

INFERNO

CANTO V

Thus I descended from the first circle
down into the second, which girds a smaller space
but greater agony to goad lament. 3

There stands Minos, snarling, terrible.
He examines each offender at the entrance,
judges and dispatches as he encoils himself. 6

I mean that when the ill-begotten soul
stands there before him it confesses all,
and that accomplished judge of sins 9
decides what place in Hell is fit for it,
then coils his tail around himself to count
how many circles down the soul must go. 12

Always before him stands a crowd of them,
going to judgment each in turn.
They tell, they hear, and then are hurled down. 15

'O you who come to this abode of pain,'
said Minos when he saw me, pausing
in the exercise of his high office, 18
'beware how you come in and whom you trust.
Don't let the easy entrance fool you.'
And my leader to him: 'Why all this shouting? 21
'Hinder not his destined journey.
It is so willed where will and power are one,
and ask no more.' 24

Now I can hear the screams
of agony. Now I have come
where a great wailing beats upon me. 27

I reached a place mute of all light,
which bellows as the sea in tempest
tossed by conflicting winds. 30

The hellish squall, which never rests,
 sweeps spirits in its headlong rush,
 tormenting, whirls and strikes them. 33
 Caught in that path of violence,
 they shriek, weep, and lament.
 Then how they curse the power of God! 36
 I understood that to such torment
 the carnal sinners are condemned,
 they who make reason subject to desire. 39
 As, in cold weather, the wings of starlings
 bear them up in wide, dense flocks,
 so does that blast propel the wicked spirits. 42
 Here and there, down and up, it drives them.
 Never are they comforted by hope
 of rest or even lesser punishment. 45
 Just as cranes chant their mournful songs,
 making a long line in the air,
 thus I saw approach, heaving plaintive sighs, 48
 shades lifted on that turbulence,
 so that I said: 'Master, who are these
 whom the black air lashes?' 51
 'The first of them about whom
 you would hear,' he then replied,
 'was empress over many tongues. 54
 'She was so given to the vice of lechery
 she made lust licit in her law
 to take away the blame she had incurred. 57
 'She is Semiramis, of whom we read
 that she, once Ninus' wife, succeeded him.
 She held sway in the land the Sultan rules. 60
 'Here is she who broke faith with the ashes
 of Sichaeus and slew herself for love.
 The next is wanton Cleopatra. 63
 'See Helen, for whose sake so many years
 of ill rolled past. And see the great Achilles,
 who battled, at the last, with love. 66
 'See Paris, Tristan,' and he showed me more
 than a thousand shades, naming as he pointed,
 whom love had parted from our life. 69

When I heard my teacher name the ladies
 and the knights of old, pity overcame me
 and I almost lost my senses. 72

I began: 'Poet, gladly would I speak
 with these two that move together
 and seem to be so light upon the wind.' 75

And he: 'Once they are nearer, you will see:
 if you entreat them by the love
 that leads them, they will come.' 78

As soon as the wind had bent them to us,
 I raised my voice: 'O wearied souls,
 if it is not forbidden, come speak with us.' 81

As doves, summoned by desire, their wings
 outstretched and motionless, move on the air,
 borne by their will to the sweet nest, 84

so did these leave the troop where Dido is,
 coming to us through the malignant air,
 such force had my affectionate call. 87

'O living creature, gracious and kind,
 that come through somber air to visit us
 who stained the world with blood, 90

'if the King of the universe were our friend
 we would pray that He might give you peace,
 since you show pity for our grievous plight. 93

'We long to hear and speak of that
 which you desire to speak and know,
 here, while the wind has calmed. 96

'On that shore where the river Po
 with all its tributaries slows
 to peaceful flow, there I was born. 99

'Love, quick to kindle in the gentle heart,
 seized this man with the fair form taken from me.
 The way of it afflicts me still. 102

'Love, which absolves no one beloved from loving,
 seized me so strongly with his charm that,
 as you see, it has not left me yet. 105

'Love brought us to one death.
 Caïna waits for him who quenched our lives.'
 These words were borne from them to us. 108

And when I heard those two afflicted souls
 I bowed my head and held it low until at last
 the poet said: 'What are your thoughts?' 111
 In answer I replied: 'Oh,
 how many sweet thoughts, what great desire,
 have brought them to this woeful pass!' 114
 Then I turned to them again to speak
 and I began: 'Francesca, your torments
 make me weep for grief and pity, 117
 'but tell me, in that season of sweet sighs,
 how and by what signs did Love
 acquaint you with your hesitant desires?' 120
 And she to me: 'There is no greater sorrow
 than to recall our time of joy
 in wretchedness -- and this your teacher knows. 123
 'But if you feel such longing
 to know the first root of our love,
 I shall tell as one who weeps in telling. 126
 'One day, to pass the time in pleasure,
 we read of Lancelot, how love enthralled him.
 We were alone, without the least misgiving. 129
 'More than once that reading made our eyes meet
 and drained the color from our faces.
 Still, it was a single instant overcame us: 132
 'When we read how the longed-for smile
 was kissed by so renowned a lover, this man,
 who never shall be parted from me, 135
 'all trembling, kissed me on my mouth.
 A Galeotto was the book and he that wrote it.
 That day we read in it no further.' 138
 While the one spirit said this
 the other wept, so that for pity
 I swooned as if in death. 141
 And down I fell as a dead body falls. 142