

## CANTO XI

We came to the top rim of a circle,  
Above an enormous band of broken boulders,  
That looked down on an even harsher crowded Alcatraz.

Here, to escape the intense stench  
That permeated the abyss  
We sheltered ourselves behind the up-tilted lid

Of a grand tomb on which was written:  
I HOLD POPE ANASTASIUS, WHOM PHOTINUS LURED  
FROM THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW.

74 “We have to wait a while  
To adapt to the noxious fumes.  
Once we do, we’ll no longer notice them.”

So my teacher said. I said, “In order that we don’t waste time,  
Is there something you could teach me?”  
He said, “MTE, my thoughts exactly. Look,” he said,

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“Within the circle of this rock there are three more circles,  
Each one smaller than the one before,  
Like the others you’ve seen between here and the world.

They’re all crammed with the souls of the damned;  
I’ll describe the three levels so you’ll know the sufferers  
The moment you meet them.

Think of it this way: every wrong that heaven hates is,  
In the end, an injustice; and every injustice injures  
Someone—one, by violence, or two, through fraud.

THE IOWA REVIEW

Since fraud is the misuse of reason's gift,  
God hates it all the more. Therefore, schemers  
Are farther down on the scale, so suffer more.

The first circle is entirely for the violent;  
That circle is further subdivided into three  
Depending on the type of damage done.

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One can be violent toward God, damage oneself,  
Or damage someone else, their person or possessions.  
I'll tell you how it works—

People may willfully kill or cruelly injure others.  
They can destroy what isn't theirs,  
Mug, commit arson, or extort.

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So, murderers and those who wound with malice,  
Looters and robbers, these receive their daily torture  
In teams according to misdeeds.

One can raise a hand against one's self, and everything  
He or she was given and worked so hard to gain;  
So in the second ring, the suicides

Who threw away the world or gambled their own good  
Away to nothing or cried about one fate  
And couldn't see a second other; sadly those repent

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And never stop. Then there's violence against God—  
Negating his essence by hating nature  
And blasphemously howling about what he gave you.

Which is why the third and smallest circle  
Is rubberstamped with a rain of falling fire on lusters  
And bankers, along with those who hate and mock him.

Fraud sucks up every conscience and can exploit  
Both those who have and those who have not  
Been entrusted by someone with his or her future.

The latter type seems merely to destroy  
The natural sense of citizenship, person-to-person,  
Thus in the second circle of the thirds, are nestled

Hypocrites, flatterers, those who practice hocus-pocus,  
Liars, robbers, sellers of church favors, pimps,  
Grifters, graft-takers, sex-traders, and similar filth.

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However, the former type of fraud doubles the injury;  
It both erases the common connections nature creates  
Between people, but also betrays the add-on trust.

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That's why in the smallest circle those who fleece others  
Burn day and night at the dead center of the universe,  
Where Dis sits, in ice, on a burnished throne

That glows on the marble. I told my teacher,  
"I can comprehend the diagram and what defines  
The triple layers of the prison abyss and its inmates

But what about the wind-whipped ones  
In the scum-marsh and the ones a heinous rain drums on  
And those who scream inanities ad infinitum?

Why aren't they down here in the glowing city,  
If they've incurred the wrath of God?  
And if they haven't, why are they in prison?"

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"Now your head, excuse me, is empty.  
Tell me, are you preoccupied with something else?  
Why are your thoughts straying that way?" he asked.

“Don’t you remember the detailed discourse in the *Ethics*  
Where you read about the three predilections  
Which Heaven insists you avoid:

Indulgent living, willful sinning, and brutality.  
Of the three, God finds wanton indulgence  
Less offensive and so makes the cure less dreadful.

If you consider this doctrine carefully and recall  
What you know about those who suffer punishment  
In the circles above these city walls,

You’ll totally get why those poor hapless souls  
Are divided from these more malicious ones,  
And why divine vengeance doesn’t slap them more.”

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“You’re like the sun, after the sun has set,” I said.  
“When you untangle these knotty issues for me,  
I’m as happy asking as I am when I’m certain.

But back up a little, please,” I said, “to where you say  
That usury not only offends another  
But also God’s goodness. Undo that knot for me.”

“You’ve got to read,” he said, “philosophy;  
If you understood it you would know it states repeatedly  
That nature follows God’s divine plan;

His intellect is the architect of nature  
And its fragile workings; if you pay close attention  
To Aristotle’s *Physics*, you’ll find it written early on,

That art imitates God’s nature, as far as it can—  
Like *Nighthawks* does the coffee drinkers—  
So that art is, as it were, the child’s child.

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If you recall at the beginning of the book of Genesis,  
Within the two—nature and art (the latter also found  
As form in industry)—lies the theory

Of eat and work/live and prosper. The usurer however  
Evades this dictum, by sham investments and instead  
Of replenishing the world, he becomes a Ponzi to the people.

But follow me, we have hours to go.  
You can just see Pisces rising on the horizon;  
Ursa Major's spangled starlight is up and to the west.

And we're far from where the cliff face crashes.”

*Notes for Canto XI*

3. *That looked down on an even harsher crowded Alcatraz:* Alcatraz Island (in San Francisco Bay) was, from 1933–1963, the site of Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary, also called “The Rock.” On November 20, 1969, a group called Indians of All Tribes (IAT) occupied the island in an attempt to reclaim the site for use as a Native American study center and museum under the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which states that any unused or abandoned federal land previously taken from Indian tribes should be rightfully returned to them. The government forcibly evicted the group on June 11, 1971. Today the island is part of the National Park System.

66–67. *on a burnished throne / That glows on the marble:* T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), *The Waste Land*, “A Game of Chess”:

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
Glowed on the marble, where the glass  
Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines  
From which a golden Cupidon peeped out  
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)

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76. *Now your head, excuse me, is empty:* Sylvia Plath (1932–1963), “The Applicant”:

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.  
I have the ticket for that.  
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet  
Well, what do you think of that?

91. *You’re like the sun, after the sun has set:* Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950), “Only Until This Cigarette Has Ended”:

But in your day this moment is the sun  
Upon a hill, after the sun has set.

103–104. *That art imitates God's nature, as far as it can— / Like Nighthawks does the coffee drinkers—*: *Nighthawks* is a 1942 oil painting by Edward Hopper (1882–1967) that depicts three customers sitting at the counter of an all-night diner; two of them have coffee cups in front of them, the third person is seen only from the back. The painting is in the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.

111. *he becomes a Ponzi to the people*: A Ponzi scheme is “an investment swindle in which some early investors are paid off with money put up by later ones in order to encourage more and bigger risks” (Webster’s Online Dictionary) named after the notorious swindler Charles Ponzi (1882–1949). Bernard (Bernie) Madoff (b. 1938), stock-broker, investor, and former non-executive chairman of the NASDAQ stock market was sentenced on June 29th, 2009, to 150 years in prison for what is believed to be the most extensive Ponzi scheme in history.

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114. *Ursa Major's spangled starlight is up and to the west*: William Shakespeare (1564–1616), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act II, scene i:

But she perforce withholds the loved boy,  
Crowns him with flowers and makes him all her joy:  
And now they never meet in grove or green,  
By fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen,  
But, they do square, that all their elves for fear  
Creep into acorn-cups and hide them there.