

The Journey Continues, One New Canto at a Time

As an ibex negotiates a sharp mountain slope at an angle,
placing its feet carefully so as not to upset the scree,
moving with confidence, but always focused on the way ahead of it.

So we continued along the downward path.
The light was grey and flat, like that of early morning,
and in it I could see that we had entered a new landscape.

On either side of the path, the land flattened out,
like a prairie or moor smoothed and rendered featureless
by centuries of winds and floods.

We walked swiftly through this terrain.
and it was not long before a great noise rose up
whose source I could not discern.

Turning to my guide, I asked
“From whence come these terrible shouts?
They are like those of people fighting, yet I see no one.”

And he to me, "Look towards your feet."
"This land is not as blank as it first appears.
You will see it is full of people, though they are concealed."

I did so, and not far from where we stood
I then beheld a strange crowd crouched low to the earth,
their movements full of struggle.

As the coastlands present treacherous sands,
which will ensnare a man when the water is low,
so these people appeared to be caught.

None could succeed in standing for more than a moment
before swiftly sinking down again, drawn by some unseen hand.
Each pushed against his neighbors, striving in vain to climb out.

"Let us walk closer," said my guide, "For in this light
I suspect you cannot yet see what these people stand upon."
He left the path, but I hesitated.

"Why do you stall?" he asked me.
"What if the ground is unstable?" I answered,
"The people move strangely, they look unbalanced."

“It is firm,” he said, “their movements are caused
by something else, as you will see.

Now let us approach them.”

When we reached the edge of the crowd, I saw
a greater horror than I had first imagined.

A vast pit opened before us, reaching far underground.

It teemed with people, piled on top of each other.
Those beneath sought to rise up, and stood briefly
on the backs of others, before they were toppled and replaced.

Thus an angry, roiling mass of bodies was formed,
constantly shifting, terrible to watch. Confronted with this,
I became startled, and drew backward in fear.

As I recoiled, my leader stepped forward.
His eyes settled on a man at the edge of the pit,
who clung to a rock, holding himself above the fray.

Motioning for me to follow, he approached the man
and, bending close so that he might be heard over the din,
asked, “Who are you who clings so stubbornly?”

“What brought you to this grim place?”

The man scowled, and turned his head,
so that it seemed he would not answer.

But then he opened his mouth,
and in a hoarse, panting voice said,
“I was a wealthy man, from an old, prosperous family.”

“You will forgive my reluctance to speak,
for this difficult task requires that I conserve my breath,
but if you wish, I will gladly relate my story.”

I still stood hesitantly behind Virgil,
watching over his shoulder, but now he drew me forward,
so that I stood close to the man, and stared at him.

His face was haggard, bathed in sweat from the effort
and exhaustion of remaining at the surface of the pit.
Oblivious to my staring, he continued to speak.

“We were poor farmers once, long ago,” he said,
“But our fortunes changed when we came across the sea.
Land was plentiful, and we soon amassed a large estate.”

“But we did not farm it ourselves.
Slavery was a well-entrenched system in this new land,
and we did not question the advantages it provided.”

“When I inherited our land, I continued the practice.
There were murmurs of protest already, I but ignored them.
It was the easiest thing to do, and the most sensible.”

“I saw nothing wrong with my actions, felt no qualms.
Yet I find myself in this pit,” he said, looking around with disdain,
“As do many others. All people are represented here.”

Casting my eyes over the pit,
I indeed beheld a diverse crowd, populated by
every manner of man and woman in equal number.

The strength of the man then appeared to wane.
His grip on the rock slackened, but before he could be pulled down,
I quickly asked him, “What sin brings so many people to this place?”

The man sighed, “We have all committed similar crimes.
In life we profited from the oppression of others,
so here we must oppress each other to sustain ourselves.”

Puzzled, I opened my mouth to speak again,
but he interrupted me, saying, “I am tired.
My time at the surface is done. Ask someone else.”

With that, he let go of the rock, and,
adding another wail to the cacophony, became submerged
amidst the crush of churning bodies.

“You retain some curiosity about the nature of this place,”
My guide then said to me, “So let us speak with another.”
He turned and walked along the rim of the pit.

I walked beside him, and soon a voice called out,
“I saw you talking to that sad old plantation owner.
Boring, isn’t he? I have a much better story.”

The man who spoke these words relied on no rock,
instead supporting himself on the swaying shoulders
of some poor soul beneath him, his arms thrown wide.

I looked to Virgil, who said, “Do approach this man.”
I did, asking, “Well, who are you? What do you have to tell?”
The man smiled. “I was great traveler,” he said.

“An explorer and a conqueror of many territories.
My country sent me south, and I returned with riches,
and won them renown and prestige.”

“I ought to have been rewarded for my achievements,
Not punished for my few faults, but here I am.
What do you think of that?”

“If you were not in this circle,” I replied, “Certainly
You would have been punished for pride instead.
Why are you here? What faults do you speak of?”

“I imposed colonial rule,” he said,
“I exploited the people I encountered, for resources and labor.
I deprived them of what was rightfully theirs.”

“But I never did it for personal gain!,” he exclaimed,
“It was all to enrich my country, and it really did.
If it was at the expense of others, then that was a small price to pay.”

As I watched, another man suddenly arose nearby,
and the colonizer struck out at him in a rage, swinging his arms
until the man fell back into the crowd.

“What causes you to fight so savagely?” I asked.

“At the bottom of this pit,” said the colonizer, “is a great fire,
Hotter than any you would know from the world above.”

“When we struggle, it is to avoid that fire.

To keep ourselves above it, we must push others downward,
And so we fight continuously.”

Seeing that my question had been answered,

My guide again began to walk, motioning for me to follow.
“Come,” he said, “we have lingered here long enough.”

“Wait,” I said. “One last question.

Is there anyone in this circle who I would be familiar with?”
“I do not know,” said the man, “This pit is very large.”

“I haven’t spoken to many people from before my own time,

And beneath the surface it is too dark to see.”
He then fell silent, and faced away from us.

Already Virgil had moved ahead of me,

And I hurried to catch up with him. We followed the edge of the pit,
Though I avoided looking at the people within.

Then we again came to the path
We had followed previously, and resuming it
Continued our ever-descending journey.