

Upon the utmost verge of a high bank,  
By craggy rocks environ'd round, we came,  
Where woes beneath more cruel yet were stow'd:  
And here to shun the horrible excess  
Of fetid exhalation, upward cast  
From the profound abyss, behind the lid  
Of a great monument we stood retir'd,

Whereon this scroll I mark'd: "I have in charge  
Pope Anastasius, whom Photinus drew  
From the right path.—Ere our descent behooves  
We make delay, that somewhat first the sense,  
To the dire breath accusom'd, afterward  
Regard it not." My master thus; to whom  
Answering I spake: "Some compensation find  
That the time past not wholly lost." He then:  
"Lo! how my thoughts e'en to thy wishes tend!  
My son! within these rocks," he thus began,  
"Are three close circles in gradation plac'd,  
As these which now thou leav'st. Each one is full  
Of spirits accurs'd; but that the sight alone  
Hereafter may suffice thee, listen how  
And for what cause in durance they abide.

"Of all malicious act abhorr'd in heaven,  
The end is injury; and all such end  
Either by force or fraud works other's woe

But fraud, because of man peculiar evil,  
To God is more displeasing; and beneath  
The fraudulent are therefore doom'd to' endure  
Severer pang. The violent occupy  
All the first circle; and because to force  
Three persons are obnoxious, in three rounds  
Each within other sep'rate is it fram'd.  
To God, his neighbour, and himself, by man  
Force may be offer'd; to himself I say  
And his possessions, as thou soon shalt hear  
At full. Death, violent death, and painful wounds  
Upon his neighbour he inflicts; and wastes  
By devastation, pillage, and the flames,  
His substance. Slayers, and each one that smites  
In malice, plund'rers, and all robbers, hence  
The torment undergo of the first round  
In different herds. Man can do violence  
To himself and his own blessings: and for this  
He in the second round must aye deplore  
With unavailing penitence his crime,  
Whoe'er deprives himself of life and light,  
In reckless lavishment his talent wastes,  
And sorrows there where he should dwell in joy.  
To God may force be offer'd, in the heart  
Denying and blaspheming his high power,  
And nature with her kindly law contemning.  
And thence the inmost round marks with its seal

Sodom and Cahors, and all such as speak  
Contemptuously of the Godhead in their hearts.

“Fraud, that in every conscience leaves a sting,  
May be by man employ’d on one, whose trust  
He wins, or on another who withholds  
Strict confidence. Seems as the latter way  
Broke but the bond of love which Nature makes.  
Whence in the second circle have their nest  
Dissimulation, witchcraft, flatteries,  
Theft, falsehood, simony, all who seduce  
To lust, or set their honesty at pawn,  
With such vile scum as these. The other way  
Forgets both Nature’s general love, and that  
Which thereto added afterwards gives birth  
To special faith. Whence in the lesser circle,  
Point of the universe, dread seat of Dis,  
The traitor is eternally consum’d.”

I thus: “Instructor, clearly thy discourse  
Proceeds, distinguishing the hideous chasm  
And its inhabitants with skill exact.  
But tell me this: they of the dull, fat pool,  
Whom the rain beats, or whom the tempest drives,  
Or who with tongues so fierce conflicting meet,  
Wherefore within the city fire-illum’d  
Are not these punish’d, if God’s wrath be on them?

And if it be not, wherefore in such guise  
Are they condemned?" He answer thus return'd:  
"Wherefore in dotage wanders thus thy mind,  
Not so accustom'd? or what other thoughts  
Possess it? Dwell not in thy memory  
The words, wherein thy ethic page describes  
Three dispositions adverse to Heav'n's will,  
Incont'nence, malice, and mad brutishness,  
And how incontinence the least offends  
God, and least guilt incurs? If well thou note  
This judgment, and remember who they are,  
Without these walls to vain repentance doom'd,  
Thou shalt discern why they apart are plac'd  
From these fell spirits, and less wreakful pours  
Justice divine on them its vengeance down."

"O Sun! who healest all imperfect sight,  
Thou so content'st me, when thou solv'st my doubt,  
That ignorance not less than knowledge charms.  
Yet somewhat turn thee back," I in these words  
Continu'd, "where thou saidst, that usury  
Offends celestial Goodness; and this knot  
Perplex'd unravel." He thus made reply:  
"Philosophy, to an attentive ear,  
Clearly points out, not in one part alone,  
How imitative nature takes her course  
From the celestial mind and from its art:

And where her laws the Stagyrice unfolds,  
Not many leaves scann'd o'er, observing well  
Thou shalt discover, that your art on her  
Obsequious follows, as the learner treads  
In his instructor's step, so that your art  
Deserves the name of second in descent  
From God. These two, if thou recall to mind  
Creation's holy book, from the beginning  
Were the right source of life and excellence  
To human kind. But in another path  
The usurer walks; and Nature in herself  
And in her follower thus he sets at nought,  
Placing elsewhere his hope. But follow now  
My steps on forward journey bent; for now  
The Pisces play with undulating glance  
Along the horizon, and the Wain lies all  
O'er the north-west; and onward there a space  
Is our steep passage down the rocky height."