

INFERNO

CANTO III

THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE CITY OF WOE,
THROUGH ME THE WAY INTO ETERNAL PAIN,
THROUGH ME THE WAY AMONG THE LOST. 3
JUSTICE MOVED MY MAKER ON HIGH.
DIVINE POWER MADE ME,
WISDOM SUPREME, AND PRIMAL LOVE. 6
BEFORE ME NOTHING WAS BUT THINGS ETERNAL,
AND I ENDURE ETERNALLY.
ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE. 9
These words, dark in hue, I saw inscribed
over an archway. And then I said:
'Master, for me their meaning is hard.' 12
And he, as one who understood:
'Here you must banish all distrust,
here must all cowardice be slain. 15
'We have come to where I said
you would see the miserable sinners
who have lost the good of the intellect.' 18
And after he had put his hand on mine
with a reassuring look that gave me comfort,
he led me toward things unknown to man. 21
Now sighs, loud wailing, lamentation
resounded through the starless air,
so that I too began to weep. 24
Unfamiliar tongues, horrendous accents,
words of suffering, cries of rage, voices
loud and faint, the sound of slapping hands -- 27
all these made a tumult, always whirling
in that black and timeless air,
as sand is swirled in a whirlwind. 30
And I, my head encircled by error, said:
'Master, what is this I hear, and what people
are these so overcome by pain?' 33

And he to me: 'This miserable state is borne
 by the wretched souls of those who lived
 without disgrace yet without praise. 36
 'They intermingle with that wicked band
 of angels, not rebellious and not faithful
 to God, who held themselves apart. 39
 'Loath to impair its beauty, Heaven casts them out,
 and depth of Hell does not receive them
 lest on their account the evil angels gloat.' 42
 And I: 'Master, what is so grievous to them,
 that they lament so bitterly?'
 He replied: 'I can tell you in few words. 45
 'They have no hope of death,
 and their blind life is so abject
 that they are envious of every other lot. 48
 'The world does not permit report of them.
 Mercy and justice hold them in contempt.
 Let us not speak of them -- look and pass by.' 51
 And I, all eyes, made out a whirling banner
 that ran so fast it seemed as though
 it never could find rest. 54
 Behind it came so long a file of people
 that I could not believe
 death had undone so many. 57
 After I recognized a few of these,
 I saw and knew the shade of him
 who, through cowardice, made the great refusal. 60
 At once with certainty I understood
 this was that worthless crew
 hateful alike to God and to His foes. 63
 These wretches, who never were alive,
 were naked and beset
 by stinging flies and wasps 66
 that made their faces stream with blood,
 which, mingled with their tears,
 was gathered at their feet by loathsome worms. 69
 And then, fixing my gaze farther on,
 I saw souls standing on the shore of a wide river,
 and so I said: 'Master, permit me first 72

'to know who they are and then what inner law
 makes them so eager for the crossing,
 or so it seems in this dim light.' 75

And he to me: 'You shall know these things,
 but not before we stay our steps
 on the mournful shore of Acheron.' 78

Then, my eyes cast down with shame,
 fearing my words displeased him,
 I did not speak until we reached that stream. 81

And now, coming toward us in a boat,
 an old man, his hair white with age, cried out:
 'Woe unto you, you wicked souls, 84

'give up all hope of ever seeing heaven.
 I come to take you to the other shore,
 into eternal darkness, into heat and chill. 87

'And you there, you living soul,
 move aside from these now dead.'
 But when he saw I did not move, 90

he said: 'By another way, another port,
 not here, you'll come to shore and cross.
 A lighter ship must carry you.' 93

And my leader: 'Charon, do not torment yourself.
 It is so willed where will and power are one,
 and ask no more.' 96

That stilled the shaggy jowls
 of the pilot of the livid marsh,
 about whose eyes burned wheels of flame. 99

But those souls, naked and desolate,
 lost their color. With chattering teeth
 they heard his brutal words. 102

They blasphemed God, their parents,
 the human race, the place, the time, the seed
 of their begetting and of their birth. 105

Then, weeping bitterly, they drew together
 to the accursèd shore that waits
 for every man who fears not God. 108

Charon the demon, with eyes of glowing coals,
 beckons to them, herds them all aboard,
 striking anyone who slackens with his oar. 111

Just as in autumn the leaves fall away,
one, and then another, until the bough
sees all its spoil upon the ground, 114
so the wicked seed of Adam fling themselves
one by one from shore, at his signal,
as does a falcon at its summons. 117
Thus they depart over dark water,
and before they have landed on the other side
another crowd has gathered on this shore. 120
'My son,' said the courteous master,
'all those who die in the wrath of God
assemble here from every land. 123
'And they are eager to cross the river,
for the justice of God so spurs them on
their very fear is turned to longing. 126
'No good soul ever crosses at this place.
Thus, if Charon complains on your account,
now you can grasp the meaning of his words.' 129
When he had ended, the gloomy plain shook
with such force, the memory of my terror
makes me again break out in sweat. 132
From the weeping ground there sprang a wind,
flaming with vermilion light,
which overmastered all my senses, 135
and I dropped like a man pulled down by sleep. 136