

'THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH'

(Pisa)

1. *The Crusaders*

Their gravestones edge a mound of soil
brought from the hill of Calvary. No one records
what weeds it grew in that first Spring, but bones
were rotted free of flesh in a single night.
And their chapel depicts 'The Triumph of Death',
work of an unknown master-victim. Its theme:
The World — As Hell Would Hate To Have It Known.

2. *The Perished*

Invisible on the left wall
death with bat wings and world-long sickle nips
the leaning poppy-heads of fine-gowned ladies. Below
in an Eastern land angels and demons cruise above
three crosses, picking off their proper prey,
while a hunter finds royal carnage in a wood.
The horse protrudes its neck in horror at the pile
of lords and ladies, jewelled and wigged,
jumbled like apples in a barrel. Souls
float up from their mouths as naked babes to where
the Heavenly Fleet — like a naval battle canvas, —
sort it out with bat-winged lion-clawed demons
that fight like tow-trucks for disputed cases.
The priest's soul like a toddler leaps for angel's
arms, while a devil's claw hooks off a foot;
and from calm bier and clasped jewelled hands of age
a Pope's soul goes whistling up to Satan's jaws.
— No lace or gold can keep the spirit in
when its true master calls. But here's one
that flips like a paper dart between Hell's
and Heaven's hands, until a snake's curled teeth
seize on its ear with glee.

3. *The World of Fools*

A lady's hands tease out her lap-dog's lips:
— the old saint points; her fingers turn
to her own heart. A monk with fiery eyes
gives a true-love kiss as he draws
a masked and hatted woman to his cell, cowl
tucked like a bib around his chin. A jewelled
snake with red underparts lithes out
from his swollen belly. Yet Satan weeps
and good lions stand on guard as the holy hermit
milks his goat that juts her haunches like a loving girl.
While giant centipedes crawl out of wombs and ears,
a golden girl, the dream of hopeless boys,
is hauled away, back arched like a fitch-cat,
to prove fine women burn as well as other fuel;
and bound and spitted flies
with the same grace that damned her worshippers.

Stirring dust, while princes pass,
the hermit's staff finds out the skull
of a good man gone to God's eternal now.

4. *The Judgement*

Opposite is the ending.
Cherub flotillas float with oarlike trumps.
The saints, all newly rescued,
join the old hands serenely reconciled
to see the devil get his due. The good King
draws his wife up from the grave, but an emperor
caught sneaking in, is trampled down
in his green-gold cloak where faceless forms
scramble at the hatch of Heaven.
Stout Sergeant Raphael draws a trembling sheep
out of the Hell-bound dung-soiled flock,
and Michael's sword says 'It is just'.

5. *The Damned*

Beyond,
dukes and emirs tumble down that pit
where (since evil hates to think) a mindless
cow-headed Satan laughs. Among caged sodomites
a hooked claw rips out guts that fall unwound
into another sinner's mouth.

The Envious pull the new damned in with glee,
helping to saw off breasts and knees. Gourmets
around a table sample their own blood;
or stand bound like pigs, before food,
while snakes constrict their throats.

Faith yields to repeated image,
to a universe of converging proofs. The as-if world
of art occludes the real, wakes childhood
terrors, compressing the mix as a diesel
piston forces the spark from sheer compression.

The four walls close like coffin lids
with their unwearying shout that all life veers
from Heaven to Hell, that every glance not bound
to Heaven plays to a pack of leering crowing fiends.
Each thought that doubts this one recruits
for the devil's torture-stacks.

Men have died
screaming of this, it is a fancy to expel
the world.

I step into the sunlight, breathe and look for warmth
among couples who kiss and joke on this thick grass.

The Triumph of Death is a gigantic mural painted by an unknown artist on the inner walls of the cemetery chapel beside the Cathedral of Pisa.