

Inferno: Canto V

Thus I descended out of the first circle
Down to the second, that less space begirds,
And so much greater dole, that goads to wailing.

There standeth Minos horribly, and snarls;
Examines the transgressions at the entrance;
Judges, and sends according as he girds him.

I say, that when the spirit evil-born
Cometh before him, wholly it confesses;
And this discriminator of transgressions

Seeth what place in Hell is meet for it;
Girds himself with his tail as many times
As grades he wishes it should be thrust down.

Always before him many of them stand;
They go by turns each one unto the judgment;
They speak, and hear, and then are downward hurled.

"O thou, that to this dolorous hostelry
Comest," said Minos to me, when he saw me,
Leaving the practice of so great an office,

"Look how thou enterest, and in whom thou trustest;
Let not the portal's amplitude deceive thee."
And unto him my Guide: "Why criest thou too?"

Do not impede his journey fate-ordained;
It is so willed there where is power to do
That which is willed; and ask no further question."

And now begin the dolesome notes to grow
Audible unto me; now am I come
There where much lamentation strikes upon me.

I came into a place mute of all light,
Which bellows as the sea does in a tempest,
If by opposing winds 't is combated.

The infernal hurricane that never rests
Hurtles the spirits onward in its rapine;
Whirling them round, and smiting, it molests them.

When they arrive before the precipice,
There are the shrieks, the plaints, and the laments,
There they blaspheme the puissance divine.

I understood that unto such a torment
The carnal malefactors were condemned,
Who reason subjugate to appetite.

And as the wings of starlings bear them on
In the cold season in large band and full,
So doth that blast the spirits maledict;

It hither, thither, downward, upward, drives them;

No hope doth comfort them for evermore,
Not of repose, but even of lesser pain.

And as the cranes go chanting forth their lays,
Making in air a long line of themselves,
So saw I coming, uttering lamentations,

Shadows borne onward by the aforesaid stress.
Whereupon said I: "Master, who are those
People, whom the black air so castigates?"

"The first of those, of whom intelligence
Thou fain wouldst have," then said he unto me,
"The empress was of many languages.

To sensual vices she was so abandoned,
That lustful she made licit in her law,
To remove the blame to which she had been led.

She is Semiramis, of whom we read
That she succeeded Ninus, and was his spouse;
She held the land which now the Sultan rules.

The next is she who killed herself for love,
And broke faith with the ashes of Sichaeus;
Then Cleopatra the voluptuous."

Helen I saw, for whom so many ruthless
Seasons revolved; and saw the great Achilles,
Who at the last hour combated with Love.

Paris I saw, Tristan; and more than a thousand
Shades did he name and point out with his finger,
Whom Love had separated from our life.

After that I had listened to my Teacher,
Naming the dames of eld and cavaliers,
Pity prevailed, and I was nigh bewildered.

And I began: "O Poet, willingly
Speak would I to those two, who go together,
And seem upon the wind to be so light."

And, he to me: "Thou'lt mark, when they shall be
Nearer to us; and then do thou implore them
By love which leadeth them, and they will come."

Soon as the wind in our direction sways them,
My voice uplift I: "O ye weary souls!
Come speak to us, if no one interdicts it."

As turtle-doves, called onward by desire,
With open and steady wings to the sweet nest
Fly through the air by their volition borne,

So came they from the band where Dido is,
Approaching us athwart the air malign,
So strong was the affectionate appeal.

"O living creature gracious and benignant,

Who visiting goest through the purple air
Us, who have stained the world incarnadine,

If were the King of the Universe our friend,
We would pray unto him to give thee peace,
Since thou hast pity on our woe perverse.

Of what it pleases thee to hear and speak,
That will we hear, and we will speak to you,
While silent is the wind, as it is now.

Sitteth the city, wherein I was born,
Upon the sea-shore where the Po descends
To rest in peace with all his retinue.

Love, that on gentle heart doth swiftly seize,
Seized this man for the person beautiful
That was ta'en from me, and still the mode offends me.

Love, that exempts no one beloved from loving,
Seized me with pleasure of this man so strongly,
That, as thou seest, it doth not yet desert me;

Love has conducted us unto one death;
Caina waiteth him who quenched our life!"
These words were borne along from them to us.

As soon as I had heard those souls tormented,
I bowed my face, and so long held it down
Until the Poet said to me: "What thinkest?"

When I made answer, I began: "Alas!
How many pleasant thoughts, how much desire,
Conducted these unto the dolorous pass!"

Then unto them I turned me, and I spake,
And I began: "Thine agonies, Francesca,
Sad and compassionate to weeping make me.

But tell me, at the time of those sweet sighs,
By what and in what manner Love conceded,
That you should know your dubious desires?"

And she to me: "There is no greater sorrow
Than to be mindful of the happy time
In misery, and that thy Teacher knows.

But, if to recognise the earliest root
Of love in us thou hast so great desire,
I will do even as he who weeps and speaks.

One day we reading were for our delight
Of Launcelot, how Love did him enthrall.
Alone we were and without any fear.

Full many a time our eyes together drew
That reading, and drove the colour from our faces;
But one point only was it that o'ercame us.

When as we read of the much-longed-for smile

Being by such a noble lover kissed,
This one, who ne'er from me shall be divided,

Kissed me upon the mouth all palpitating.
Galeotto was the book and he who wrote it.
That day no farther did we read therein."

And all the while one spirit uttered this,
The other one did weep so, that, for pity,
I swooned away as if I had been dying,

And fell, even as a dead body falls.