

Canto 3

THROUGH me the way is to the city dolent;⁴⁰
 Through me the way is to eternal dole;
 Through me the way among the people lost.

Justice incited my sublime Creator;
 Created me divine Omnipotence,
 The highest Wisdom and the primal Love.

Before me there were no created things,
 Only eterne, and I eternal last.
 "All hope abandon, ye who enter in!"

These words in sombre colour I beheld
 Written upon the summit of a gate;
 Whence I: "Their sense is, Master, hard to me!"

And he to me, as one experienced:
 "Here all suspicion needs must be abandoned,
 All cowardice must needs be here extinct.

We to the place have come, where I have told thee
 Thou shalt behold the people dolorous
 Who have foregone the good of intellect."⁴¹

And after he had laid his hand on mine
 With joyful mien, whence I was comforted,
 He led me in among the secret things.

⁴⁰This canto begins with a repetition of sounds like the tolling of a funeral bell: *do-lente...dolare!*

⁴¹Aristotle says: "The good of the intellect is the highest beatitude"; and Dante in the *Convito*: "The True is the good of the intellect." In other words, the knowledge of God is intellectual good. "It is a most just punishment," says St. Augustine, "that man should lose that freedom which man could not use, yet had power to keep, if he would, and that he who had knowledge to do what was right, and did not do it, should be deprived of the knowledge of what was right; and that he who would not do righteously, when he had the power, should lose the power to do it when he had the will."



Figure 7: "All hope abandon, ye who enter in!"

There sighs, complaints, and ululations loud
Resounded through the air without a star,
Whence I, at the beginning, wept thereat.

Languages diverse, horrible dialects,
Accents of anger, words of agony,
And voices high and hoarse, with sound of hands,
Made up a tumult that goes whirling on
For ever in that air for ever black,
Even as the sand doth, when the whirlwind breathes.

And I, who had my head with horror bound,
Said: "Master, what is this which now I hear?
What folk is this, which seems by pain so vanquished?"

And he to me: "This miserable mode
Maintain the melancholy souls of those
Who lived withouten infamy or praise.
Commingled are they with that caitiff choir

Of Angels, who have not rebellious been,
Nor faithful were to God, but were for self.
The heavens expelled them, not to be less fair;
Nor them the nethermore abyss receives,
For glory none the damned would have from them."
And I: "O Master, what so grievous is
To these, that maketh them lament so sore?"
He answered: "I will tell thee very briefly.
These have no longer any hope of death;
And this blind life of theirs is so debased,
They envious are of every other fate.
No fame of them the world permits to be;
Misericord and Justice both disdain them.
Let us not speak of them, but look, and pass."
And I, who looked again, beheld a banner,⁴²
Which, whirling round, ran on so rapidly,
That of all pause it seemed to me indignant;
And after it there came so long a train
Of people, that I ne'er would have believed
That ever Death so many had undone.
When some among them I had recognised.
I looked, and I beheld the shade of him
Who made through cowardice the great refusal.⁴³
Forthwith I comprehended, and was certain,
That this the sect was of the caitiff wretches
Hateful to God and to his enemies.
These miscreants, who never were alive,
Were naked, and were stung exceedingly
By gadflies and by hornets that were there.
These did their faces irrigate with blood,
Which, with their tears commingled, at their feet
By the disgusting worms was gathered up.
And when to gazing farther I betook me.
People I saw on a great river's bank;
Whence said I: "Master, now vouchsafe to me,

⁴²This restless flag is an emblem of the shifting and unstable minds of its followers.

⁴³Generally supposed to be Pope Celestine V.

That I may know who these are, and what law
Makes them appear so ready to pass over,
As I discern athwart the dusky light.”⁴⁴

And he to me: “These things shall all be known
To thee, as soon as we our footsteps stay
Upon the dismal shore of Acheron.”

Then with mine eyes ashamed and downward cast,
Fearing my words might irksome be to him,
From speech refrained I till we reached the river.

And lo! towards us coming in a boat⁴⁵
An old man, hoary with the hair of eld,
Crying: “Woe unto you, ye souls depraved
Hope nevermore to look upon the heavens;
I come to lead you to the other shore,
To the eternal shades in heat and frost.

And thou, that yonder standest, living soul,
Withdraw thee from these people, who are dead!”⁴⁶
But when he saw that I did not withdraw,

He said: “By other ways, by other ports
Thou to the shore shalt come, not here, for passage;

⁴⁴Spencer’s “misty dampe of misconceyving night.”

⁴⁵Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI., Davidson’s translation: – “A grim ferryman guards these floods and rivers, Charon, of frightful slovenliness; on whose chin a load of gray hair neglected lies; his eyes are flame: his vestments hang from his shoulders by a knot, with filth overgrown. Himself thrusts on the barge with a pole, and tends the sails, and wafts over the bodies in his iron-colored boat, now in years: but the god is of fresh and green old age. Hither the whole tribe in swarms come pouring to the banks, matrons and men, the souls of magnanimous heroes who had gone through life, boys and unmarried maids, and young men who had been stretched on the funeral pile before the eyes of their parents; as numerous as withered leaves fall in the woods with the first cold of autumn, or as numerous as birds flock to the land from deep ocean, when the chilling year drives them beyond sea, and sends them to sunny climes. They stood praying to cross the flood the first, and were stretching forth their hands with fond desire to gain the further bank: but the sullen boatman admits sometimes these, sometimes those; while others to a great distance removed, he debar from the banks.”

And Shakespeare, *Richard III.*, I. 4:

“I passed, methought, the melancholy flood
With that grim ferryman which poets write of,
Unto the kingdom of perpetual night.”

⁴⁶Virgil *Aeneid*, VI.:

“This is the region of Ghosts, of sleep and drowsy
Night; to waft over the bodies of the living in my Stygian boat is not permitted.”

A lighter vessel needs must carry thee." ⁴⁷

And unto him the Guide: "Vex thee not, Charon;
It is so willed there where is power to do
That which is willed; and farther question not."

Thereat were quieted the fleecy cheeks
Of him the ferryman of the livid fen,
Who round about his eyes had wheels of flame.

But all those souls who weary were and naked
Their colour changed and gnashed their teeth together,
As soon as they had heard those cruel words.

God they blasphemed and their progenitors,
The human race, the place, the time, the seed
Of their engendering and of their birth!

Thereafter all together they drew back,
Bitterly weeping, to the accursed shore,
Which waiteth every man who fears not God.

Charon the demon, with the eyes of glede, ⁴⁸
Beckoning to them, collects them all together,
Beats with his oar whoever lags behind.

As in the autumn-time the leaves fall off,
First one and then another, till the branch
Unto the earth surrenders all its spoils;

In similar wise the evil seed of Adam
Throw themselves from that margin one by one,
At signals, as a bird unto its lure. ⁴⁹

So they depart across the dusky wave,
And ere upon the other side they land,
Again on this side a new troop assembles.

"My son," the courteous Master said to me,

⁴⁷The souls that were to be saved assembled at the mouth of the Tiber, where they were received by the celestial pilot, or ferryman, who transported them to the shores of Purgatory, as described in *Purg.* II.

⁴⁸Dryden's *Æneid*, B. VI.: – "His eyes like hollow furnaces on fire."

⁴⁹Mr. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, III. 160, says: – "When Dante describes the spirits falling from the bank of Acheron 'as dead leaves flutter from a bough,' he gives the most perfect image possible of their utter lightness, feebleness, passiveness, and scattering agony of despair, without, however, for an instant losing his own clear perception that *these* are souls, and *those* are leaves: he makes no confusion of one with the other."

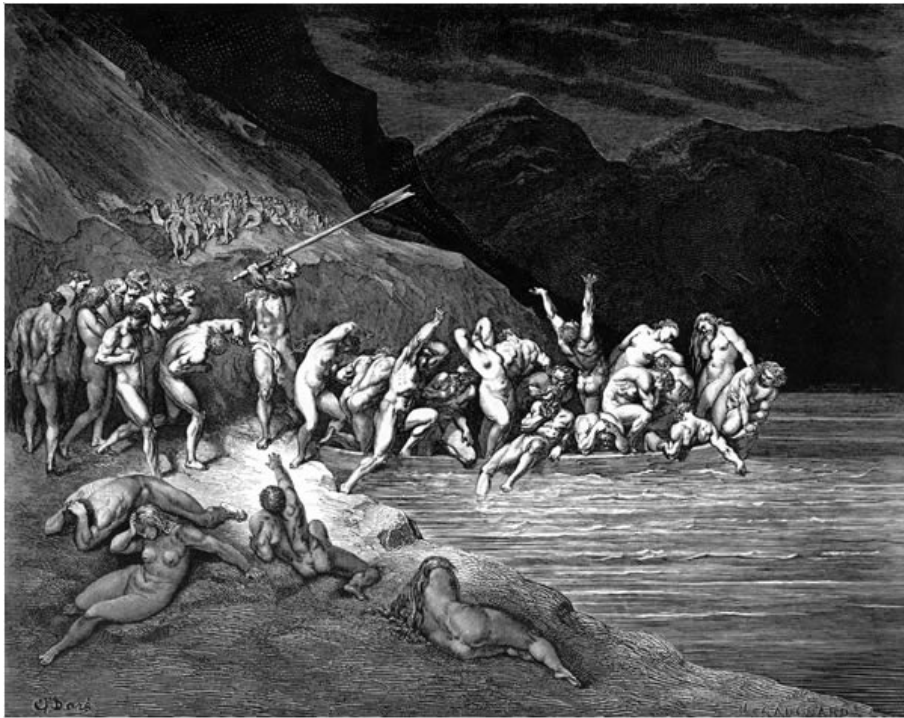


Figure 8: Charon the demon ... beats with his oar whoever lags behind.

“All those who perish in the wrath of God
Here meet together out of every land;
And ready are they to pass o’er the river,
Because celestial Justice spurs them on,
So that their fear is turned into desire.
This way there never passes a good soul;
And hence if Charon doth complain of thee,
Well mayst thou know now what his speech imports.”
This being finished, all the dusk champaign
Trembled so violently, that of that terror
The recollection bathes me still with sweat.
The land of tears gave forth a blast of wind,
And fulminated a vermilion light,
Which overmastered in me every sense,
And as a man whom sleep hath seized I fell.



Figure 9: And lo! towards us coming in a boat, an old man, hoary with the hair of eld.