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DANTE ALIGHIERI

*The Divine Comedy*

Translated by  
C. H. SISSON

With an Introduction and Notes by  
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I tell you, when the ill-born spirit comes 7  
 To him, there is nothing that is not confessed;  
 When he takes cognisance of any sin

He sees what place in hell is suited for it; 10  
 And whips his tail around himself as many  
 Times as the circles the sinner must go down.

A crowd of sinners always stands before him: 13  
 Each of them takes his turn to go to judgement;  
 They speak and listen; then they are swirled away.

'O you who come into this place of pain,' 16  
 Said Minos to me, when he saw me there,  
 And for a moment he paused from execution,

'Be careful how you enter and whom you trust: 19  
 Don't let yourself be tricked by the wide entrance.'  
 My guide said to him: 'Why do you call out?'

Do not impede him, for his going is fated: 22  
 It is willed where everything is possible  
 If it is willed: and ask no further questions.'

And now the painful notes began to fall 25  
 Upon my ears; for now I am come indeed  
 To where a great lamentation strikes me.

I have come to a place where every light is silenced, 28  
 Which roars just as the sea roars in a storm,  
 When it is beaten by conflicting winds,

The infernal gale, which blows and never pauses, 31  
 Directs the spirits which it carries before it:  
 Harassing them with turning and buffeting.

When they arrive at the threshold of this ruin, 34  
 There, there are cries, complaints and lamentations;  
 And there, they blaspheme against the divine power.

I understood it is to this torment 37  
 That are condemned those who sin in the flesh,  
 And let their reason give way to their wishes.

CANTO V

And so I went deeper down from the first circle  
 Into the second, smaller in circumference,  
 But greater in its cries, and stinging pain.

4 Minos was there, scowling and terrible,  
 Examining the faults of new arrivals;  
 He judges them, and sends each to his place.

- 40 And, as starlings are carried on their wings  
In the cold weather, in a vast wavering troop,  
So that breath carries the unfortunate spirits:
- 43 It drives them here and there, now down, now up;  
There is no hope ever to comfort them;  
They cannot stop, or ever suffer less pain.
- 46 And as the cranes go, chanting as they fly,  
Stretched out in a long ribbon in the air,  
I saw the approaching shadows, uttering cries
- 49 As they were carried by the trouble I have spoken of;  
And so I said: 'Master, who are those people,  
Who are so punished by the black air?'
- 52 'The first of those about whom you are asking,'  
He told me in reply, 'is that empress  
Who ruled over so many lands and languages.
- 55 She was so at the mercy of sensuality,  
That she made laws allowing what she liked  
So that her own conduct could not be blamed.
- 58 That is Semiramis, of whom we are told  
That she succeeded Ninus and was his wife;  
She held the land which the Soldan now rules.
- 61 The other is she who killed herself for love,  
And broke faith with the ashes of Sichaeus;  
And there you see the lustful Cleopatra.
- 64 See Helen, who brought about such evil times,  
Which lasted for so long; and great Achilles,  
Who in the end was in combat with love.
- 67 See Paris, Tristram,' and then more than a thousand  
Shadows he showed me, named and pointed out  
Those whom love had separated from life.
- 70 When I had heard my instructor in this way  
Naming the ladies and lovers of former times,  
I felt pity, and was as if bewildered.

- I began: 'Poet, I should like, if it were possible,  
To speak to those two who are coming side by side  
And seem to be so light upon the wind.' 73
- He said to me: 'You will see them when they come  
A little closer to us: you have only to ask them,  
Invoking the love that brings them, and they will come.' 76
- As soon as the wind blew them to where we were standing,  
I raised my voice: 'O you two panting spirits,  
Come now and speak to us, if it is not forbidden.' 79
- And just as doves called home to their desire,  
With stretched and steady wings, back to the nest,  
Come through the air because instinct carries them; 82
- So, separating from the flock where Dido was,  
They came towards us through the malignant air,  
So strong was the affection of my cry. 85
- 'O kind and gracious living creature who  
Go through the darkened air to visit us,  
Although, when alive, we dyed the world with blood; 88
- If only the king of the universe were our friend,  
We would pray to him that you should have peace,  
Because you pity our perversity. 91
- Matters it pleases you to hear and speak of,  
We will now hear and speak about to you,  
While the wind is silent, as it is now. 94
- The country I was born in lies along  
The coast, just at the point the Po descends  
To have some peace among its followers. 97
- Love, which quickly fastens on gentle hearts,  
Seized that wretch, and it was for the personal beauty  
Which was taken from me; how it happened still offends me. 100
- Love, which allows no one who is loved to escape,  
Seized me so strongly with my pleasure in him,  
That, as you see, it does not leave me now. 103

- 106 Love led us two to find a single death;  
 Caïna awaits him who brought us to this end.  
 These were the words which came to us from them.
- 109 When I had heard those souls in their suffering,  
 I bowed my head, and kept it bowed so long  
 That at last the poet said: 'What are you thinking?'
- 112 When I replied, I started: 'Oh, alas,  
 That such sweet thoughts, desires that were so great,  
 Should lead them to the misery they are in.'
- 115 I turned to them again and spoke again,  
 Starting this time: 'Francesca, your great sufferings  
 Make me weep for you out of sadness and pity.
- 118 But tell me: in the time of those sweet sighs,  
 How and on what occasion did love allow  
 You to experience these uncertain desires?'
- 121 And she replied: 'There is no greater sorrow,  
 Than to think backwards to a happy time,  
 When one is miserable: your instructor knows this.
- 124 But if you have such a desire to know  
 The first root of our love, then I will tell you,  
 Although to do so, it will be as if I wept.
- 127 One day, when we were reading, for distraction,  
 How Lancelot was overcome by love—  
 We were alone, without any suspicion;
- 130 Several times, what we were reading forced  
 Our eyes to meet, and then we changed colour:  
 But one page only was more than we could bear.
- 133 When we read how that smile, so much desired,  
 Was kissed by such a lover, in the book,  
 He, who will never be divided from me,
- 136 Kissed my mouth, he was trembling as he did so;  
 The book, the writer played the part of Galahalt:  
 That day we got no further with our reading.'

- While one of the spirits was speaking in this manner,  
 The other shed such tears that, out of pity,  
 I felt myself diminish, as if I were dying,  
 139
- And fell down, as a dead body falls. 142