

## CANTO 16

*The noise of the great cataract—the three Florentine noblemen—  
denunciation of Florence—the cataract—the pilgrim's belt—the  
summoning of Geryon*

- 1           Already I was in a place where one heard the  
          thundering of the water falling into the next circle,  
          like the rumbling that beehives make,  
4           when three shades came running together out of a  
          herd passing by beneath the rain of the harsh  
          punishment.
- 7           They were coming toward us, and each was  
          shouting: “Stop, you who by your clothes seem to be  
          someone from our depraved city.”
- 10          Alas, what wounds I saw in their members, recent  
          and old, burned into them by the flames! It still pains  
          me when I remember.
- 13          At their shouts my teacher paused; he turned his  
          face toward me and: “Now wait,” he said, “to these  
          we should be courteous.
- 16          And if it were not for the fire that the nature of  
          the place pours down, I would say that haste would  
          more become you than them.”
- 19          When we stood still, they began again their  
          former verse; and on reaching us they made a wheel  
          of themselves, all three.
- 22          As is the custom of wrestlers, naked and oiled,  
          spying out their holds and their advantage before  
          they come to blows and wounds:
- 25          so they wheeled, and each kept his face toward  
          me, so that their necks made a constant motion  
          contrary to their feet.
- 28          And: “If the wretchedness of this vile place brings  
          us and our prayers to scorn,” one began, “and our  
          darkened, scorched appearance,

31           let our fame incline your spirit to tell us who you  
are, who so confidently step with your living feet  
through Hell.

34           This man, in whose steps you see me tread,  
though he now goes naked and hairless, was of  
higher degree than you believe:

37           he was the grandson of the good Gualdrada;  
Guido Guerra was his name, and in his life he  
accomplished much with wisdom and the sword.

40           The other, who wears the sand behind me, is  
Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, whose words should have been  
more pleasing in the world above.

43           And I, placed on the cross with them, was Iacopo  
Rusticucci, and certainly my fierce wife harms me  
more than anything else.”

46           If I had been protected from the fire, I would have  
thrown myself down there among them, and I  
believe my teacher would have suffered it;

49           but because I would have burned and cooked  
myself, fear vanquished the good will that made me  
greedy to embrace them.

52           Then I began: “Not scorn, but grief was fixed in  
me by your condition, so great that it will long  
endure,

55           as soon as my lord here said words that made me  
think people such as yourselves were coming.

58           I am from your city, and always your works and  
your honored names I have repeated and heard with  
affection.

61           I am leaving the bitter and seek the sweet fruit  
promised me by my truthful leader; but first I must  
plunge as far as the center.”

64           “So may your soul long guide your body,” he  
replied then, “and so may your fame shine after you,

67           tell if courtesy and valor dwell in our city as they  
used to do, or if they have utterly forsaken it:

70           for Guiglielmo Borsiere, who has been grieving  
with us but a short time and goes there with our  
companions, causes us much pain with his words  
about it.”

73           “The new people and the rapid gains have  
generated pride and excess, Florence, in you, so that  
you already weep for it.”

76           So I cried with face uplifted; and the three, who  
took that as my reply, looked at each other as one  
looks at the truth.

79           “If at other times it costs you so little,” they all  
replied, “to satisfy others, happy are you, if you  
speak so readily!

82           Therefore, if you escape these dark places and go  
back to see the beautiful stars, when it will be  
pleasant to say, ‘I was,’

85           see that you speak of us to people.” Then  
they broke the wheel, and their quick legs seemed  
wings to their flight.

88           An amen could not be said more quickly than  
they disappeared; so my master judged we should  
move on.

91           I was following him, and we had not walked far,  
when the sound of the water was so close to us that  
we could hardly have heard each other speak.

94           Like that river which is first to take its own course  
toward the east, after Monte Viso, on the left side of  
the Apennines,

97           which is called Acquacheta above, before it falls  
down into the low bed and loses that name at Forlì,

100          as it thunders there above San Benedetto de  
l’Alpe, when falling in one cascade where it usually  
descends by a thousand:

103          so down from a steep cliff we found that dark  
water resounding, such that in a short while it would  
have harmed our ears.

106          I had a cord girding me, and with it I had thought  
at times to capture the leopard with the spotted hide.

- 109           After I had untied it from around me, as my  
leader had commanded me, I held it out to him  
knotted and wound.
- 112           And he turned toward his right side and  
somewhat far from the bank threw it down into that  
deep pit.
- 115           “Some new thing must answer,” I was saying to  
myself, “the strange sign that my master is following  
with his eyes.”
- 118           Ah, how cautious men should be in the presence  
of those who not only see our actions but with their  
wisdom see our inner thoughts!
- 121           He said to me: “Soon what I expect, what your  
thoughts are dreaming, will come up; soon it will be  
revealed to your sight.”
- 124           Always to that truth which has the face of  
falsehood one should close one’s lips as long as one  
can, for without any guilt it brings shame;
- 127           but here I cannot conceal it, and by the notes of  
this comedy, reader, I swear to you, so may they not  
fail to find long favor,
- 130           that I saw, through that thick dark air, a figure  
come swimming upward, fearful to the most  
confident heart,
- 133           as one returns who at times goes down to release  
an anchor caught on a rock or other thing hidden in  
the sea,
- 136           and reaches upward as he draws in his feet.

