

In silence and in solitude we went,
One first, the other following his steps,
As minor friars journeying on their road.

The present fray had turn'd my thoughts to muse
Upon old Aesop's fable, where he told
What fate unto the mouse and frog befell.
For language hath not sounds more like in sense,
Than are these chances, if the origin
And end of each be heedfully compar'd.
And as one thought bursts from another forth,
So afterward from that another sprang,
Which added doubly to my former fear.
For thus I reason'd: "These through us have been
So foil'd, with loss and mock'ry so complete,
As needs must sting them sore. If anger then
Be to their evil will conjoin'd, more fell
They shall pursue us, than the savage hound
Snatches the leveret, panting 'twixt his jaws."

Already I perceiv'd my hair stand all
On end with terror, and look'd eager back.

"Teacher," I thus began, "if speedily
Thyself and me thou hide not, much I dread
Those evil talons. Even now behind
They urge us: quick imagination works

So forcibly, that I already feel them.”

He answer’d: “Were I form’d of leaded glass,
I should not sooner draw unto myself
Thy outward image, than I now imprint
That from within. This moment came thy thoughts
Presented before mine, with similar act
And count’nance similar, so that from both
I one design have fram’d. If the right coast
Incline so much, that we may thence descend
Into the other chasm, we shall escape
Secure from this imagined pursuit.”

He had not spoke his purpose to the end,
When I from far beheld them with spread wings
Approach to take us. Suddenly my guide
Caught me, ev’n as a mother that from sleep
Is by the noise arous’d, and near her sees
The climbing fires, who snatches up her babe
And flies ne’er pausing, careful more of him
Than of herself, that but a single vest
Clings round her limbs. Down from the jutting beach
Supine he cast him, to that pendent rock,
Which closes on one part the other chasm.

Never ran water with such hurrying pace
Adown the tube to turn a landmill’s wheel,

When nearest it approaches to the spokes,
As then along that edge my master ran,
Carrying me in his bosom, as a child,
Not a companion. Scarcely had his feet
Reach'd to the lowest of the bed beneath,

When over us the steep they reach'd; but fear
In him was none; for that high Providence,
Which plac'd them ministers of the fifth foss,
Power of departing thence took from them all.

There in the depth we saw a painted tribe,
Who pac'd with tardy steps around, and wept,
Faint in appearance and o'ercome with toil.
Caps had they on, with hoods, that fell low down
Before their eyes, in fashion like to those
Worn by the monks in Cologne. Their outside
Was overlaid with gold, dazzling to view,
But leaden all within, and of such weight,
That Frederick's compar'd to these were straw.
Oh, everlasting wearisome attire!

We yet once more with them together turn'd
To leftward, on their dismal moan intent.
But by the weight oppress'd, so slowly came
The fainting people, that our company
Was chang'd at every movement of the step.

Whence I my guide address'd: "See that thou find
Some spirit, whose name may by his deeds be known,
And to that end look round thee as thou go'st."

Then one, who understood the Tuscan voice,
Cried after us aloud: "Hold in your feet,
Ye who so swiftly speed through the dusk air.
Perchance from me thou shalt obtain thy wish."

Whereat my leader, turning, me bespake:
"Pause, and then onward at their pace proceed."

I staid, and saw two Spirits in whose look
Impatient eagerness of mind was mark'd
To overtake me; but the load they bare
And narrow path retarded their approach.

Soon as arriv'd, they with an eye askance
Perus'd me, but spake not: then turning each
To other thus conferring said: "This one
Seems, by the action of his throat, alive.
And, be they dead, what privilege allows
They walk unmantled by the cumbrous stole?"

Then thus to me: "Tuscan, who visitest
The college of the mourning hypocrites,

Disdain not to instruct us who thou art."

"By Arno's pleasant stream," I thus replied,

"In the great city I was bred and grew,

And wear the body I have ever worn.

but who are ye, from whom such mighty grief,

As now I witness, courseth down your cheeks?

What torment breaks forth in this bitter woe?"

"Our bonnets gleaming bright with orange hue,"

One of them answer'd, "are so leaden gross,

That with their weight they make the balances

To crack beneath them. Joyous friars we were,

Bologna's natives, Catalano I,

He Loderingo nam'd, and by thy land

Together taken, as men used to take

A single and indifferent arbiter,

To reconcile their strifes. How there we sped,

Gardingo's vicinage can best declare."

"O friars!" I began, "your miseries—"

But there brake off, for one had caught my eye,

Fix'd to a cross with three stakes on the ground:

He, when he saw me, writh'd himself, throughout

Distorted, ruffling with deep sighs his beard.

And Catalano, who thereof was 'ware,

Thus spake: "That pierced spirit, whom intent

Thou view'st, was he who gave the Pharisees
Counsel, that it were fitting for one man
To suffer for the people. He doth lie
Transverse; nor any passes, but him first
Behoves make feeling trial how each weighs.
In straits like this along the foss are plac'd
The father of his consort, and the rest
Partakers in that council, seed of ill
And sorrow to the Jews." I noted then,
How Virgil gaz'd with wonder upon him,
Thus abjectly extended on the cross
In banishment eternal. To the friar
He next his words address'd: "We pray ye tell,
If so be lawful, whether on our right
Lies any opening in the rock, whereby
We both may issue hence, without constraint
On the dark angels, that compell'd they come
To lead us from this depth." He thus replied:
"Nearer than thou dost hope, there is a rock
From the next circle moving, which o'ersteps
Each vale of horror, save that here his cope
Is shatter'd. By the ruin ye may mount:
For on the side it slants, and most the height
Rises below." With head bent down awhile
My leader stood, then spake: "He warn'd us ill,
Who yonder hangs the sinners on his hook."

To whom the friar: "At Bologna erst
I many vices of the devil heard,
Among the rest was said, 'He is a liar,
And the father of lies!'" When he had spoke,
My leader with large strides proceeded on,
Somewhat disturb'd with anger in his look.

I therefore left the spirits heavy laden,
And following, his beloved footsteps mark'd.