,

Until at last a tower came in sight.

(Version by Sean O’Brien)