

CANTO 16 ½

Descent from the Seventh Circle;

Indifference – Federico Laredo Brú and Boutros Boutros-Ghali

As Virgil and I approached the next circle, silence descended upon us like a bitter gust of wind that makes a traveler yearn for a warm hearth. For the first time there was true silence. I turned to my loving master; he motioned and we continued to the promontory.

Not yet had I absorbed the silence when I witnessed sinners arranged like soldiers in the Battle of Thermopylae, standing in phalanx-like formations with their shoulders touching. The shades were arranged in clear groups, but within each group, there was much diversity. The seamless organization of the groups resembled a valley covered with multicolored tulips on a spring morning in the Netherlands.

The shades remained in their normal human forms, yet something about them was quite inhuman. Their humanity was like the sun on a cloudy day; one knows that it continues to shine, yet he cannot perceive it through the thick veil. Never had I seen such a disquieting formation; the phalanx of sinners evoked bitter memories of Campaldino. I turned to Virgil and asked, “What malfeasance led to this punishment?”

“It was not so much their actions as their inaction,” replied my leader. As I pondered his statement we reached the first group of sinners. The shades before me were pallid reflections of bodies relegated to coffins on Earth.

My sage, sensing my confusion, said: “Let it please you to stop here and look into the eyes of the sinners.”

I looked into the eyes of the sinner in front of me. His reminded me of a child watching a bullfight for the first time -- mesmerized yet terrified. As the scene in the sinner’s eyes unfolded, I noticed tears streaming down the sinner’s face. I looked over to see that all the sinners were drenched in their own tears just as Pheidippides was drenched in sweat as he took his last breath.

“What causes you to grieve as you do?” I asked the sinner.

The sinner replied, “All of those that I held dear before Minos’ tail circled eight times have taken my place in suffering. I am forced to watch their suffering and when they cry for help, I can do nothing.”

I then asked, “What is your name and what causes your mute suffering?”

The sinner replied, “Oh soul who who has arrived to see this contemptible dwelling, I am President Federico Laredo Brú, and I did nothing wrong. I cared for my people in Cuba and did my best to create prosperity. The Jews on the *MS St. Louis* were not my problem; they were not my people. I denied the them entry into Cuba not out of hatred but because of a new immigration policy, for we were no longer accepting foreign refugees. And now in my mind’s eye, I am forced to witness my family members being turned and sent to their deaths. It is I who must turn them away.”

My good master pulled me to the next sinner before I could ask the suffering soul another question. I reached the next sinner and demanded, “If you wish me to bring news of you back to the living, give me your name and explain what you did to merit this punishment.”

And he to me: “Let it please you to know that I am Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and I did nothing wrong. I was the UN Secretary General during the Rwandan and Yugoslavian genocides.

I was a dedicated civil servant who was undaunted by the challenges of my venerable position. Let your memory serve you that I was not to blame for the failure to provide aid. It was insufficient resources and the ambivalence of others that precluded action. Why must I watch my family be brutally tortured for no reason other than their connection to me?"

Disgusted, Virgil turned to me and said, "We have heard enough from this sinner; we must move on for our time here is short and we have much to see." I dared not stay and question further.

As Virgil and I began to travel out of the bolgia he remarked, "The sinners held in this bolgia may appear undeserving, but they were seduced by the easy decision to continue their daily lives and ignore the suffering of other humans. Their sinful passivity enabled the genocidal aggressors. This sin is but a 'strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil.'^[1] The lack of immediate consequences to the sinner leads the afflicted to become mere abstractions. And is not an abstraction easily ignored?"

Author's Note:

Merriam Webster defines indifference as "a lack of interest in or concern about something."

However, the definition of indifference for this Canto was taken from the speech entitled "The Perils of Indifference" delivered by Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel. In his speech, Wiesel poses the following questions:

Has the human being become less indifferent and more human? Have we really learned from our experiences? Are we less insensitive to the plight of victims of ethnic cleansing and other forms of injustices in places near and far?

I chose to explore this complicated topic because I am convinced that we are still struggling with this challenge. Wiesel's moving remarks about the dangers and consequences of human indifference to the suffering of individuals or groups endure today. One has only to consider the current plight of the Syrian refugees to confront evidence of indifference and the need to strive for a world more animated by individual conscience.

Sources:

Wiesel, Elie. "The Perils of Indifference." The Millennium Lecture. White House, Washington, DC. 12 Apr. 1999. History Place. Web. 28 Oct. 2016.

<http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/wiesel.htm>.