

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, translated by John Ciardi

Canto 5

The Poets leave Limbo and enter the second circle. Here begin the torments of Hell proper, and here, blocking the way, sits Minos, the dread and semi-bestial judge of the damned who assigns to each soul its eternal torment. He orders the Poets back; but Virgil silences him as he earlier silenced Charon, and the Poets move on. They find themselves on a dark ledge swept by a great whirlwind, within which spin the souls of the Carnal, those who betrayed reason to their appetites. Their sin was to abandon themselves to the tempest of their passions; so they are swept forever in the tempest of Hell, forever denied the light of reason and of God. Virgil identifies many among them. Semiramis is there, and Dido, Cleopatra, Helen, Achilles, Paris, and Tristan. Dante sees Paolo and Francesca swept together, and in the name of love he calls to them to tell their sad story. They pause from their eternal flight to come to him, and Francesca tells their history while Paolo weeps at her side. Dante is so stricken by compassion at their tragic tale that he swoons again.

So we went down to the second ledge alone;
a smaller circle of so much greater pain
the voice of the damned rose in a bestial moan.

There Minos sits, grinning, grotesque, and hale.
He examines each lost soul as it arrives
And delivers his verdict with his coiling tail.

That is to say, when the ill-fates soul
appears before him it confesses all,
and that grim sorter of the dark and foul
decides which place in Hell shall be its end,
then wraps his twitching tail about himself
one coil for each degree it must descent.

The soul descends and others take its place:
each crowds in its urns to judgment, each confesses,
each hears its doom and falls away through space.

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“O you who come into this camp of woe,”
cried Minos when he saw me turn away
without awaiting his judgment, “watch where you go
once you have entered here, and to whom you turn!

Do not be misled by that wide and easy passage!”
And my Guide to him: “That is not your concern;
it is his fate to enter every door.

This has been willed where what is willed must be,
and is not yours to question. Say no more.”

Now the choir of anguish, like a wound,
strikes through the tortured air. Now I have come
to Hell’s full lamentation, sound beyond sound.

I came to a place stripped bare of every light
and roaring on the naked dark like seas
wracked by a war of winds. Their hellish flight

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Of storm and counterstorm through time foregone,
sweeps the souls of the damned before its charge.

Whirling and battering it drives them on,
and when they pass the ruined gap of Hell

through which we had come, their shrieks begin anew.
There they blaspheme the power of God eternal.
And this, I learned, was the ending flight
of those who sinned in the flesh, the carnal and lusty
who betrayed reason to their appetite.
As the wings of wintering starlings bear them on
in their great wheeling flight, just so the blast
wherries these evil souls through time foregone.
Here, there, up, down, they whirl and, whirling, strain
with never a hope of hope to comfort them,
not of release, but even of less pain.

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As cranes go over sounding their harsh cry,
leaving the long streak of their flight in air,
so come these spirits, wailing as they fly.
And watching their shadows lashed by wind, I cried:
“Master, what souls are these the very air
lashes with its black whips from side to side?”
“The first of these whose history you would know,”
he answered me, “was Empress of many tongues.
Mad sensuality corrupted her so
that to hide the guilt of her debauchery
she licensed all depravity alike,
and lust and law were one in her decree.

She is Semiramis of whom the tale is told
how she married Ninus and succeeded him
to the throne of that wide land the Sultans hold.

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The other is Dido; faithless to the ashes
of Sichaeus, she killed herself for love.
The next whom the eternal tempest lashes
is sense-drugged Cleopatra. See Helen there,
from whom such ill arose. And great Achilles,
who fought at last with love in the house of prayer.
And Paris. And Tristan.” As they whirled above
he pointed out more than a thousand shades
of those torn from the mortal life by love.

I stood there while my Teacher one by one
named the great knights and ladies of dim time;
and I was swept by pity and confusion.

At last I spoke: “Poet, I should be glad
to speak a word with those two swept together
so lightly on the wind and still so sad.”

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And he to me: “Watch them. When next they pass,
call to them in the name of love that drives
and damns them here. In that name they will pause.”

Thus, as soon as the wind in its wild course
brought them around, I called: “O wearied souls!
if none forbid it, pause and speak to us.”

As mating doves that love calls to their nest
glide through the air with motionless raised wings,

borne by the sweet desire that fills each breast –
just so those spirits turned on the torn sky
from the band when Dido whirls across the air;
such was the power of pity in my cry.
“O living creature, gracious, kind, and good,
going this pilgrimage through the sick night,
visiting us who stained the earth with blood,
Were the King of Time our friend, we would pray His peace
on you who have pitied us. As long as the wind
will let us pause, ask of us what you please.
The town where I was born lies by the shore
where the Po descends into its ocean rest
with its attendant streams in one long murmur.
Love, which in gentlest hearts will soonest bloom
Seized my lover with passion for that sweet body
From which I was torn unshriven to my doom.
Love, which permits no loved one not to love,
Took me so strongly with delight in him
That we are one in Hell, as we were above.
Love led us to one death. In the depths of Hell
Caïna waits for him who took our lives.”
This was the piteous tale they stopped to tell.
And when I had heard those world-offended lovers
I bowed my head. At last the Poet spoke:
“What painful thoughts are these your lowered brow covers?”
When at length I answered, I began: “Alas!
What sweetest thoughts, what green and young desire
Led these two lovers to this sorry pass.”
Then turning to those spirits once again,
I said: “Francesca, what you suffer here
melts me to tears of pity and of pain.
But tell me: in the time of your sweet sighs
by what appearances found love the way
to lure you to his perilous paradise?”
And she: “The double grief of a lost bliss
is to recall its happy hour in pain.
Your Guide and Teacher knows the truth to this.
But if there is indeed a soul in Hell
to ask of the beginning of our love
out of his pity, I will weep and tell:
on a day for dalliance we read the rhyme
of Lancelot, how love had mastered him.
We were alone with innocence and dim time.
Pause after pause that high old story drew
our eyes together while we blushed and paled;
but it was one soft passage overthrew
our caution and our hearts. For when we read
how her fond smile was kissed by such a lover,
he who is one with me alive and dead

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breathed on my lips the tremor of his kiss.

That book, and he who wrote it, was a pander.

That day we read no further." As she said this,
the other spirit, who stood by her, wept

so piteously, I felt my senses reel

and faint away with anguish. I was swept

by such a swoon as death is, and I fell,

as a corpse might fall, to the dead floor of Hell.