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The Divine Comedy of
Dante Alighieri

A Verse Translation

with Introductions & Commentary by

Allen Mandelbaum

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CANTO V

So I descended from the first enclosure
down to the second circle, that which girdles
less space but grief more great, that goads to weeping.

There dreadful Minos stands, gnashing his teeth: 4
examining the sins of those who enter,
he judges and assigns as his tail twines.

I mean that when the spirit born to evil 7
appears before him, it confesses all;
and he, the connoisseur of sin, can tell
the depth in Hell appropriate to it; 10
as many times as Minos wraps his tail
around himself, that marks the sinner's level.

Always there is a crowd that stands before him: 13
each soul in turn advances toward that judgment;
they speak and hear, then they are cast below.

Arresting his extraordinary task, 16
Minos, as soon as he had seen me, said:
"O you who reach this house of suffering,
be careful how you enter, whom you trust; 19
the gate is wide, but do not be deceived!"

To which my guide replied: "But why protest? 22
Do not attempt to block his fated path:
our passage has been willed above, where One
can do what He has willed; and ask no more."

Now notes of desperation have begun 25
to overtake my hearing; now I come
where mighty lamentation beats against me.

I reached a place where every light is muted, 28
which bellows like the sea beneath a tempest,
when it is battered by opposing winds.

The hellish hurricane, which never rests, 31
drives on the spirits with its violence:
wheeling and pounding, it harasses them.

The Second Circle, where the Lustful are forever buffeted by violent storm. Minos. The catalogue of carnal sinners. Francesca da Rimini and her brother-in-law, Paolo Malatesta. Francesca's tale of their love and death, at which Dante faints.

Così discesi del cerchio primaio
giù nel secondo, che men loco cinghia
e tanto più dolor, che punge a guaio.
Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia : 4
essamina le colpe ne l'intrata;
giudica e manda secondo ch'avvinghia.
Dico che quando l'anima mal nata 7
li vien dinanzi, tutta si confessa;
e quel conoscitor de le peccata
vede qual loco d'inferno è da essa; 10
cignesì con la coda tante volte
quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa.
Sempre dinanzi a lui ne stanno molte : 13
vanno a vicenda ciascuna al giudizio,
dicono e odono e poi son giù volte.
"O tu che vieni al doloroso ospizio," 16
disse Minòs a me quando mi vide,
lasciando l'atto di cotanto offizio,
"guarda com' entri e di cui tu ti fide; 19
non t'inganni l'ampiezza de l'intrare!"
E 'l duca mio a lui: "Perché pur gride?
Non impedir lo suo fatale andare : 22
vuolsi così colà dove si puote
ciò che si vuole, e più non dimandare."
Or incomincian le dolenti note 25
a farmisi sentire; or son venuto
là dove molto pianto mi percuote.
Io venni in loco d'ogne luce muto, 28
che mugghia come fa mar per tempesta,
se da contrari venti è combattuto.
La bufera infernal, che mai non resta, 31
mena li spirti con la sua rapina;
voltando e percotendo li molesta.

When they come up against the ruined slope, 34
 then there are cries and wailing and lament,
 and there they curse the force of the divine.

I learned that those who undergo this torment 37
 are damned because they sinned within the flesh,
 subjecting reason to the rule of lust.

And as, in the cold season, starlings' wings 40
 bear them along in broad and crowded ranks,
 so does that blast bear on the guilty spirits:

now here, now there, now down, now up, it drives them. 43
 There is no hope that ever comforts them—
 no hope for rest and none for lesser pain.

And just as cranes in flight will chant their lays, 46
 arraying their long file across the air,
 so did the shades I saw approaching, borne

by that assailing wind, lament and moan; 49
 so that I asked him: "Master, who are those
 who suffer punishment in this dark air?"

"The first of those about whose history 52
 you want to know," my master then told me,
 "once ruled as empress over many nations.

Her vice of lust became so customary 55
 that she made license licit in her laws
 to free her from the scandal she had caused.

She is Semíramis, of whom we read 58
 that she was Ninus' wife and his successor:
 she held the land the Sultan now commands.

That other spirit killed herself for love, 61
 and she betrayed the ashes of Sychaeus;
 the wanton Cleopatra follows next.

See Helen, for whose sake so many years 64
 of evil had to pass; see great Achilles,
 who finally met love—in his last battle.

See Paris, Tristan . . ."—and he pointed out 67
 and named to me more than a thousand shades
 departed from our life because of love.

No sooner had I heard my teacher name 70
 the ancient ladies and the knights, than pity
 seized me, and I was like a man astray.

My first words: "Poet, I should willingly 73
 speak with those two who go together there
 and seem so lightly carried by the wind."

34 Quando giungon davanti a la ruina,
 quivi le strida, il compianto, il lamento;
 bestemmian quivi la virtù divina.
 37 Intesi ch'a così fatto tormento
 enno dannati i peccator carnali,
 che la ragion sommettono al talento.
 40 E come li stornei ne portan l'ali
 nel freddo tempo, a schiera larga e piena,
 così quel fiato li spiriti mali
 em. 43 di qua, di là, di giù, di sù li mena;
 nulla speranza li conforta mai,
 non che di posa, ma di minor pena.
 46 E come i gru van cantando lor lai,
 facendo in aere di sé lunga riga,
 così vid' io venir, traendo guai,
 49 ombre portate da la detta briga;
 per ch'i' dissi: "Maestro, chi son quelle
 genti che l'aura nera sì gastiga?"
 52 "La prima di color di cui novelle
 tu vuo' saper," mi disse quelli allotta,
 "fu imperadrice di molte favelle.
 55 A vizio di lussuria fu sì rotta,
 che libito fé licito in sua legge,
 per tòrre il biasmo in che era condotta.
 58 Ell' è Semiramìs, di cui si legge
 che succedette a Nino e fu sua sposa:
 tenne la terra che 'l Soldan corregge.
 61 L'altra è colei che s'ancise amorosa,
 e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo;
 poi è Cleopatràs lussuriosa.
 64 Elena vedi, per cui tanto reo
 tempo si volse, e vedi 'l grande Achille,
 che con amore al fine combatteo.
 67 Vedi Paris, Tristano"; e più di mille
 ombre mostrommi e nominommi a dito,
 ch'amor di nostra vita dipartille.
 70 Poscia ch'io ebbi 'l mio dottore udito
 nomar le donne antiche e ' cavalieri,
 pietà mi giunse, e fui quasi smarrito.
 73 I' cominciai: "Poeta, volontieri
 parlerei a quei due che 'nsieme vanno,
 e paion sì al vento esser leggieri."

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And he to me: "You'll see when they draw closer 76
to us, and then you may appeal to them
by that love which impels them. They will come."
No sooner had the wind bent them toward us 79
than I urged on my voice: "O battered souls,
if One does not forbid it, speak with us."
Even as doves when summoned by desire, 82
borne forward by their will, move through the air
with wings uplifted, still, to their sweet nest,
those spirits left the ranks where Dido suffers, 85
approaching us through the malignant air;
so powerful had been my loving cry.
"O living being, gracious and benign, 88
who through the darkened air have come to visit
our souls that stained the world with blood, if He
who rules the universe were friend to us, 91
then we should pray to Him to give you peace,
for you have pitied our atrocious state.
Whatever pleases you to hear and speak 94
will please us, too, to hear and speak with you,
now while the wind is silent, in this place.
The land where I was born lies on that shore 97
to which the Po together with the waters
that follow it descends to final rest.
Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart, 100
took hold of him because of the fair body
taken from me—how that was done still wounds me.
Love, that releases no beloved from loving, 103
took hold of me so strongly through his beauty
that, as you see, it has not left me yet.
Love led the two of us unto one death. 106
Caïna waits for him who took our life."
These words were borne across from them to us.
When I had listened to those injured souls, 109
I bent my head and held it low until
the poet asked of me: "What are you thinking?"
When I replied, my words began: "Alas, 112
how many gentle thoughts, how deep a longing,
had led them to the agonizing pass!"
Then I addressed my speech again to them, 115
and I began: "Francesca, your afflictions
move me to tears of sorrow and of pity.

76 Ed elli a me: "Vedrai quando saranno
più presso a noi; e tu allor li piega
per quello amor che i mena, ed ei verranno."
79 Sì tosto come il vento a noi li piega,
mossi la voce: "O anime affannate,
venite a noi parlar, s'altri nol niega!"
82 Quali colombe dal disio chiamate
con l'ali alzate e ferme al dolce nido
vegnon per l'aere, dal voler portate;
85 cotali uscir de la schiera ov' è Dido,
a noi venendo per l'aere maligno,
sì forte fu l'affettüoso grido.
88 "O animal grazioso e benigno
che visitando vai per l'aere perso
noi che tignemmo il mondo di sanguigno,
91 se fosse amico il re de l'universo,
noi pregheremmo lui de la tua pace,
poi c'hai pietà del nostro mal perverso.
94 Di quel che udire e che parlar vi piace,
noi udiremo e parleremo a voi,
mentre che 'l vento, come fa, ci tace.
97 Siede la terra dove nata fui
su la marina dove 'l Po discende
per aver pace co' seguaci sui.
100 Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,
prese costui de la bella persona
che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende.
103 Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,
mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,
che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona.
106 Amor condusse noi ad una morte.
Caina attende chi a vita ci spense."
Queste parole da lor ci fuor porte.
109 Quand' io intesi quell' anime offense,
china' il viso, e tanto il tenni basso,
fin che 'l poeta mi disse: "Che pense?"
112 Quando rispuosi, cominciai: "Oh lasso,
quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio
menò costoro al doloroso passo!"
115 Poi mi rivolsi a loro e parla' io,
e cominciai: "Francesca, i tuoi martiri
a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio.

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But tell me, in the time of gentle sighs,
with what and in what way did Love allow you
to recognize your still uncertain longings?" 118

And she to me: "There is no greater sorrow
than thinking back upon a happy time
in misery—and this your teacher knows. 121

Yet if you long so much to understand
the first root of our love, then I shall tell
my tale to you as one who weeps and speaks. 124

One day, to pass the time away, we read
of Lancelot—how love had overcome him. 127
We were alone, and we suspected nothing.

And time and time again that reading led
our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale,
and yet one point alone defeated us. 130

When we had read how the desired smile
was kissed by one who was so true a lover,
this one, who never shall be parted from me,
while all his body trembled, kissed my mouth. 133
A Gallehault indeed, that book and he
who wrote it, too; that day we read no more." 136

And while one spirit said these words to me,
the other wept, so that—because of pity—
I fainted, as if I had met my death. 139

And then I fell as a dead body falls. 142

118 Ma dimmi: al tempo d'i dolci sospiri,
a che e come concedette amore
che conosceste i dubbiosi disiri?"

121 E quella a me: "Nessun maggior dolore
che ricordarsi del tempo felice
ne la miseria; e ciò sa 'l tuo dottore.

124 Ma s'a conoscer la prima radice
del nostro amor tu hai cotanto affetto,
dirò come colui che piange e dice.

127 Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto
di Lancialotto come amor lo strinse;
soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto.

130 Per più fiate li occhi ci sospinse
quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;
ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse.

133 Quando leggemmo il disiato riso
esser baciato da cotanto amante,
questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,
136 la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante.
Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse:
quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante."

139 Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse,
l'altro piangëa; sì che di pietade
io venni men così com' io morisse.

142 E caddi come corpo morto cade.

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