

From the first circle I descended thus  
Down to the second, which, a lesser space  
Embracing, so much more of grief contains  
Provoking bitter moans. There, Minos stands  
Grinning with ghastly feature: he, of all  
Who enter, strict examining the crimes,

Gives sentence, and dismisses them beneath,  
According as he foldeth him around:  
For when before him comes th' ill fated soul,  
It all confesses; and that judge severe  
Of sins, considering what place in hell  
Suits the transgression, with his tail so oft  
Himself encircles, as degrees beneath  
He dooms it to descend. Before him stand  
Always a num'rous throng; and in his turn  
Each one to judgment passing, speaks, and hears  
His fate, thence downward to his dwelling hurl'd.

"O thou! who to this residence of woe  
Approachest?" when he saw me coming, cried  
Minos, relinquishing his dread employ,  
"Look how thou enter here; beware in whom  
Thou place thy trust; let not the entrance broad  
Deceive thee to thy harm." To him my guide:  
"Wherefore exclaimest? Hinder not his way  
By destiny appointed; so 'tis will'd

Where will and power are one. Ask thou no more.”

Now 'gin the rueful wailings to be heard.

Now am I come where many a plaining voice

Smites on mine ear. Into a place I came

Where light was silent all. Bellowing there groan'd

A noise as of a sea in tempest torn

By warring winds. The stormy blast of hell

With restless fury drives the spirits on

Whirl'd round and dash'd amain with sore annoy.

When they arrive before the ruinous sweep,

There shrieks are heard, there lamentations, moans,

And blasphemies 'gainst the good Power in heaven.

I understood that to this torment sad

The carnal sinners are condemn'd, in whom

Reason by lust is sway'd. As in large troops

And multitudinous, when winter reigns,

The starlings on their wings are borne abroad;

So bears the tyrannous gust those evil souls.

On this side and on that, above, below,

It drives them: hope of rest to solace them

Is none, nor e'en of milder pang. As cranes,

Chanting their dol'rous notes, traverse the sky,

Stretch'd out in long array: so I beheld

Spirits, who came loud wailing, hurried on

By their dire doom. Then I: "Instructor! who  
Are these, by the black air so scourg'd?"—"The first  
'Mong those, of whom thou question'st," he replied,  
"O'er many tongues was empress. She in vice  
Of luxury was so shameless, that she made  
Liking be lawful by promulg'd decree,  
To clear the blame she had herself incurr'd.  
This is Semiramis, of whom 'tis writ,  
That she succeeded Ninus her espous'd;  
And held the land, which now the Soldan rules.  
The next in amorous fury slew herself,  
And to Sicheus' ashes broke her faith:  
Then follows Cleopatra, lustful queen."

There mark'd I Helen, for whose sake so long  
The time was fraught with evil; there the great  
Achilles, who with love fought to the end.  
Paris I saw, and Tristan; and beside  
A thousand more he show'd me, and by name  
Pointed them out, whom love bereav'd of life.

When I had heard my sage instructor name  
Those dames and knights of antique days, o'erpower'd  
By pity, well-nigh in amaze my mind  
Was lost; and I began: "Bard! willingly  
I would address those two together coming,  
Which seem so light before the wind." He thus:

“Note thou, when nearer they to us approach.

“Then by that love which carries them along,  
Entreat; and they will come.” Soon as the wind  
Sway’d them toward us, I thus fram’d my speech:  
“O wearied spirits! come, and hold discourse  
With us, if by none else restrain’d.” As doves  
By fond desire invited, on wide wings  
And firm, to their sweet nest returning home,  
Cleave the air, wafted by their will along;  
Thus issu’d from that troop, where Dido ranks,  
They through the ill air speeding; with such force  
My cry prevail’d by strong affection urg’d.

“O gracious creature and benign! who go’st  
Visiting, through this element obscure,  
Us, who the world with bloody stain imbru’d;  
If for a friend the King of all we own’d,  
Our pray’r to him should for thy peace arise,  
Since thou hast pity on our evil plight.  
Of whatsoe’er to hear or to discourse  
It pleases thee, that will we hear, of that  
Freely with thee discourse, while e’er the wind,  
As now, is mute. The land, that gave me birth,  
Is situate on the coast, where Po descends  
To rest in ocean with his sequent streams.

“Love, that in gentle heart is quickly learnt,  
Entangled him by that fair form, from me  
Ta’en in such cruel sort, as grieves me still:  
Love, that denial takes from none belov’d,  
Caught me with pleasing him so passing well,  
That, as thou see’st, he yet deserts me not.

“Love brought us to one death: Caina waits  
The soul, who spilt our life.” Such were their words;  
At hearing which downward I bent my looks,  
And held them there so long, that the bard cried:  
“What art thou pond’ring?” I in answer thus:  
“Alas! by what sweet thoughts, what fond desire  
Must they at length to that ill pass have reach’d!”

Then turning, I to them my speech address’d.  
And thus began: “Francesca! your sad fate  
Even to tears my grief and pity moves.  
But tell me; in the time of your sweet sighs,  
By what, and how love granted, that ye knew  
Your yet uncertain wishes?” She replied:  
“No greater grief than to remember days  
Of joy, when mis’ry is at hand! That kens  
Thy learn’d instructor. Yet so eagerly  
If thou art bent to know the primal root,  
From whence our love gat being, I will do,  
As one, who weeps and tells his tale. One day

For our delight we read of Lancelot,  
How him love thrall'd. Alone we were, and no  
Suspicion near us. Ofttimes by that reading  
Our eyes were drawn together, and the hue  
Fled from our alter'd cheek. But at one point  
Alone we fell. When of that smile we read,  
The wished smile, rapturously kiss'd  
By one so deep in love, then he, who ne'er  
From me shall separate, at once my lips  
All trembling kiss'd. The book and writer both  
Were love's purveyors. In its leaves that day  
We read no more." While thus one spirit spake,  
The other wail'd so sorely, that heartstruck  
I through compassion fainting, seem'd not far  
From death, and like a corpse fell to the ground.