

CANTO 23

*Imagined pursuit—slide into sixth bolgia: the hypocrites—two Frati
godenti—Caiaphas—the devil lied—Virgil's anger*

- 1 Silent, alone, without companions, we were
walking one before, the other after, as friars minor
go their way.
- 4 Because of the present scuffle, my thoughts had
turned to that fable by Aesop where he spoke of the
frog and the rat,
- 7 for *mo* and *issa* are not more alike than the scuffle
and the fable, if one couples beginning and end with
close attention.
- 10 And, as one thought bursts out of another, so
another was born from that one, and it redoubled my
former fear.
- 13 I considered: “These through us have suffered
shame with harm, and with mockery that I believe will
bitterly wound them.
- 16 If anger is spooled onto their ill will, they will
come after us, crueller than a dog after the hare he
snaps at.”
- 19 Already I felt all my hairs curling with fear, and I
kept looking back, when I said: “Master if you do not
hide
- 22 yourself and me quickly, I am frightened of the
Evil Claws. They are already behind us; I imagine
them so strongly, I already hear them.”
- 25 And he: “If I were made of leaded glass I would
not catch your outer image any faster than I grasp
your inner one.
- 28 Just now your thoughts came among mine, with
similar bearing and similar face, so that I have made
a single counsel of them.

- 31 If the right bank slopes so that we can go down
into the next pocket, we will escape the imagined
pursuit.”
- 34 He had not finished giving this advice, when I
saw them coming, with outstretched wings, not far
away, intent on seizing us.
- 37 My leader seized me quickly, like a mother who is
awakened by the noise and sees the flames burning
close by,
- 40 who takes up her son and flees, caring more for
him than for herself, not stopping even to put on her
shift:
- 43 and down from the neck of the hard bank, he
gave himself supine to the sloping rock that encloses
the near side of the next pocket.
- 46 Water has never coursed more swiftly down a
sluice to turn the wheels of a land mill, as it
approaches the paddles,
- 49 than did my master down that wall, carrying
me along on his breast like his son, not his
companion.
- 52 Hardly had his feet touched the bed of the ditch,
when the devils appeared on the bank above us; but
now there was nothing to fear,
- 55 for the high Providence that placed them as
ministers of the fifth ditch takes from them all power
to leave it.
- 58 Down there we found a painted people who were
walking with very slow steps, weeping and, by their
expressions, weary and defeated.
- 61 They were wearing robes with hoods pulled low
over their eyes, made in the fashion that is sewn in
Cluny for the monks.
- 64 On the outside they are dazzlingly gilded, but
within they are all of lead, so heavy that the ones
Frederick put on people might have been of straw.
- 67 Oh eternally laborious mantle! We turned once
more to the left with them, attentive to their sad
weeping,

70 but because of the weight those weary people came
on so slowly that we had a new companion with
each motion of our hips.

73 Therefore I said to my leader: "Try to find
someone known by deed or name, moving your eyes
about as we walk."

76 And one who understood my Tuscan speech,
behind us, called: "Stay your feet, you who are
running so through the dark air!

79 Perhaps you will have from me what you desire."
And so my leader turned and said: "Wait, and then
walk at his pace."

82 I stood still and saw two showing in their faces
great haste of the spirit to be with me, but their
burden slowed them, and the crowded way.

85 When they had reached me, for a long time they
looked at me sidelong, without saying a word; then
they turned to each other and spoke together:

88 "That one seems alive, by the motion of his throat;
but if they are dead, by what privilege are they
exempt from the weighty stole?"

91 Then they spoke to me: "O Tuscan who have come
to the college of the sad hypocrites, do not disdain to
say who you are."

94 And I to them: "I was born and raised beside the
lovely river Arno in the great city, and I am here
with the body I have always had.

97 But who are you, whose great pain distills all I see
trickling down your cheeks? and what punishment is
in you that sparkles so?"

100 And one replied: "The orange robes are so thick
with lead that the weights make their balances creak.

103 We were Jolly Friars, and from Bologna, I
named Catalano and he Loderingo, and taken both
together by your city,

106 though the custom is to take a single man, to
preserve the peace; and we were such that it still
appears around the Gardingo."

109 I began: "O friars, your evil . . ." but I said no more,
for into my view came one crucified to the earth with
three stakes.

112 When he saw me, he twisted himself all over,
puffing into his beard with sighs; and Brother
Catalano, who perceived it,

115 told me: "That one staked there at whom you are
looking counseled the Pharisees that it was
expedient to put one man to death for the people.

118 He is stretched naked out across the road, as you
see, so that whoever passes, he must feel his weight first.

121 And his father-in-law is laid out in the same way
in this ditch, and the others of the council that sowed
so ill for the Jews."

124 Then I saw Virgil marveling over him who was
so basely stretched cross-wise in the eternal exile.

127 Then he directed to the friar this word: "Let it not
displease you, if it is permitted, to tell us if on the
right hand some passage slopes

130 whereby we can both climb out of here, without
requiring any of the black angels to come to this
bottom to transport us."

133 So he replied: "Closer than you hope, we are
approaching a ridge that goes from the largest circle
across all the savage valleys,

136 except that in this one it is broken and does not
cover it; you will be able to climb up along the
landslide, which slopes gently up the side and is
heaped up at the bottom."

139 My leader stood a little with head bent down;
then he said: "Ill did he recount the business, who
hooks the sinners on this side."

142 And the friar: "In Bologna I once heard many
vices of the devil told, among which I heard that he
is a liar and the father of lies."

145 Then my leader walked off with great strides, his
face a little disturbed with anger; so I left the
burdened ones,

148 following the prints of his dear feet.