

Inferno: Canto 3

Hell Gate - Good Friday, 7 p.m.

THROUGH ME THE ROAD TO THE CITY OF DESOLATION,
THROUGH ME THE ROAD TO SORROWS DIUTURNAL,
THROUGH ME THE ROAD AMONG THE LOST CREATION.

JUSTICE MOVED MY GREAT MAKER; GOD ETERNAL 4
WROUGHT ME: THE POWER, AND THE UNSEARCHABLY
HIGH WISDOM, AND THE PRIMAL LOVE SUPERNAL.

NOTHING ERE I WAS MADE WAS MADE TO BE 7
SAVE THINGS ETERNE, AND I ETERNE ABIDE;
LAY DOWN ALL HOPE, YOU THAT GO IN BY ME.

These words, of somber color, I descried 10
Writ on the lintel of a gateway; "Sir,
This sentence is right hard for me," I cried.

And like a man of quick discernment: "Here 13
Lay down all thy distrust," said he, "reject
Dead from within thee every coward fear;

We've reached the place I told thee to expect, 16
Where thou shouldst see the miserable race,
Those who have lost the good of intellect."

He laid his hand on mine, and with a face 19
So joyous that it comforted my quailing,
Into the hidden things he led my ways.

Here sighing, and here crying, and loud railing 22
Smote on the starless air, with lamentation,
So that at first I wept to hear such wailing.

Tongues mixed and mingled, horrible execration, 25
Shrill shrieks, hoarse groans, fierce yells and hideous blether
And clapping of hands thereto, without cessation

Made tumult through the timeless night, that hither 28
And thither drives in dizzying circles sped,
As whirlwind whips the spinning sands together.

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Whereat, with horror flapping round my head: 31
"Master, what 's this I hear? Who can they be,
These people so distraught with grief ?" I said.

And he replied: "The dismal company 34
Of wretched spirits thus find their guerdon due
Whose lives knew neither praise nor infamy;

They're mingled with that caitiff angel-crew 37
Who against God rebelled not, nor to Him
Were faithful, but to self alone were true;

Heaven cast them forth - their presence there would dim 40
The light; deep Hell rejects so base a herd,
Lest sin should boast itself because of them.

Then I: "But, Master, by what torment spurred 43
Are they driven on to vent such bitter breath?"
He answered: "I will tell thee in a word:

This dreary huddle has no hope of death, 46
Yet its blind life trails on so low and crass
That every other fate it envieth.

No reputation in the world it has, 49
Mercy and doom hold it alike in scorn -
Let us not speak of these; but look, and pass."

So I beheld, and lo! an ensign borne 52
Whirling, that span and ran, as in disdain
Of any rest; and there the folk forlorn

Rushed after it, in such an endless train, 55
It never would have entered in my head
There were so many men whom death had slain.

And when I'd noted here and there a shade 58
Whose face I knew, I saw and recognized
The coward spirit of the man who made

The great refusal; and that proof sufficed; 61
Here was that rabble, here without a doubt,
Whom God and whom His enemies despised.

This scum, who'd never lived, now fled about 64
Naked and goaded, for a swarm of fierce
Hornets and wasps stung all the wretched rout

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Until their cheeks ran blood, whose slubbered smears, 67
Mingled with brine, around their footsteps fell,
Where loathly worms licked up their blood and tears.

Then I peered on ahead, and soon quite well 70
Made out the hither bank of a wide stream,
Where stood much people. "Sir," said I, "pray tell

Who these are, what their custom, why they seem 73
So eager to pass over and be gone -
If I may trust my sight in this pale gleam."

And he to me: "The whole shall be made known; 76
Only have patience till we stay our feet
On yonder sorrowful shore of Acheron."

Abashed, I dropped my eyes; and, lest unmeet 79
Chatter should vex him, held my tongue, and so
Paced on with him, in silence and discreet,

To the riverside. When from the far bank lo! 82
A boat shot forth, whose white-haired boatman old
Bawled as he came: "Woe to the wicked! Woe!

Never you hope to look on Heaven - behold! 85
I come to ferry you hence across the tide
To endless night, fierce fires and shramming cold.

And thou, the living man there! stand aside 88
From these who are dead!" I budged not, but abode;
So, when he saw me hold my ground, he cried:

"Away with thee! for by another road 91
And other ferries thou shalt make the shore,
Not here; a lighter skiff must bear thy load."

Then said my guide: "[Charon](#), why wilt thou roar 94
And chafe in vain? Thus it is willed where power
And will are one; enough; ask thou no more."

This shut the shaggy mouth up of that sour 97
Infernal ferryman of the livid wash,
Only his flame-ringed eyeballs rolled a-glower.

But those outweari'd, naked souls - how gash 100
And pale they grew, chattering their teeth for dread,
When first they felt his harsh tongue's cruel lash.

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God they blaspheme, blaspheme their parents' bed, The human race, the place, the time, the blood, The seed that got them, and the womb that bred;	103
Then, huddling hugger-mugger, down they scud, Dismally wailing, to the accursed strand Which waits for every man that fears not God.	106
Charon, his eyes red like a burning brand, Thumps with his oar the lingerers that delay, And rounds them up, and beckons with his hand.	109
And as, by one and one, leaves drift away In autumn, till the bough from which they fall Sees the earth strewn with all its brave array,	112
So, from the bank there, one by one, drop all Adam's ill seed, when signaled off the mark, As drops the falcon to the falconer's call.	115
Away they're borne across the waters dark, And ere they land that side the stream, anon Fresh troops this side come flocking to embark.	118
Then said my courteous master: "See, my son, All those that die beneath God's righteous ire From every country come here every one.	121
They press to pass the river, for the fire Of heavenly justice stings and spurs them so That all their fear is changed into desire;	124
And by this passage, good souls never go; Therefore, if Charon chide thee, do thou look What this may mean - 'tis not so hard to know."	127
When he thus said, the dusky champaign shook So terribly that, thinking: on the event, I feel the sweat pour off me like a brook.	130
The sodden ground belched wind, and through the rent Shot the red levin, with a flash and sweep That robbed me of my wits, incontinent;	133
And down I fell, as one that swoons on sleep.	136