

Inferno by Dante Alighieri as translated by John Ciardi

This blog serves as a guide for those who wish to read the English translation of Dante Alighieri's Inferno. This is the translation of John Ciardi. We hope we can help you in this little way.

Canto III

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Canto III The vestibule of hell: The opportunists

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.
I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW.
SACRED JUSTICE MOVED MY ARCHITECT.
I WAS RAISED HERE BY DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE,
PRIMORDIAL LOVE AND ULTIMATE INTELLECT.
ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS TIME CANNOT WEAR
WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I STAND.
ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.

These mysteries I read cut into stone
Above a gate. And turning I sad: “Master,
What is the meaning of this harsh inscription?”
And he then as initiate to novice:
“Here must you put by all division of spirit
And gather your soul against all cowardice.”

This is the place I told you to expect.
Here you shall pass among the fallen people.
Souls who have lost the good of intellect.”
So saying, he put forth his hand to me,
And with a gentle and encouraging smile
He led me through the gate of mystery.

Here sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled
On the starless air, spilling my soul to tears.
A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents toiled
In pain and anger, voices hoarse and shrill
And sounds of blows, all intermingled, raised
Tumult and pandemonium that still

Whirls on the air forever dirty with it

As if a whirlwind sucked at sand. And I,
Holding my head in horror, cried: "Sweet Spirit,
What souls are these who run through this black haze?"
And he to me: "These are the nearly soulless
Whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise.

They are mixed here with that despicable corps
Of angels who were neither for God nor Satan,
But only for themselves. The High Creator
Scourged them from Heaven for its perfect beauty,
And Hell will not receive them since the wicked
Might feel some glory over them." And I:

"Master, what gnaws at them so hideously
Their lamentation stuns the very air?"
"They have no hope of death," he answered me,
"and in their blind and unattaining state
Their miserable lives have sunk so low
That they must envy every other fate."

No word of them survives their living season.
Mercy and Justice deny them even a name.
Let us not speak of them: look, and pass on."
I saw a banner there upon the mist.
Circling and circling, it seemed to scorn all pause.
So it ran on, and still behind it pressed

A never-ending rout of souls in pain.
I had not thought death had undone so many
As passed before me in that mournful train.
And some I knew among them; last of all
I recognized the shadow of that soul
Who, in his cowardice, made the Great Denial.

Fig. Pope Celestine V

At once I understood for certain: these
Were of that retrograde and faithless crew
Hateful to God and to His enemies.
These wretches never born and never dear
Ran naked in a swarm of wasps and hornets
That goaded them the more the more they fled,
And made their faces stream with bloody gouts

Of pus and tears that dribbled to their feet
To be swallowed there by loathsome worms and maggots.
Then looking onward I made out a throng
Assembled on the beach of a wide river,
Whereupon I turned to him: “Master, I long

To know what souls these are, and what strange usage
Makes them as eager to cross as they seem to be
In this infected light.” At which the Sage:
“All this shall be made known to you when we stand
On the joyless beach of Acheron.” And I
Cast down my eyes, sensing a reprimand

In what he said, and so walked at his side
In silence and ashamed until we came
Through the dead cavern to that sunless tide.
There, steering us in an ancient ferry
Came an old man with a white bush of hair,
Bellowing: “Woe to you depraved souls! Bury
Here and forever all hope of Paradise:
I come to lead you to the other shore,
Into eternal dark, into fire and ice.
And you who are living yet, I say begone
From these who are dead.” But when he saw me stand
Against his violence he began again:

“By other windings and other steerage
Shall you cross to that other shore. Not here! Not here!
A lighter craft than mine must give passage.”
And my Guide to him: “Charon, bite back your spleen:
This has been willed where what is willed must be,
And is not yours to ask what it may mean.”

The steersman of that marsh of ruined souls,
Who wore a wheel of flame around each eye,
Stifled the rage that shook his woolly jowls.
But those unmanned and naked spirits there
Turned pale with fear and their teeth began to chatter
At sound of his crude bellow. In despair

They blasphemed God, their parents, their time on earth,
The race of Adam, and the day and the hour
And the place and the seed and the womb that gave them birth.

But all together they drew to that grim shore
Where all must come who lose the fear of God.
Weeping and cursing they come for evermore,

And demon Charon with eyes like burning coals
Herds them on, and with the whistling oar
Flails on the stragglers to his wake of souls.
As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down
Until the branch stands bare above its tatters
Spread on the rustling ground, so one by one

The evil seed of Adam in its Fall
Cast themselves, at his signal, from the shore
And streamed away like birds who hear their call.
So they are gone over that shadowy water,
And always before they reach the other shore
A new noise stirs on this, and new throngs gather.

“My son,” the courteous Master said to me,
“all who die in the shadow of God’s wrath
Converge to this from every clime and country.
And all pass over eagerly, for here
Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so
Their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear.

No soul in Grace comes ever to this crossing;
Therefore if Charon rages at your presence
You will understand the reason for his cursing.”
When he had spoken, all the twilight country
Shook so violently, the terror of it
Bathes me with sweat even in memory:

The tear-soaked ground gave out a sigh of wind
That spewed itself in flame on a red sky,
And all my shattered senses left me. Blind,
Like one whom sleep comes over in a swoon,
I stumbled into darkness and went down.

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Summary:

Dante and Virgil arrived at the gateway of Hell, whose famous inscription ends with the words: “Abandon hope, ye who enter here.” The damned shall suffer eternally and Hell will endure forever, in Dante’s vision. Past the

gate, Dante heard voices of suffering and despair that made him weep. Virgil told him that he was hearing the laments of the morally neutral people, the “sorry souls of those who lived without disgrace and without praise,” as well as the angels who sided neither with God nor with Satan in Satan’s rebellion. These cowardly people were tormented by wasps, flies and worms. They are shut out of both Hell and Heaven, disdained by the forces of good and evil alike.

Dante and Virgil approached the shore of the river Acheron, which forms the boundary of true Hell. Charon, a demon in the shape of an old man, warned the waiting souls of the torments in store for them, and told Dante that he, a living man, could not cross the river. However Virgil told him that God had willed it, and Charon could not countermand that order. The exhausted, bitter and despairing damned souls were forced by Charon across the Acheron on his boat. Even as the first group of the damned crossed the river, more crowds assembled on the bank, waiting, unable to resist their fate. The earth trembled and Dante, terrified, fell unconscious.

Analysis:

The inscription on the gate is the only text Dante reads in Hell. In it, different attributes are assigned to different members of the Trinity: God-the-father is “divine authority,” Christ is “highest wisdom,” and the Holy Ghost is “primal love.” Dante will very rarely refer to God directly: just as Mary is known as “a gentle lady,” God is known as these different forces. The eternal things made before Hell are the heavens, the angels, and primal matter, which were made on the first day.

Dante’s rejection of the lukewarm, neutral souls might seem overly harsh: although they did nothing evil, their torments are great. This, and Dante’s lack of compassion for them, are evidence that he was no believer in moderation or compromise. Just as he firmly and unrelentingly espoused his political position, he expects others to do the same. The genuinely sinful souls may be more blame-worthy, but as we shall see, Dante also finds them to be more worthy of compassion.

One of the neutral souls is singled out: he who made “the great refusal.” He is thought to be Pope Celestine V, who was elected Pope in July 1294, and abdicated five months later, which allowed Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303), a bitter enemy of Dante, to come to power. There are unflattering references to Boniface VIII in Cantos XIX, lines 52-57, and XXVII, line 70.

Charon and the Acheron are both borrowed from Classical mythology: Dante uses Pagan characters and geography in his Christian underworld. In the Italian Renaissance, there was great renewed interest in Classical mythology and literature, which was sometimes at odds with Christian beliefs, since theoretically even the greatest Greeks and Romans were all worthy of damnation. Dante is careful to make sure that his veneration for Antiquity is kept within the bounds prescribed by Christianity, as we shall see in the description of Limbo in the next Canto.



Fig.1. Virgil and Dante as they enter the gate of hell where the “Abandon all your hope” is found.



Fig.2. The Opportunists' Punishment



Fig.3. Pope Celestine



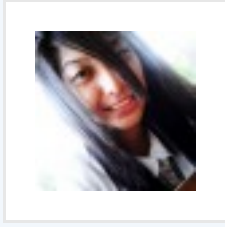
Fig.4. The demon Charon beats the sinners

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